



No Kind Words

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Category: Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Out of sight, but not out of mind and heart.

His father kicked him out, warning him never to return.

His boyfriend shunned him, never getting in contact.

But Jethro is a fighter. He chases his dream of becoming a vet and makes a life for himself far away from the coast, though he's never forgotten his boyfriend, whom he had to leave behind. No one can hold a candle to Benny.

Fifteen years later, a veterinary practice comes up for sale. It all looks perfect, apart from it being in Calston Cove. But he can't forgo this opportunity and returns to his hometown.

What he doesn't expect is that Benny is still living in the town where they grew up and fell in love.

Can they have a second chance at love, or stand bruised souls and wounded pride in the way of happiness?

No Kind Words is the third book in the Calston Cove series. It can be read as a stand-alone but is enjoyed more when you've read the other two books. Expect two stubborn men who don't have kind words for each other but have never forgotten their first love.

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The slight creak of the barn door has my blood pressure rising, my heart beating faster, and my hands trembling. Footsteps are approaching the ladder. He's here! This is actually going to happen. After all the sneaking around and finding secret, unseen places, today is the day. Everyone is out of the house and away from the farm. I've planned this down to the last detail. A blanket is spread out over the worn floor. The condoms and lube are hidden under the corner of the tartan fabric. God, I'm so nervous but also excited. No way on earth am I going to flee.

The footsteps hit the ladder, and before I can speak, he's in front of me. Curly blond hair, sparkling blue eyes, and a mouth that's made for kissing.

"Hi." It sounds more like a soft sigh than a greeting. "You're here."

Of course he's here. He's standing right before me.

"Yeah, there's no way I wouldn't be here. I've been waiting for this moment as long as you." He smiles. "Is it all done and dusted?"

The last of my A levels is over with. I'm a free man for the summer. "And before you ask, it went really well." I wink. He steps closer to me, and he seems so much larger than me.

He skims his nose up the side of mine, and I suck in a breath. "So sure."

Then his mouth is on mine. Our hands scrabble at each other's clothes. We've waited too long to get to this moment. The stolen kisses that started all this led to handjobs and blow jobs. Hidden from anyone's eyes, we've fallen in love.

“Lie down. Let me look at you.” His stare doesn’t embarrass me. I want him to look at me. I know he likes what he sees as he gives me a crooked grin. A dimple appears on his left cheek. “Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you. Get down here and kiss me.”

As soon as his mouth is on mine, we both let out a groan. The next moments are a sensory overload. He presses his naked body against mine. Our hands roam freely over our bodies, which are getting hotter and harder by the second.

The point of no return comes when a cold, wet finger pushes gently at my entrance, asking for admission. One finger becomes two. The stretch and burn are exquisite and everything I’ve been craving. That’s until I’m empty, and the condom wrapper is being torn open.

“Keep your eyes on me and breathe, baby,” he whispers, his lips close to mine. His breath warms my moist skin.

The hot, blunt head of his dick presses firmly at my hole, and then there’s the pressure again. He kisses me so deeply I almost forget what’s happening lower down until he slides farther in. “So big,” I pant. He stops and waits for me to adjust.

When I nod, he pushes farther. The tight pain changes, and pleasure floods my body. A cry breaks free from him. “God, so good, so fucking good. I’m never going to want to leave.”

I lose myself to the intensity of my first time. I’ll never forget this moment. The smell of the old hay, the warmth of the sun through the holes in the timber roof, and the dust motes it makes through the gaps of the old barn.

We come together, crying out each other’s names.

“I love you,” I whisper into his hair. He repeats the words in my ear.

We lie together, bravely talking about the future until the sun goes down and we have to say goodbye for now.

The summer is going way too quickly. We’re together as much as we can, and our meetings get hotter as we get braver with each other. Today is a big day, and once again I’m in the loft of the barn farthest away from the farmhouse. The chores over the summer months—the harvest, the baling, the stacking and storing of hay, straw, and silage—have left me suntanned and muscled. For once, I may have impressed my argumentative, aggressive, and alcoholic asshole dad.

It’s the end of August, and next to the usual supplies on the picnic blanket lies a white envelope. It’s the first thing he notices. My heart is in my throat as he looks at me. “Have you opened it?”

After checking online, I know what’s in it, but I want us to open the letter together. This affects him as much as it does me. “I want you to do it.”

Without hesitation, he flips the envelope over and slides his finger under the sealed flap. When he pulls out the paper and his eyes go wide, I can’t hold back my smile. “Four A+s, oh my god, Jethro, that’s incredible. You did it! Have you submitted your results? Did you get in?”

I nod, too giddy to speak. He pulls me into his arms and twirls me around. We’re both laughing until my feet hit the ground and our lips touch. I’m lost in him, aching for more, for him to be inside me again. For as many times as we’ve managed this summer, I still want him all the time.

We lie back down on the blanket. Sweat is sticky on our skin, making the loose hay attach itself to us. “Have you decided where you’re going to go?” He makes circles

on my chest with his fingers.

“I’ve been accepted at Cambridge, Bristol, and Edinburgh. I need to decide which one. What do you think? Where would you like to go?” We’ve talked this over so many times, but now, with my results, it’s finally real. He can stop the job he hates and maybe get a job in a kitchen and work his way up while he goes back to college.

He tenses. When I turn to look at him, he’s biting hard on his lip. Something has happened. “What’s going on? Have you changed your mind? Jesus, we’ve been planning this for months. Please don’t do this.”

“I’m still coming, but maybe I should wait a month or two. It will be too obvious if we both leave at the same time.”

I sit upright and stare at him. He’s kidding. He’s got to be. No more hiding, he promised me. “You said it wouldn’t matter. You didn’t want to hide anymore. I don’t believe this.” The sting of tears burns my eyes. I don’t want to cry, but there’s no way of holding them back. Tears flow down my cheeks, and I swipe them angrily away. “You have no intention of coming with me, do you? You’ve used me for the summer, had your fun with the closeted gay kid. You’re twenty-five and have lied to get what you wanted.”

“Jethro, sweetheart. That’s not true. I love you. Nothing I’ve said has been a lie. How can you even think I only wanted to fuck you? I’ve given you my heart. You can get settled, and I’ll join you, I promise.” He pulls at my arm, gently tugging me back down. He holds me in his arms, letting me rest my head on his chest. His lips touch my hair, pressing kiss after kiss on my head.

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My brain catches up with my heart and believes him. We stay still, silently lost in our thoughts, until the sky darkens and twilight descends around us.

“I’d better go. You’ll be missed if we stay here much longer.”

I draw back from his embrace, sit up, and pick up my clothes. We dress, but he doesn’t look at me like he usually does. Doubts creep in. Is he telling me the truth? He hasn’t lied to me before, so I smile and press a quick kiss on his lips. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes, love. I’ll be here.”

He climbs down the ladder and slips out of the barn door. I gather up the blanket and shake it out. The hay flutters around me, then rests on the floor again. The condoms and lube are tucked away in an old box no one would think to look at.

I check to see if it all looks normal, then get down the ladder. There’s a shadow by the door. “Hey, did you forget something?”

The shadow moves into the light, and my father emerges, his belt in his hand. The sneer on his face tells me all I need to know. He’s found out. Can I brush it aside, tell him he’s got it all wrong? It’s worth a go.

“Hey, Dad, what’s up?”

Before I can move to get past him, his fist flies out and hits me square on the jaw. I fall to my knees. “You filthy, dirty faggot. I know what you’ve been doing and who

with. You disgust me. No son of mine is a fucking queer. You stink of him, of sex, you pervert.”

The belt comes down over and over. The harsh metal buckle breaks the skin on my hip and back. When his foot joins in the fight, I curl up into a ball and cover my head, desperate to shield it from his feet and fists. Blood runs down my head and back. How am I going to survive this? Another voice, high and shrill, full of fear, breaks through the daze. My mother’s.

“For god’s sake, stop. That’s enough, you bastard. You’re going to kill him. I’m calling the police.”

Then darkness envelopes me.

When I step into the barn, there’s something different about it. It feels cold, hollow, like it would echo if I spoke aloud. The hay loft is quiet. No soft light from the lamp Jethro usually has on the ground. I climb up the ladder, and the place is empty. There’s no sign of us ever being here before. What the hell is going on? When I step off the ladder and walk to the bales, Jethro’s dad appears from behind the tallest stack.

Everyone knows he’s a mean bastard who drinks too much and gets heavy with his fists when he hits a rage. He straightens his shoulders and flexes his hands. Hands that already have scabs and broken skin over the knuckles. Fear for Jethro floods me. The fact that his father is here proves that he knows about us.

“What have you done to him?” I’m grateful that my voice is steady and the words are strong and loud.

“Me? What have I done to him? You’re the deviant who’s been corrupting boys. How old are you, Benny? You’ve gotta be ten years older than him. Is this how you get

your rocks off, fucking school kids? What's the town gonna say when they find out what you've done?"

I'm only seven years older than Jethro, which could cause a scandal in this small town, but I doubt it would last long. Jethro is an adult, and we've done nothing illegal. But judging by his red face contorted in anger, his father is beyond being reasoned with. "Where is he? Where's Jethro?"

"He's gone. Good riddance. I'm not having some shirt-lifter degenerate in my house. So unless you want everyone to know what a filthy piece of scum you are, you'll get out of here too." He cracks his knuckles, and as much as this crazy fucker scares me, I'm not running from him.

"What. Did. You. Do. To. Him?" I enunciate each word as I step closer. I won't win in a fight, but I'm standing up for Jethro and myself. There's no shame in who we are.

"I did what a man should do when they have vermin in the house. I got rid of him. Now unless you want the same thing to happen to you, you'd better get the fuck off my land." He puts his hand behind his back and pulls something out of his waistband. A belt, a thick, heavy leather belt. Fuck, did he kill him?

"You piece of shit. I'm calling the police." I fish my phone out of my pocket.

"Yeah, you try that and see where it gets you. Now get out of here, out of town, before I tell everyone you're a fucking paedo." He points to the ladder with the belt.

I step back but don't turn around. I don't want to have my back to him. He doesn't move, his feet planted on the wooden floor, a look of disdain on his face. "You don't scare me, you drunken piece of shit. I'll be back, and you'd better let me see him."

“Fuck off. Don’t you ever set foot on my land again. I’ll have you arrested for trespassing. Who’s the old bill gonna believe? The respectable farmer or the man who gets his kicks fucking kids?”

I take a step closer to him. “That’s a risk I’m prepared to take, so call them, old man.”

Instead of calling the police, he stomps past me and out of the barn. When I’m alone, I look around for any sign Jethro may have left for me, anything to let me know he’s okay. But there’s nothing, nothing to show we’ve been here for the last three months.

All night, I try to work out what has happened, where Jethro would’ve gone. The more I think about it, the less I believe he’s gone. The asshole is bluffing. He’s done something to him. That belt was for more than to threaten me with. He’s hurt him. Jethro has told me about his tantrums and rants when he’s plastered, his days of drinking followed by shouts and arguments with his mum. That’s a point. Where is she in all this? I can’t imagine her letting Jethro be hurt. She could be scared of her husband, especially if he’s violent with her too.

It's market day. Jethro’s father leaves in his muddy Landrover, the trailer behind him with the sheep, his dog hanging its head out the window. I walk slowly up to the farmhouse door. With a shaky hand, I knock on the door. It’s all quiet for a minute. Footsteps approach the door, and it slowly opens. Mrs Palmer looks out nervously. “Oh, Benny, you can’t be here.”

She knows about us. Was it her who told on us? “What did he do? Has he hurt him? Please let me see him.” I don’t care if I sound desperate. “How badly is he hurt?”

She shakes her head, but her eyes flick up to the ceiling. Is he in his room upstairs? “Go home, Benny. You can’t come here anymore. Leave us alone, please.”

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I don't, though. I go as often as I can, and each time she turns me away. Until one day when she opens the door, her eyes are rimmed red as if she's been crying. "Oh, Benny, don't come back. He's not here."

This time I believe her. "Did he say anything, give you anything for me?"

Her expression changes, indecision flashing in her eyes. "N...no, no, I'm sorry."

And there it is. My first love left without a word. The only man I was Ben to has gone. What do I do now?

Why am I even considering this? After fifteen years of staying away from the place where has the interest in it come from? I look over the details of the practice and property for the tenth time. It's a stupid idea, but I can't switch off the yearning I have to go home.

"That's the last of them, Jet." Maeve, my vet nurse, stands up from her desk and stretches her arms above her head. She's a beautiful woman. Her thick, long, dark auburn hair shows off her Scottish heritage. "Do you want me to lock up tonight?"

"Hmm?" I look up from my laptop. Maeve looks at me expectantly. What did she ask? "Oh, sorry. No, you can go. I've got some work to finish up. I'll do the rounds on the pens."

"You've been staring at that same screen for two days now. Are you going to share what's so interesting about it?" Before I can close the page down, Maeve leans over my shoulder. "Ooh, that's a pretty town. Are you thinking of going on holiday?"

I close my laptop and take a deep breath before I answer so I don't snap. "Looks can be deceiving." It still comes out churlish. "I'm sorry. That was rude. It's Calston Cove. I grew up there. It wasn't a happy place."

"So why look at it?" Maeve is a good friend. She's worked with me since I graduated and started to work here. "Is it why you never talk about your family?"

"My father died years ago, but his solicitor recently contacted me that someone has bought his property, and he wanted my bank details to send the money from the sale. It's a farm and has been empty for a long time, so much so I'd forgotten all about it."

"Oh, I guess saying sorry for your loss is unnecessary. What have you decided to do?"

"I'm giving it to the Terrence Higgins Trust. Giving it to a charity he would've hated is very satisfying. But more to the point, I'm looking at it because there is a veterinary practice for sale. Now all the demons have been laid to rest I'm tempted to return home." There's still one demon left for me to face, but I doubt very much it wants to see me. Ben never contacted me.

"You want to leave here?" Shock is written all over her face. I'm not surprised, though. I haven't given any indication of leaving. I love my job and the people I work with.

Honestly, I haven't thought of leaving, and I sure as shit haven't had any inclination to go back to Calston Cove. I didn't go to my parents' funerals. My mother died first. I never understood why she stayed with my father. He bullied her as much as he did me. I don't think he was physically violent to her, but words can hurt almost as much as a leather belt. Why didn't she stick up for me all the countless times before that night? What did he threaten her with?

I'm thirty-three and a grown-arsed man. There are no more nightmares and no one to call me out for being gay. Maybe it is time to go and see what's changed down there. I doubt someone will recognise me. I'm different from the eighteen-year-old kid who left with a couple of suitcases and nothing else.

"You know, I'll come with you. If you leave, that is. I can't imagine working with anyone else. And you may want a friend with you, someone who's got your back."

"What? No, I wouldn't ask you to do that. You've got all your family here. It's over five hundred miles away." After everything that happened, I chose Edinburgh. I wanted to be as far away from home as possible. It was the only time my mother stood up to him, insisting he paid all the tuition fees. His condition was I never came back. That was something I was more than happy to agree to.

"You're not asking. I'm ready for something and somewhere new. If not down there, then maybe somewhere else."

This surprises me, and the look on her face tells me she's seen it. "Are you thinking of leaving?" She hasn't shown any signs of wanting to leave, that she's had enough of being here.

"No, but I'm not interested in working with anyone else, so if you go, so do I. You're stuck with me, mister, so suck it up." She swats my shoulder light-heartedly.

I look back at the photograph. The river with the black swans runs through the centre of the town, along the pub where I had my first legal drink. The rest of the shops are new. I don't recognise any of them, but they all look smart. It could be photoshopped and probably is with the cloudless cerulean sky as the background.

"Are you busy this weekend?" I already know the answer. She has nothing to do. It's been the same since she broke up with the last loser boyfriend.

“Nope.” She pops thePand grins. “Are we going on a road trip?”

“It’s too far to drive for a weekend. I’ll see if I can get a flight to either Plymouth or Exeter. We can hire a car.” An enthusiasm I wasn’t expecting bubbles up inside me.

“What do you say?”

“I say hell yeah!” She hugs me from behind. “Do you want me to sort out accommodation?”

“Um, yeah, I suppose so. I’m sure there are plenty of Airbnb rentals. We’re out of season, so it should be easy enough.”

“Kay, see you tomorrow.” She leaves. I wait until she hops into her car and drives away, then log on to look for flights. It doesn’t take long to book two return tickets and a hire car. With that done, I shut down my laptop and do the rounds on the overnight guests. It’s an easy walk-through with only one grumpy cat that gives me an evil look, but I scratch behind her ear all the same.

I check all the doors are locked and set the alarm, then take the short walk to the cottage that came with the job. A huddled shape lies on the porch but sits up when I approach.

“Hey, Roddy, what’s going on? I haven’t seen you for a while.”

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The young homeless guy looks up at me. He's thinner than he was the last time I saw him. "Sorry for disappearing. I thought I had a place to stay. Turned out to be another drugged-filled squat. I don't do that shit anymore."

"Come on in. I'll order some food while you get washed up. What do you want?"

"Pizza would be great." He enters the house, drops his ratty backpack, and heads to the bathroom. I've been helping this kid out for about a year now. He reminds me of what could've happened to me. He says he's eighteen, but I have my doubts. He's still so fragile. He was thrown out for being gay, then fell into the trap so many kids do: drugs, selling blow jobs for food or somewhere to stay. I help him out as much as he'll let me.

I grab some clean clothes for him, a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. I keep a few things here for him just in case he shows up. He never stays more than a night and is usually gone by the time I get up. He always leaves a thank-you note. It will be the same tonight.

I was right about Roddy. He did his usual bug-out in the morning. As much as I worry about him, I know he won't accept any money from me, and I must respect that.

Tonight, there's no sign of him, and after a shower, I order Chinese, grab a beer from the fridge, and wander to the sofa, snagging my laptop again. Instead of opening it, I flick on the telly and search through Amazon and Netflix until I find something to keep my mind occupied enough not to want to look for anything to do with Calston Cove. I pick MasterChef and enjoy the irony of tucking into a huge bowl of fried rice

and sticky chilli beef while culinary art is being made on the TV.

I successfully make it through the evening without Googling anyone I used to know. Friends like Drew and Ivan. Did they ever give me another thought? Did they assume I'd gone to university and like so many other kids never come back?

It's not until I get into bed that I let the memories of the last few weeks I lived there flood my mind. How Dad refused to let Mum take me to the hospital, that I was locked in my bedroom with only my mum to help me clean the wounds, doped up on the diazepam the doctor prescribed for her. More than a handful of scars cover the front of my torso, and a mess of criss-cross scars on my back from the buckle are ugly and raised because they should've been stitched. As much as I refuse to be a victim, I'm more than a little conscious of them when I meet a guy I want to take to bed, keeping my shirt on as much as I can. Hook-ups and Grindr work best. There's no need for questions.

By Friday, I'm ready to cancel the whole trip and stay far, far away from Devon, but Maeve is keeping me from backing out of the whole weekend.

"Jet, sweetie, it's time to get this out of your system. Plus, you know this practice is perfect for you. It's been so long I doubt people will recognise you. And if they do, that's not a bad thing. If you want to do this, having people you know around you will be fun."

"When did you get so wise?" I laugh and wrap my arms around her shoulders. Thankfully, the queue for boarding is short, and we board quickly. The flight takes less than two hours, so we should be at the house Maeve found by about seven o'clock.

"Do you need your satnav? I thought you'd know the way," Maeve asks as I put the address in the rental BMW's GPS.

“There are bound to be new roads and layouts. I can’t be arsed with getting lost. I want a beer and something to eat. Have you got the code for the key to the house?”

“No, the guy said he’d meet us there. He lives in the town.” She makes herself comfy in the leather seat. “I approve of your choice of car.”

Chuckling, I drive out of the car hire’s car park. “That’s good to know.”

Maeve looks at the scenery, commenting on how different it is from the Scottish countryside. I’m too busy trying not to get worked up before I get to the house. As I drive into the town that was my home for eighteen years, it’s hard not to cry. I’ve missed being here. The scent of the sea immediately acts as a time machine, and I’m transported back to where it all started, with one man, one person I’ve never been able to forget. I’ve never found a connection with another as much as I did with him all those years ago. Is he even still here, or has he left, found a new place to be himself? That was all both of us wanted. Would I recognise him? Would he recognise me? I’m a different man at thirty-three than I was at eighteen. I was merely a boy then. He’ll be forty now, but I doubt he’s lost his looks.

“We’re here, hon. Do you want to sort out the house?”

She pulls out her phone and searches for the contact number. It rings a couple of times. “Hi, is that Ivan?”

I don’t listen to anything else. All I can think of is the kid I knew at school. Will he recognise me?

The room is busy with a mix of men, attractive and available single men, all here to meet someone. I don’t usually go for these sorts of meet-and-greets, but I’m tired of being alone. I want someone looking for a relationship, but all the apps seem to be focusing on hook-ups. I’ve had enough of swiping right. This agency has a reputation

for success, so hopefully, I'll meet the right man. After all these years of holding on to the idea of Jethro returning, I'm ready to find my forever man. He's never come back, and he never will. It's time to change and look for a man ready to do the same as me—settle down.

A man, maybe a little younger than me—not a problem—looks around the room. When he sees me watching him, he raises his glass of red wine. That's all the invitation I need to walk over.

“Hi.” He smiles and holds out his free hand. “I'm Jamie.”

“Benny.” I shake his hand. It's warm and smooth and as firm as it should be. No wishy-washy grip from him. “Do you come here often?” I groan at the banal opening question but am pleased when he chuckles.

“Is that a chat-up line that works for you?” He sips at his wine, but the corners of his mouth are flickering up in a cute smile.

“If it did, I don't need to be here.” I gesture at the room of single men, smiling, even though my cheeks are bound to be pink.

“Fair point.” He's attractive, with dark hair curling a little around his ears like it's due a cut, but it suits him.

“So, is there a line that will work?” I ask. A pale pink blush rises on his cheeks.

His mouth lifts, and a dimple appears. Yep, I'm interested in this guy. “A simple invitation to dinner usually works for me.”

“Would you like to? Have dinner with me, I mean.” I have a drink of my wine while he slowly looks up and down my body. I feel conscious of my soft stomach. Years of

being a baker has taken its toll. I vow to get back to Brodie's exercise classes.

"I would," he replies without expanding. He pulls his phone out of his back pocket.

"When would you like to go?"

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“How about now? It’s not too late.” I don’t want to give him time to change his mind, and while I’m prepared to travel out of town for dates, it’ll be easier to get the first one done and dusted. If it goes terribly, I haven’t wasted another evening. God, that’s a dreadful attitude. I’m already deciding he’s not going to like me or we realise we’ll be wildly different by the time we’ve got through the first course.

“I’d like that. Do you like Chinese? There’s a great one not far from here.”

That gives me an insight that he may live here. Which works well for me. It’s only ten miles from Calston Cove. Close enough to see each other again, far enough to stop having the town talking about me in my café. “That sounds great.”

As we walk away, the eyes of the organiser are on us. I give him a nod, which he returns with a smile.

We get through a lot of the obvious questions as we walk to the restaurant. He’s a teacher in the secondary school I and all the kids from the town went to. Bussed in and out every day for five years.

When I tell him I own a café, he smiles gleefully. “I’ve heard of it. The teachers rave about your pastries. I can impress them when I tell them I’ve had dinner with the owner.”

That stops me from asking if he’s out with his peers. “You’ll have to come over and try me.” That doesn’t quite come out the way I meant it, but Jamie’s eyes twinkle with merriment.

“I like that idea.” He stops in front of a restaurant. “We’re here.”

It’s a great meal, and Jamie is good company. There’s definitely something between us, a chemistry I’d like to check out again.

At the end of the evening, we walk back to our cars, which are parked in the hotel car park. He leans against a modest Mercedes a couple of years old, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. “I’ve had a great evening. Thank you for asking me.”

“Would you like to do it again?” I’m hopeful because he’s still smiling and not in a rush to get his car door open and away from me.

“I would, very much so. Can we swap numbers? We can arrange another date. This was a date, right, or have I read too much into it? I tend to do that.” His cheeks flush, and he looks away.

“Yes, this has been a date. Add your number to my phone.” I hand him my phone, and he quickly types in his number, then gives it back to me. I send him a text message. “Now you have mine.”

I lean forward and press a soft kiss on his cheek. “I’ve had a lovely evening, Jamie. I’ll call you.”

A couple of days later, I do just that, and I’m grateful when he picks up after only a couple of rings. No hesitation with a ‘shall I-shan’t I’ answer vibe.

“Benny, hi. How are you?” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m good. Are you having a good week?”

“Better now, thank you. I sometimes wonder why I thought educating teenagers was

a good idea. Manoeuvring them into a classroom and then settling down is like herding squirrels on speed.”

I chuckle at the image. “I have no doubt. I remember my days there, and I was considered a studious one. Would you like to meet up again this weekend? I’m free from Friday evening, so whenever you can make it.”

“I’d love to. Maybe I can come over on Saturday afternoon. I’m dying to try your famous French toast.” His laughter is carefree, something I haven’t felt for a long time. I’m ready to see where this can go.

“That sounds like a date. I’ll send you my address. Come to me first so we can walk to the café.”

“Perfect. Around twelve?”

We agree on the time, and as soon as the call ends, I send him my address just in case I get side-tracked and forget. When I get a heart emoji back, I smile.

“What has you smiling so widely, Benny?” Drew walks up to me at the counter. I hadn’t noticed him come in. The high voice of Willow calling my name pierces my ear drum. She’s waving furiously. “My here, Benny.”

I laugh when Drew shakes his head. “We’re still working on indoor voices.”

The arrival of Merrick and his young daughter to the town a couple of years ago had all tongues wagging. A wealthy single man with a child had bought the dilapidated Mill House and had hired Drew to do all the renovations. I don’t think falling in love with each other was part of the plan, but it didn’t take long to happen. Partly thanks to Willow’s infatuation with Drew. It was like he was made to be her dad.

I wave to the little girl. “I’m guessing someone wants French toast fingers.”

Drew nods. “No getting out of it, Benny. What’s with the smile?”

My face heats up, but I grin. “I met someone at the weekend. He’s coming down on Saturday.”

“Good for you, bud. Don’t introduce us to him too soon, or we’ll frighten him off with all the stories we have of you.” His laughter is rich and full of jest. I know they wouldn’t do that. They’ve been trying to find me someone for years.

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“There’s no way I’m ready for him to meet you.” I chuckle, but I want Jamie to meet my friends. I can’t remember ever feeling like this about another man I’ve been with.

I take Drew’s order and get busy making it, all the while thinking of Jamie and what we could do on Saturday. It’s too early to ask him to stay. Isn’t there a third-date rule? Does that mean it’s okay on the third date or after the fourth? Now I’m overthinking it.

“What time are you coming over?” I ask Jamie. We’ve been seeing each other for six months now, and I finally feel like we’re getting serious. We spend weekends together at either of our places. This weekend, it’s his turn to come to mine. We had trips away, spent time in London at the museums, stayed a weekend in the Peak District, where we both decided that having a dog would be a great idea. Thoughts of moving in and forever sort of feelings run through me. He’s everything I’ve been looking for. Or waiting for. I’m not sure which is more valid. We’ve even got to the L word. I couldn’t believe he said it before me, but it didn’t take me a heartbeat to say it back.

For tonight, I’ve finished clearing up the house and getting all his favourite food together, and a bottle of wine we both love is breathing on the countertop.

“I’ll be with you at about seven. I’ve got a couple of things to sort out at work. Please tell me we’re staying in tonight. I’m exhausted.” He works as a deputy headteacher at the main secondary school ten miles away. He’s only worked there for a year, moving down here with a promotion. His ex didn’t want to leave Bristol. They tried long distance, but it didn’t work, and they split up. It was messy and acrimonious, leaving him hurt and alone.

I understand how he feels, but it's not as if Jethro and I had a meaningful adult relationship. That was stripped away from us before we had the chance. I do know how it feels to be the one left behind.

We're not doom and gloom, though. In fact, I have had more fun and laughter with Jamie than anyone else in many years. I'm trying not to think too far ahead, but we could be good together in the long term. He wants the same things as I do—marriage and kids.

When the knock on the door comes, my heart beats faster.

"Hi." I open the door and take in the sight of this gorgeous man. I lean in and press a kiss to his lips. He smiles against my mouth, then kisses me back. "Hi to you too."

It's an easy evening. We drink the delicious wine he brought with him and eat all the charcuterie board. It's not until we're going to bed that he drops a bombshell.

"Duncan called me last night." He carries on unbuttoning his shirt, but I stop undressing with my fingers on the button of my jeans.

This isn't going to be bad news for me, for us, is it? He wouldn't have left it this late in the evening if he was planning to break up with me. "Really? What did he want?" I know they hadn't been in contact for months. Jamie has, on more than one occasion, said he has no interest in him.

"I don't know. It was all very strange. All he wanted to know was if I'm okay and if I'm in a new relationship. He didn't say much at all."

"Did you tell him about us?" His ex sounds like he's fishing, but I'd put money on him already knowing. He's spoken to someone still in contact with Jamie, most likely a family member. They're all still living in Bristol, and he and Duncan had been

together a long time. Duncan would know them well.

“Of course I did. I took great pleasure in it. How happy I am with you and that we’re getting serious. I want him to know I’ve moved on and not to call me again.” Jamie steps up to me, slides his hands around my neck and into my hair, and brushes his lips against the shell of my ear. “You’re the only man I want.”

My clothes are off in a matter of seconds, and before I know it, I’m on my back on the bed with my heart pounding. Jamie crawls up my body and straddles my chest, his eyes boring into mine. “Do you want to suck my dick?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I prop up on my elbows and open my mouth.

The next day, we’re happy to lounge around the house. I attempt to teach him how to make pasta and a fresh tomato sauce. We end up in a floury and sauce mess, but it tastes delicious. And on the plus side, we’re having fun.

Jamie has had a tough work week. We’ve hardly been able to talk, and when we have, it’s been rushed sentences before he had to go again. The Ofsted inspection has got everyone at the school stressed out, but I thought he would enjoy getting away from his place and meeting my friends. It’s crazy that after all this time, we still haven’t managed to get everyone together for a night out.

Parking is easy at his apartment block, and I slot into one of the visitor spaces. I grab the pizza box from the passenger seat and get out of the car. I have the entry code to the building and shoot him a text as I enter the lift. He’s only on the fourth floor, but I’m not in the mood for that sort of cardio on a Friday night.

The door is shut, which is strange as he usually opens it after getting my text so I can walk in. I knock once. “Hey, babe, it’s me.”

Footsteps walk down the hallway, and the latch clicks open. From the moment I see his face, I know something is wrong. He's in his bathrobe, and his hair is wet. Guilt is written in large neon letters above his head, of what I'm not sure.

"Benny? This is unexpected. What are you doing here?"

Okay, what's with the weird panic in his voice? Is work really stressing him out this much? "I know you're having a nightmare week, but I thought it would be great for you to escape all your notes and reports, and unbelievably, all my friends are about tonight, so we could meet up with them."

When Jamie doesn't say anything or move to let me in, I look at him closer. "What's up?"

He seems to be in complete shock. His hand is still on the door handle as if he's going to shut it on me. What's going on? I notice movement behind him, farther down the hall, and I glance past his shoulder and see the one person I never wanted to meet—Duncan. Not just standing there, but standing naked apart from a towel around his waist. His hair is wet too. I've interrupted them.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" It all clicks into place, the rushed conversations, the being too busy to talk. It's because Jamie's been lying to me. "How long has this been going on? Y'know what? Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

His cheeks are flushed, whether in embarrassment or guilt, I don't know. "I'm sorry, Benny." Is that all he has to say?

"No, you're not. You wouldn't be doing this again with him if you were sorry. You'd be telling him that you were with someone, and he's wasting his time. That you weren't going to put up with his gaslighting and have moved on. You're supposed to tell him you love me."

“It’s not like that. He’s changed. He’s asked me to marry him.”

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“And you said yes. You’re a bloody fool, Jamie. Maybe you deserve to be together. Don’t come back to me when he starts all his shit again.”

I turn around and walk back to the lift, refusing to look back. I get home on autopilot, then proceed to get drunk.

Very drunk.

As I turn into a vaguely familiar road, Maeve counts the numbers on the doors until we reach the one she booked. A truck is parked at the kerb, with two men leaning against it. One of them is holding a baby. As I pull up behind the truck, the man gives the child to the other and kisses them both. When he turns to us, recognition flashes through me. Although Ivan is, I think, a year or two older than me, in a town with limited numbers of kids, we all hung out together.

With lightly shaking fingers, I switch off the engine but don’t open the door. Maeve places her hand on my arm, obviously sensing something is wrong. “You can wait here. I’ve booked in my name, so you don’t have to meet them.”

Do I really want to do that? It’s stupid if I’m considering moving back here again. Having friends is a must. I just hadn’t expected to meet one in the first five minutes of arriving here. “No, I’m good. It will be good to see old friends.”

And it will be. Why haven’t I thought of this angle of being back here? I used to know these people. Although I don’t recognise the man with Ivan. Nor do I miss the tender kiss he plants on both of them. That is interesting. Memories come back of Ivan having both girlfriends and boyfriends, but he seems settled with the latter now.

Not sure where a child comes in, though.

I get out of the car and look down at my torn black jeans, matched with an old grey Stone Roses T-shirt that has seen better days but is still one of my favourites. My black leather jacket covers the full sleeves of tattoos on each arm, but the earrings and leather studded bracelets tend to give off a bit of a bad boy vibe, which couldn't be further from the truth.

Maeve has already introduced herself and is bouncing her slim 5'3" body in excitement. Ivan takes me in from the tips of my tattered black high-tops to the top of my scruffily styled hair. He narrows his eyes, obviously trying to work out who I am. I need to put him out of his misery and introduce myself.

"Hello again, Ivan. Jet Palmer." I hold out my hand.

It still takes a moment of scrutiny. Then his smile broadens from polite to recognition. "Fucking hell, Jethro. You're a blast from the past. Where the hell have you been?"

"Edinburgh." I shake his hand. "University, then stayed on."

"Wow." He frowns a little and looks over his shoulder. "Hey, Brodie, come here."

The other man walks up to us, the baby asleep in his arms. Ivan wraps his arm around Brodie's waist. "Babe, this is Jethro Palmer. He grew up in your farmhouse. Brodie bought it and renovated it. You should see it now. It's unrecognisable."

I smile but don't comment. I have no intention of setting foot on that piece of land ever again. "I'm glad you like it there."

Maeve can sense my anxiety and turns the conversation back to the here and now. "Is

there anything we should know about the house?”

“Shit, yes, of course. Come in. I’ll show you around.”

Five minutes later, we’re left alone, with our luggage by our feet. “Do you want me to take your luggage up to your room?” I ask her.

“Please. I’ll have a look in the kitchen.”

After I put our bags in our rooms, I return to her.

“Your friend has thought of everything, but maybe we should get some breakfast stuff. There’s some coffee for the morning, but not enough to get you on your feet.” Maeve closes the fridge. “What time is the viewing?”

“I’m not sure we’re friends just yet. We may never see him again if the practice isn’t what I’m looking for.”

“True, but I get a good feeling about this place. I think you’re going to find everything you need.”

“Is that your spidey senses talking again?” I laugh, but my friend does have a canny knack for getting her predictions right.

In the end, we decide to stay in. With all the groceries Ivan provided, we don’t need to go for breakfast produce. I’ve had enough excitement for the day, and Maeve is happy to watch some TV with some wine and the cheeses we bought en route.

The morning is cold but dry. I’m grateful for the scarf and beanie I packed at the last minute when I remembered how cold the wind can be coming off the sea. Maeve looks as if she’s prepared for an Arctic expedition. I laugh at her. “It’s not that bad, I

promise. Anyway, you grew up in Scotland. You're used to the cold."

We can walk to the vet's, which is in a prime location with parking. I had to come here with one of the dogs, but I doubt it's the same vet. It was over twenty years ago. The high street is busy, and as we walk past one of the cafés, my mouth waters at the tantalising scent of good coffee and sweet cinnamon.

"God, that smells amazing." Maeve breathes in deeply and gives me puppy dog eyes. "Can we come back here later?"

I look up at the name. That Seagull. Strange name, but does it matter? It can be called every strange name in the book with smells like that. I peer through the window. All the tables are full, and people are waiting at the counter to be served. Worth a closer look, for sure.

We carry on along the smart shops and restaurants. The town is quite different from when I left. It's all gone upscale, which shouldn't surprise me. The towns and villages in Devon have become very popular with city dwellers, who have houses here many as second homes.

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“This way.” I lead Maeve to the left and down another busy street. This one has an exclusive-looking art gallery halfway down, the window display showcasing some incredible paintings. Another place I’d like to explore.

I’m only here for the weekend, for now anyway, but my interest is piqued. Calston Cove looks a lot better than the town I left.

When we get to the property, a sporty, bright red Mini is in the car park. The estate agent, I presume. The door opens, and a familiar person steps out: Stacey. Her surname escapes me, but she’s my age, and we were in a lot of classes together.

“Oh my god! Jethro Palmer. Where the hell have you been?” She leans in and kisses my cheek. She was always pretty, but now she’s a beautiful woman. She looks me up and down. “Wow, you look great.”

“You look great too, and it’s Jet now,” I say, then turn to Maeve. “Stacey, this is my friend and right-hand person, Maeve.”

After they say their hellos, Stacey takes a ring of keys out of her bag and motions for us to go forward. “It’s such a shame about Mr Gurney. He was a lovely man. It was all very sudden too. One minute he seemed right as rain, then gone the next. A heart attack. There’s no one to keep running the place. He worked by himself and has no family able to take over. So it’s being sold as seen. All the equipment is included. We can negotiate the price as the family are open to offers.”

She unlocks the doors, goes in first, and turns on the lights. “I can’t believe it’s you. You left so suddenly, and no one saw or heard from you. We were worried. Your dad

was a difficult man. Everyone knew that.”

“He was a mean and violent drunk, Stacey, not difficult. He was a bastard.” I can’t keep the hardness out of my voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come out that way.”

“That’s okay. I’m sorry I brought it up. I’m going to let you look around. You know way more about this sort of stuff than me. One thing, Jethro, it would be good to have you back here again. We missed you.”

I don’t know what to say. It’s sweet of her, and the kindness has chipped off a little of my armour.

Of course the place is perfect. Everything I want for my practice is here. I’m sure I’ll be able to get the loan from the bank, and combined with my savings, I can buy it. I’ll need to see the accounts and get a survey on the building.

After saying goodbye to Stacey and telling her I’ll be in touch, we walk back towards the house. Maeve is buzzing with excitement and plans. She can so see it as my place. We reach the café with the amazing aromas, and Maeve walks to the door. “Come on. My treat.”

It’s quieter now. There are still plenty of customers, but the rush seems to be over. I let Maeve lead me to the counter to look at all the pastries as well as the board on the wall behind the server.

Just as I’m about to order, I overhear the server say Benny to the other young worker. It’s only a casual comment, but it feels like the whole world is closing around me. Does he work here too? Where is he? Could he come out of the kitchen right now? I listen a little closer. The young worker says he’s gone home. So he does work here. It could be a coincidence—Benny is not that rare a name—but when I left fifteen years

ago, he was the only one with that name. Although I was the only person to call him Ben. Just for the two of us.

The art of tuning out customers' conversations is something that takes time. My coffee shop slash bakery is a focal point for locals to meet and catch up. I've heard plans to break up before the poor soul concerned did. I watched people fall in love and have seen heartbreak. I heard joy over pregnancies and wedding proposals, and worry over health scares. The ability to not listen has taken me years to perfect.

Saturday mornings are always hectic, with queues outside the door waiting for a table or takeaway coffees and pastries. Today is no different. Even the cold weather hasn't kept anyone away. I lift my hand in greeting to Ivan and Brodie, who's carrying Milo.

They walk to the only table available, which is closest to the counter. It takes them a couple of minutes to get settled. Coats and hats come off, and Milo sits on Ivan's lap while Brodie comes up to the counter to order.

I hold up my hand. "Gimme a couple of minutes, and I'll get it out to you."

With two plates of bacon and cheese omelettes and extra bacon on the side for Ivan, I walk to their table. Ivan's words stop me in my tracks, and the plates wobble in my hands.

"I was so shocked to see him, and he looks so different from when he was in school. He was quiet, studious, cute in a geeky sort of way. Nothing like the sexy tattooed guy I met yesterday, and the woman with him is a surprise. I always thought he was gay. Then Jethro disappeared. A matter of here one day and gone the next."

Jethro? Jethro is back in town. Fuck, he didn't come home for the funerals of either of his parents. Why now? What the fuck is going to happen when I see him? Especially if he's not the beautiful, shy but adventurous young man I knew and wanted to share

my life with fifteen years ago.

Brodie's voice brings me back to the here and now. I give them an apologetic smile and place the plates in front of them. "Here you go. Enjoy."

I don't give them time to reply and flee back to the kitchen with every intention of staying there for the rest of the day. Too many thoughts, unanswered questions, and anger are whirring around in my head and coursing through my body. As I sink into the chair at the small prep table, memories of the barn and the last time I saw him assault me.

The sheen of sweat that clung to his chest as he drew deep lungfuls of air, the blissed-out smile and half-closed eyes as he came down from his orgasm. The smell of sex mingled with hay and warm sea air. I can almost taste it on my tongue. Before I can lick my lips to see if it's real, the air turns to fear. And fury. Anger so palpable I want to shrink away from it.

The nightmares that followed me after he left always felt like this: it wasn't me being threatened; it was Jethro, and I was always too far away to reach him, to get to him before the first lash of the belt hit him. I'd wake up with his name on my tongue and bile in my throat. My imagination has run wild with thoughts of what had happened. The shouting, the vile, hateful words Palmer spewed at him as he attacked his own flesh and blood.

"Benny?" Maddie puts her head around the kitchen door. "Are you okay? I've called you a couple of times."

I straighten, push my hair from my clammy forehead, and get it together again. Thank god, she snapped me out of my haunting memories. "Um, no. I'm not feeling too good. Can you let the customer know the kitchen is closed for fresh cooking?" It's two o'clock, so I'm not going to let too many people down, and we've got plenty of

food we can heat up. There's soup, and baked potatoes are warming in the oven. No one will starve.

The short walk to my house makes me nervous. I could bump into him at any moment. What would he do or say? And me, what am I going to say? Will we recognise each other? He'll be thirty-three now, still prime age, whereas I'm forty and, in my mind, officially middle age. The hair at my temples is going grey, as is my short beard. After the shitshow that was Jamie, I joined Brodie's running group, determined to get back in shape. For six months, I had happily eaten whatever Jamie wanted, and I'd put on a few pounds.

I'm not certain I have enough to gain Jethro's interest again. The lust for a twenty-five-year-old is different. I'm not looking for secretive hook-ups. Hell, I'm not looking for hook-ups at all. If only I'd got the life Jamie said he wanted too. I haven't changed my mind about that. I still want the whole caboodle—marriage, kids, the cute house, and the golden retriever. Would Jethro be into that? He's still only thirty-three. Way too young to want to be tied down with a husband and children. And even if he does, who says he'd want that with me?

Why is he here? His old home has been sold. The barns, almost derelict when we sneaked in them, are restored to function as working buildings again. Does Ivan know? And he mentioned Jethro having a woman with him. Has he realised he's bisexual? The idea doesn't seem real, not to the man I knew all that time ago.

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All the talk of Jethro leaving without saying goodbye to any of his friends soon died down. I'd wanted tell them what had happened. I wanted to shout out that he was mine, that I loved him, that it was all down to his father, but it would've been pointless. It seemed we'd kept our secret a little too well.

Missing him became a part of my life. I was never brave enough to look him up. My annoying inner voice chimes up. Oh, be quiet. I've called it self-preservation because I didn't want my heart broken a second time when I found him married with children. I've compared every man to him, which now, at my age, is just dumb.

I promised my mother I would move on, that living half a life is no life at all. She would know. She loved my father deeply, and they had a full and happy life, but when my dad passed, she followed only weeks later. I have everything I want professionally. I love my job, am proud of the café, but coming home to an empty house is getting old. When Jethro disappeared, I tried to get over him and start over. Accepted some dates when I was asked. I've even thought of joining a dating site again, but after Jamie, that's not my idea of fun.

But why is he here?

It's not until the next day that I get my answer. The pub is buzzing with the usual crowd, minus the ones with children. As I grab my pint and walk to our usual corner, Trent and Merlin are the first to greet me.

Stacey stops in the middle of a story and looks at me. "Benny, you must remember Jethro Palmer, right? He just fell off the face of the earth years ago, didn't he?"

“Yeah, I remember him.” I hear the croak in my voice, but it seems to go unnoticed by the others, and I take a long swallow of my beer.

“Well.” She does a drum roll on the table. “He came back, flew down from Edinburgh. He’s totally different now and so bloody fit.”

“What was he doing back here? It’s not like he’s got any family anymore, and he didn’t show up when his parents died,” Melanie says, but there’s no malice in her words. They all know what a wanker his dad was. It was only me who knew how violent he was, how he was with Jethro and the threats he made to me.

“Mr Gurney’s veterinary practice. It’s up for sale. He’s interested in buying it. He only came for the weekend, but I think he’s serious about it.”

“Did he come by himself?” I know the answer, but Stacey may have more knowledge of who she was.

“No, he was with a woman, very nice, pretty lady. She’s just his friend, though. They work together. I think she’ll come with him if he does buy it. Honestly, I always thought he was gay.”

Melanie nods. “Me too. When are we going to get any bloody straight guys moving here?” she grumbles light-heartedly.

I finish my pint and say goodnight, stating my early start as my reason. When all I can think about is that Jethro could finally be coming home.

I don’t know how to process that idea.

“It’s a very promising opportunity and, looking at all the numbers, a financial one too. I would be surprised if your offer is not accepted.” My accountant looks over the

proposal and the confirmation from the bank of the loan. “Are you ready to move to the other end of the country? It seems to have come out of the blue.”

Should I tell him? It will lead to more questions. But if I get my offer accepted, especially after the first was turned down, I won’t be seeing him again. “I grew up there.”

Colin raises an eyebrow. I shouldn’t have expected anything else. In all the years I’ve known him, I’ve never mentioned my childhood. Very few people know my past. It’s so far behind me in years as well as memories. The only time I go back there in my mind is when I think of Ben and the way he made me feel, how one touch from him had me wanting so much more. I gave it to him. I gave him everything, including my heart. For the first couple of years at university, I tried to screw him out of my head, but he wouldn’t leave. No one has ever made me feel the way he did. Even now, it’s him I imagine when I’m alone in bed.

“I best get going. Thanks for your help, Col.” I stand and take the folder he offers.

“Good luck, and don’t go without us having a pint.” He grins.

As I walk briskly down the street to the car park, my phone rings. The Scottish winter wind is cruel as it whips around my ears and neck. “Hello.” I have to raise my voice over the wind.

“Jethro, it’s Stacey.”

I stop in the middle of the pavement. Someone has to dodge me, grumbling as they pass. I nip into a lane between two shops to get out of the cold. “Hi.” I don’t want to ask if my offer has been refused. She can let me down gently.

“I have news. Your offer has been accepted. Isn’t that great?” I can hear the smile in

her voice. It warms me through the freezing weather.

“Really? Oh my god, Stacey, that’s more than great news. Wow!” I shove my free hand through my hair, knocking off the beanie I pulled on outside Colin’s office. “What do I have to do next?”

She runs through the procedure and timeline of the sale to go through smoothly. When we end the call with a promise of getting back in touch tomorrow, my cheeks hurt from smiling.

The smile is still on my face when I walk back into the surgery building and give Maeve a thumbs up. She does a little squee. The partners and the staff have been supportive of my decision to move on. I think they were surprised I’d stayed so long. It’s been a good place to start. I’ve learnt so much away from the university teachings.

Now it’s time to face my demons and maybe punch them in the throat.

I give Maeve the option of flying down again, but she chooses to drive with me. She sold her car, which was so old it wouldn’t make the long journey. For the first one hundred and fifty miles, her cat is yowling, but then it settles down, and the trip is going uneventful. Isla, my black lab, is getting bored from looking out the window and falls asleep in the back seat.

Finally, we arrive in Calston Cove. We’re staying at Ivan’s Airbnb again until the work on the little cottage that came with the practice is ready for habitation. It’s been Gurney’s home for a long time and dated. I haven’t seen it yet, but it can wait until tomorrow.

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We don't plan to open for a few weeks. The practice is so outdated I want to get the whole place remodelled first. I want a whole new experience for the customer, and I need to employ a new receptionist, seeing as the old one decided to retire when Mr Gurney passed away.

Stacey told me that Drew, her brother, still lives in Calston Cove and is a builder. No surprise. He was always into that kind of shit at school. I check out his website. The reviews all sing his praises, and some of the photographs are impressive, including the one of the old Mill House we all used to hang out in. He's at the top of my list of people to call tomorrow.

"Come on, girl. Time to stretch your legs," I say to Isla, who jumps out of the back of the car, and just like any other labrador, she springs around with all the energy and enthusiasm of a puppy. I could do with some fresh air and stretch my legs, my whole body really. Eight hours in a car is not good for my back. Maeve is carrying the cat basket inside. "I'm going to take Isla for a walk," I call back to her.

After attaching Isla's lead to her collar, I wander down the street into the town that brings back many memories. The conscious decision not to think of any negative parts of my past allows me to look at my surroundings with new and eager eyes, ready to make new memories. It only takes me five minutes to come out of the small housing estate and onto the high street leading down to the beach. Isla gives a yip of excitement and bounces towards the steps.

As we reach the row of cars parked in front of the steps down to the beach, we're forced to stop and allow a group of ten runners to pass. Why are people out running on a cold early November night? I let my gaze roam over their faces. I get some

flashes of recognition as well as a couple of curious glances. But before I can put any names to the faces, they're speeding up and sprinting away from me. The pathway is clear for us to cross, and we head down to the beach.

For the next ten minutes, I let Isla race around. She darts down to the sea and back again, barking happily at me, wagging her tail frantically the whole time. We need to wrap it up when it's too cold to hang around any longer. "Come on, girl. Let's go home to get warm."

The walk back is quicker as rain decides to join the cold wind. We're both ready for a warm house and a towel to dry off.

"I've ordered a pizza," Maeve says as we walk back through the door. "It will be twenty minutes."

"Great, thanks. I'm going to get her fed, then jump into the shower."

As I walk down the stairs, the doorbell buzzes. "I'll get it," I say over Isla's enthusiastic barking.

The kid at the door smiles politely and hands over the box of excessively greasy, carb-loaded meat and cheese delight. My stomach rumbles as I carry it through to the kitchen. Maeve has a wad of kitchen roll ready on the table. She knows, like me, that pizza tastes better straight from the box.

"Do we have a plan for tomorrow?" Maeve asks around a huge bite.

I nod, swallowing my food. "Yep, first I want to get a good look around the surgery and the cottage, then call the builder. He's a guy I knew from before. I want to see if and when he can start."

“I think being back here is going to be good for you, Jet.”

I sure hope she's right.

As we drive up to the surgery, excitement fills me. All kinds of ideas I want for the practice are cannoning through my head. I've researched equipment to update some of the older pieces and budgeted how much I need for this place, but not so much for the cottage. This is where I'll need a builder's eye, someone with experience in redeveloping houses.

I park in front of the cottage, and as Drew is nowhere in sight, I take my time to look around it again. When I first came here, I hadn't paid too much attention. My brain was running a mile a minute trying to work out that not only was it viable, but that it also wasn't pure madness coming back to a place that had more bad memories than good. Even the ones of Ben were tarnished by the pain from my arsehole sperm donor as well as his lack of contact. I never saw or heard from him again. His talks of love and forever were just that—all talk. It was the easiest way to get me naked.

The rumble of an engine breaks through my bad memories, bringing me back to the present. I've been wondering if I'll recognise Drew, but when he steps out of the cab of his truck, I have no doubt it's him. The only difference is the muscles and beard; the bright, happy eyes and the easy smile haven't changed. He shakes his head as he walks towards me.

“You know, I thought Stacey was pulling my leg when she said she's seen you. Then Ivan said the same, so I had to believe it. I've gotta say I never thought I'd see you again. Not after the way you just disappeared. You look good, Jethro. It's good to have you back again.”

“Thanks. It's a surprise for me too, but here I am. And from the look of this cottage, I'm going to need your help and expertise. Are you available for work?” I hate that I

sound nervous, that I'm worried he won't want to work for me after all this time. I don't want to ask him for anyone else's number if he can't do this.

"I'm sure I can help. You wanna show me what it's like in there? William Gurney has been the vet here forever, and if it's anything like him, it will be pristine but outdated by a fair few decades. You must remember him."

I do remember him, mainly because my father would always argue the bill. The old miser never wanted to pay full price. Him leaving his money to me when he died was a complete shock. I thought I would've been disinherited the moment I left the farm. But I took it and put the farm up for sale. I never wanted to set foot on that land ever again. Giving the money to the Terrence Higgins Trust was one of my most satisfying moments. A real kick in the teeth to the homophobic arsehole.

"Yeah, I remember him. He was a good man." I put the key in the lock and twist it. The door swings open easily. The floor is littered with takeaway pizza and Farm Food leaflets, but past that, it looks clean and tidy. "Your sister gave me a quick tour of the place, but it was all such a rushed weekend I didn't take much in."

I let Drew enter ahead of me. He'll have a better idea of what can be done with the place. The cottage has two small rooms and the kitchen downstairs. The stairs to the first floor are to the right in the small hallway. The upstairs is the same layout, only with two bedrooms and a bathroom. I try to visualise what can be done here, but I don't have much imagination when it comes to house renovations. The one thing I do like, though, is that it has a lot of space. I'm a couple of inches over six feet and don't want to bump my head as I walk through the low doorways. Perhaps the walls can be knocked down to make one space.

"What do you think?" I step up next to him. "I'd like to open it up, get more space and light in. The doorways aren't friendly to anyone tall, so the less of them, the better."

“You’ve changed, Jethro. I’m not sure I would’ve recognised you. How long has it been? I mean, one minute you were here, the next you disappeared, and no one knew where you’d gone. We were all concerned. Benny was the worst. He was sure something bad had happened.”

The easy way he says Ben’s name makes my stomach turn. It’s as if Drew knows Ben. I’d heard the shouting, my dad threatening to call the police. My mum wouldn’t say who it was. I had hoped it was Ben. At the time, I thought he’d see what was happening at my place and get someone around on a welfare check. He was twenty-five after all, with much more life experience. But no. Nothing. Instead of trading in my phone when I upgraded, I’d kept it in case he called. My dad took it off me, and I only got it back when he ordered me to get the train out of Calston Cove.

I still remember Dad’s final words to me. “Don’t come back until you change your perverted ways.” He slammed the door in my face. Mum was crying the whole way to the station, but she never stood up for me. Her tear-stained cheeks as I hauled my luggage onto the train is the last memory I have of her.

Drew clears his throat.

Shit, he’s waiting for an answer. “Um.” I cough, erasing any trace of emotion I may have. “It’s been fifteen years. Honestly, Drew, I never planned to come back here again.”

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“Why now? It’s great to have you back, and I can’t wait to introduce you to Merrick and my girl, Willow. I think the gay population has been multiplying rapidly since he arrived. His friends and family are turning up left, right, and centre. Ivan’s with Brodie. He bought your farmhouse. I did the work there. You won’t recognise the place.”

“I hope he’s happy there. I won’t be setting foot on that land if I can help it.” I’ve had enough of these questions and revelations. It’s time to get back on track and see what he can do to this place. “Let’s go and get a look at the upstairs.”

Whether Drew recognised my switch in conversation or not, he nods and follows me. Again, I have to duck my head to get through the doorway to the main bedroom.

“I’m not sure I can raise the height of the doorway without having to make some serious structural adjustments. The lintel runs across, making it a supporting wall,” Drew says, then continues by explaining why cottages like this one only have a certain leeway with developments without it being a major rebuild project.

“I’ll just have to remember to duck, even in the middle of the night.” I smirk. “I’ve not got deep enough pockets to go too far. All I want is to open up the rooms and have the bathroom and kitchen upgraded.” I look around the small room with the window in the eaves. “Can this be turned into one room?”

“Yep, that isn’t a supporting wall.” He points to the one on my left. “But I recommend keeping an extra room up here. It doesn’t have to be big, but if we open up everywhere, you’ve got no room for storage. You can keep one of the rooms downstairs and still open up into the kitchen or the same upstairs.”

“The next question is when can you start?” I rock back on my heels, enthusiasm and interest coursing through me. I want the work done as soon as possible. I can see myself living here.

“You said there was some work in the surgery building. Can I have a look? I may be able to get my crew working in both. It depends on how much remodelling it needs.”

“Shall we go over? Have you got time?”

Drew nods and turns back to the door. I follow him out, his words about Benny being the most concerned still buzzing around in my head. My father was more than happy to talk about him running away with his tail between his legs. That Ben was lucky he hadn't got the same treatment as me. He called him plenty of hideous, disgusting words, taking pleasure in watching me suffer. Happy to prove I was nothing but a toy to him.

I knew then that my father would lie and argue over anything and everything he could. That he always had to have the last word. He would gloat over every winning word. Even if I knew he was lying, he couldn't be contradicted. So if Drew says Ben was worried, maybe he didn't leave town. The only way to find out is to ask.

“You said Benny was worried. How did you know that?”

The morning is its usual manic self. The rush of coffees, pastries, and breakfast rolls to take away is followed by all the tables becoming full as friends meet up after the school run. Their chatter fills the room. The laughter, clattering of cutlery on china plates, and clinking of cups resting back on saucers are usually settling to me. But not today.

No. Today I met the woman who arrived with Jethro. I want to hate her. I want to tell her he was mine first, that I should be the one who knows how he takes his coffee or

what his favourite breakfast roll is. But I can't because she's kind without the haughty behaviour some city people have.

I serve her with a cheery smile and watch her almost bounce out of the room, saying hello to anyone who greets her. In the week he's been back, Jethro seems to have met all his old friends. Drew is even doing the work in the little cottage and the vet practice. Yet he hasn't been here.

Does he even know I'm here? Has he mentioned my name to any of the friends he's spoken to, the ones who have been here the whole bloody time? Ivan must have got it wrong when he said Jethro and Maeve—yes, she introduced herself—aren't together. It's the only reason I can think of that has stopped him from coming to see me. It's not as if I can ask anyone. No one knew about our relationship. Although now, after all this time, I can't think of any reason we didn't share what we had going with our friends. In fact, I doubt old man Palmer would've got away with the things he did had they known. Everyone believed the easy, glib way he lied about Jethro's disappearance, saying he'd gone to university early to get ready.

When the morning rush dies down, I leave the front café and head back to the kitchen, taking the last few hours to prep for tomorrow. It's easy to lose track of time making pastries, bread, and all the other items I'll need. The business has been more of a success than I could ever have imagined or hoped for. The loan from the bank has been paid off, and soon I'll own the building outright. It has almost made the last fifteen years of being on my own bearable. I can hardly count the six months of being with Jamie. I try not to think of him at all. He did as I asked and left me alone.

But I can't get the memory of Jethro and the way he gave himself to me, the way I loved him, out of my mind. No one came close to him. It's stupid hanging on to a past that I've probably distorted over the years, even more so now that I know it meant nothing to him. That I meant nothing to him. A distant past he obviously doesn't hold much credence to. At eighteen and about to start a new chapter in his life, he

simply moved on. I gave him the experience to be able to move on, to have other lovers and find someone to settle down with.

Finally, I'm finished for the day and can leave. The afternoon staff are more than capable of handling the customers' orders until we close at six. I pull on my coat, and as I wrap my scarf around my neck, someone calls my name.

"Benny, have you a moment?" Merrick, one of my closest friends and Drew's partner, approaches me. "Don't worry. I won't keep you. You've been here long enough. You know we're having a New Year party. Of course you do. You've got an invitation. Sorry, my head is all over the place. Willow suddenly has the attitude of a teenager and is having tantrums at every opportunity. It seems that Drew is the only one who can placate her, and he's over at the new vet's place all the time. Anyway, to get to the point, can you do the food? Nothing too complicated, just your usual amazing stuff."

As he mentions the vet, meaning Jethro, I stop listening. All I can think of is Drew getting to spend all his time with a man who should be with me. Fuck, I'm doing it again, claiming him again. "Sorry, what did you say?"

Merrick frowns. "The food, Benny, for the party, can you do it?"

"Oh, oh yes, sure. No problem. Let me know what you want, and I'll sort it for you."

"All done. Here you are." Merrick pulls out an envelope and passes it to me, but before he lets go, he cocks his head to the side. "Are you okay? You're very distracted. If it's a problem, I can hand this over to Waitrose."

"No, sorry. I'm fine. It's been a busy day." I want to go before my friend's keen mind latches on to something. "Everyone wanted to get out of the cold and ended up here."

“Have you seen your old friend, the vet is it? Jethro? I’m not sure that’s his name. Drew said you two were close before he went to Edinburgh.”

They’ve discussed us. Drew and Merrick know; they must. I try to form a coherent sentence but fail miserably. “I, um... I, no, no, I haven’t. It’s been a long time, and he’s here with the redhead, Maeve, I think.” God, someone shut me up and push me out the door.

“It is Maeve, and they’re nottogethertogether. She’s his vet nurse or tech, whatever they call them. They’ve been friends for years. I’m pretty sure Drew said Jethro is gay.”

Where’s a tornado or a lightning strike when you need one? I so don’t want to have this conversation. I shuffle uncomfortably, wanting to be anywhere but here. “I’m sorry, Merrick. I’ve got things to do at home. I’ll get this sorted for you.”

Merrick looks surprised at my abrupt end to the conversation but smiles. “Okay, thanks, Benny. See you soon.”

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I'm already on the move to the door and out into the bitter cold. The wind whips around my head, and I duck down into the scarf in an effort to keep my ears warm. The winters on the south coast of Devon are wet and wild. I should be used to them by now, but the cold seeps into my bones, urging me to pick up my pace and get home.

With the door firmly shut behind me, I strip out of my coat and kick off my shoes, feeling more tired than normal. My shower will have to wait. I take off my flour-covered clothes and climb under the thick quilt. My eyelids close heavily, and I sleep.

I dream of chasing Jethro as he moves farther and farther through the fields behind the barns and away from the farm. All I can do is call his name. He stops, and when he turns around, his face is covered in cuts and bruises. He speaks, but I can't hear him. He shakes his head, telling me no, not to go after him. I shoot up in bed, gasping for breath, my hand on my chest.

As I slump back down, my head hits the soft pillow. The usual sadness these nightmares cause is replaced with something new—anger.

I'm angry, angry that he's back in my thoughts, angry that he's talking to his old friends. And most of all, I'm angry that he hasn't been to see me. I'm angry that I couldn't keep Jamie. He quickly dumped me for his ex. I'm a forty-year-old man who's acting like a teenager. I've been hanging on to something that isn't real anymore. My whole life has been wasted on a dream my lover would come back for me. Not anymore. I'm done.

I walk around the newly refurbished building, which, after Drew has had his crew

work their magic, has become much more open, spacious, and light. The new furniture has arrived, and we're only a week away from opening. I'm halfway through interviewing for the receptionist position. I was surprised by the number of replies and have narrowed it down to a handful.

Maeve sees the third person out the door, her face a mask of polite friendliness, but I know my friend. She's already discounted this one. I agree. That was not the right fit. I glance down at the name of the next applicant: Luke Penberthy. He's young, only nineteen, but he has all the computer skills and has been studying animal management at the local college. I've got my sights set on him before he's even walked through the door.

Twenty minutes later, I know he's got the job. The last interviewee only cements my thoughts. When it's just Maeve and me, I lock the door. She grins at me. "If you don't give the job to Luke, I'm going back to Scotland."

"You don't need to pack your bags. He's perfect for the position. I'll call him this evening. He'll need training, though, and that's where you come in." I lean back in my chair, my fingers knotted together behind my head.

"We should go out to celebrate." Maeve claps her hands. She's been trying to get me to the pub for days without success.

I'm hiding away. Ever since Drew told me Ben's been here the whole time I've been gone, disproving my father's rant that he'd run him out of town with threats of exposing him as a predator, I'm avoiding seeing Ben. Guilt floods me every time I hear his name or think about him. I'm a coward. I should've gone to see him as soon as I found out, yet my heart and my head are battling with each other. My heart is aching to see him and tell him how hard it was to leave him. That the cruel lies I'd been told were the reason I never got in touch with him again.

My head says to stay away, that he won't be interested in me anymore. Still, I want to explain that my tattoos and piercings were a way to change, to be different from the eighteen-year-old who had pledged his love to a man seven years older than him. The kid who was too scared of being found out, to keep it a secret, when all he wanted to do was shout from the barn rooftop that he was gay and that he loved Ben. While no one has mentioned him having a partner, I haven't asked either.

I stare around the room, trying to find an excuse to stay here and not go out. Maeve cocks her head and frowns, worry lines marring her usually smooth forehead. "I'm not going to take no for an answer tonight. What was the point of moving back here if you become a hermit? You had a much better social life back in Edinburgh. Are you regretting your decision? Because, my best buddy, you're too far in to back out now. And I like it here. The people are friendly, and the town is cute."

"Fine, we'll go out." Yeah, I'm being churlish. And no, I don't care. "I'll even buy the drinks. How does that sound?"

"That's a good start. You need to see the people you grew up with. They're going to be the ones bringing their pets to you. You need to move on from the past. It's all-consuming, taking over your thoughts and actions. You're going to bump into him, mate. That's a given. No one hangs on to the past like you have. You need to get over yourself."

"Oh, great. Thanks for that, Maeve. That's really boosted my confidence." She's right, though. I've spent more time worrying about bumping into Ben than manning up and going to say hello. He was more than the guy I was into, who I messed around with, or who I gave my virginity to. He was my best friend. I'm sure we won't have any fire left to rekindle, and that's the crux of it. I'm afraid that when we do meet, there's nothing left apart from an embarrassed mumble of hellos and 'how have you beens?' And that's worse than any angry words could be.

This conversation has gone on long enough, and I've had enough of thinking about Ben. "I'm going to set up the meds cupboards." I stalk out of the office, leaving Maeve to her own devices. It's easy to lose track of time when all I'm doing is inputting names and batch numbers into the computer. It's also a great way to clear all the clutter messing up my mind.

A knock on the door interrupts me. I blink a few times to get my eyes to adjust after staring at the screen. I hadn't noticed how dark it had got. Drew stands in the doorway. The darkness from the window behind him is more proof of the lateness of the day.

"Drew? Hi. You okay?" Has he found something wrong in the cottage? It's all been plain sailing so far. Admittedly, this place took priority, and he's done an amazing job.

"Not at all. I reckon another week before you can start decorating. Is it all good here? Any niggling problems?" He looks around as if expecting to see a fault.

"Nope, it's great." There's something he wants to say, but he's hesitating. "Spit it out, mate."

"We're all going to the pub. It's early doors. You wanna come?"

I've turned him down every other time he's asked, but after agreeing with Maeve, I can't say no this time. "Yeah, sure. Sounds good. Let me shut this down and lock up, and I'll be with you."

"Awesome." He taps the door frame and goes back out to the reception area, where he says, "see you later" to Maeve. She's probably behind him coming over, and for the first time, I'm not annoyed by her meddling.

Before I go, I call Luke and offer him the job. His enthusiastic reply tells me I've made the right decision. And it puts me in a better mood.

We're rushing to get out of the bitter wind coming off the sea and inside the warm pub. Maeve heads over to Stacey and Melanie. They've become good friends in the short time we've been here. They've even managed to get her to an exercise class, something she has baulked from for as long as I have known her.

"What are you having?" Drew asks as we walk to the bar.

"Just a pint, the Peroni," I say after looking at what they have on tap. The pub is quiet for a Friday night, but as Drew said, it's early doors. Drew and his friends have taken over a table in the corner. Ivan, his boyfriend, and the three women are already sitting.

Ivan gives me a nod, which I assume is him saying hello. If only I could remember his boyfriend's name. I don't want to come across as rude. As I rack my brain, Drew hands me my glass and points to the corner.

I find myself sitting next to the nameless boyfriend. He smiles at me. "I'm Brodie. We met at Ivan's house a while back."

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“I remember, but thanks for the name update.” I take a sip of my lager and another and another until I’ve drunk a good few swallows. It seems I needed this more than I thought.

Drew introduces me to his partner, Merrick, and Trent and Merlin, the first being one of Merrick’s friends from before he lived here.

“It’s growing gayer every day around here,” Stacey gripes. “I need some straight men to move into town.”

Melanie and Maeve agree, giving the men a faux disgruntled look. “Where’s Benny?” Melanie asks.

All the air in my lungs turns to cement, and I’m frozen in my seat, waiting for a reply from anyone. Maeve gives me a small smile of support. It’s not until Ivan answers that he’s stuck at work with a large order to complete that I can exhale and breathe again.

“You must remember him,” Melanie says to me.

My excuse for not going to the pub tonight is a lie. As soon as Merrick mentioned Drew was asking Jethro, my head held up a huge STOP sign. The bulk of the food for his party is already done and finished and is now waiting in the freezer. All except the last-minute pieces that won’t freeze.

Am I a coward? Yep, bigger than the poor giant cat in The Wizard of Oz. Is it going to make a difference in the long run? Nope, it’s going to happen. It just doesn’t need

to be on a cold, wild, and windy winter night. I'm trying to hold off until Merrick and Drew's party, where I'll be surrounded by friends and all the compliments that go with them eating my food. I'm more than just a baker with a coffee shop. I enjoy my busy shop. Not many know about my exclusive online wedding catering and cake-making business. I do fewer than a handful of weddings a year, but I'm still booked a couple of years in advance.

I like to think Jethro is feeling the same as me: too cautious, too worried, and not sure how to react to seeing each other again. A lot of remorse and guilt weigh down on my shoulders. I know what his father had done to him. I know his mother covered it all up. I should've gone to the police, yet I kept my mouth shut. I can only imagine the hurt, not only of his injuries but also of how I made him feel—rejected and unloved.

In the dark of the nights, I go back to that summer and the time spent in the loft of the decrepit barn. I can still smell the old hay, still feel the warmth of the sun shining down on us from between the broken roof tiles. Still taste his sweat, clean and sharp on my tongue. His skin, so silky smooth under my fingertips. But the most vivid memories, the ones that have me grasping my dick, fucking its full, rigid length through my clenched fist, are of the feeling of being inside him, the heat, the tight grip, the sounds he made as he begged for more, for harder, for faster. They're the ones that have me spilling over my fingers and onto my stomach. In those moments, I could hate him for not being here, but I hate myself more. Because the truth is I've never stopped loving him.

But I don't deserve him.

The wind rattles the door, bringing me back to the present. I look down at the sugar rose petals I'm supposed to be painting but have crumbled between my fingers into soft icing sugar again. It's time for me to stop and go home.

"Benny, there's someone wanting to talk to you." Amy, one of my morning staff,

pops her head around the kitchen door.

That's is not what I need when I'm up to my elbows in flour. "Who is it?"

"The new lady from the vet's. She says it's important."

"Fine, but she'll have to come in here. I'm not cleaning up. I'm too busy," I snap. Her eyes go wide. I never use this tone with her or any of my employees. "Sorry, sweetheart. Just ask her to come through."

I carry on making the pastry, which needs plenty of attention to get it right. At the light tap on the door frame, I look up. Maeve stands there, shuffling on her feet. "Um, hi, Benny. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to hand-deliver this." She waves an envelope at me.

"What is it?"

"An invitation to the opening of the new veterinary practice. It's on Thursday evening." She bites her lip like she wants to say more but doesn't know if she should. "It would be good if you came. Um, I think Jet would like to see you."

Jet? Is that what he goes by now? I'm not surprised. He never really liked his name. Bitterness floods me. Jet sounds far too cool for Calston Cove. And for me. I'm never going to fit in his life now.

"Thank you, but as I don't have any pets, it hardly seems relevant for me to come." I keep my voice as light and easy as possible.

Maeve doesn't move. I feel her eyes on me. I don't want to look over, but I don't think she's going to go until she's said her piece. When I can't resist the urge and glance at her, I expect her to be annoyed, angry even, but there's none of that. Only

sadness.

“He’s afraid to see you, afraid you’ll tell him you’ve moved on and there’s nothing between you anymore. And I think you feel the same way.”

“You don’t know me, Maeve. And Jethro has known where I’ve been for the last fifteen years. He’s never once reached out. You can take that back. I won’t be coming.” I nod at the envelope she dropped on one of the stainless-steel counters.

She snatches it up, muttering something about bloody, stubborn men.

For the next three days, the conversation in the coffee shop is all about the opening of the practice. How Luke is thrilled to be the receptionist there and how good it is to have Jethro back again. I’ll be glad when it’s all settled down and life can get back to normal.

Not that I think I’ll ever feel ‘normal’ again, knowing Jethro is only a few streets away from my cottage. If only I could switch off my feelings for him. Because right now, I can’t tell the difference between wanting him and hating him for coming back and upsetting my life without even having the decency of coming to see me. I can’t believe he’s this messed up over me. He’s melded back into the crowd of friends, my friends, as easy as pie. The long-lost brother has returned. Christ, when did I turn into a bitter old man?

I work late, letting the others go, and get ready for the evening. It seems that everyone is going to the opening. It’s an open house. Which confuses me. Why would Maeve bring me an invitation specifically? What if Jethro asked her to? No, she doesn’t seem to be the person to let him play games.

Eventually, all the jobs I could think of are done. I’ve made enough to cater this weekend and probably the next. When I leave, I remember I need to go to the

supermarket, so I have to go home and get my car. Shit, why have I left it so late? I all but stomp my way home, ignoring anything around me. At the corner of the street, I slow down to cross the road.

A low whimper comes from beneath the hedge. It stops, then starts again. I bend down. The streetlight gives me just enough light to see what's making the noise. A tiny dog with a black nose is peeking at me with a pair of dark eyes.

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“Hey there, little one. What are you doing in here?” I hold my hand out, but the dog shrinks farther into the hedge. I’m on my knees, the cold, damp from the concrete seeping into my jeans. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.” I keep my voice soft as I reach in farther. “Come on, sweetheart. You can’t stay here in the cold and wet.”

Patiently I wait for the dog to come closer. I’m not sure how much time has passed before the cold, damp nose of the pup touches my hand. “That’s it, sweetheart. Come on out.”

Finally, it’s close enough for me to wrap my arms around it and lift it. The poor thing whimpers and snaps at my hands. I obviously cause it pain, but I don’t know where or how it’s hurt. Under the streetlight, I take a better look. Blood covers its back leg. I shudder when I see why. The leg is broken.

I clutch the dog to my chest and sprint home to my car. With the dog lying on the passenger seat, I rush to the driver’s side and start the ignition. I drive as fast but as carefully as possible to the vet’s. It’s not until I push the door open that where I am sinks in.

“I need help.”

The chatter stops, and everyone looks at me.

“He’s hurt. It’s his leg.”

The crowd separate, and Jethro stands in front of me.

I can't believe how many people have come along to the opening or how so many are registering their pets. The welcome from everyone touches me in ways I never expected. They share memories of my childhood, many I'd forgotten. Some I preferred not to be reminded about, but the most surprising was the apology from the retired GP.

"I wish I'd stepped in to stop what was going on under everyone's eyes. Your father was a bully to many people but the most brutal to you. And for that, I apologise. I should've stopped him long before you had to leave. I've never forgiven myself for that."

It felt like a sucker punch to my gut. My cheeks heat, not with the anger that should've been my first reaction but with sadness for the old man in front of me. "You don't need to apologise. I doubt anything you said would've made a ha'p'orth of difference. He was an evil old bastard, worse when he drank. I'm sure he's got what he deserves."

"You're too kind, but thank you." He gives me a look that has a wicked gleam in it. "You'll find happiness here. You're among a lot of like-minded men." With a small smile, he wanders off to talk to someone else.

I'm left reeling at his parting words. He knows I'm gay. He knew I was gay. I glance around the room. Everyone who has befriended me is here. And I can see at least half a dozen gay men, and there may be more I haven't met yet. Including the main reason I'm back—Ben, the elusive baker. The man known as Benny by the people in town, the one I'm too afraid to reach out to. He's single and without any long-term partners, or so everyone says. Yet we're both stubbornly ignoring each other.

The chatter and laughter quieten, and I look at the door that has just beeped open. Without being able to see who has just come in, I walk forward, ready to greet and thank them for coming along. The injured dog is the first thing I notice, and I rush

forward to take it. “What happened?” I ask, then look at the person carrying the animal.

My heart stops—Ben. He looks like he’s in shock. His arms are shaking as he holds on tight to the wounded dog. “I...I don’t know. I heard the whimpers coming from under the hedge on the corner of Sandy Lane. He was hiding.”

“You’re soaking wet.” His dirty blond hair is plastered to his face, his coat drenched through. The drizzle from earlier must have turned into a downpour. As if proving my thoughts, thunder rattles the window of the reception.

He lets out a dark, humourless chuckle. “You don’t say. It took me a long time to coax him out. I can see his leg is broken.”

“I need to get him into an exam room. Maeve?” I call to her, but Ben shakes his head.

“I’ve got him. I’ll bring him through.”

Maeve follows us through the packed room and into the largest exam room at the rear of the building, where we have the X-ray machine. Maeve appraises the dog and gives me a look that she can see something I haven’t yet. Hopefully, they won’t have to move him around too much.

Ben slowly and carefully lowers the dog onto the examination table. There’s no doubt of the damage done. His femur, the thigh bone, is protruding through the fur. Which indicates he was hit by a car. He couldn’t have been under the hedge for long before Ben found him. Otherwise, the dog wouldn’t have survived with the amount of blood loss this had caused.

“Is it bad?” Ben asks with a wobble in his voice. He rests his hand on the dog’s head, stroking through the sopping fur.

“You may have saved his life. This is very serious. He’s lost a lot of blood. I’m going to X-ray the leg and check for any other injuries. It’s probably from a traffic accident, so his ribs could be damaged, and he may have some internal injuries. He’s very poorly, Ben.”

His name on my tongue retrieves memories I’ve kept locked away for so many years, and an emotion I’ve been guarding for as long breaks free. I have to clamp my jaw shut to stop me telling him how much I’ve missed him. Now is not the time. But will there ever be a right time?

“Do you think he belongs to anyone?”

“I can check for a microchip once I’ve got him stable. We’ve got him from here. You’ve done the right thing.” As I take over and get to work on her, he slumps. Shit, I’ve offended him by dismissing him. I didn’t mean to, but I must get the dog stable first.

“Okay.” He strokes the dog’s head again. It’s obvious how difficult it is for him to leave him. “Would you, um, I mean, can I wait? I won’t be any trouble. I want to know how he is.”

“Of course. You may want to go home, get some clean, dry clothes,” Maeve says kindly but stops short when she sees the determination on his face. “Or we have some scrubs here.”

A knock on the door is followed by Luke popping his head around. “Sorry to interrupt, boss. Everyone has done the clearing up and has left. Do you need me to stay?”

“Can you show Ben to the scrub room and find him something clean for him to wear? He’s going to wait while we operate. You’re free to go after that. Thank you for all

your help tonight.”

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Luke looks to me, then Maeve, then to Ben. “Um, okay. Benny, it’s this way.”

The door closes behind them, and I focus on the dog. Maeve has already got an IV line into the dog with fluids to hydrate it and the X-ray ready to go. Damn, I’m off my game. “I’m sorry. That was kinda weird. I wasn’t expecting to see him, not after the way you said he dismissed you. Which was bloody rude, by the way.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that already. Can we get to work and forget about him? This is more important.”

So that’s what we do. We insert a metal rod to bring the two broken parts together and stabilise the leg. The poor dog, that is actually a she, not a he, has had a rough night ahead of her. Along with the broken leg, she’s got broken ribs, a lot of cuts and abrasions, and bruising to her stomach and liver. The torn foot pads and ripped nails have been bandaged. Plus, a cut above her eye needed stitching. Whoever hit her must have been travelling at some speed. I’d like to get my hands on them. A thin nylon collar with a bit of snapped lead still attached is wrapped around her neck. There’s more to this than just a hit and run, and the idea of what makes me shudder. Was she dragged? Once she’s patched up and coming out of the anaesthetic, I carry her through to the crates and get her settled. Her drips have antibiotics and painkillers flowing through them.

“We need to check for a microchip.” Maeve has the scanner already in her hand. After running the device over his body, it beeps, bringing up a number.

“Bugger,” she says. “I was kind of hoping there wasn’t one. I’ll go and run it through the database and get the details.”

I nod and stay with the dog. I have a horrible feeling Ben is going to be disappointed that she has an owner. It will hurt to tell him, but hopefully, the knowledge that he saved the dog's life will be enough for him. With a final pat, I close the crate door and go to the office to write up the details of the surgery and injuries. Maybe they would be useful if it ever came to finding the Formula One wannabe.

Maeve comes storming into the room with a face like thunder. "That fucking wanking-tosspot-arsehole." She collapses onto the chair. "You wanna know what he said?" Her Scottish accent becomes so much more pronounced as she gets angrier. "He said he wasn't going to pay a penny for fixing her up. She wasn't supposed to survive. Whatever the hell that means, and that we should go ahead and put her down."

"Who was it? Someone from the town?" I can't believe someone from around here would do such a thing.

"That's just it. The address on the database is somewhere in Exeter. I think they drove down here and dumped her. He could be the one who hit her."

The idea of what really happened feels more possible. "You could be right, but we can't prove anything. She's going to be here for a few days anyway. We can seek out foster care." I scrub my hand down my face. "I'm gonna go and talk to Ben."

When I get out into the reception room, Ben is asleep, slumped in one of the comfy chairs, but he jolts upright as I stop in front of him.

"How is he?"

Startled, I jump up from the seat, rubbing my face to try to wake up. Jethro is standing in front of me, looking worn out but not unhappy. "Is he okay?"

His smile is small, and the attempt at laughter is even worse. “He is actually a she, and she’s pulled through. She’s got a long way to go, though, and it will take a while for her to fully recover. I’ll be keeping her here for the next forty-eight hours, maybe more. She’s resting now and has both painkillers and antibiotics being administered through a drip.”

While it’s great to hear the dog is going to recover, all I can think of is whether they’ve found a microchip. “That’s good. I mean, it’s great, but all I want to know is if he—sorry, she—has a chip? Have you found an owner?”

Jethro’s expression becomes hard, angry even. “The dog is microchipped, and Maeve spoke to the owner, but I need to talk to him myself. It’s complicated. Maybe you should get home, Ben. It’s late, and there’s nothing more you can do tonight.”

Now there’s a dismissal if I’ve ever heard one. I wasn’t just waiting for news on the dog, but to see him—Jethro. To talk to him. But it’s obvious he doesn’t want to. Like he said, it’s late. “Can I see her before I go?”

He stares at me for a fraction too long, and I back-pedal. “Okay, I get it.”

“No, wait. It’s fine. I hope she’ll be sleeping again. Come this way.”

I follow him through the door separating the public area from the private one. I pay more attention to it all this time around. Everything looks smart and sleek, expensive. Talk was he hadn’t kept any of the sale of his house, so this must have cost a pretty penny. He stops at the door. “She has had a lot of fur shaved away so we could get to all the injuries, so she’s in a bit of a sorry state.”

This poor dog has got under my skin way more than it should’ve done. I want to be the one to look after her. But I’m not sure my life is conducive to having a dog. I’m up early every morning to bake, then work in the shop until late afternoon. A little

voice in the back of my head adds its opinion. You're only there because you have nothing better to do. Maybe it's right. I do work long hours because I have nothing else to do. When I was with Jamie, I took more time off, but when that relationship went to pieces, I lost myself in baking.

I'm getting way ahead of myself. The dog has an owner. There may be issues with that, but it still doesn't mean I can take ownership. I'm getting in way too deep, too quickly. Hell, Jethro can hardly look me in the eye, let alone see me regularly with a poorly dog.

When I look into the only occupied crate, my breath comes out in awoosh. She's pretty banged up, with the stitches, the shaved fur, and, most obvious, the heavily bandaged leg. I raise my hand, wanting to stroke her, to offer her comfort even in her sleep. Jethro must have noticed because he opens the door a little, and I can touch her sweet, soft muzzle and nose. I pull back quicker than I want to, but Jethro is right. She needs her rest. "Thank you."

It's time to go home. I don't want to get into any kind of conversation at this late hour. We're both tired, and I'm feeling emotional after everything that's happened tonight. "Can you please keep me updated?"

"Of course. You did an amazing thing tonight, Ben. You saved her life." Jethro tries to touch my arm, but I shrink out of the way. I'm already hanging by a thread, and exhaustion is coming over me in waves. "Hey, it's okay. I know you must be tired. I'll speak to you tomorrow. Drive carefully, please."

I nod and retrace my previous steps into the reception and out the door. As I breathe in deeply, the air freezes in my throat as I hold back a sob. I need to be at home, in my bed. I can have a meltdown then.

But I don't. In fact, I don't even remember the drive home or climbing into bed.

The next morning, the dull, dark grey clouds greet me through the window framed by undrawn curtains. I stretch out in my bed and cringe at the click in my back and knees as my joints begrudgingly wake up. Memories of last night flood my mind, forcing any residue of sleep away. The dog. Jethro.

My phone rings, and I jump out of bed to the pile of scrubs I stripped carelessly out of last night. “Lo.” It comes out scratchy. I clear my throat and start again. “Hello.”

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“Benny, it’s Amy. Are you coming in this morning? I heard all about your rescue last night, so it’s okay if you’re not. We’ve got it all under control. I just thought I’d check on you.”

I don’t even know what the time is, but seeing as it’s daylight, it’s later than I usually get up. Normally, I’m in the kitchen nearly every morning before sunrise. “Shit, Amy. I’m sorry. Give me half an hour, and I’ll be there.”

“Okay, but don’t rush. We’re managing fine.”

We say goodbye, and I stumble off to the bathroom to grab a shower.

I walk through the back door into the café’s kitchen. I’ll get out of my coat and my apron on before I face the crowds and the myriad of questions I don’t know the answer to. Hopefully, I have at least a text updating me on the dog. Maybe nothing has changed. Or maybe something bad has happened to her. I reach for my phone. Shit, I don’t have the number. If I don’t hear anything, I’ll go over there later.

As I walk from the kitchen into the shop, all eyes turn to me. Amy smiles at me. “I told you it was all under control.”

“I’ll have to promote you to manager if you keep this up.” Her eyes go wide at my suggestion. I was only kidding, but after my night and my desire to keep the dog, it doesn’t seem such a bad idea. Something for me to think about when I have an update. I face the counter and take my first order.

As I expected, every customer—and there are a lot more than usual for this time of

year—has found out about last night and wants to know all the details. The speculation of who and what happened runs rife, becoming more elaborate and embellished as the morning goes on. I'm getting tired of talking about it all. It's not until mid-afternoon before someone who may have a genuine update comes into the shop—Luke. Not the person I wanted to hear it from, but better than no one informing me.

“Hey, can I get a takeout order?” he asks Maddie, but he gives me a nod. “Can I talk to you, Benny? Do you have time?”

“Of course. Come through.” I open the pass to let him in. Luke worked for me for a long time over the school holidays and later through college. He knows his way around the café. “Is it about the dog?” I ask him once we're away from the eyes and ears of the customers.

“Yes, Jet wondered if you could call around after you've finished here. There are some things he wants to explain.”

And he couldn't be bothered to come and see me himself. He really is an asshole. “I'm not sure I'll have time. I was late getting here this morning. Just tell me if she's doing okay.”

Luke shuffles his feet as if he wants to get out of here as quickly as possible. “Yeah, she's improving. But I think it's important what Jet wants to say to you. I told him it would be better if he told you himself, but he's busy today.”

“As long as the little dog is getting better, I don't think there's anything else to talk to me about,” I snap. “I'm sorry, Luke. I know this isn't your business. Can you let Jethro know I won't be coming over?”

“Okay, yeah, sure. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“Luke, you haven’t bothered me, not one bit. I’m sorry you got to be the messenger. I hope you get on well there.”

He gives me a small smile like it’s his fault I’m annoyed. Poor kid. He dashes to the counter, collects the lunch order, and walks out.

Bloody Jethro. Why is he doing this? If he wants to talk, he can get off his arse and come to me. I’m not chasing after a man who has already broken my heart.

The afternoon goes slowly, like snail slow, paint-drying slow, and all because I want to get to Ben’s house and bloody throttle him. The bloody, stubborn man. I’ve got things to tell him about the pup he brought in, sad things, things I hoped he’d want to hear, seeing how devoted he was to wait through the operation. Honestly, I thought he’d be on the doorstep as we opened. I’m sure he will want to adopt her, even though she’s not going to be easy to look after, at least not to begin with.

The phone call to the registered owner went down like a lead balloon, even when I told him my opinion on how she got her injuries. He said I couldn’t prove any of it and reiterated to have her euthanised. My refusal pissed him off, so I said I would rehome her and put the phone down on him. I can’t prove he ran her over on purpose, but I can make sure she never sees him again. I could keep her myself; Isla won’t be jealous. She’s always played nicely with other dogs. But that’s not where I think she should be. She should be with my very mulish ex-bloody-boyfriend.

At last, it’s time to close. Maeve is on duty tonight and will be sleeping in the small on-call room I managed to squeeze into the corner of the building. “Call me if there are any problems.”

“Will do. Have a good night.” Maeve glares at me, her words weighed down with another meaning—go and speak to him.

I whistle for Isla and open the back door into the private parking area. I look at my little cottage. It'll only be a week or so before I can move in. Maeve has stayed in Ivan's house. They've come to an agreement over rent. She seems settled, even in the middle of a wet and windy Devon winter. The Scottish girl is happy in any kind of weather. It's her highland upbringing, she says.

When I get into my car, I crank up the heat, even though it's only a five-minute drive to Ivan's rental, but I hate being cold. The high street is quiet. Most of the stores are shut, but lights are on at a couple of restaurants and one just farther up, the one that belongs to Ben. I didn't realise he stayed open late. I thought he'd close at five thirty like the other shops. As I get closer, I see it's empty. I slow down. The Closed sign is on the door. So, why am I pulling over and stopping? I have no intention of going to the door, but memories of our conversations from too long ago come back. His love of cooking, but he knew there wasn't any way he could go to college to study. His parents were old and needed him to help them out. It was why he worked at the supermarket; he had set hours that fitted around his home-life commitments.

They must be long passed. Is that how he ended up fulfilling his dream? I doubt I'll ever know if I don't make a move to speak to him. Last night was hard enough, and then my mind was on the job, and I had Maeve around. I could smell him, the rich cinnamon and spicy scent that was always him. It made my heart race and my skin prickle with goosebumps. It was shocking how quickly I reacted to him, that my body remembered him so acutely. How much I wanted him. The pedestal I put him on when I left was my downfall. No man stood a chance at anything serious with me. No one matched the way my body sang for Ben. So why didn't he contact me? I left the letter for him with my mum. I trusted her not to say anything to my father and pass it on.

The lights in the café go off, and the door opens. I stay rooted in my seat as Ben locks up, then, with the collar of his coat turned up, walks away. On autopilot, I put the car back in gear and follow him. He doesn't notice me until he stops at a corner, checking

around for any traffic.

Our eyes lock, and he takes a step back from the kerb, looking like he's going to change direction. Before he can, I open the window. "Ben, wait."

"What do you want?" he asks. I want to roll my eyes at the ridiculousness of the question. What does he think I want?

"To talk. I'd like to talk to you. It's been too long." I've had enough of staying away. The town is too small for us to be apart. We share the same group of friends, for god's sake. I get that he doesn't want anything from me, that we're not the same people we were fifteen years ago, but I'd like to get to know him again. There's no reason we can't be friends.

"Why? Why now? You've been back here for well over a month and didn't want to talk. Not even when I brought the dog to you." He hasn't moved from the pavement to get closer to my car nor made any eye contact with me.

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“Please, Ben. Why don’t you get in, and we can go somewhere to talk?” It’s a risky request, but I’ve got nothing to lose. “We can go back and see the dog. She’s recovering well, much quicker than I expected.”

I’m not playing fair, and we both know it, but I may get a chance with him by tempting him with the dog.

“I doubt we have anything to say to each other, Jethro. Or is it Jet now? It’s been fifteen years. Fifteen years with no contact. I don’t know anything about you or you me. What the hell would we have to talk to each other about? Good night, Jethro.” With that, Ben crosses the road and carries on his way home.

As much as I want to follow him, I don’t. I’ve pushed my luck to the end tonight. There will be other times.

“Are you ready for this?” Drew dangles a set of keys at me. He’d called me this afternoon to tell me it was all finished. The little house was ready.

“I am. I can’t believe you got it all done so quickly.” It had taken a little over five weeks, and while I’ve had a few walk-throughs with him, I haven’t seen it all cleaned up and fitted out. The new furniture is in, and the few things I had sent down from Scotland have been put in place.

“Merrick said he’d have my balls on a platter if I didn’t have it finished before the party. You are coming, right?” Drew grins. I quickly worked out that Drew was happily at the beck and call of his partner and his daughter.

I take the keys from him. “I wouldn’t miss it. Maeve has been talking about it for days. She’s been constantly texting the other girls as they organised their wardrobes.”

“I’ll see you later, then. Let me know if there are any niggling issues.”

As he walks back to his truck, I open the door. The smell of fresh paint and newly laid carpets greets me. I smile. This is the first home I own. The others have been rented or came with the job. I never in a million years imagined it would be back in Calston Cove. The fact that I’m happy here surprises me even more. To have rekindled friendships has made it all so much easier.

Except for the one person.

I’m exhausted before the party even starts. It’s easy to forget that Merrick still has a lot of London connections. That he has such high standards and expectations when I’m used to seeing him with his daughter messing around on the beach or searching for crabs in the rock pools when the tide has gone out.

I look over the kitchen, checking the last of the food, some already on the silver trays. The servers are looking neat and tidy in black trousers and crisp white shirts and are ready for the first round of champagne and tiny mouthfuls of amuse-bouche. But I’ve been told I’m a guest, not a caterer.

“Benny, you’ve passed all my expectations. Please leave the kitchen and enjoy the party,” Merrick admonishes me.

My plan was to stay out of the way of a certain guest, but obviously, I’m not allowed, and that was probably Merrick’s plan all along. His determination to have all his friends as happily in love as he and Drew are. Of course I want that too. I always have, but the person I’ve become is because I fixated on the past, on the love I thought was perfect. I’ve become a stupid middle-aged man. Who knows who and

what I've said no to because I thought Jethro would come back for me?

It's time to turn over a new leaf, to make a resolution before the New Year. I'm going to put Jethro behind me. I did it before, and although Jamie was a total dick, I still found out I can be happy and in love with someone else. There are online dating apps, not Grindr, something, I don't know, something—more. Maybe there's someone here tonight. Merrick has invited a ton of people outside of the town. So I pull up my metaphorical big girl panties and face the group.

It's a good thing Merrick has such a large house. The number of people here are doing a great job of filling it. When someone calls my name, I look up. Stacey is motioning for me to come over. "Oh my god, Benny. The food is fantastic. I think I should marry you."

"I'm glad you like it, but unfortunately, you're lacking what I like in a person." I grin and accept her hug.

"Why are all the best men gay?" Her lamentation is greeted with sighs of agreement from Melanie and Maeve.

Maeve's gaze lingers on me for a moment longer than the others. Then it flickers to the other side of the room. I don't want to follow her gaze because I know who she's staring at, but like a lamb to the slaughter, I look. He is beautiful. I've never had an opinion on tattoos, but on him, they look incredible. Has he more hidden under the deep green button-down shirt that's clinging to him like a second skin? As if he can feel me, he glances my way. The heat in his eyes burns through me as if it pierces down into my core.

All the resolves from five minutes ago have flown out the window. Fuck it. I want him. Maeve's voice breaks my gaze. "It's not too late, y'know. He's never let anyone get near him because of you. He won't let himself fall for anyone because of you. He

moved back here because of you. You are both stubborn. He made the first move, and you turned him away. It's up to you now. Don't be a fool."

"You don't know me." It's a weak answer, proving just how stubborn I am.

"Is being alone better than swallowing your pride and seeing if there's something there? A reminder of what you had and maybe a promise what you can still have?"

"I don't know. It's all I've known for the last fifteen years." I've said enough. It's time to move on. Brodie and Ivan are standing close together, talking quietly. Brodie says something that makes Ivan smile, a sweet smile followed by a kiss on his temple.

That does it for me. They have what I want. It's intimate, and my heart squeezes painfully. I need to get some fresh air. With so many people here, the front door is the easiest way out. I can't leave, though, not with all the servers to keep an eye on, but I need to be away from all the loved-up couples. Even Mel has been seeing someone and she rarely dates.

As I stand on the wide front doorstep, my back to the hallway, I breathe in the cold December air. A hand touches my shoulder. Jethro waits for me to look at him, but it's hard. All I can see is everything I've ever lost and everything I want to have. "Ben, are you okay? What did Maeve say to you? She has the knack of running her mouth before thinking."

I try to smile, but it's a feeble attempt when all I see is pity in his eyes. "Nothing. It doesn't matter." I turn back to look out at the night sky. For the first time in a while, it's a clear sky. The new year starts afresh. What will it have in store for me? "It wasn't anything she said. It all got a bit too much."

"Too many perfect couples. Yeah, I get it." Does he? Is he seeing the same as me? A

room full of friends who have everything I ache for. “Can we...? Shit. I mean, I really would like us to talk. I’m sure there are a lot of things you want to get off your chest. I know I have a decade and a half’s worth of explanations and grovelling to do.”

I spin back and gape at him. “What? Why do you say that? You hate me.”

Shock flashes in his gaze; it’s fleeting, but it’s there. “I don’t hate you. Jesus, Ben, this isn’t how I imagined talking to you. Can you leave? I know this is your gig, which is incredible, by the way, but I really would like to talk to you.”

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Is there any point in putting this off? We can't carry on like this, with me avoiding him for the rest of our lives. He's here for good, and I'll never leave. It's a can of snakes instead of worms we'll be opening, and both of us will be hurt by the words we say. After fifteen years, there won't be many kind words, but I want to hear him out. I've had enough of burying my head in the sand, although I doubt what Maeve has said. I don't think there'll be anything between us except maybe friendship. Can I live with that? I won't know until we try.

Before I can speak, Amy appears in the doorway. "There you are, Benny. We need more salmon canapés. Have you got any in your car?"

I fish my keys out of my pocket. "They're in the large cooler." I hand her the keys but change my mind. "Never mind. I'll come with you. We can get the rest out."

"Ben?" Jethro says with a croak in his voice. "Please?"

"Yes, but when the party is over. An hour tops."

Amy looks from me to Jethro and back to me. She pales, which means the whole town knows there's something going on between us. "Give me the keys, Benny. Luke and Maddie can help me. We've got this. Go." She shoos me away. "Talk to Jet."

Does everyone call him that now? As much as I hate to admit it, it does suit this new edgy version of the young man I used to know. And that's it. That's the crux of the matter: I'm trying to avoid the man I used to know.

"Okay, call me if there are any problems. Can you drive my car back to the shop?"

Amy rolls her eyes. There's no way she's going to interrupt this. In fact, I could probably sell tickets for the show. "Sure, boss."

I turn to Jethro. "Lead the way."

"I apologise for the smell of wet dog." I open the doors of my Landrover. "Isla is a demon for the sea."

"Don't worry about it." There's a nervous tremor in his voice. He gets into the passenger seat but doesn't make eye contact as he buckles his seat belt.

"Your place or mine?"

"It doesn't matter."

I shove the keys into the ignition and lean back in my seat, turning my head to face him. "Look, is it really this hard to talk to me? Do you hate me that much? I can drop you off at your home, or you can get out right now. I'm not going to force this. If I've got it all wrong, tell me now, and I won't bother you again."

He finally glances at me, and it looks a lot like fear staring back at me. "No, it's okay. We should do this."

"This isn't easy for me either, you know."

We drive back in silence. I'm trying to work out how to start or where to start. I expect he's doing the same thing. I pull up alongside the cottage, and Ben looks surprised. "What?"

"Huh, oh, nothing. I didn't know you'd moved in. I thought you were still staying at Ivan's."

“It’s only been a few days. You’ll have to excuse the boxes. Drew did an amazing job. That man has serious talent when it comes to seeing what a building can become.”

As I open the door, Isla and the injured dog bark enthusiastically. My lab reaches me first, but the girl is behind her, the bandaged leg causing her tardiness.

“You kept her?” At the sound of Ben’s voice, the little dog woofs excitedly and wriggles her whole body as she directs her focus on the man who saved her. “She remembers me?” The wonder in his words squeezes my heart.

“It looks like it, and I’m only fostering her while she still needs treatment.”

“You said you found her owner. Don’t they want her back?” Ben crouches on the hallway floor and pets the little dog. “What breed is she?”

“I think she’s a labrador crossed with a Staffordshire bull terrier. And as for the owner, I have reason to believe he’s responsible for her injuries.”

This is going better than I could’ve hoped. The tension between us has vanished as his focus has switched to the dog. “What’s her name?”

“She doesn’t have one. I thought it would be best to wait for her new owner to name her.” If I get my way, he’ll be taking her home with him.

Ben runs his hand softly over her face, smoothing the scar above her eye. The stitches came out a few days ago. She’ll never get the hair to grow back over the scars. “When is she ready to go?”

“Do you want her? I think she’ll do well with you. She obviously likes you.” I join him on the floor.

“I do. I think we’ll be good together. I need to sort my life out a bit before I can take her, though. Work stuff. I pretty much spend all my time at the bakery.”

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“Whenever you’re ready, Ben. She’s not going anywhere.” I stand, wanting to shift the conversation to us. It’s the reason I want him here. “Can I get you a drink? I’m having one.”

Hesitantly he rises, but he nods and follows me into the large open-plan kitchen and living room. He looks around the space, a hint of a smile playing on his full lips. “Wow! This is impressive. There’s so much space.”

It’s the reaction I’m getting from everyone who’s visited. I couldn’t be happier here. Except maybe I could. Maybe I could have a future with Ben. I don’t think we’re going to fall into each other’s arms, declaring love and forever anytime soon, but being able to talk again is a starting point.

I grab a bottle of single malt whisky and two tumblers from a cupboard in the kitchen and approach him again. The dog has plastered herself against his leg, looking up with adoration. She definitely won’t be staying here with me. “Have a seat, Ben.”

He sits uncomfortably on the sofa. I take a seat in the large chair opposite him, splash a couple of fingers of the Scotch into the glasses, and hand one to him. Then wait.

Ben looks down at the amber liquid in the crystal glass, then takes a sip. “Look, I’m not sure what you want to hear or if you just have something on your chest you want to get out. But I want you to know I’ve missed you. I have never really got over the way we ended. Your silence hurt. However much I wanted to get away from here, I knew it was the only place you’d know where to find me.” He takes another sip. “I don’t know what you want, Jethro, or should I call you Jet like everyone else?”

“Jethro is fine. It seems I’m the only one here who calls you Ben. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t care. It’s just a name. It’s your turn to speak. You asked me here to do just that.” He pets the dog’s head, sliding his fingers through the short, soft hair. He must be taking comfort—or perhaps strength—from the brave little animal.

“Do you want the whole story or just the whos and whys I’m here for now?”

“I want the truth, Jethro. I think you owe me that. Fifteen years of silence. Fifteen long years.”

I take a gulp of Scotch. I need to man up, but the memories of that time in the barn are all spoiled by the pain inflicted on me. The way my father treated me. The pain I endured was nothing compared to losing Ben. The fact that he never got in touch hurt me to the core. I was an eighteen-year-old kid. I looked up to him. He was much more of an adult than I was. “It was bad, really fucking bad. But after a long time, I recovered from the injuries. But the silence from you hurt the most. I thought you loved me. We had plans for the future.”

He's silent for a long time. “I had no way of contacting you. You left without a trace. I didn’t even know where you’d gone. You’re the one who broke us up, not me.”

“But the letter. I gave my mum a letter to give to you. She promised me she would.”

We stare at each other. Ben shakes his head. “I never got a letter. Didn’t she tell you I’d been to your house nearly every day? Whenever your dad was away from the farm, I would call. Did she tell you that? Shit, I even asked her if you had anything to pass on to me. She said no. To my face, Jethro. She said no to my face.”

“Would it have made a difference? Would you have left here and followed me to

Scotland?" If he says yes, he's a liar. He wouldn't have left his elderly parents.

"I want to say yes, but it would've had to be later. But we would have been together still. We would've had each other."

"Do you really believe that? That a long-distance relationship would've lasted? I was in uni for six years, Ben. That's a bloody long time. It was incredibly hard, so much harder than I expected. We would've been another statistic. I was so young, so naïve. We both were."

"And now? What do you think is going to happen now? What did you think would happen when you showed up again?"

He's angry. Have I just dashed the dream he's been carrying for all these years? That we would have a perfect life together, marriage, kids, the whole caboodle? "No one has seen or heard from you, Jethro. You didn't come back for the funerals. You did nothing with the farmhouse as it disintegrated. Honestly? I thought you'd stay away for good."

"So did I."

This isn't how I expected this conversation to go. I thought we'd be so angry with each other we'd get everything off our chests, then be able to talk normally. Instead, it's sad and final. There's nothing left between us. No spark, no interest. But I still have questions I want an answer to. "Then why now? I don't believe it was because of the practice coming up for sale."

A myriad of emotions flutter over his face and in his eyes. The predominant one, the one that stays the longest, is sadness. I want to reach out and pull him in close, to wrap my arms around him and tell him it's going to be all right. He sighs and takes another sip of his whisky but stays silent. I don't want to be here any more. I'll be

professing my love and begging him to have me back. Fuck that. I'm forty, for god's sake. "Look, Jethro, we're getting nowhere. When you work out why you wanted to talk to me, come and see me."

When I stand, the pup shifts, looking up at me with a 'don't leave me' look in her eyes. I pet her gently. "Let me know when she's healthy enough to come home with me."

The short distance from the living room to the front door feels like a mile. I take my coat from the hook on the wall and turn the latch.

Jethro touches my shoulder with a firm grip. "For you," he says, his voice raspy, thick with emotion. "I came back for you. I've spent all these years missing you. I haven't found anyone who can hold a candle to you."

His breath is close enough to make the hairs on my neck stand up and ghost over my ear. I'm afraid to turn around. My face will give away my feelings, my fears. "Ben, please."

"Please, what?" I croak.

"Don't go." He's so close his lips touch the shell of my ear.

I shiver, stepping away from him, then slowly turning to face him. "Yet you've been ignoring me. That's not what you do if you've missed me. You show up, and you say hello. You ask to talk."

"You're right, but there were things I had to get done first. It sounds pathetic, I know. I had to get all my ducks in a row before I had anything to offer you. I hated that the first time we saw each other was in a room full of our friends, our community, and you had that sweet dog in your arms. I didn't know what to say. She had to be dealt

with. I have asked since, though.”

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“Through Maeve, Jethro. You sent Luke, for god’s sake.” I sigh. It’s been a long day. The food for the party took its time to get set up and ready, not to mention having the coffee shop running smoothly. I need to leave. It’s not like we’re going anywhere. “I should go.”

Disappointment floods his face. “Okay, I’ll come to see you tomorrow.” He checks his watch and smiles. It’s a much more grown-up smile than the sweet, shy ones he used to give me. It suits him. “Or in the morning. Happy New Year, Ben.”

“Happy New Year, Jethro. Sleep well.”

Years of early mornings have stripped away my ability to sleep in, but I can appreciate staying in bed long past a decent time to get up. The image of the poor little dog comes back to me. If she comes to live with me, the days of long lie-ins will be over. The thought makes me smile. It also brings back yesterday’s events and the conversations with Maeve and, more importantly, with Jethro. Will he be here soon, or will he have changed his mind? We didn’t talk of love or even getting back together. Missing each other is a good place to start, but after this long, are we compatible? I doubt he’s the meek, eager, and compliant lover he was at eighteen. He has experienced the world and all it has to offer. His appearance—the tattoos and piercings—give off an edgy confidence and a sexiness I never thought I’d find attractive, but damn, I do. I want to find out what else he’s hiding.

With my second cup of coffee drained, I get out of bed and go for a shower, but before I can get under the spray, the doorbell chimes.

“Crap.” I wrap my bathrobe around my body and rush out of the bathroom and

downstairs. The wind is howling, and the rain is hammering against the windows. Whoever is out there is getting soaked. When I pull open the door, Jethro is shielding the little dog in his arms from getting battered about in Devon's glorious winter weather. Instead of gawping at him, I usher him in.

"What are you doing here?" I close the door behind him.

"I said I'd come and see you, and you wanted to know when you can have this little maidie." He looks up and down my body. "Have I got you out of bed?"

"Shit, my shower is still running." I dash back up the stairs. Once the shower is off, I grab some sweats and a hoodie and pull them on. I wasn't comfortable being naked under a bathrobe. As I jog back downstairs, he's talking quietly to the dog. I can't make out the words, but I smile. Should I be happy about him being here? I'll have to wait and see why he's come before I decide.

When I join them, his eyes darken. Oh shit, I've made the situation so much worse by free-balling it under my sweats. "Stop looking at me like that," I grumble, but I like knowing he likes what he sees. I've done as much as I can to look after my health and body, but being a baker doesn't make it easy.

"I thought you couldn't be sexier than you were at twenty-five, but I'm wrong. You're even hotter now."

My cheeks warm at his words. I'm not able to reply because if we start complimenting each other, we could rush into something I'm not ready for. Instead, I drop to my knees next to the little pup he has settled on the rug and stroke her head. "Is she ready to be here?"

She's still bandaged up, and her leg is in a cast. "Can she walk? Is she allowed to?"

“She’s okay to move around inside, but she can’t do stairs or anything like that, plus slippery floors are a no. Her X-rays are looking good. I’ve said it before, but you saved her life. She would have bled out and perished under that hedge.”

“Don’t. I can’t bear the thought. Do you really think she’s better off with me than with maybe a family, someone at home all the time?”

He shakes his head. “She’s chosen you.”

He’s right. Her head is on my lap, and her tail’s wagging frantically. “Okay, she stays. I’ll need to think of a name for her.” She looks up at me with big brown eyes. I snap my fingers. “Hope. I think that suits her.” She licks my hand approvingly.

“That’s settled, then. I’ll bring all her things in from the car. Put the kettle on, Ben.”

Both the dog and I watch Jethro walk out. My gaze is on his tight arse in the well-fitting, snug, ripped-at-the-knee jeans. I’m doomed. I still want him as much as I did when I was twenty-five. The difference is that this time around, I’m more than aware of his ability to break my heart.

I scratch the back of Hope’s ear and let out a sigh. “I’d better go and make us something to drink.” I wander into the kitchen, thinking about what I’ve got to offer for breakfast. There’s bacon and the fixings for French toast, so I pull all the ingredients out of the fridge and cupboards. The front door closes with a solid thud, probably the wind helping it shut, followed by something being dropped. Jethro is back.

His footsteps approach the doorway. When I turn around, my heart beats faster. The easy, relaxed way he leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest and his ankles crossed, he looks like a model on one of those romance book covers. The tatted bad boy who will break every heart in the book and that of the readers too.

“Whatcha doing?”

Telling him I’m ready to drop to my knees and pull his cock from his tight-as-fuck jeans may not be a good idea. “I thought I’d make us something to eat.”

Yep, that will have to do for now.

Turning up with the young dog in my arms is blackmail on both counts. First, to get him to keep her, and second, to let me in his house. The sight of him in a dark blue towelling bathrobe sets off every nerve in my body singing, and I’m desperate to touch him. To pull him close to my body. Will he feel the same as he does in my memory and my dreams? He looks fit and firm. His age has only made him more handsome. The small crow’s feet by his eyes and the slight greying of his blond hair at his temples accentuate his good looks.

While he escapes upstairs to turn off his shower, I place the dog on the rug by the unlit fire. I glance around the cosy room. The soft cream with navy striped sofa looks incredibly comfortable, a place to snuggle up in, the fire burning, and a book from the large, packed bookcases.

My perusal of his life halts as he returns to the room. He wears black sweats and a hoodie. His feet are bare, and fuck me, it looks like he’s naked underneath the soft brushed cotton. When he notices where I’m looking, he blushes a gorgeous rose pink.

With ease, I get the conversation back on track and have him agree to adopt the newly renamed Hope. I grab the bag of food and meds from my truck and tuck the soft, padded bed she’s been resting on under my arm. When I come back in, the room is empty, but the clink of rattling pots and pans comes from the open doorway.

“Whatcha doing?” I lean on the doorframe.

The look he gives me does nothing to hide the flare of lust in his eyes. The blush from earlier reappears. “I thought I’d make us something to eat.” He trips over the words and turns back to the ingredients laid out on the counter.

“Really? Thanks, Ben. I’m starved. I’ve not had anything to eat yet.” All because I’ve been too busy fretting over what to do and how to proceed. I know for sure that I want to be with him again, but he’s like a nervous horse, one that’s been hurt and neglected all its life. Too wary to trust me.

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I know he's incredibly successful and well liked, that his skittish behaviour is only around me. Therefore, it's up to me to make it right. He wants me. I can see it. I can still feel him deep inside me. He's changed, though. He no longer gives off the possessive top vibe, the one that would have me instantly hard and begging for his hands on me. I've changed too. I went to university angry, so angry, after I'd had everything stripped from me, and I wanted control of my life and my body. The first tattoo, the first piercing, and the first time I topped. I loved all of it.

I kept the mess of scars on my back covered. It took me years to be comfortable naked with a lover, not so much out of shame but because I only wanted hook-ups. Anything more hurt too much. I wanted Ben, but he hadn't come. He didn't want me. Hook-ups didn't feel like cheating. It wasn't true, of course. It was another lie I told myself.

"It's only French toast with some berries, and I'm doing some bacon. I don't know if you prefer sweet or savoury."

"I've heard rave reviews about your breakfasts, especially the French toast. Maeve says she's put on a stone since she got here."

"Maybe I should put up a disclaimer—zero responsibility for any weight gain." He grins at me, the first genuine smile he's given me. He seems to realise the easy-going attitude and turns back to the stove and the sizzling pans.

He doesn't say anything else, and I'm more than happy to observe him move confidently around, looking like he's doing half a dozen things at a time. He's effortlessly talented. It's easy to stay quiet and just watch.

With another smile, a smaller one this time, he instructs me to get the cutlery. “It’s in the top drawer over there.” He nods toward the drawers.

Obediently I follow his instructions and grab the knives and forks as he pulls out plates from a small warming oven on the range cooker. When everything is set on the table, we sit on opposite sides to each other. Ben busies himself serving me. He looks like he’s trying to avoid any questions, but me being me, I’m not going to let him get away with it.

“How did the café and the catering come about? I know you loved cooking, but I didn’t think it was something you were able to pursue.” The moment the words leave my mouth, I could slap myself. How stupid can I be? He didn’t go to college because he had to care for his parents.

He doesn’t seem to mind. “There was no way I was leaving, even when your father threatened me with just about everything he could. I stayed because my parents needed me. And after, when they both passed, which was in a few months of each other, I did my catering and bakery courses. When the shop came up for sale, I bought it. That was over a decade ago. I love it. It suits me.”

I can see how much he loves his work, and after the first mouthful of his French toast, I know what all the fuss is about. “Oh my god, Ben, this is delicious. I get it now.”

Ben smiles but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he eats his breakfast too. When we’re finished and he’s collected the plates, he points towards the living room. “Can we go through all the dos and don’ts for Hope? It’s been years since I had a pet. I think I was about fifteen or sixteen years old when our family dog died.”

This must be his way of rounding up my visit. After this, he’ll tell me to find my way home. While it stings, I’m aware I’ve got to take baby steps with him. It’s all about proving that I’m serious about getting to know him again, that I’m not going

anywhere. He's like a skittish stray that doesn't know whether he can trust the hand being held out to him. "Sure, I've got a printout of her medication, mainly low-dose painkillers, but that can change depending on her mobility. You'll have to bring her in to have her cast removed, and I'll get Maeve to show you how to clean up some of the sore spots. There are some instructions about what she can and can't do regarding her mobility. There's not much to it. A lot of it is common sense."

A wry smile is playing on his lips. "And you had all this ready before you turned up on my doorstep. Were you that confident I would take her?"

"Honestly? I wanted a way to come and see you. You left with plenty unsaid last night. I told you how much I missed you, that I wanted you, came back here for you. You didn't say anything back."

Ben sighs and walks into the living room. I follow him. He's got to have something to say about this, about us. He sits on the floor, Hope's head on his thigh, and combs his fingers through her hair, just as he did last night. I lower myself on the opposite side of the dog.

"I don't know you anymore, Jethro. You've changed so much. You have an edge about you that was never there. It makes the relationship we had before such a piece of the past, almost as if it happened to someone else. Over time, I've forgotten how much you would change. You were barely a man the last time we were together. You're a different person now, and I'm not. I don't have anything to offer you. You don't need me, not the way you used to."

Of all the things I thought he would say, I never imagined it would be this. Does he think so little of himself? How exciting the thought of getting to know each other again will be? "Don't you think learning all the new things about each other is exciting? Whatever you think about yourself, you're wrong. Yes, you've changed. You're this new hotter version of yourself. I can't believe you're not married. I like

what I see, Ben. I want to know you, this version of you.”

“What do you want from me?”

“What do you mean?” Does he think I’ve got some ulterior motive?

“I don’t know if you want us to get back together as if nothing ever happened. Or what? Friendship? Because I’ve got enough friends.”

I push myself up onto my feet. “I want it all, Ben, or Benny, or whatever you go by now. I want every fucking bit of you. And when you’re ready to get to know me again, you know where to find me.”

It takes Hope and me a couple of days to get used to each other. She’s doing well and eating, beginning to find her feet, but I’m not letting her move around too much. Today is her first trip back to Jethro. And the first time I’ll speak to him again since New Year’s Day. I haven’t gone silent, though. I’ve sent a few texts, mainly about Hope, but also to let him know I’m thinking about him and all he said. Which is true. He’s been on my mind constantly. He spoke the absolute truth that we needed to talk to each other. Use this time to learn everything we can about each other. Only then will we be able to see if we have something still.

“Come on, Hope, let’s go and see the sexy vet. Do you think he’ll want to come on a date with me? There’s only one way to find out.” Hope’s tail thumps frantically on the rug she’s made her own. Thank god she’s a small dog. Carrying a German Shepherd or, hell, a Great Dane up and down stairs or in and out of the car would not be fun. I’d do it, but I’m glad my girl is a compact one.

The weather is dreadful again. I can’t wait for spring and then summer to come. Having to drive even short distances around town is annoying. The trip to the vet’s takes a little more than five minutes. A few other cars are parked in the car park. It’s

good to see it's going well for Jethro.

Luke greets us with a huge grin, but his smile isn't aimed at me but at Hope. Her wriggling in my arms shows how pleased she is to see him too. "Take a seat. Jet, I mean Jethro, will only be a minute."

It's more than a minute, more like five, but everyone seems to have heard about Hope, and the other people giving her lots of fuss, which passes the time. When it's finally our turn, I follow Jethro and his perfect tight jean-clad arse into the examination room.

He takes Hope from me and places her gently on the rubber-topped table. He looks her over thoroughly while I fill him in on all she's managed to do. I'm surprised at how impersonal he's keeping it until he rests his hand on her head and looks at me. I know he wants me to speak first. He deserves it, probably with a bit more panache than I manage to stutter. "You wanna have dinner, or um, like something, or just a drink? Together, me and you?"

He stares at me for a good thirty seconds longer, then bursts out laughing. "That was smooth. You must have spent hours practising." His eyes are warm and gentle, no hint of ridicule or even hostility.

"I did. You should've heard the ones I discarded." I chuckle, still not sure if he'll say yes or not. I wait a moment longer, then ask again, "Will you?"

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“Yes, to all of it. Especially the ‘or something’. I can’t wait to find out what that is.” He straightens his face. The smile is gone, but his expression is still kind. “Ben, I told you I want it all with you. If this is how you want to start, I’m happy. When would you like to go out?”

“Are you free this evening?” I want to do this now. If I don’t, I’ll talk myself out of it again. I’m very good at telling myself he’ll get bored of me or he’ll realise that the torch he held burnt out years ago. At eighteen, he loved that I was the hot older guy. At thirty-three, he’s the hot one. I’m forty and pushing my luck for a chance with him.

“I am, and any or every night you want to spend with me.” He leans over Hope, his mouth tantalisingly close to mine. “Trust me, Ben, I want you.”

“I’m beginning to get the message.” I want to press my lips to his, but he pulls back, the tease. He knows exactly what game to play, and I’m annoyed and excited at the same time. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“I’ll be ready.” As he walks me to the door, he places his hand against the small of my back, the warmth radiating through me. I press into it, and he reciprocates by pushing a little harder.

As we return to the reception, everyone turns their heads to look at us, making me aware of how close we are. Jethro’s low chuckle proves he not only knew this would happen but that he planned it.

“You’re going to get us talked about, Jethro Palmer,” I mock whisper, unable to

contain my happiness.

“I’m banking on it, Benny-boy.”

“Don’t call me that.” I shake my head but grin like a fool.

Before I can get ready for Jethro, I’ve got a meeting with Amy back at home, purposely planned to take my mind off either excitement or rejection, depending on how my talk with Jethro would go.

As I offer her a management role at the café, her expression morphs from incredulity to delight. “I thought you were kidding, Benny. Are you sure? Do you think I can do it?”

“Amy, you’re more than capable of running the place. I’m not asking you to bake or do any cooking.” She’s balked at the thought of it over the last year or more than she’s been with me.

“Phew. That would’ve been a deal-breaker.” Amy laughs, swiping her hand over her forehead.

“I’m going to need to be around for Hope, especially while she’s still recovering. Friends also told me I work too hard, and I’ve finally decided they’re right. Obviously, this position comes with an increase in responsibilities. Therefore, you’ll be salaried accordingly. I believe this is the going rate for a manager.” I hand her a piece of paper. “That will be your starting point. I know how popular the café is, so I’m happy to reassess as time goes on. Is that acceptable to you?”

“It sounds amazing. I know I’ve got lots to learn, but I really want to do this.” Amy’s virtually vibrating with excitement.

“I have every faith in you. We can start on the background duties tomorrow. You’re already more capable than you think you are.”

We talk for another five minutes and arrange a time to meet in the morning. When she leaves, I get ready. I made the brave decision to book a table at the bistro farther up the high street from the café. If Jethro had turned me down, I would’ve cancelled it.

As I pull up outside Jethro’s, nerves do a tango in my stomach. The lights in the kitchen and one above the front door are on. Should I wait in the car? It’s been so long since I went on a date I’ve forgotten the protocol. I should go to the door. Yes, that’s the right thing to do. I think. Is it? Yes.

The cold air swirls around me, and shivering, I jog up to the door. Before I get the chance to knock, it swings inward. Jethro stands tall and breathtakingly gorgeous. His hair looks stylishly messy, and he’s got jet-black studs in his ear. Again, I wonder what else he is hiding under the well-fitting clothes. “Hi,” I manage to say.

“Hi. Let me grab my keys, and I’ll be ready.” He steps back, leaving the door open for me to step inside. He collects his phone and keys, says something to his dog and gives her a pat, then returns to me. He leans in and hovers his mouth over the shell of my ear. I hold my breath. “I’m really looking forward to this.” Almost imperceptibly, he brushes his lips over my cheek. I nearly swoon.

As we walk back to my car, his hand is on my back again. Even through my coat, I feel the possessive pressure, and I like it. His confidence is the opposite of how he was all those years ago. The nervous way he spoke to me when he asked if we could meet up, the tentative kisses and touches that sent fireworks through both of us. He found the best places to meet without any eyes near us, the fear of his father always in the back of his mind. With all that behind him and the experiences he’s had since those secret rendezvous, I don’t think Jethro is going to hold anything back tonight.

How am I going to stay level-headed?

Do I want to?

“Um, I made a reservation at the bistro. Is that okay? I haven’t eaten there for a while, but it still gets rave reviews, so it should be good. Would you have preferred somewhere else? There’s a great fish restaurant or a Chinese. I’m sorry. I should’ve asked you. You haven’t gone vegetarian. Of course not. You had bacon at my house.”

Ben is rambling, likely because he’s nervous, and it’s adorable. I’m going to have to do something to calm him down. Something he’s not going to expect. I wait until he’s parked his car and we both get out, then approach him. I step so close he has to lean back against his car. As his eyes go as wide as saucers, I get even closer, bend my head, and run my nose up the edge of his.

“You need to relax, Ben. It’s only me.” My words are low and wash over his lips in a warm breath on this cold night. I press my lips to his, soft but firm. His are cold and smooth but not rigid or unwelcoming. I slide my hands from his shoulders to his neck, up to his jaw, my thumbs on his cheeks. The surprise comes when he parts his lips and tentatively touches my tongue with his.

A possessive growl grows in my throat as I sweep my tongue inside his mouth and deepen the kiss. He swallows down another of my moans. Ben slips his hands under my leather jacket, pressing his fingers into the cotton of my shirt. Goosebumps break out over my body. I shudder, relishing his touch. It’s like no one else has ever touched me. I’m right back to being eighteen and desperate for more of him.

The slam of a car door and laughter jolt us apart. The street light glows on Ben’s face, the wetness on his lips. The darkness in his dilated eyes highlights his beautiful face. “Let’s get some dinner.”

He nods and moves away from me, looking dazed. As we walk into the restaurant, I take his hand. This seems to bring him back to the real world, and he approaches the host, greeting him by name. I forget that there are many people who aren't familiar to me. I expected the town to have been stuck in a time warp. That everything and everyone would be the same, apart from my parents. But I wouldn't be here if they were.

Once we're seated and alone, Ben scrutinises me, looking for what?

"Why did you do that?"

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“What? Kiss you? Because you were so nervous. I thought it might relax you. And I’ve been thinking about it for too many years. Was it wrong? Shouldn’t I have done it? You seemed to like it.”

Ben shakes his head. “No, I mean, yes, it was okay to do it. It surprised me, is all. A good surprise.” He straightens the knife next to his plate, taking his time choosing his words. “You seem to have it all worked out like nothing else matters. The last fifteen years just brushed away. I don’t know how you do that.”

“Because I want you. I want to see how great we can be together. Not many people get a second chance at love. We loved each other then. I want to see if we can love again. If it doesn’t work, at least we’ve tried.”

The waiter arrives, takes our drink order, and leaves us alone again.

“This wasn’t what I had planned for tonight. I thought it would be a good way to get to know each other again, to talk about our pasts. I wasn’t planning on being kissed.” Ben gives a wry smile and a dry chuckle. “But as always, you get straight to the point. You haven’t changed as much as you look.” He gestures to my jewellery and tats. “All this is new, but it suits you.”

I wondered when he’d get around to mentioning it. I can tease him with the hints of more to find under my clothes. With a tip of my head, I grin back. “There are more for you to find when you’re ready.”

Ben’s eyes go wide. If only I knew what he’s thinking. Is he interested? Maybe he has some for me to find. Before he can speak, our drinks arrive, something he looks

relieved about. He's going to be so much fun to tease, but not now, not yet. He's right. We do need to know more about each other. As we both sip at our drinks—a lager for me and a red wine for him—we peruse the menu.

“What's good in here?” I ask. It has seasonal food with plenty of fish, which all look amazing.

“Honestly, all of it. I've never had anything I didn't love.” He bites on the corner of his lip as he reads the list of today's dishes.

“What do you want to know?” I ask Ben after we've given our food order.

He's quiet, but I can tell he's thinking. How far back does he want to go? “I don't know what to ask. We got through the shitty stuff on New Year's Eve. You've told me that you want me, that you want to try this again, and I've spent the time since you left wanting the same thing. We were both stupid and held on to a grudge more than our feelings for each other. We should've been either together all this time or split up and have closure. What I'm saying is, do you want to find out which way it would've gone, or are you serious and want to make a relationship with me work?”

Okay, that wasn't what I expected. I thought we'd be catching up on lost time. Telling tales of our past, the friends we have, and the antics we got up to. He's right to ask, though. What's the point of falling back into this if I'm only testing the water before jumping in? “I don't know the answer to that, but I know above anything I want to start over. To have a chance at being with the man you are now. We're both different. Not only to look at, but we also probably have secrets we don't want to share. If I'd just moved here and didn't know you, you'd be the man I was hitting on in the pub. You're so totally my type. Add the fact that I also know what you look like naked, and it's a win-win. I've seen you check me out too.” I waggle my eyebrows and laugh loudly when he blushes.

“Saved by the food.” He sighs in what looks like fake relief.

He’s right. I lay off any contentious topics. Instead, we talk about Hope. I tell him I reported the owner to both the police and the RSPCA. Not that they will be able to do anything, but it clears my conscience.

“I made Amy, one of my staff, the manager today,” he says. “I want to be around more for Hope. She can’t go into a commercial kitchen, and I’d rather be at home. I’ll go in a few times a week to bake and keep the freezer stocked. I’m going to enjoy the time off. I’ve worked there solidly since it opened.”

The food is as good as Ben claimed, and soon, we’re both full and ready to go. Ben takes the bill with a smirk. “You can pay next time.”

Outside, I reach for his hand again. This time, when his brain isn’t fried from me kissing him, he looks more hesitant. Then he smiles and takes it. “That wasn’t too hard, was it?”

“No, I’m just not used to it. I don’t think I’ve ever held hands with someone here.”

“Never? How? Haven’t you ever had a date in town or with someone on holiday?”
How can he not have dated here?

“That’s not the same as being with someone long enough to want to hold hands. I’ve managed to keep my personal life out of the prying eyes of the people in town. I didn’t want to be the name on the gossipers’ lips and prefer my privacy. I like to be able to show my face in the café.”

“Even when everyone in town is watching us like hawks as if they know something is going to happen? Which is weird because where would that idea come from?”

“That may be all on your friend Maeve’s shoulders. She’s not subtle about wanting us to hook up. The only thing she’s left out is the time we had together before.”

“That woman is a bloody nuisance,” I say, but I laugh.

Trust Maeve to open her mouth.

As I pull up in front of his home, Jethro turns to me, a smile on his beautiful mouth. “I’ve had a great evening, Ben. It will be my choice next time.” He leans over the centre console and kisses my cheek. Before I can say a word, he opens the door and gets out. Speechless, I watch him walk up the gravel path to his front door.

What the fuck just happened?

Just as I put the car back in gear, he turns around, stomps back to the car, and pulls open my door. “I wanted to be good, to say goodnight, but I can’t. I don’t want the night to end yet. Come inside, Benny. Please.”

Should I go in? Do I want to? The answer to both is a resounding yes. Maybe not the most sensible decision, but I need to throw caution to the wind for once and do what my heart wants. And it wants him. I’m out of the car before I’m even aware of switching off the engine. He’s holding my hand again and striding rapidly up the path. He even manages to shuffle his keys and get the door unlocked and open with one hand. I’m impressed.

He practically drags me through the door and closes it with a solid thud. My back is against it, and his mouth is on mine. The kiss is bruising, punishing, and all-encompassing. I match his fervour with my own, grabbing his hips and pulling him closer, tighter to me. Just like at the car, he pushes his tongue into my mouth, licking over my own. He winds his fingers through my hair, tugging at the strands. It’s not painful, but the sharpness shoots straight to my aching cock, and I moan into his

mouth. I slip my hands around his back and down to his stunning arse. As I squeeze the perfect, firm cheeks, he thrusts into me, rubbing up his dick to mine. Gone is the naïve, shy, eager-to-learn boy. Now I have a mature, experienced man who knows exactly what he wants, and at this moment, he wants to be inside my jeans. And god, I want him to touch me. Is it too soon? Are we rushing ahead? Yes, but I don't care. I want him too much.

“Please, can I touch you?” He moves his hands to my waist, to the buckle on my belt, and tugs it open. His kiss doesn't falter, his tongue as domineering as it has been the last few kisses. When he flips open the button and his fingers make quick work of my zip, he slides his hand into my briefs and wraps it around my desperate, aching, throbbing, needy cock. Involuntarily I thrust into his hand and moan in his mouth. I reach for his belt, but he shakes his head, biting down on my lip. Instead, I push my hands through his hair. The soft strands slip easily through my fingers as I stroke them.

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I gasp, pulling away from his mouth to look into his eyes. He picks up speed, jacking my cock, harder, firmer, with a twist at the head. He remembers how I like it. As I rest my forehead on his, my breath quickens and my balls tighten, drawing high into my body. “I’m gonna come, Jet. Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

My dick spurts cum like a geyser, coating his hand and drenching his fingers. As I soften, he brings his hand to his mouth and cleans up the sticky mess I just made. His eyes never leave mine the whole time. We sink slowly to the floor.

“God, Ben, I’ve missed you so fucking much.” He leans in and presses his mouth to mine. His kiss is so tender now. My eyes sting with the burn of tears, and I have to blink them away. “Why were we so fucking stupid, so stubborn? We should have fought for each other, not run away. I should’ve called you. I was a fucking idiot.”

I shift off my knees to sit properly on the floor. When he sees what I’m doing, he gets to his feet and holds out his hand. He seems to do that a lot—take my hand. “I can think of better places to sit.”

I let him pull me up to stand and lead me into the main sitting area. Isla, his dog, lifts her head and thumps her tail but doesn’t get out of her bed.

The minute we sit down, I’m back in his arms. “God, that was incredible. I’ve wanted to do that, and more, from the moment I saw you again. I can’t wait for you to reciprocate.” He grins and waggles his eyebrows.

I huff out a chuckle. “Maybe another night.” I straighten, finally believing we could have something together. “I want this. I want us, but I owe you a huge apology. I kept

what happened to you a secret, and that was wrong. I should've told the doctor or the police, someone, to get you out of that house and somewhere safe. I didn't, and I'm sorry."

"Ben, it wasn't on you to do that. We had made such efforts to be secret. I was eighteen, an adult, not a shy little boy. I'm the one who should've called the police on him. Everyone knew he was a violent bastard. I think he scared himself a bit with what he did. My mum tore into him, threatening all sorts of things, including leaving him. I didn't know what he'd said to you, which was one of the reasons I didn't call you. I thought he would have threatened you off, and, fuck, I was ashamed. I didn't want you to see what he'd done to me."

"What do you mean?"

"He made quite a mess of my back with his belt."

I stare at him, speechless. "He did what?" Jesus, what kind of savage was the man? He should've gone to prison. I let him get away with it. I should've stood up to him. We should've found somewhere safer. Hell, my home would've been better than the barn. "Will you show me?"

Jethro shakes his head. "Not now, not tonight. I think we're raw enough. Please don't pity me, Ben. I don't want or need it. It's done and over with. We deserve to forgive ourselves for the past. I want us to forget about it now or at least ignore it. We have a future to be hopeful about."

He's right. I've apologised, and he's accepted it. I won't ever be over what I didn't do, but I can lock it up tight and move on. "Come here." I hold out my arms. He moves swiftly into my embrace, and I kiss him. I kiss him until we're both breathless and my dick aches. His probably does too, but neither of us makes a move.

When we pull apart, Jethro gives me a goofy grin, his lips swollen and eyes glazed. “You’re still a great kisser.”

“I would hope so. It’s not something I want to get worse at. You’re so different. The confidence in who you are is hot, but you were never shy about trying something new or saying what you wanted. I’m going to guess that you top now too.”

“Benny, sweetheart. I do it all, and I can’t wait for that part to happen. I’m prepared to wait. This is something worth waiting for, I think. Don’t you?”

“What kind of timescale are you thinking of? Does the three-date rule still apply?”

“As long as we count tonight as date number one.”

Not long after our talk, he left, wanting to get back to Hope. I wish he could’ve stayed, but I don’t know if we’re there yet. Maeve walks into the examination room, her riotous auburn curls tied back but still trying to escape the confines of the clip she has holding it in.

“What’s up?” I wipe down the table before the next client.

“What’s going on with you and Benny? I know you had a date. Everyone’s talking about it and something about a hot kiss.” She grins cheekily, trying to push my buttons.

“You should know better than to listen to gossip or try to get the tea so you can tell your little coven of gossipers.” I match her smile as her cheeks go a little pink. She has made good friends with Stacey and Melanie, and she hangs out with a few other women, but the main friends are the two I went to school with. “But FYI, it was a lovely meal at the bistro. That’s all you’re getting.”

“You’re a meanie.” She pokes her tongue out at me like a toddler.

“Stop being a pain in my arse and bring in the next patient.”

Halfway through the afternoon, my phone vibrates in my pocket. When I check it, it’s a missed call from an Edinburgh code, but the caller didn’t leave a voicemail or text. Curiosity has me calling the number back. It’s a hospital switchboard, but I have no clue why they would call me, so I put it down to a wrong digit being pressed.

Tonight it’s the late-night opening, with the last appointment at seven thirty: a quick check-over and a vaccination booster for a couple of cats. Then we’re done. Ben called to see if I wanted to go to his place, but with it being so late, all I want is a hot shower and something loaded with carbs. As I lock up, my phone buzzes again. This time it’s Ben, or Benny as I’m now beginning to call him, thanks to everyone else’s usage.

Benny: Open the door.

I walk to the front door and pull it open. He stands on the steps with Hope by his side and a huge pizza box in his hands. “I had a feeling you might not be in the mood to cook tonight.” He nods to the box.

“You’re a mind reader. Your place or mine?” Hopefully, he says mine because I want a shower. “Yours. I’m sure you want to get out of your scrubs.” He really is a mind reader. Or he still knows me so well.

“Did you walk?” His car isn’t parked in the practice’s car park.

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“Yes, I thought we may have a beer, so I left the car at home.”

All I need to do is switch off the lights and set the alarm as I walk out the door. He stands just outside the entrance. Isla and Hope are wagging their tails at each other. The young dog is getting better but not ready to start the zoomies, so I call Isla back to me.

We get into my house, and Benny puts the pizza box on the counter in the kitchen.

“Is that going to stay warm enough if I go and have a shower?” I ask.

“It hasn’t been cooked yet. Can I use your oven?”

Intrigued, I lift the lid. Inside is what looks like a gourmet pizza. “Did you make this? Is there no end to your talents?”

“What can I say? You’ll have to see what else I’m good at.” His voice deepens seductively, as seductive as the heat in his eyes. His attitude is becoming much bolder. It’s almost back to the sexy man I knew years ago.

“I’d like that.” I lean into him and press a kiss to his surprised lips, but he catches up fast and kisses me back. The quick kiss intensifies, and soon we’re in a heated embrace, licking, tasting, and delving into each other’s mouths. As he moves his hands down and clutches my arse, I pull back. I do need a shower. The image of him joining me, his strong hands soapy as he runs them over my body, floods my mind. It’s too soon for that, but hopefully, it’s not too far away. “Go ahead with the oven. I won’t be long.”

I head to the stairs but feel his eyes on me. When I turn, he blushes and casts his eyes down. “Were you staring at my arse?”

“Maybe.” He laughs. “It’s a great arse.”

“If you play your cards right, you’ll get to touch it again.” As I turn back and walk away, I put a lot more swagger in my step. I love hearing him chuckle almost as much as I love seeing him in my kitchen. As I strip out of my clothes, I hear him talking to the dogs, but it’s too quiet for me to determine what he’s saying. The hot water pounds down on my head as I soap myself, my thoughts drifting back to Ben and the evening ahead. I’m planning on a lot more kissing and touching. My cock twitches at the idea, throbbing and thickening. I imagine unzipping his jeans, exposing his dick for me to see after all these years. Without thinking, I stroke my own. In my head, it’s his hands on me, gripping me tightly as I thrust into his fist. It takes an embarrassingly short amount of time to come, and I only just manage not to cry out his name.

After getting my heart rate back to its normal rhythm, I switch off the shower and grab a towel. I love having the large bedroom with the wet room sectioned off by an almost ceiling-height L-shaped wall. Seeing as it’s only me here, the need for privacy isn’t necessary. Or the need for covering myself as I walk around the partition to the bedroom. Only this time, Ben is standing in the doorway of the room.

“Shit!” I pull the towel from around my shoulders and wrap it quickly around my hips to cover my dick.

He holds his hands over his eyes. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. I didn’t expect you to only have one room up here. I just came to ask if you wanted some wine.”

“Ben, you can open your eyes. I’m decent. Plus, you’ve seen it all before.” I gesture at my tattooed torso. “Well, most of it. The art and metalwork are new.” I won’t

mention the Prince Albert through the end of my cock or the guiche that's sitting happily under my sac yet. He'll find those himself.

Ben lowers his hands, shock written all over his face. Then it changes, morphing into curiosity and intrigue. He lets his eyes roam over my multicoloured chest, the phoenix coming out of the fire over my ribcage, sternum, and pecs. The reason behind it is obvious and personal. I wear it with pride. The longer he stares, the more interested my dick becomes and swells beneath the short towel.

It takes him a while to notice, but then he looks down. "Oh!" Red splotches appear on his neck and cheeks.

"My dick seems to like you staring at me." I smirk. "Has the pizza gone in the oven yet?"

He shakes his head, seemingly unable to find any words. I take that as a good sign and drop the towel. His eyes bug out of his face. "What the fuck? Jesus, Jethro, that must've hurt like hell."

"It gives an incredible amount of pleasure, apparently." I wink. "Wanna know what it feels like?"

"More than you would believe." His answer astonishes me and thrills me at the same time, and I take a few steps closer.

"Ben, baby, I'm all yours." I lean in and run my nose up his neck to his ear. "Touch me."

Dear god, I think my heart is going to burst out of my chest. I've never seen anything as hot as Jethro's naked body. The tattoos are as bold and as bright as he is, but it's the ring through his cock that has me captivated. I've only ever seen them in porn.

They have been a turn-on for me, and for the first time in a very long while, I want to feel that inside me. I haven't bottomed for god knows how long. With a hook-up, I prefer to top, but with a boyfriend, I've been happy to give and receive.

What will it feel like on my tongue? By the look on Jethro's face, he's going to let me do anything as long as I do something. His command to touch him, so soft and warm by my ear, urges me to move. I do as he demands. When I grip his solid shaft and tug, a groan rumbles from his throat, and I press my mouth against it. He swallows beneath my lips. As I run my thumb over the metalwork, a shudder wracks his body. "How does it feel to have my hands on you again? How many nights have you jerked off to the memories? Because I've lost count."

Jethro tips his head back, giving me the chance to scrape my teeth over the day's stubble on his jawline up to his ear. "There's no going back, Jet." I use the cool version of his name. "I've held back, been cautious with my heart, but if you give yourself to me, there's no staying away from me."

I jack him harder, faster, as his chest heaves. He looks at me, his eyes blazing with lust, need and something very much like...love. I halt my hand, and he moans and thrusts to gain friction again.

"Don't stop. I'm so close. Christ, fuck, yeah. Like that." Jethro's voice is deep and desperate as he chases my mouth for another kiss. As I devour his mouth, sucking on his tongue, biting on his lip, he stiffens and shudders and comes into my hand. Hot, silky spunk coats my fingers, dripping over my knuckles. I want to taste him, so just like when he pinned me to the door, I lift my hand to my mouth and lick a long stream from my knuckles.

As I clean my hand, Jethro's gaze is fixed on my tongue. Before I can finish, he pushes his hands into my hair and kisses me, licking at my lips and tongue, chasing the last of his release. Slowly we separate, and he bends to pick up his towel, his back

to me. Fuck. Scars criss-cross his skin, some in the shape of a heavy buckle. There's one I can't look away from—a deep keloid dark pink scar over his hips and kidneys. Others are paler, silver marks. As I stroke over his shoulder blades, he stiffens, then turns his head to me. He looks stricken and slowly straightens up. Before he's upright, I place a kiss on the marks on his ribs, letting my lips roam over every scar.

“I'm so sor—” Jethro places two fingers over my lips. “Don't. It's over and doesn't matter anymore. We've found each other again.”

“Is it that easy?”

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“Yes. The only downside is that the old bastard isn’t around to see us.” He smiles, and I can’t help laughing as well.

“Get some clothes on, and we can get the food sorted.”

I watch with amusement as Jethro groans around the first bite of the pizza, his eyes rolling back. From what my friends have said, I make a damn good pizza. And seeing Jethro almost having another orgasm proves they are right.

“Oh, god, this is the best pizza I’ve ever tasted,” he mumbles around the second mouthful. “Do you sell these in the café? Because I’m sure Maeve would’ve told me.”

“No, this is something I do for myself or friends if they ask.” I shrug.

“That’s crazy. You could make a fortune.”

“I work enough already. I’m already up at four a.m. to bake for the café.” People rarely realise how much work goes on before they walk into the café for their morning coffee. The early mornings have always been a peaceful time. Until I discovered audiobooks, and now I’ve succumbed to books I never thought I’d love—gay romance. The hours fly by as I lose myself in the world of hot hockey players and special forces, but mainly the lost lovers who finally make it back together. Wishful thinking, I always thought, but here I am, with Jethro and the new start I’ve been wishing for.

Jethro wipes his mouth and hands with a serviette and screws it up into a ball, all

laughter gone. This is going to be something serious, and I'm not sure if it's going to be a good serious or a bad one. "You okay?" I shift on the sofa to get a better look at him.

"What do we do now?" Jethro asks, looking a little unsettled.

"What do you mean?"

"Us. What do you want? I've never really done this. I rarely dated. Boyfriends never lasted more than a couple of months. I never wanted to show my back, so making it more serious was out of the question. I don't know how to do this, not out in the open." The furrow on his forehead has deepened. This is troubling him.

"We don't need to do anything but be together. Hang out with our friends at early doors. The food is pretty good in the pubs. Nobody is going to be surprised, are they? You already know everyone's been waiting for this." I pull him against me, placing a gentle kiss on his temple. "I'm not expecting anything. There's no rush for us to jump into bed together. We can get to know each other again. Which brings us back to dating. It will be fun. We never got the chance before."

Jethro is quiet. The crease on his forehead has lessened in its ferocity, but it's still there. Then he smiles, and his whole face lights up. "Y'know, handjobs are still considered sex, so just because we're not rushing straight towards full-on fucking, I'm down for more of that. Nor am I averse to blow jobs."

I laugh and kiss him again. "That's good to know. I'm sure I can be accommodating." I check my watch. "I think I'd better get home. Hope needs her meds before I can get her settled down for the night."

"I'll drive you back."

The journey home only takes a few minutes. When Jethro pulls up outside my home, he switches off the engine and twists to face me. “I’ve had a great evening. I can’t wait to get together again. When are you free?”

“It’s early doors tomorrow night. What time can you be finished at work?”

We arrange to meet at the pub tomorrow, and after some steaming hot kisses, I get out of the car and into my house. I give him a wave before he leaves.

It doesn’t take me long to get Hope sorted and settled for the night. Unfortunately, it’s not the same for me. My head is spinning with the memory of the way he came, the metal ring in his cock that had him groaning when I touched it. The taste of him when I licked my hand clean took me back to the warmth of the hay loft, but more than any of those memories, the scars on his back prevent me from going to sleep. What would I have done if I’d known how badly that bastard had hurt his son? After all these years, I still don’t have a truthful answer.

All I know now is that Jethro is back, and I’m not giving him up again.

Getting to know Ben again is exhilarating. He’s so different yet still the same man I was in love with years ago. But it’s getting harder and harder to say goodnight to each other. We have yet to get into bed, and it’s been three weeks since the night of the pizza at my place. We’ve seen each other at least three, if not four times, a week, and we message all the time. So why aren’t we fucking like rabbits?

Tonight, I’m going to ask him why. I want us to go to bed together, sleep in each other’s arms, and take the exploration of each other’s bodies to the next level. If he puts up a barrier or gives me another lame excuse, I’ll call him out on it.

The doorbell rings, and Isla barks. Hope joins in from the other side of the door. Laughing, I open the door. Ben is chuckling too. “Come on in.” I step back to let him

in and look over his shoulder. His car is parked next to mine. Normally, he walks over, giving Hope some easy exercise for the day. “You drove?”

He nods. “Hope was limping a little more today. I didn’t want to risk her hurting herself.”

“I’ll give her a check-over for you.” But before he can get any farther inside, I push the door shut, pull the dog lead from his hand, and kiss him. This is a kiss full of promise, of desire, and of the absolute need for him to know I’m not letting him go home tonight. As I delve my tongue into his mouth, I grip his face and slide my hands up into his hair, clutching the still-damp curls in my fingers. Something drops to the floor, but I don’t stop and look. It doesn’t matter because his hands are on my waist, and his cock is pressing hard into mine.

When we break apart, panting with swollen lips, he stares at me. I’m not sure his eyes are even focusing. He darts his thumb over his bottom lip. “I don’t want to go home tonight. I’m sick of doing the right thing. I want you, Jethro. I don’t care how we do it as long as we do it.”

“About fucking time too. I was going to tie you to the bloody bed tonight.”

He smiles, stroking his fingers over my cheek. “Hmm, bondage, I like the sound of that.”

“Really? You like that?” Colour me surprised. I would never have thought it, although I don’t know why. We never had the chance to explore all the fun and different games. I’m not into pain of any type, for obvious reasons, but a little light bondage is fun.

“I think anything we try will be what I want to do. We’ve missed out on so much, Jet. All I want is to be with you.”

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“You called me Jet.” I grin as his cheeks pink a little. “I like it. Come on. We said we’d meet them all at the pub.”

Ben groans and sticks his bottom lip out in a cute pout. “Do we have to? I’d much rather stay in. I’ll even cook for you.”

That’s a dirty move. He knows how much I love his cooking. The guy should be on MasterChef. But going out to see our friends has become the thing we do on Friday nights. We can skip it, especially since we’re finally going to get down to some serious dicking. I snigger. Like how old am I? But still, it’s the truth.

“Hmm, not sure that’s enough. What else have you got to tempt me?” I move into his space and whisper in his ear, “Show me what you’ve got, Benny.”

He shudders as I nip his ear lobe. “We need to take this upstairs. I don’t want the dogs judging us.”

“You know the way.” I step back, giving him room. He bends to pick up whatever he dropped. “You brought a bag?”

He smiles, which brightens up his whole face. “I knew I’d need clean clothes for the morning.” He walks past me, and I can’t take my eyes off his arse and how it fills his jeans so perfectly. Will he let me fuck him? There’s only one way to find out.

I follow him upstairs.

When I get in my bedroom, Ben looks out the window. It’s not a great view from

here. The cottage faces away from the sea and the beach, so I'm not sure what has his attention. As I approach him, he doesn't turn, but when I wrap my arms around his waist, he leans back onto me. "What's going on?" I ask quietly.

"I didn't think this would ever happen. I'm nervous. I don't know if I can be the man you knew fifteen years ago. You've said and thought the same things, and I believe you completely, but the body of twenty-five-year-old me is very different from the one I have now. I want this to be good, better than good. But what if I don't live up to your expectations? You're so different, in such a good way, whereas I'm just me."

"Then how about I show you how much I want this—want you. Because, trust me, you're exactly what I want." I slide my hands under his T-shirt, ignoring the way he breathes in, tightening his abs muscles. My dick throbs, thickening in my boxers as I push the fabric up his body, running my fingers through the soft hair that wasn't there before. "Everything about you, about this, is so thrilling. It's familiar yet so new. I'm nervous too, babe, but it's going to be so good you'll never doubt yourself again."

We separate so his T-shirt can come off. I pull it over his head and throw it somewhere in the room. He turns to face me. The deep fire, the need, the want in his eyes are palpable. His mouth hits mine in a powerful, demanding kiss. His tongue invades my mouth, clashing with mine in a fervour he hasn't shown before. It's like his anxiety has been turned off at the click of a switch. I match him, and our tongues tangle, twisting and turning, as we chase to be in charge. Ben pushes my clothes up, forcing us to break apart, something that needed to be done so I can catch my breath.

"We need to be naked right now." Ben unbuttons his jeans and shoves them down his legs until they get jammed at his ankles by his shoes. "Shit."

In moments, we're down to our underwear, with erections bulging in the soft cotton. When I stroke a finger up his length, a wet spot appears, pre-cum ready at the tip to burst free. "That's sexy as fuck." I grip him through the fabric. He lets out a soft

moan, hooks his thumbs into the waistband, and yanks his briefs down his legs. Instantly, I wrap my hand around his cock, pumping the solid rod, encouraging more clear fluid to the tip and nestling in the slit. As I stroke over the tip with my thumb, Ben's moans become louder. He reaches for my boxer briefs and pushes them down my thighs to the floor.

Any nerves Ben was feeling minutes ago have disappeared, and the confident man is back, walking me backwards to my bed. When my knees hit the mattress, I sit. Ben drops to his knees between my legs. With a wink, he takes my cock into his hand, pumping once, twice, three times until my pre-cum beads. He licks, flicking the ring. My head swims with blissful pleasure. Then his mouth is on me. As he takes more and more of me deep into his mouth and then his throat, the wet heat and slow suction are incredible. He doesn't seem to have any issues with the ring through the head. He only pulls back to tug on it gently with his teeth. I nearly come on the spot. Pleasure courses through me, and I cry out his name and push my fingers through his hair.

I'm holding my breath, desperately trying not to come. I manage a strangled "Stop."

He pulls back, twirling his tongue around the head like it's an ice cream, one of the good ones with the flake in. "Problem?" he asks smugly. The fucker, he knows exactly what was going on.

"You're far too fucking good at that."

At last, we're here, where we should have been for so long, yet the time apart is no longer relevant. It's the now that matters, and I want to make this the best he's ever had. The next question is what he wants. I haven't bottomed for a long time, but the thought of that beautiful, fat cock inside me makes me clench my channel. I'll make it easy for him.

"I want you inside me," I all but growl. Surprise lights up in his eyes.

“Yeah? You sure?”

“I am. We’ve got all the time in the world to swap and change. Right now, I want to know what the ring feels like.”

Jethro’s smile is so bright you’d see it from outer space. With a kiss on my lips, he scrabbles across the bed to his nightstand and pulls open the drawer. A packet of condoms and a bottle of lube hit the centre of the bed. I get up from the floor and climb onto the bed. “I want to ride you.”

Jethro pulls a condom out of the box, drops it on the bed, and picks up the lube. As the liquid drips onto his fingers, I kneel over his waist, giving him room to stretch my hole.

“Kiss me,” he says. I bend over him, my head in line with his. As our lips touch, he slides his blunt, slick fingers between my legs and rubs over my hole. The sensation is familiar yet strange. It had been the other way around before. Jethro hadn’t shown any interest in topping me. Looking back, I think he was too nervous to ask, too eager to get fucked.

As the kiss deepens and our tongues stroke languidly together, he slips the first finger inside me and pumps slowly in and out. I relax into the feeling. A hitched breath turns into a sigh as the second finger slides in.

As he grazes over my prostate, I break the kiss. “Enough. That’s all I need.” I groan as he withdraws, leaving me empty and aching for more.

I have to shift farther down his body, freeing his dick from behind me so he can put the condom on. I chuckle when his slippery fingers fumble with the foil wrapper. “You do it.” He shoves the packet into my hand. I open it but give it back. I’m not sure about the ring and want to watch how he does it.

Seconds later, I'm up on my knees again and sliding down onto Jethro's cock. He feels huge, so much bigger than he did in my mouth, but I guess the size difference is the reason for that. Laughing, I hold still, allowing my arse to adjust.

Jethro's eyebrow shoots up. "Something funny?"

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I shake my head and sink a little lower. Oh my fucking god. So that's the purpose of the piercing. I let out a guttural, animalistic grunt as my prostate reaps the benefit. Jethro chuckles and flexes his cock inside me. "I told you that you'd love it."

When I reach the base and my bum hits his groin, all conversation ceases. With our eyes locked on each other, I move, rocking forward and back. No words are needed as we increase the pace. With his hands on my hips, he thrusts up while I push down. It's hard, intense, and so utterly perfect that my climax builds and builds, tingling through me from my toes up to my head. It's going to be unstoppable. I tense, clamping hard onto him as my balls draw up into my body. He halts, holding me still as I throw my head back and scream with pleasure.

Before I can come down from a cloud so much higher than the ninth, I'm flipped over and on my back. Jethro leans over me, and with a devilish grin, he whispers, "My turn."

I expect him to pick up the frantic pace we've just come down from, but he moves slowly. "Watching you come like that was so fucking hot," he says quietly, his words a warm breath over my lips. Gradually he picks up speed, thrusting deeply, until my name is a chant on his lips and his cock pulses relentlessly inside me. He collapses onto me, his face tucked into my neck as he gets his breathing back on an even keel.

I lazily trail my fingers up and down his spine, ghosting over the nodes. Goosebumps bloom over the heated and sweat-slicked skin. I manage to turn my head enough to kiss his temple. "Are you human again yet?"

He smiles in my neck. "Just about."

Slowly he pulls away from me, and his dick slips free from my body. After tying off the condom, Jethro drops it into a small bin by the side of the bed and lies back down next to me. “So much better than a night at the pub.” He laughs and leans in to kiss me.

“That was incredible.” I cup his face. “It was just so much.” I sigh. “So much more. I didn’t think it would be so good, so right. Better than anyone else, even better than when we were last together.”

“I’d like to think I’m not the shy, inexperienced boy I was then.” A strange look crosses his face. Guilt? Why should he feel guilty?

“Jethro, babe, neither of us have been monks. There’s no need to regret anything.” But he does. The thought we cheated is a silly one, but I get it.

“I can’t believe that all the things we could’ve done for us to be together, the years we’ve been apart, and the relationship we should’ve had been because we were both fucking idiots. One phone call and this would never have happened. I feel fucking stupid and angry—because I still love you, Benny.” There’s a hitch in his voice, emotion pouring from him. I pull him into my arms. He presses his face into my chest, hiding his wet cheeks.

I kiss the top of his head. “All we can do is move on. It’s a brand new start for us. I can’t wait to learn all the new things about you.”

He lifts his head, looking much more relaxed. “Starting with discovering my favourite food. I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“I imagine it’s going to be neeps and tatties or maybe haggis or Scotch pies.” I grin as he grimaces in mock indignation.

“You can do better than that, and I’ve stocked my fridge so you can let your imagination go wild.” He kisses my cheek and all but jumps out of bed. He pulls his jeans back on sans underwear and leaves the top button undone. My dick twitches. His feet are bare, and the T-shirt stretches tight over his chest. He is perfect. Perfect for me.

I follow his lead and get, at least partially, dressed. Jethro is already in the kitchen, his head in the fridge as he rummages around to find the ingredients he wants for his dinner.

“So, what have we got to work with?” I look over his shoulder as he drops some steak and salad on the counter. “Excellent. Let’s get to work.”

We quickly put together the simple meal that, because Ben cooked, is so much better, but it’s the easy domesticity of the whole procedure that feels so right to me. It’s not until we’re cosied up on the sofa, each with a glass of wine, that Jethro lets out a heavy sigh.

“What’s up?”

“Did I fuck up when I said I love you? Maybe it’s too soon, but I wanted you to know how I felt.”

Why would that be a problem? “Why would you think that? I love that you told me.”

“Because you never said it back.”

Shit, he’s right. I didn’t tell him. “Jethro, Jet, whatever you want me to call you, I’ve never stopped loving you. You’ve been a flame in my heart for over sixteen years. I love you with every beat of my heart and every breath I take.”

“Then show me.”

“When am I going to see you in my gym?” Brodie asks me as we stretch out before starting his run training. It was Drew’s idea for me to join the running group. I can bring Isla too, which gives her a long run after a day of being in the surgery. This is only my second time, but I enjoy it.

I knew this question was coming, but it still takes me by surprise, so my planned, practised, and prepared answer flies right out of my brain. “Um, that would be never.”

He reels back as if I’ve slapped him. What did I say? Shit, my words came out pretty hard. No wonder he looks offended. “Shit, Brodie, I didn’t mean to say it quite that way. It’s nothing to do with you, but I vowed to never set foot on the property ever again. It’s not a good place for me. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, okay. I’m sorry. I promise you it doesn’t look anything like the farmhouse it was. Come around anytime, and I’ll give you a tour.”

I nod politely, but it’s not going to happen. After a few minutes, the last runners turn up, including the man I only have eyes for. The month since we finally made it into bed has been the happiest I’ve ever had. It seemed we were the reason for a sweepstake among our friends. I’m not sure who won. And I don’t want to know.

“Hey there, handsome.” Ben slides his hand around my waist and plants a kiss on my all-too-willing lips.

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“Hello to you too. How did your day go?” It was only this morning that he climbed out of my bed at four o’clock, but it seems like a long time ago.

“It was good. I got a lot done. Thanks for hanging on to Hope.”

“There was no way Isla was going to let her go.”

“Okay, are we all stretched and ready?” Brodie’s voice cuts through all the chatter.

“Let’s go.”

We set off at a steady pace. Ben is running next to me, catching me up on his day. Talking is easy. Brodie notices and gives me a sneaky smile. “Okay, everyone, it’s sprint time.” With that, he races away, shouting for us to get our arses in gear and catch up.

Forty-five minutes later, I’m bent over with my hands on my knees, gasping for air. “You know, I thought I was fit, that this wouldn’t be too hard. But shit, Brodie, I think you’ve broken me.”

Ben isn’t in quite the same condition as me, and I’m more than impressed. Maybe it’s muscle memory, just being used to the area and the routes. Edinburgh is very hilly, and I was okay with that, but I’d never chosen to run in the truly hilly parts. The treadmill at the gym, even on an incline, didn’t kill me the way this has.

“Looks like I’ll be taking care of you tonight.” Ben grins, his words and his eyes laced with humour.

“Fuck off.” I can’t help but smile when both he and Brodie laugh at me.

“The offer stands, Jet. Any time you want to.” When I straighten, Brodie pats my shoulder and walks over to Drew and Merlin. Maybe I should ask him to magic my aching limbs away. He’s some kind of gardening wizard, so his name suits. His boyfriend, Trent, is a friend of Merrick, Drew’s partner. He moved here last summer. As did Brodie. It’s all very easy to have them as friends now.

“What did he mean by that?” Ben asks.

“He offered to show me around his gym. Well, the property in general, said it isn’t the same as it used to be.”

“It’s not. I mean, the house is the same structurally, but it’s very different. The barn—our barn—is a stunning gym. I think you’d be okay.” I look at him incredulously. He’s been there! How could he step foot not just on the property but in the barn as well? I don’t know what to say to him, apart from shouting, “What the fuck!” I step back from him, grab my water bottle, and hoof it out of there. It’s a dry night and would be cold if I hadn’t just run five miles. I’m so disappointed in Ben I have to fight back my anger.

“Jethro!” Ben’s voice carries through the still air, but I don’t stop. He calls out again. “Jethro, wait.”

I slow my strides, not because I want to talk to him, but because I want to hear what he has to say. Then I’m going home alone. “What?”

“I can ask you the same thing. What’s going on?” He looks bewildered. Has he no clue how fucked up that place left me, physically and mentally?

Are we going to talk about this here? I want to be alone tonight, so I guess this will

have to do. “You...you went back there? You actually went back to the place I was beaten so hard I was pissing blood and couldn’t get out of bed. My mother had to do everything for me because that bastard wouldn’t let her take me to hospital. Or even call the bloody doctor. Everyone knew what he was like, and no one, not one single person, stopped him or asked where I was or if I was okay.” My voice has got louder, but I’m not shouting, not yet. But it’s simmering beneath the surface. One wrong word and I would be.

Ben looks at me, hurt in his eyes. “I did. I went to your house.”

The anger leaves me like the air being let out of a balloon. His confession isn’t enough, and while I know what I’m going to say will hurt us both, I can’t seem to hold the words back. “But you didn’t go and seek help. You didn’t tell anyone. You were twenty-five, an adult, someone who the town liked, from a family it respected. You didn’t go for help.” I stomp off. “I’ll see you around.”

“No. No way. You are not ending this. We’ve only just got it right—together. I fucked up. I know that. I had to live with the fact that him threatening to do the same to me was enough to silence me. I was a coward, and I live with that every day.”

I deflate even further. I have no more fight left in me. Why am I the only one hurting and holding on to the hatred of what is just a building? Just bricks and mortar, lathe and plaster in some areas. It’s so old and not worth my fury. Ben’s not the one at fault. “I’m sorry, and you’re right. I need to be alone for a while if that’s okay, but I’ll come to the coffee shop for breakfast.”

“Can I walk back with you to get Hope?”

I nod, and we walk side by side. I don’t know which of us reached first, but soon we’re holding hands.

The next day, the weather turns back into a wet and windy dismal day, disrupting any plans for a leisurely walk to the coffee shop, then a walk on the beach to feel less guilty for the decadent breakfast Ben is bound to make me. It also would have been a great way to clear my head from the demons and nightmares I had throughout the night. I would've preferred a sleepless night to the one I had with dreams full of the past.

Never mind. I grab Isla's lead and my phone, and we get into the Landie as quickly as possible. Isla still manages to shake water everywhere as soon as she's buckled in. I shake my head. We drive into town, then struggle to find somewhere to park. Everyone else has the same idea as me. Eventually, I find one close enough to the café not to get too wet. The windows are steamed up, but I can still see how busy it is inside.

The door opens, and a couple with a young child walk out. Maybe there'll be a table free. With luck, it's a corner table, and I can let Isla sit under the table without getting in anyone's way. When I look around, I recognise a few people. They all give me a nod or a hello. I feel good, comfortable. I'm accepted and, seemingly, liked as well. Maeve waves her fork, a square of French toast speared on the tines. She really is obsessed with it. My mouth waters at the sight of it, so maybe it will be on my order too.

Ben steps out from the counter and weaves through the tables to reach me, a tense edge to his expression I put there. I stand to greet him and ease his mind by popping a chaste kiss on his lips. His smile lights up his face, and his shoulders relax. "Hi," he says softly. "What can I get you?"

"Surprise me. I know everything will be amazing. And some bacon for Isla." I gesture at my dog, who's excitedly whipping her tail from side to side.

"I will, and I'll get some coffee sent over. Oh, have you heard about the attempted

break-in at the doctor's? The police think they were after the meds. Be careful with the surgery. You could be the next target. I wouldn't be surprised if you get a visit from the police."

Worry floods me at the thought of my practice being broken into. The drugs are all kept strictly under lock and key and never in large quantities. I learnt that the hard way in Edinburgh when we were robbed. The city, just like all cities, has a huge drug problem amongst the homeless. That was the reason I befriended Roddy so he'd always have an open door if he needed it, a safe place if he felt tempted to take anything again.

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Fuck, I haven't given him a thought in a long while. After saying goodbye to him months ago, I've forgotten about him. I've had more calls from unknown numbers and another from an Edinburgh hospital switchboard. Could that have been about him? Guilt washes over me, and I take out my phone, but who could I call? The police? I doubt they'll know anything. He wasn't dangerous or a troublemaker. He always slipped under their radar.

The thought of breakfast doesn't sit so well anymore.

Benny brings me a full English breakfast, which looks and smells amazing, but my appetite has gone. "Hey, what's up?"

Of course he recognises something's wrong. Instead of telling him, I smile and shake it off. "Nothing. I'm good. This is amazing."

I can't do anything about Roddy, not this morning. I need to try to find out where he is. But how? The police? I pick up my knife and fork as Ben pulls the chair across from me and sits down. "Don't bullshit me. Something's wrong."

"I got a bit thrown by the break-in. I didn't expect that to happen here. This is a quiet town, a town where everyone knows each other. Or that there could be addicts desperate enough to resort to that. Are there any homeless people around here?"

He shakes his head. "Not so much at this time of year. You get a few who travel around the area in the summer, picking up odd jobs here and there."

Is he saying that there are really no homeless people or that he has never noticed any?

There's a difference. Even in the sleepiest places, people are down on their luck or hiding from someone. "I'm surprised the police haven't been in touch. They normally want to check the security system on the property and see how secure the drugs cabinets are."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"We had a few break-ins where I worked before, but Edinburgh's a huge city, and with that comes an equally large homeless population. I used to volunteer at a food kitchen. The people on the streets never imagined it would happen to them. It's a hard and often brutal way of life. I helped out when I could because but for the grace of whoever, it could have happened to me."

Ben looks as if he couldn't imagine me in that situation.

"Don't you think that if my father could've got away with throwing me out, he would've done it. My mother stopped that from happening."

"I would never have let that happen, Jethro. I would've taken care of you."

"Anyway, that's all in the past, and I'll double-check my alarms and security system from now on." I want this conversation to turn away from me and the past. Especially with what I have planned for this afternoon. I eat the breakfast, groaning at the taste of it all. Ben is a genius.

"Are you busy this afternoon? I'll be finished here around two o'clock," Ben asks.

I should include him or at least let him know where I'm going, but I want to do this by myself. I may not even make it, and if I do chicken out, I don't need the pressure of someone telling me it will all be okay. I have no problem telling him afterwards and maybe going again together.

“I’ve got a couple of things to do, but I can see you later around teatime or in the evening. We can go out if you like.” Going out could be fun. It’s Saturday, and a lot of our friends will be out too. The face he pulls isn’t a positive one.

“I’d rather stay in. We didn’t see each other last night. You can come to mine, and I’ll cook.”

Last night obviously upset him more than I both thought and intended it to. I don’t want to hurt him or make him feel unwanted, so I nod, agreeing to his proposal. “I can be persuaded by food, especially if it comes in the form of one of your pizzas.”

Relief flashes over his face. I lean towards him and press a soft kiss to his mouth. “I’ll come over as soon as I can. Shall I bring Isla?” This is code for ‘will I be staying overnight?’

“Hope will enjoy the company.” He grins back. “I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you later.” He kisses me and heads to the kitchen, oblivious to the men and women watching him weave between the packed tables. He has no idea how attractive he is. How the hell can he still be mine?

I finish my coffee and stand. Isla moves from her spot under the table but waits while I walk up to the counter and pull out my wallet. Amy smiles. “There’s no charge, Jet. Orders from the boss-man.”

I shake my head at the new manager, then pull out a ten-pound note and put it in the tip jar. “He’s ridiculous.”

When we get outside, the rain has stopped, and the sun is attempting to break through the heavy grey clouds. I don’t think it will be successful, but it’s nice to feel that spring might be slowly coming back to us. When I get settled in the car, I pull in a huge breath and hold it, counting to five. As I exhale, I start the car. “I can do this. It

won't be the same.”

The drive out of town is quick. The roads are quiet as if sensing my mood. I'm not focusing as much as I should. My mind is far away, thinking the unthinkable. As I turn off the main road, I already see the difference. The road is no longer a mud and gravel minefield full of potholes but a smooth, black tarmac. A new oak five-bar gate is swung open, latched on a post to stop it from swinging shut. I keep my eyes fixed on the road in front of me. I don't want to look around, fearful of any triggers that can have me slamming on the brakes and going back the way I came.

A fork in the road appears, one that wasn't there before. A sign with 'To the gym' stamped like a street name on it points to the right. To the left is the farmhouse. Brodie was right. It's very different, but I can still see the place that was my home. That was my happy place as a young kid. Images of those happy times come back. Me sitting in the tractor with my dad. He'd set me on his knee and let me steer. I could hardly see over the top of the steering wheel, but I felt so grown up. They are still my happiest childhood memories of my father. The farmhouse was my mum's domain and would smell of freshly baked bread. The radio was always playing in the kitchen. We would sing along to the songs as I helped her bake cakes or cook dinner.

My carefree childhood stopped when the arguments started. It took me a long time to know it was because of his drinking. All I knew was the tractor rides stopped, and the happy, laughing days in the sunshine disappeared. The insults started, the jabs at my mum, the cuffs around my head when I wasn't quick enough to act on his demands. It left me unhappy and confused, wondering what I'd done wrong.

Can I do this? I run my hands down my face as I attempt to clear the bleak memories rising, ready to consume me. My hands are shaking when I grip the steering wheel. After another deep breath and a slow count to five, I can move again. I want to turn around to race back to my little cottage, which has no reminders of my past, but the new front door under a newly added oak porch opens, and Ivan steps out. He raises

his hand, acknowledging me. It's too late to turn around now. I drive to the left and head down the road to his door.

I switch off the engine, tell Isla to stay, and get out. Brodie has joined Ivan, and he smiles. "Hey, you came. It's good to see you. Come in."

"I can't stay too long. I've got the dog in the car." Hopefully, that is a good enough excuse to bug out if it gets too much.

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“Bring her in. We don’t mind,” Ivan says, dashing my chances of a quick exit. I let Isla out of the passenger side and keep her close to me. “It’s good to see you here.”

A dry chuckle escapes me as I shake my head ruefully. “I wish I could say it’s good to be here, but...” I can’t finish. I shrug instead.

Ivan’s friendly expression falters, and concern takes its place. “We never knew, Jet.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s okay. I’m not sure I would’ve sold it if I’d known it was to you. I wouldn’t want you to live in a house that’s full of so much pain and sadness.”

“Come inside. You might be surprised. It’s not the same house, I promise you.”

Reluctantly I walk alongside him.

He’s right, of course. It’s not the same place. In fact, it barely resembles the home I remember. It’s light and open. The whole interior has been remodelled. The old-fashioned kitchen is now modern and slick, with expensive fixtures and fittings while still looking like it’s part of a farmhouse. Brodie is swaying the baby from side to side. Not only has the house changed, but Ivan has as well. He always had so many girlfriends, but now he’s settled with a man, a family.

“Would it be too nosy to ask how you seem to have a baby?”

Both men laugh.

“He’s mine,” Ivan says. “An ex decided she didn’t want him. It was way more

complicated than that, but it's not important. He's here, and we love him."

"Fair enough. And you're right. This house is nothing like I remember."

"Did you want to see the gym?" Brodie lays the sleeping baby in a kind of rocking swing.

"Maybe. I mean, I should, especially after seeing what you've done in here. I know it's going to be nothing like a barn, but that barn holds a lot of memories. A lot of them good, but some really bad ones too."

"Then it's time to lay them to rest." Brodie isn't going to take no for an answer, and he's right. It's time to push the last memory of my father and what he did in that barn out of my head.

"Okay, let's do this."

I'm glad I came by myself. If I'd brought Ben, I would feel the need to talk about it, how different it is, how there's nothing left to remind me. Also, Brodie is a newcomer. He doesn't know the old me, and that's another thing that makes this easier.

"I'm guessing that something happened here, Jet, something not good."

"Yeah, my father nearly killed me with his belt, fists, and feet." I didn't mean to say that, but the bitterness is like bile on my tongue.

"Shit."

I potter around the house, changing the linen on my bed, cleaning up the bathroom, and vacuuming everywhere. Why do I feel fussy about him coming here? It's not like

this is the first time he'll come over or stay, but he was different this morning. There was something on his mind, and I think it was about the gym and Brodie's invitation to see it. It was the reason for our almost argument and us spending the night apart.

I'm just finishing the pizza when his Landrover pulls up to the side of the house. The butterflies that live permanently in my stomach whenever I think of him flutter excitedly.

The light tap on the door makes Hope jump up and bark. She races to the door, her tail wagging frantically. "Who's at the door, sweetie?"

She woofs again, and she gets an answer from the other side of the door. I pull it open, and the two dogs rush to each other and touch noses. How's my lover? He looks okay, not wrung out or stressed. In fact, he looks happy, contented, and the smile he gives me lights up his eyes. Whatever he's done today has done him some good.

"Come on in. It's too cold to stand out here." I take his hand and tug him inside.

As soon as I close the door behind him, Jethro pushes me against the wall and slams his mouth against mine in a full-on, hands-in-the-hair, groins-pressed-together kiss. I let him take what he needs but grip his arse through his soft, well-worn jeans, holding him as close as I can. After sucking on my tongue and biting my bottom lip for god knows how long, he breaks away.

"Have you got anything in the oven?"

Huh? Weird question. "No, not yet. Are you hungry?" Can he switch off all that passion for food? His erection is still hard against my own.

"Not for food, for you. I want you. I need you." He grasps my hand and drags me to

the stairs. “Get naked.” He kicks off his shoes and pulls his hoodie and T-shirt off at the same time. It doesn’t take me long to catch up, and I shove my jeans down my legs. My cock bounces hard against my stomach.

Jethro opens the drawer by the side of my bed, takes out the supplies, and throws condoms and lube onto the bed. I expect him to suit up. He’s topped every time we’ve had sex. I haven’t minded. I love the feeling of a man inside me. But if he wants me inside him tonight, I’m going to grab that chance by the horn. Pun intended.

“Slow down, babe.” I run my fingers down his spine. “What’s going on?”

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“Can we talk afterwards? Right now, I need your cock in my arse.” He reaches out to me, and I go to him willingly. “Is that okay with you?” His cocky grin is the same as the one I’ve held in my memory for so many years. I can see him back in the barn, giving his body, with a smile as he teases me.

“I can manage that.”

We lie together on the bed, kissing slowly, hands roaming softly over each other’s bodies. I slip my lubed fingers down the crease of his bum to his hole. When I slide a finger over his pucker, then to his taint and balls, Jethro shivers and moans. I wrap my fingers around his sac.

“Goddammit, Ben, that’s not where I want your fingers.”

“Steady, baby. What’s the rush? I haven’t been in here”—I release his balls and tap his hole again—“for too many years. I want to savour every moment.” But I let one digit sink into his body. His channel clamps around my finger, even more than all those years ago. “You’re so tight.”

He grunts out a laugh as I push deeper. “It’s been a while.”

“I’d better make it as good as you remember.” I slip a second finger in and hook them to stroke over his prostate. His hiss of pleasure spurs me on to get him ready. Two fingers become three, and Jethro is almost bucking on them to fuck himself. “Behave, or I’ll stop.” I smack his arse, and he shudders.

“I’m ready. Please, Benny, just fuck me.”

I've teased him enough. I line up my cock, push into his body, and pause only an inch in. Christ, he feels incredible, gripping me so hard. I don't want this to be over quickly, but fuck, he feels good. With a deep breath, I thrust deeper, taking my time. His muscles ripple around me. I bottom out as deep as I can go, then lean forward to kiss him. He wraps his legs around my waist. Our lips part, and he touches my tongue with his briefly. "Now fuck me."

I don't need to be told again. I flex my hips and slide in and out. Slowly to start with, but when his heels dig into my thighs, I don't hold back, wanting to pour all my love for him into this moment. I thought I'd captured and kept every kiss, every touch, and every caress, but this, this is so much more, and the depth of feeling, the realness of this moment, is overwhelming. My eyes are burning with unshed tears. Jethro pushes his fingers through my hair and pulls my head down. I expect him to kiss me, but instead, he whispers, "This is why I couldn't let anyone else inside me. You are my everything, my world. I'm never letting you go."

"I love you," I murmur back. "Get ready to come." We fuck faster now. I twist and turn onto my back. "Ride me, baby."

I watch with eager eyes as the love of my life fucks himself on my dick. He closes his eyes and lets out a moan of sheer lust, raw and ragged. My balls tingle and draw tight. There's no way I'm coming before him, and I clasp his cock in my hand. I take him in firm, determined strokes. "Come for me, Jet."

Thick ropes of creamy cum shoot from his dick, covering my abs and chest, splattering over my heated, sweat-soaked skin. The muscles in his arse clench around my length, drawing me deeper still. With one final thrust, I roar out his name and come. Shuddering and jerking, I fill the condom with my release. If only I were shooting into his body, not some latex. That's something worth discussing, but later.

Jethro collapses onto me. I wrap my arms around him, pressing kisses on his neck,

tasting the salty skin, relishing the unadulterated flavour of him.

We stay locked together as we catch our breaths. Jethro mutters something I don't catch. "Hmm, what was that?"

"I'm stuck to you," he says.

I chuckle. "It's your cum, baby." I run my hands down his back to his bum, stroking over the slightly fuzzy skin. "We can shower if you want. It's big enough for both of us."

"Only if you carry me."

My laugh turns into a groan as my now almost flaccid dick slips from his channel. Jethro rolls off me so I can deal with the condom. He watches me, frowning. Does he have the same thought of ditching rubbers as I had moments ago? "What's got you concentrating so hard?"

He bites on his lip. "Do we need to use condoms? I've never gone without them, and I was clear after my last test before I left Edinburgh. I've only been with you since then."

"I've not been tested for a while, but that's only because I haven't had sex with anyone for a long time. I can get a new one done. I've always been clear and safe. Like you, I always used protection."

"You don't need to have a new one. I trust you. Would you like to stop using them? If you don't, I'm happy to keep using them."

I'm grateful for his trust, but getting tested again is a good idea. I can make an appointment next week. "I'd like to stop using them." I kiss him. "Shower, then

food?”

Jethro nods. “Shower, then pizza.”

The pizza is incredible again. I pat my stomach and let out a groan. “Is there anything you can’t cook? I’m going to have to go running every day if this is how you’re going to feed me.”

Ben laughs, reaching for the last slice. “You’ll have to tell me all your favourite dishes. I can make them up for your freezer on days you’re working late.”

I want to fill him in on my day, but I’m not sure if he’ll be annoyed or not. From what he’s said, he would have liked it to be something we did together. “I went to Brodie and Ivan’s today.”

Ben stills, his glass of wine halfway to his lips. With a blink, he takes a sip. “What did you think?”

“The house looks almost the same, from the outside anyway. The interior is another thing altogether. Brodie has done a great job. It looks totally different, homely, a happy place.”

“Yes, it’s a beautiful home. Did you look at anything else?” he asks hesitantly. Why doesn’t he just come out and say it?

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“You mean the barn? Yes, I did. You don’t need to be so cagey about it. I know I’ve been a dick about it, and honestly, I didn’t think I’d be able to go there. It’s why I wanted to go alone. Brodie doesn’t know anything about me, us, and our past. I didn’t have to explain myself.”

“It’s okay. I understand, but I wouldn’t have pushed you, Jet. I would’ve held your hand, though.” He’s thoughtful for a moment. “How was it?”

A low chuckle slips from my lips. “Anticlimactic. Nothing is left to make any connections of the past. It’s just the frame of something so very different. I even signed up to be a member.”

Ben laughs loudly. “Of course you did. We’ll have to go together.”

Ben doesn’t need to know how much I explained to Brodie, that he had found the box of mementoes I’d hidden in the hayloft. The box contained all the messages we’d sent each other, silly things like the pale blue and green sea glass pieces, a receipt from our first date when we’d gone up to Exeter and a restaurant. Having that box back again meant so much to me. Brodie couldn’t say why he kept it, but it had obviously meant so much to someone he couldn’t throw it away. I had it in my car and would hide it away in my new home.

We spent a relaxing evening together, stretched out on the couch. My tension has eased now that the demons I’ve kept living rent-free in my head for so many years have been banished, shunted to the same place as my parents, never to be thought of again.

It's only ten thirty when, after my fourth or fifth yawn almost cracks my jaw, Ben nudges me. "Bedtime. Go on up. I'll let the dogs out and lock up."

I don't complain but stretch my neck and kiss his chin. "Okay, don't be too long, or I'll be asleep."

He chuckles as we untangle our limbs and get up without tripping over each other or the dogs.

I'm under the duvet with my head already in that fuzzy state between awake and asleep when Ben comes into the bedroom. He undresses quickly and slides naked in next to me. I tuck under his arm, rest my head on his chest, and throw my leg over his. He's quiet but not asleep. He hasn't relaxed fully yet. I'm staving off going to sleep until he's got whatever he's thinking about.

"Can I ask you something?" His voice is quiet in the dark.

"Of course."

"You said it had been a while since you bottomed. How long?"

"Um, does it matter?" I'm going to have to explain myself to him. He'll make a big deal out of it. When it doesn't matter anymore, not now we're together.

"No, not really, just curious. I've bottomed more for you in the last couple of months than I have in a long time. It's not a problem. I love having you inside me, especially with your magical metalwork."

That gets a chuckle out of me. I'll tell him and get it over with. Then sleep can happen. "It's been over fifteen years since I bottomed." My voice is as quiet as his, although in the dark and silent room it seems louder.

“Wait. What? That makes me the last time. I don’t understand.”

I shrug, trying to make light of the situation. “I didn’t want anyone else, so I topped.”

“Fucking hell, Jet. This is huge. Why haven’t you told me this before?” He’s almost shouting now, the words reverberating through his chest.

I tilt my head, moving away from under his embrace. “It’s not a big deal. I found out I liked topping just as much, so I carried on doing that.” He raises one eyebrow. Shit, he doesn’t believe a word. This could get ugly, and I’m not up to it tonight. I’ve fought enough battles today, and I need to sleep.

“I don’t believe you. You don’t stop doing something you love because you tried a different way.” He’s not angry; he’s exasperated with my indifference. Just like when we were younger and I didn’t want to talk about my home life or my parents arguing. He’d want to talk it over, to dissect every minutia.

“Ben, please, I’m tired. I’ve had a tough day. I need some sleep,” I mutter, rolling off him. I don’t turn my back on him but lie on my back, looking up at the ceiling. He runs a hand down my arm, and I turn my head. I can just make out the concern on his face in the darkness. I sigh. “You broke my heart, so instead of being mature and contacting you, I fucked everyone I could. I’d move on before I could make any commitments. I did that for probably the first couple of years at uni. I only started to be a bit more responsible when the workload got hard and I had to study so much more. It’s an incredible course, and many don’t make it to the end. I had to stop fucking about and work. That’s it. I didn’t want to be that vulnerable again because the only person I wanted to be with didn’t exist anymore.”

Ben is quiet, his breathing slow, hitching in his throat a couple of times. Then he turns to face me. I do the same. “I can’t believe we’re back together.”

“I know. Don’t get me wrong. I had a lot of fun too. Met some great people—Maeve, for one. Plus, I started a career I’ve always wanted and that I love. I wasn’t all pining and crying into a pillow for you. We moved on, Benny. I certainly didn’t plan to come home, but fate showed her face when I was messing about on the internet. I didn’t expect you to be both here and single.”

“I never wanted to leave. I had friends here. I knew what I wanted to do, and I love it. This place is my home. It suits me. I made the effort to move on, be happy, and I was. I am.”

“So am I.” I roll him onto his back, going with him so I am on top of him. Ben parts his legs, allowing me to lie between them, our hips together. Both our cocks are plumping as I rock against him. As I kiss him, he wraps his hand around my arse and squeezes tightly.

“I want you inside me,” he says quietly. “No condom, just you.”

“You sure?” I’ve never considered going bareback before tonight. Now the idea has my head swimming and my cock hardening painfully.

“Yes, come inside me.”

All the talk in the café is about the break-in at the school only a week after the doctor’s was targeted. The residents are getting twitchy and discussing upgrading alarm and security systems. Maeve comes in for her usual coffee and sandwich, informing me that the police turned up and spoke to Jet.

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“He’s not too stressed. Everything is well locked up. They seemed happy and left, telling us to look out for anyone unfamiliar hanging around,” she says, but she doesn’t look convinced. “I’ve told him he should call Drew and get some security screens for the windows.”

“I think Drew’s going to be getting a lot of calls.” Should I be looking into shutters for the wide windows here? I can’t imagine they would be cheap. The café is doing well, but can I justify the expense? I doubt I’m a target.

“The weird thing is nothing was taken. They didn’t get into the doctor’s, and they only took some food from the staff room, no petty cash. It’s more like whoever it is needs help. They must be desperate,” Maeve says sadly.

There isn’t anything more to say about it, and I switch on to easier topics. “Is the practice a success? Jethro only nods and says it’s fine.”

“He’s being too modest. It’s better than he expected. People are coming in from other towns to see him. If the numbers keep rising, he’ll need another vet. Even the animal shelter has asked for him. He’s an amazing vet, and it shows in his work.”

Pride for him swells in my chest. I knew he’d be good. It’s all he ever wanted to do, a bit like me. I always loved to bake and wished to do something with it. It took me a little longer to reach my goal, but here I am.

I’ve got a busy week with a wedding coming up. The cake is made, but I still have the icing and artwork to do this week. I doubt I’ll see much of Jethro unless I go over later in the evening. We haven’t agreed on anything.

By six o'clock, the café is closed, cleaned, and ready for tomorrow. The lights are all off, and it's just me in the kitchen collecting the cake to take it home and start. My phone ringing startles me. I've already spoken to Jethro this evening. Am I that sad I don't speak to anyone else in the evenings? All our friends use a WhatsApp group to arrange to meet up. I grab my phone from the counter but don't answer. Jamie's name on the screen leaves me stumped. What's he calling me for?

"This is a surprise. What do you want, Jamie?" I haven't given him a single thought for a long time and can't imagine why he thinks it's okay to call me after all this time.

"I wasn't sure if you would answer, so thank you." He sounds sad, troubled. I can imagine what it is but still don't see what it has to do with me. I stay quiet. Will he tell me? He doesn't.

"I wasn't sure either. It's been two years. What do you want?" I don't have time for this. I've got too much to do, and I need to get back to Hope. She's been on her own for a few hours, and I don't like to be late for her dinner time.

Jamie sighs. "You were right. I was stupid to believe anything Duncan said."

I exhale slowly, unsurprised by his words. "I'm sorry, Jamie, but why are you calling? I doubt you want me to do the I-told-you-sos, and anything else has nothing to do with me."

"I know, I know. I made a mistake and should've stayed with you. Is there anything I can say that would change your mind? Could we meet up, have a coffee or something? I think about you a lot, about how good we were together. Maybe we could have that again?"

I do not need this tonight—or any time—but I can stop this conversation. "No, Jamie. We can't meet up. There's nothing you can say to change my mind. And anyway, I'm

with someone. He's good and kind, and he loves me."

"Really? I thought you'd still be obsessed with that boy, the elusive Jethro. I had to compete with a fifteen-year-old memory." He sneers.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Jamie, I don't know why you thought calling me after what you did to me was a good idea. You said yes to his proposal, so I'm guessing you're married now. Which makes you wanting to meet me wrong."

"The bastard cheated on me." He chokes out, a sob following it.

"So, I'm the backup, right? I'm sorry he did that to you, but you let him. Good luck for the future, Jamie."

"Are you really with someone?"

"Yes. Jethro came back home."

"I don't believe you. There's no way there was something still between you. He left you in a spectacular manner. He didn't want you."

"Goodbye, Jamie." I end the call.

The desire and peace I need to decorate the wedding cake have gone. I feel wrung out. A five-minute phone call from a man I never want to hear from has left me jittery. The audacity of the man! I'm pissed off and want to talk to someone, but I don't think Jethro would appreciate me moaning about my ex. We haven't spoken specifically about past lovers or relationships. Jethro said he never stayed long with any one partner. I was the same until Jamie, and even though it lasted less than a year and ended long before Jethro came back, I'm not comfortable talking about it.

I take a deep breath, load the cake into the car, and get home to Hope. She won't mind if I talk shit about Jamie.

There's huge satisfaction in watching the blank surfaces of the cake turn into a work of art. Flowers with the palest pink, almost translucent sugar petals become flowers that sweep across the three layers. I try to keep the conversation with Jamie out of my head, but it creeps back in. How could he have thought calling me would be a good idea? I can still bring up Duncan's smug, satisfied smile like he'd won a game. That was what he thought it was. He'd made sure he was still on Jamie's mind. The texts testing his resolve to stay away from him would appear in the middle of the night, waking us both up. I thought Jamie was seeing through his game, but ultimately, Duncan got his way, only to continue playing with him by cheating.

Another thought crashes through me. What if I was still with Jamie when Jethro came home? What would've I done? My hands still, the petal in my fingers falling onto the table. It's something I can't even imagine because the moment I saw him again, I wanted him.

Stop! That's not what happened, and I have Jethro.

With a creak, I lift my arms above my head in an attempt to stretch out the aching muscles in my back and neck. When I see the time on the kitchen clock, I groan. It's almost quarter to two. How did it get so late? It's time to stop working. I should have wrapped it up two hours ago. I'm going to be dead on my feet at work.

I look at the progress I've made on the cake and smile at how good it looks. The bride and groom will be thrilled. "Come on, girl," I call to Hope.

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She hops out of her bed and wags her tail. While she potters around in the garden, looking for the perfect spot to pee, I clear up, put the cake back in the container, and wipe all the surfaces down.

It's not until I'm undressing that I check my phone. Two messages from Jethro flash on the screen. I read them, smiling at the sweet sentiments of missing me, but it's too late to reply. I'll call him tomorrow.

As spring brightens the days and the temperatures rise again, I get more and more settled into the town. The quiet, slow way of life suits me. The only thing that's caused a ripple of gossip and concern was the break-ins. The culprits were a couple of kids messing around, and as nothing was stolen, they got off with a warning and some community service. A far cry from the city life I'd grown used to, where sirens were a regular sound. It's a relief to know it wasn't someone living on the streets here in Calston Cove. I'd like to think we're good people and would help someone struggling. Memories of Roddy come back to me, and with them, the guilt is creeping in. How's he doing in the cold winter?

The bell above the door rings. I look up and smile when Maeve walks in. "Good morning."

"Good morning." She holds up a paper bag. "Your man had this ready for us. He says he'll see you tonight."

I look inside the bag. A bacon sandwich, thick doorstep soda bread and brown sauce oozing out of the sides. "That man is a genius. He truly makes the best food ever. What did you get?"

“The same as you. I can’t resist. Promise me you’ll never upset him.” She grins and walks through the reception to the office.

It’s Saturday, so we’re only open until one o’clock, but the diary is full. Once Luke is here, we’ll open. For now, I’m going to sink my teeth into this sandwich and have the coffee that came with it.

My relative peace and quiet is disrupted by a commotion in the reception. Laughter and lots of voices, including a high-pitched child’s voice, filter in. I open the door and look out. Luke is talking to Drew’s partner, Merrick, while Drew and their little girl—Willow, I think—show something to Maeve. They’re the last appointment of the morning and seem very excited.

As I approach, Drew straightens and smiles. “Sorry about the noise. Willow is very enthusiastic this morning.”

The little girl looks me up and down with a confidence way above her three or four years. She must find me worthy. With a nod, she shows the object of everyone’s attention. A little puppy, a Border terrier at first glance. “Are you the vet man?” she asks. “Because we have a puppy, and Daddy says she needs to be vaccinated by a vet.”

“Vaccinated, sweetheart,” Drew corrects her gently.

“That’s what I said, vaccinated.”

I crouch and get a closer look at the dog. “I am the vet man. Would you like to come in? We can get your puppy all checked over. Does it have a name?”

“Fidget. Because she’s very wiggly, and that’s what fidgets do,” she says seriously, brushing her blonde hair from her eyes. The vow I made myself years ago to never

have any children waivers. If they're all as cute as this one, I could be persuaded.

I break up the meet-and-greet and get all the relevant people and the puppy into the consultation room. Merrick shakes my hand. "It's good to see you again, Jet."

I run through the usual checks, explaining everything I'm doing to the interested child. I even let her try the stethoscope to hear the pup's heartbeat. By the time I've finished with Fidget's vaccinations, Willow is already planning her future career.

"Thanks for encouraging the most expensive university course there is," Drew grumbles, but the love he has for the bold, confident little girl shines in his eyes.

I don't even bother to apologise. "You're very welcome. I look forward to seeing you again, Miss Willow, and make sure you sign up for our puppy parties. Fidget will love them."

"Does it have cake? All parties have cake." Willow's eyes are bright with excitement.

"I'll make sure it does, but only puppy-friendly cake. You have to be careful what she eats. No sugary things and no raisins or grapes."

I open the door to let them all back into the reception. As they file past, Willow chattering away to Drew, Merrick pauses. "Oh, Jet, I've just remembered. Melanie said there was someone in the gallery asking about you. She didn't give him any information, but you may want to talk to her and ask her. I don't know anything more, sorry."

Why would someone look for me in an art gallery? If they know me, they know I'm a vet, and it would make sense to come to the practice. "Weird, but okay, thanks. I'll catch up with Mel."

Once they've left, I lock the door. "That was a busy morning. Are you all sorted, Luke?"

"I'm updating the patient files, and I still need to send out some invoices, but that won't take me too long. Are you in a hurry? I can lock up if you like."

"No, it's okay. I'm going to be in the office for the afternoon." I walk past the desk, then turn around. "Are you enjoying working here? Is it what you wanted?" I should've asked him before now.

Luke looks surprised by my question. He widens his eyes as if I've said something dumb. "Jet, I love it here. It's the best job I could wish for. I love all of it. Have I done something you don't like?"

"No, of course not. You've taken to it like a duck to water. Your customer service is brilliant. You seem to get on with everyone. I'm very happy with you, but if you think there are courses you'd like to do, skills you'd like to learn, let me know."

"Oh, thank you. There's an AMTRA course I'd love to do. It would allow me to dispense worming and that sort of thing. It's quite expensive, and I can't afford it now, but if I save for it, I can do the next one."

"You wouldn't have to pay for it, Luke. It would benefit the practice, so I'll cover all the fees. Bring me the details, and we can look into it together."

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His face lights up as he nods happily. “Thanks, that’s awesome.”

I walk into the office. Maeve is on the phone but gives me a nod as I sit at my desk. There’s a pile of bills and receipts to go through, and while Ben is busy at the café, I spend the time doing all the work that gets pushed aside during opening hours.

“I’m heading home. Will you be out tonight?” Maeve stands up from her side of the desk.

“I’m not sure what we’ve got planned. I’ll see what Ben wants to do. We’ve been home boys lately, so a night out could be good for us.”

“Give me a ring later.” She leaves.

The next time I look at the time, it’s close to five. I’ve worked through the majority of the tedious paperwork. The rest can wait. It’s time to go. It takes a couple of minutes to shut everything down. I whistle to Isla, who jumps up from her bed in the corner of the room. “Come on, girl, let’s go and stretch our legs. Beach time.” She twists and turns around my legs, wagging her tail frantically. “I wonder if Hope wants to come. Shall we call Ben?”

When I exit the building, a familiar face with a happy smile spread wide greets me. “I was just about to call you,” I say as he gets closer. “Do you want to take them to the beach?”

Hope and Isla bump noses, turning circles around each other. Hope still has a small limp, but it’s hardly noticeable while she’s this excited. Ben leans into me and places

a soft kiss on my mouth.

“Sounds good. I need some fresh air. It’s been a crazy busy day. I think the sunshine brought everyone out.”

We head off towards the beach. “I saw Drew and his family today. The little girl is something else. They’ve bought a puppy, and Willow has decided to be a vet.” Then I remember what Merrick said. “Merrick said someone was looking for me at the gallery. They spoke to Melanie, but Merrick didn’t have any other info about it. That’s a bit weird, right?”

Ben’s steps falter. Does he know something? “Did he say what the person looked like?”

“No. Like I said, it was Mel who told him. Do you know who this person is? Have they been into the café?”

“No, it’s news to me. Are you going to ask Mel?”

I shrug. “Probably not. I’m not hiding. They’ll find me soon enough.”

The dogs race together across the damp sand, jumping in and out of the foamy sea, looking like they’re having the time of their lives. I wish I could say the same for me. Doubt and insecurity have been seeping into me. It’s all since the stupid phone call from Jamie. Is he the mystery person? After what happened and what he said, would he be interested, curious, to see the elusive Jethro? I doubt he believes me. He’ll want to see who I was holding on to for so many years. Especially now he seems to be single again, but it’s been years since it all blew up in my face. I haven’t given him a thought until he rang.

“What’s going on in your head, sweetheart? You’re lost in thought.” Jethro takes my

hand as we watch the dogs.

There's no one else on the beach, which is surprising considering how busy the day has been. In a few weeks, it will be Easter, and the holiday homes will open up again. The town will have its influx of people: the second home owners, the surfers, and the holidaymakers. The people who make this town a lot of money and are always welcome.

Is this the right moment to tell Jethro about the phone call? Honestly, while we're out here in the chilly evening sun alone, it won't get better than this.

"I had a phone call a few nights ago from someone I never expected to hear from again. An ex. His name is Jamie. It all ended over two years ago. He cheated on me when he got back with his old boyfriend. I only found out when I turned up unexpectedly to take him out for the weekend. He's a teacher at the secondary school, or he was when I met him. I don't know where he is or what he does now."

"What did he want? Or is it an easy guess? He wanted to see you, to try again." Jethro's voice is even, calm. He doesn't look or sound annoyed. I guess he's confident in who and what we are.

"Something like that, just sounding out my situation. He wanted to meet for a coffee. I told him I was with someone. He wasn't very happy about that. Snapping that I was still fixated on a past that was never going to happen."

"He knew about me, about us?"

"Yes, of course. When you're my age and not settled down, people ask questions. I didn't go into it too much, just a lost chance at what I thought would be my forever. I told him it was you, that you had come home. Then I said goodbye and ended the call."

“You think this person looking for me could be him? Why?” His forehead is etched with deep frown lines. “What good does that do? He can’t gain anything from it.”

“I don’t know if it’s him. The two things could be completely unconnected. I wanted to tell you about the call. Y’know, in case you heard something different.”

Jethro sighs, pulls me into him, and wraps his arms around my shoulders. “It won’t take long for whoever it is to find me. I’m not hiding. It doesn’t make sense that it would be either of them.”

“I’m sorry.” He’s right. It does seem a bit far-fetched. But it being Jamie would make sense. He might believe me if he sees Jethro or both of us together. In any case, I’m deleting his number from my phone. I don’t know why I haven’t done it before.

“Hey, you don’t have anything to apologise for. The easiest way to find out is to talk to Melanie. Maeve’s going to the pub tonight, and she’s bound to be there too.”

“Okay, sounds good. Do you want to meet there? I have to get home. Hope will want her dinner and drying off. Otherwise, she’ll lie on the sofa, soaking it with seawater and sand.”

Jethro agrees and calls his dog back. Hope follows eagerly, and we have them back on their leads. At the top of the steps, we pause. “See you about eight?” Jethro asks. I nod and kiss his cheek.

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When I get back indoors, I dry Hope and feed her. While she's happily munching away, I get in the shower. As the water cascades over my head and neck, I run over the conversation with Jethro. He didn't have a problem with my past relationship or the thought of potentially being stalked. I'd be freaking out. He's right, though. We can solve it easily.

The rumble of his engine surprises me. I thought we were meeting at the pub. When I open the door and see Isla waiting patiently, I get why. Someone is planning a sleepover. Jethro walks in and kisses my neck, breathing in deeply. "God, I love how you smell."

The pub is loud and busy, but we squeeze through the tables and the groups standing near the bar. I order a beer for Jethro and a gin and tonic for me. I'm not that much of a beer drinker or a drinker at all. Years of having to get up before dawn stop nights out and alcohol. I'd rather have this or a glass of wine.

We walk to the corner table where the usual gang is sitting. All the empty glasses show they've all been here a while. Jethro sits next to Melanie and leans close to speak to her. I take a seat opposite them, so I can't hear the words, but with a little bit of lip-reading, I understand he's asking about her visitor. She says something I don't get. I risk looking through the photos on my phone. Have I saved any pictures of Jamie? I thought I'd dumped them, but I missed one. I bring it up and pass my phone to Jet.

I'm surprised when she shakes her head. I really thought it would be Jamie. When he hands me back my phone, I delete the picture, along with his number. Relief lifts off me like a heavy weight around my neck. I sit back and take a sip of my drink. After

talking to Mel for a bit longer, Jethro comes over and sits next to me.

“Not him,” Jethro says. “It was a younger man, and he didn’t speak directly to Mel but to another staff member. So she couldn’t give me anything more than the description she was given. You can stop fretting over a long-gone ex. And get rid of the bloody photo, please.” That’s the only indication he gives me that he’s pissed off with it all.

“Already done, and I also blocked his number.” I peck his lips with a soft kiss. He smiles against my mouth, and all the butterflies in my stomach flutter their wings contentedly. Happy that any drama has been halted. “You’re not bothered who it is?”

“Nah, like I said, I’m not hiding from anyone. I’m not wanted by the police, no bank robberies or spy missions in my past. I’m clean as a whistle.”

“Really? That’s such a shame. I can see you as James Bond. Although I doubt he’s pierced quite as much as you and in the same places.” I grin. He knows how much of a fan I am of his dick ring.

“Did I hear piercings?” Stacey’s eyebrows shoot up as she nudges Maeve. “You must know about them. Spill.”

Maeve splutters over her drink. “No way, I don’t know what he’s sporting. Gross.”

Stacey turns to me. “Benny, come on. You’ll tell us, right?”

Jethro is laughing so much I’m almost tempted to tell them, but nope, that secret is just for us.

The remainder of the evening is fun. Of course Jethro has the piss taken out of him, but he remains tight-lipped, only his thumb running up and down the inseam of my

jeans shows me he's thinking about what we're going to be getting up to in, say, about half an hour.

"You ready to go?" he whispers in my ear, his warm breath on my skin sending a happy shiver down my spine.

"Hmm, yes, more than ready."

By the time we leave the pub, the weather has changed, and the rain is pouring down. "Oh, just great. We're gonna have to run." I grab Ben's hand, and we leg it across the road and down the high street to the corner that leads down to Ben's house. I'm grateful we're staying here. It would've taken us longer to get to mine.

"Thank god," Ben groans as he fishes his keys from his pocket. We stumble in through the door and shake the same way the dogs do. "That was not fun."

"Why are you grinning, then?" I ask. The dogs wriggle by our legs, wanting some attention. I pet them both, then peel out of my soggy coat. Ben still hasn't answered, and when I look at him, he's smirking.

"Because I think we need to get naked and warmed up. A shower seems the best way to do that." Ben waggles his eyebrows suggestively. "Don't you think?"

"Sounds good to me. You get it started, and I'll settle the dogs."

He nods and goes upstairs while I try to get the dogs out for a last pee, but one look at the rain has them both turning away and going straight to their bed. They lie down together, snuggled in close. Friends for life, it seems.

As I climb the stairs, the shower is running. Ben will be naked by now, and I hate missing him strip. On the last step, I finish unbuttoning my shirt and let it drop

soggily from my shoulders, catching it in my hand. Instead of turning to the bedroom, I head for the bathroom and push open the door. Steam billows around me. I was right. Ben is naked, leaning with his hands on the sink, looking into the soon-too-cloudy mirror.

“You okay?” I ask as he turns to face me.

“Yeah, tired. I’ve had a lot on my mind. Tonight helped, though. I had fun.” He smiles, moves away from the sink, and pulls the shower curtain back. “Are you joining me?”

“Yep.” I strip off the rest of my clothes and step in behind him. I press a kiss between his shoulders as I stroke down his ribs to his waist and hold him against me. “I love you,” I whisper, kissing up his neck to his chin. Stubble has bloomed over his jawline. I run my own over it, scratching and scraping, and slip my hands down lower to his arse. “I love your body.”

He scoffs, and I squeeze his bum hard. He groans. I dip my finger down the valley between his cheeks, slipping farther and farther to his hole. “I’m having this tonight.” I tap the pucker.

“Yes, here, now.” He shuffles his feet apart, giving me more access.

“No, I want you spread out in bed. I want to play tonight.” I’m in the mood for some teasing and edging. “You’ve been wound up too tight lately. It’s time to come apart.”

I grasp his dick and tug it firmly. He shudders and thickens even more. As I stroke him slowly, his cock throbs and pulses in my hand. “Y...yes, god, yes.”

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After a last pull, I let him go and grab the soap. “Time to wash up.”

“Bastard,” he says, but humour laces his voice.

“By the time I let you come, you’ll be calling me worse.”

And he is.

Finally, I let go of his balls but stroke and stop, stroke and stop on his cock with lube-slick fingers. Ben is covered in sweat, fisting the sheet over the mattress. Tiny little movements of my fingertips over the head and crown have left his skin purple, painfully dark, and pre-cum runs like beads of water down an icy glass. “Are you ready, sweetheart?”

“Fuck yes!” His eyes are wild, dark as midnight, and boring into mine. “God knows how I haven’t already.”

I lean in and kiss him deeply, slipping my tongue languidly into his mouth as he tries to control his panting—and cursing—enough to kiss me back. When I pull back, I only have to circle his shaft and tug one more time before he comes.

Boy, does he come. Ribbons and ribbons of sticky white cum splatter over his stomach, our chests, even his chin. He sobs his release through gritted teeth, chanting “fuckfuckfuck” over and over.

When his breathing regulates and I’ve washed him clean with a warm cloth, he stares at me. “Where the hell did you learn to do that?”

I smile and shrug. “The same place I learnt how amazing a dick piercing feels. I knew a guy.” The guy had taught me many other things, stuff I doubt I’ll ever need to use again, not now, not with Ben. It was a way to allow myself to top, even without having to fuck.

“I don’t know whether to curse him to hell or send him a thank-you card,” Ben says as he looks straight up at the ceiling.

I burst out laughing, and soon we’re both chuckling like loons, then kissing, his hands on me this time. “I can’t replicate that, babe, but I can make you come.”

He pushes me onto my back and slides down my body to kneel between my legs. The next instant, his lips are around my cock and his hands on my hips, and I’m writhing beneath him. His blow job skills are incredible, and it takes an embarrassingly short time for me to come.

We fall asleep wrapped in each other’s arms, my head on Ben’s chest, the strong beat of his heart quickly lulling me to sleep.

The mattress shifting disturbs my sleep. “Hmm, what’s up?”

“Nothing, I need to get to the café. Can you take Hope home with you? I’ll be with you about midday,” Ben whispers, but it seems loud in the quiet darkness. He presses his lips against my temple. Then he’s out of bed. I fall back asleep.

The next time I wake up, the daylight is creeping through the gap in the curtains. I stretch out in Ben’s divinely comfortable bed. A wet nose peeps over the covers, and a pair of dark amber eyes meet mine. “Good morning, Isla.” She wriggles her body in delight. I sit up and check the time. It’s already eight thirty. I rarely sleep this late, but I guess I needed it.

With the decision to shower at home, I quickly get dressed and head downstairs. When I open the front door, I groan. It's still pouring down. Both dogs look at me hopefully. A little water never puts a labrador off going for a walk. "Maybe later." They wag their tails. They know they've got their own ways.

We dash to my car, and soon we're in and on our way home. The streets are free of the usual Sunday walkers, all having to stay inside for a while. When I pull up in front of my little house, the rain is bouncing high on the road. We jump out and race to the door. After only a few steps, Hope growls, but Isla yips excitedly. I have no idea what's causing the kerfuffle, but then I notice a heap in front of my door. What the fuck?

Isla has no qualms about rushing up. Hope and I are more hesitant. Until the heap moves and turns into a man. A man who is soaked to his bones. He straightens and looks at me with hollow eyes in a battered and bruised face, a familiar face.

"Roddy?" Not just what the hell, but how the hell? "God, look at you. Let's get inside."

As soon as he stands, he sways. Fuck, there's nothing to him. He looks half-starved as well as really badly beaten. I catch him, tuck him under my arm, and manage to get the key in the lock and opened without him collapsing. His laboured breath comes out in painfully wheezing pants. He's either got a chest infection or broken ribs. I'll get him checked out as soon as he's warm and dry.

When we get in, I kick the door shut and lead him straight for the stairs. I need to get him warmed up, and the shower is the quickest way. "Nearly there, mate."

I don't think he's aware of his surroundings, but he lets me get him into my room and to the shower. I switch on the water, not caring how wet I'm getting. Slowly I undress him. The heavy black duffle coat falls to the floor, but there aren't many more layers

to strip off him. His boots are the toughest. The laces are knotted and swollen from the rain. Eventually, he's naked. I hold him under the water, careful not to let the spray hit his black eye and swollen lip. He's been beaten pretty savagely and not too long ago.

I wash his hair and most of his body, but I'm not sure it's too painful in places. When I think he's warmed up and has reached his limit, I lean him softly against the tiles. "Can you stand while I get us some towels?"

He nods but doesn't speak. I step out and quickly strip off. I grab my towelling robe and the biggest towel I can find for Roddy. When I come in again, my heart breaks. He's curled up on the floor, his arms wrapped around his knees. He's sobbing so hard it's heart-wrenching to listen to. This is a man truly at the end of his tether and ready to snap.

I slip down next to him, pull him onto my lap, and hold him while he cries.

I don't know how long we stayed on the floor, long enough for my bum to go dead and the robe to be as wet as my clothes were. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that this young man realises he's safe and won't have to sleep outside another night.

Slowly the sobs subside, and Roddy relaxes into me. "I'm sorry," he says, his eyes cast down. "It got really bad. I didn't know what to do."

"Shh, you don't have to talk, not yet. Just breathe." I pull the towel tighter around him. "Do you want food or sleep first?" What have I got in the fridge I can cook up that won't be too rich? It doesn't look like he's eaten much at all lately. I can make him some porridge, bland enough not to upset his stomach but filling enough to satisfy his immediate hunger. "I can make porridge. I've got brown sugar and honey if you want?" I remember him having it with me before.

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“Soon. Sleep first, please. I don’t know when I last slept.” His eyes are already drooping.

“Do you need to see a doctor? You’ve been hurt pretty bad.” His entire body is marred with bruises and scrapes.

He goes rigid at the suggestion and shakes his head vehemently. “No! No doctors. It’s only bruises.”

“Okay, okay. No doctors, but you’re not going to get into trouble. Not here, I promise.” I run my hand up and down his arm, soothing him gently. “Can you stand? I’ll get you some of my trackies and a T-shirt to sleep in.” Something else flits into my head. “Are you in any trouble? With the police or anyone?”

He looks at me now, and a flash of fear flits across his face. “No, not the police. I’m not in trouble, I promise. I’ll explain later.”

“Then sleep now, food later,” I say with finality, and we manage to get to our feet. Roddy uses the wall as support with one hand and hangs on to the towel around his body with the other. “Sit there. I’ll get the clothes.”

My clothes are huge on him, but he doesn’t care. I wait by the side of the bed as he pulls the covers back and climbs in. By the time his head hits the pillow, he’s fast asleep.

I dry off again for the second time and pull on some clean clothes. I pick up Roddy’s. Nothing is salvageable, but it’s not for me to throw his possessions away. When I get

downstairs, the dogs look at me expectantly. I haven't even fed them breakfast yet.

It's now past ten o'clock. I hadn't realised how long I'd been upstairs. I hurry to get their kibble, apologising for being such a bad daddy. When they're racing to beat each other to the first empty bowl, I lean back on the counter and let out a long, shaky breath. How the hell did he get here? I doubt the trip was easy, but why is the biggest question, and if it's not the police, what is he running from? For the first time since I left, I look up the headlines in the Edinburgh News, dating it back to December. When did I get the bizarre call from the hospital? Does that coincide with Roddy getting into trouble? Maybe I should wait until he wakes up, get the story from him rather than look through a haystack of possibilities. Yeah, I'll do that.

I gather all the ingredients for porridge and get a pot on to cook slowly, letting it take its time. The poor kid could be out for the count for hours. It's hard to think of anything but the reason and the way he got here. It's obvious he's scared of something and unwilling to see a doctor. Guilt for not thinking about him enough to check up on him burns in me. But who could I have asked? I could've asked any of my friends to seek him out. Or Maeve. I pull out my phone and call her.

After a few rings, she answers, but when I try to speak, I have a huge lump in my throat. "Roddy's here," I croak out.

"Jet? What are you talking about?" The concern in her voice, the worry is palpable. "Roddy? As in your homeless lad. How the hell has he turned up here?"

I swallow down another lump and try to make a coherent sentence. "Yes, that's Roddy, but how or why, I haven't a clue. Can you come over?"

"Of course. I'm on my way."

It will take her at least five minutes to get here, but I pace in the kitchen, watching out

the window every few seconds. She must have driven like a Formula One driver because after only three minutes, she speeds around the back of the surgery and comes to a sharp stop behind my Landrover.

As I open the front door, I put my finger to my lips, not wanting her to come storming in, asking a million questions a minute. “He’s asleep,” I say softly. I’d never thought I’d have to be quiet for anyone here.

“What the hell is he doing here?” She pushes her hand through her hair and looks around the room as if he’s hiding.

“I don’t know anything apart from finding him hunched up in front of the door this morning. I stayed at Ben’s last night. God knows how long Roddy had been here because he was soaked to the skin. He’s well bashed up, has a black eye, bruises all over his body, and he’s so thin. Like almost starved thin. He couldn’t hold himself upright. It’s bad, really bad. He won’t let me call the doctor. He was exhausted, so I’ve put him to bed.”

“In your bed?” She arches her eyebrows. “What’s Benny going to say about that?”

“Of course in my bed. I only have one bed. What’s it got to do with Benny? Roddy’s a friend in desperate need of my help. I’m sure Ben won’t mind.” I hadn’t even given it a thought. Why wouldn’t he be anything but compassionate?

“Sorry, you’re right. Tell me what Roddy said.”

I run through as much as I can, including the part where he said he’s not in trouble with the police. “It sounded like he was in trouble with someone else. What does that mean? He doesn’t do drugs, has no money to waste on alcohol. He has barely enough to feed himself.”

“No idea. Did he have any bad blood with anyone? Exes or people he’d come across in the past, like in the squats?”

She may have a point. I’m sure he’s hung out with some dodgy bastards, but his danger radar has been good in the past. He would walk away from any kind of trouble. He definitely isn’t a fighter, and right now, a slight breeze would knock him off his feet. “He said he’ll tell me more when he wakes, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s out for ten or twelve hours.”

“Yet you’ve made him porridge. You’re a good man, Jet Palmer.”

The dogs let out a volley of loud barks, but before I can stop them, Ben opens the door. They go quiet and rush up to him, all waggy tails and happy faces. I smile at him, walking over to give him a kiss. “It’s been a morning.” He gives me a hug.

I chuckle drily. His morning has nothing on mine, but I don’t say anything. He should at least get his jacket off. Maeve gives me a look that I have no doubt Ben will see and gives him reason to question me.

“Oh, hi, Maeve. I didn’t know you were coming around. Is everything okay?”

Before she can answer, a deep, rasping cough, one that doesn’t sound good at all, reaches us from my room. Fear of an infection is foremost in my thoughts. Ben looks up the stairs and frowns. “Who’s that?”

Maeve pats my shoulder. “I’ll get going. If I can find out anything, I’ll call.”

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“Yeah, thanks, Maeve. I’ll keep you updated.”

She leaves. Ben is still looking up as if he can see through the ceiling. “Jethro, who’s that?”

“That, my love, is Roddy. A friend from Edinburgh. I found him on my doorstep this morning.” That’ll have to do for now. I’ll fill Ben in on the rest as soon as I’ve checked on Roddy. “Let me go and see if he’s okay, and I’ll tell you the rest.”

I take the stairs two at a time. Roddy is sitting up in bed, one arm around his ribs as he tries to control his coughing. “Hey, steady, mate.”

He stares at me with unfocused eyes. He’s sweating and pale-faced, even after his coughing fit. Damn, he must have got a temperature. I’m no human doctor, but I can still recognise an ill person when I see him. Roddy needs a doctor, and I don’t care what he says. I’m calling my GP. Fear crosses his face, and he turns his head violently from left to right as if he doesn’t know where he is. “It’s okay. You’re with me. Jet. Stay still. I’ll get you some water.”

After he’s taken a few sips, he relaxes a little, and I can get him settled again. I prop him up with more pillows so his chest is elevated. “Sleep. I’ll be back soon.”

When I’m downstairs, Ben is giving me a ‘what the fuck’ look, but any explanation can wait. I grab my phone from the counter and search for the doctor’s number. It’s his home number, and he answers on the second ring.

“Hi, George, I know this is a huge ask, but a friend of mine turned up, and he’s very

ill. A chest infection for sure, but I'm worried about pneumonia. He's been homeless for many years, and time takes its toll. Can you come and check him out, please?" I look at Ben. His frustration has turned into worry, and he gives me a small smile.

"That's wonderful, thank you. I'll see you shortly."

Jethro and George have been upstairs with a man I've never heard of for over ten minutes now. Jethro told me a bit of the backstory while we waited for the doctor to arrive. I've got to admit it's a horror story. The poor kid got from Edinburgh to here with no money, no transport, and no idea where Jethro lived. At least we now know who asked at the gallery, although why Melanie left out the terrible state of the poor kid, I'll never know.

I have no idea what will happen next because I doubt he'll agree to go to the hospital if he needs to, and Jethro isn't going to let him leave here until he's healthy. Footsteps approach the stairs, and I glance up. Jethro is coming down.

"How is he?" I ask, even though the drained look on my lover's face speaks volumes.

He sighs heavily. "It's not pneumonia, not yet anyway. But he's got some damage to his ribs, cracked rather than broken, but still bad enough to hurt like hell. George gave him some antibiotics and painkillers. There's something Roddy's holding back from me. I've left him to talk to George. It may be easier to talk to a stranger than me. The beating came after his last ride here. The driver wanted a different payment for getting him down to Exeter. He's never done that kind of thing, always preferring to go hungry than selling himself."

"The poor kid. Do you think he could reach out to his parents?" I guess this is a stupid question, considering how young he is and how long he's been living rough. But people can change, especially at the thought of losing a child forever. Although that would never have been possible for Jethro. His father would have walked past

him if he'd seen him living on the streets.

The doctor comes down the stairs, a grim expression on his face. He too sighs in the same sad manner as Jethro. "Is it bad?" Jethro asks, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, probably to stop himself from wringing them together.

"How long have you known him?" George asks.

Jethro frowns. "A bit more than a couple of years, I suppose. Why?"

"Do you know how old he is?"

I don't like where he is going with this. Jethro frowns even harder. "He was eighteen last year. I remember we had a pizza to celebrate. Why, how old is he?"

"Sixteen." George shakes his head. "The poor lad got thrown out at thirteen."

"No. No way. He can't be. I know the difference between a sixteen-year-old boy and an eighteen-year-old one."

"Not when they look the way the homeless do. The dirty clothes, the tired exhaustion that rolls off them can age someone so much people don't ask too many questions. He's frightened you're going to hand him over to the authorities."

"That's not going to happen. I told him he can stay here as long as he needs to. Which has to be at least two years." He steps away from me, pacing the room. "I don't believe it. Fuck! How did I not see? He'd come to my place, get a shower, and I'd wash his clothes. I still never thought he was younger than he said."

George shrugs. "You see what you want to see. Anyway, I've given him an antibiotic injection that will last until you can get the prescription. Call me if he gets any

worse.”

It’s a long afternoon, and the more I hear about Roddy, the more I want to help him. I get why Jethro is so attached to him, so desperate to help him. He sees himself. It could have happened to him if he’d been thrown out, left homeless and alone.

“What’s the plan of action? Because in case you’ve forgotten, you only have one bedroom,” I ask after Jethro comes back downstairs from checking on Roddy again. The painkillers have knocked him out, and the coughing bouts have lessened and not woken him.

“I’ll take the sofa. We can work out the rest when he’s well enough to move.”

I’ve got an idea but no clue if he’ll agree. “You could move to my place. I’ve got a spare room already set up as a guest room.”

Jethro gapes at me as if I asked him to dance naked in the town square. Is it because we haven’t talked about living together, or is he surprised I want to be a part of this? “I...I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. You really okay with it? We haven’t talked about anything like this.”

“I know, but it would make sense. It doesn’t have to be permanent, but you can’t deny it would make life easier.” I want to add how much I’d love to have him in my home—and my bed—forever. That I would marry him in a heartbeat, but we’ve only been together a few months, and while I believe we want the same things, we haven’t laid our plans on the table. But Jethro doesn’t say anything, and doubt is creeping in. I want to withdraw the offer, tell him it doesn’t matter, that Roddy hasn’t even met me and may not want to. Then Jethro smiles, and it’s one of his thousand-megawatt, light-up-the-whole-world kind of smiles, and I can’t help but smile back.

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“You’re incredible, you know that, Ben. This is so kind of you, and you haven’t even met him yet.” He leans forward on the sofa and takes my hand. “I can’t think of anything better than being with you.”

The stairs creak, and we both look up. The frail, bruised young man stands on the middle step, staring at us, one hand on the rail, the other holding up the too-large sweatpants. Everything is swimming on him. He looks so fragile and scared. I want to wrap my arms around him and promise he’s going to be okay. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he says in almost a whisper.

“It’s okay. Come on down. I’ll introduce you to my boyfriend.” When he gets to the bottom of the stairs, we both stand. Jethro walks up to Roddy and puts his hand gently on his shoulder. “This is Ben, but everyone else calls him Benny.”

“Hi, Roddy, it’s great to meet you.” I hold out my hand. He grips it softly. I keep it gentle, conscious of the many injuries he has.

“Um, hi. Nice to meet you too.” He tries to smile, but with all the bruises and swelling, it’s more of a grimace.

“What’s up? Are you hungry?” From the softness in Jethro’s eyes, the tender way he speaks to this broken young man, it’s obvious why Roddy travelled over five hundred miles to be with him. He knew he would be welcome and safe with Jethro.

“I am a bit. The doctor says I should start by eating little amounts until my stomach is used to it again.” Christ, he sounds like a starvation case. He should probably be in the hospital, but he’s already said no to that.

“Not a problem. Let’s start with some of the porridge. There’s nothing in it that can cause any upset. But when you’re feeling better, you can get some of Ben’s famous French toast. You won’t believe how good it is.” Jethro smiles at me. “It’s a fact, right, Ben?”

“Just let me know when, kiddo.”

“You cook?” A little spark flares in his eyes for a second. Then it’s gone, snuffed out.

“I do. I own a café in town. I bake all the cakes, pastries, and savoury goods myself. You’ll have to come and taste some or tell me what you like, and we can make them here.” I’m more than happy to give him something to look forward to and focus on if cooking is something he’s interested in.

“Thank you, you’re kind.” He blushes a little, although it’s hard to tell with the bruises.

And doesn’t that break my heart a little bit more? He shouldn’t have to thank me for something as normal as making something to eat. “You’re in a good place, Roddy. There are a lot of kind people here.”

Jethro looks at me like he wants to snog my face off, so I’ve said the right thing.

Good to know.

The last ten days have flown by. Between work and looking after Roddy, I’m exhausted, but seeing Roddy begin to heal is a joy. George has done another check-up. His chest infection is improving, and the bruises are fading. The only issue is that he’s still silent about why and how he’s come here. The one thing he’s said is that he needed to get away. Hopefully, he’ll eventually trust me enough to tell me.

“Hey, Roddy,” I call as I walk into the house. After three days of me sleeping on the sofa, I’d had enough, and we moved over to Ben’s. Roddy and Ben are getting on well. All Ben does is cook and feed him. Roddy’s already filling out a little.

“I’m in here,” he shouts back, and I’m not surprised he’s in the kitchen. He’s taking a great interest in cooking and is showing a talent for it too. I am worried about his lack of education and why he lied about his age, though. I’m not sure how to approach it. I suppose the best way is to ask him.

I walk through to the kitchen and find him looking through recipe books. I sit at the table opposite him. “Roddy, can we have a talk? You’re not in any trouble, but I’d like to know why you lied to me about your age.”

He worries his lip between his thumb and finger, and his eyes well with tears. He shakes his head so the tears splatter across his cheeks. I capture his free hand in mine and squeeze it gently. “I told you, you’re not in trouble. Nothing you say will make me send you away.”

“I knew you’d tell the police, and they would take me home. I wasn’t safe there. My dad, he-he would do things to me.”

A shiver of terror runs down my spine. I thought what my dad had done to me was bad, but if Roddy had been molested, that knocks anything that happened to me into the dust. “You weren’t thrown out, were you? You ran away.”

He nods. “I couldn’t stay there any longer. He was getting worse. He never touched my sister, so I thought she’d be safe.”

“Jesus, Roddy, I’m so, so sorry. I wished I’d known. I would’ve helped you so much more. God, how did you survive?”

He shrugs. "I just did what I could. I hid a lot of the time. I thought he'd be looking for me or told the police." He lifts his head, defiance glaring in his gaze.

Is his nonchalance an act to look as if he doesn't care, or is he so hardened by his past it's genuine. A lightbulb goes off, and I know why he ran to me. "He found you."

Tears flow freely down his cheeks. "Yeah, twice. The first time he beat me up when I refused to come home, then dumped me at the hospital. I think he knew he'd be able to keep an eye on me there, but I ran away."

"Did you try to call me from there?" God, why hadn't I picked up the call? He nods but doesn't say anything. "I'm sorry, Roddy, about everything. You said he found you again."

"Yeah, one of the other kids I hung out with said a man was looking for me. When he described him, I knew I had to leave. I walked, hitching rides when I could. I gotta say it was scary as fuck, Jet, but not as scary as being found again." He wipes his face with his palm and gives me a watery smile. "I'm sorry."

"What for? You've done nothing wrong. I'm glad you're here. I don't know what will happen next, but we'll work it out."

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“Are you going to tell Benny?” He fiddles with his lip again, an obvious nervous reaction.

“Do you want me to?” This is a heavy secret to keep from Benny, especially as he’s letting Roddy have his spare room.

Roddy’s chin wobbles, and he bites down on his lip, but with a tiny nod, he whispers, “Yes, but not when I’m here. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Okay, but he’s not going to think of you any differently, except how brave and strong you are.”

Roddy scoffs, muttering under his breath something that sounds very much like, ‘Yeah, right.’ I give him a smile. “Do you want to know why I invited you the first time I met you? It was because I saw myself in you. Because it could have been me. I grew up here. I haven’t been back for over fifteen years because of what happened. Ben was my boyfriend when I was eighteen, and he was twenty-five. No one knew I was gay. I had to keep it secret because my father was a violent, drunken asshole. Homophobic doesn’t even cover his hatred. Anyway, he found out and took it out on me. The only reason I got to be able to go to university instead of being thrown out was my mother. She should have taken me to hospital, but she was afraid of what he would do to her. So she looked after me until I was well enough to leave. While I was never allowed to return, she made him pay for me to become a vet. I got to live with the consequences of not getting proper hospital care. I’ve only ever shared this with Ben, but I think you deserve to see it so you’ll understand why I wanted to help you.” I stand, pull my sweatshirt over my head, and turn my back to Roddy.

“Fucking hell. Shit, I’m sorry, Jet.”

Before we can say any more, the front door opens, and the dogs bark. Ben is home. He talks to the dogs, fussing them. “We’re in the kitchen,” I call out. I’ve tugged my top back down, and in an attempt to look like nothing dramatic has gone down, I put the kettle on.

Ben tilts his head on the pillow while I’ve got mine propped up in my hand. He looks as if he doesn’t want to believe me, but he knows it’s the truth. “What are we going to do? What’s the legal take on this? He’s only sixteen.”

“He’s old enough to leave home, but his parents are still responsible for him unless there are specific reasons they shouldn’t be. I think that’s the basics of it. There’s no way he can go home, and he doesn’t want to go to the police. He wants to stay with us.”

“I’m okay with that, but you’ve just got your home refurbished, and there’s not enough space for you and a teenager. Don’t look at me like that. You know I want you here, but is this the right way to decide to live together?”

I relax the scowl on my face. He’s right, but I don’t have the answer. I can’t get the cottage remodelled. I don’t have the cash for it, plus I love it there. I’ll have to talk to Drew. He may have some ideas that won’t cost an arm and a leg. “I know. I’ll see what can be done to the place without breaking the bank.”

It’s time to stop all the serious talk and get down to something way more fun. “No more talking.” I lean in and press a no-nonsense kiss on his mouth, telling him exactly what’s going to happen.

It takes a few rings before Drew answers his phone. “Jet, how are you?”

“I’m good, but I don’t think you’re going to be happy with me. Can you meet me at the cottage this evening?”

“Is there a problem?” Of course he sounds concerned.

“No, nothing that you’ve done. I’ll explain when I see you, if that’s okay?” I doubt there’s anything that can be done, but I’m no builder. It’s the cost I’m more worried about.

“I can do half past six. Is that any good?”

After that’s dealt with, I can get back to work. It’s hard leaving Roddy at the house, but he assures me he’s okay by himself. I think he’s enjoying dog-sitting and getting to watch the telly again. Having the chance to be his age.

Drew turns up bang on time, and as much as Roddy wants to hide, I remind him that as he’s going to stay here, he needs to meet people. With a nod, he agrees but sticks close to me, fiddling with his lip, the way he does whenever he gets nervous.

“Hi, Drew, thanks for coming down.” I give Roddy a gentle squeeze on his shoulder. “This is my friend Roddy. He’s going to be living with me.”

“Good to meet you, Roddy. Welcome to Calston Cove.” Drew raises his eyebrows. “You need more room.” He laughs. “I told you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I turn to Roddy. “Drew tried to persuade me to keep a spare room, but stubbornly I wanted as much space and light as I could.”

“Why don’t we just stay at Ben’s? There’s room for all of us.” Roddy asks without any whingeing, just interest.

Drew claps his hands. “Why don’t we have a look and see what’s possible?”

I’m in the kitchen finishing dinner when the guys come back in. It doesn’t sound as if Jethro’s very happy if the tone of his voice is anything to go by. They’re not arguing, though. It sounds like Roddy’s trying to explain something.

He’s first in the kitchen. “You talk to him, Benny. It doesn’t make sense to spend more money.”

“What’s the problem?” I wipe my hands on a tea towel and kiss Jethro’s cheek. I can guess, but I’ll wait for one of them to tell me.

“It won’t be easy or cheap to make another room.” Jethro pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s not a quick job either and would make an awful mess. I’m pissed off because Drew suggested leaving one room for a spare or storage, and I ignored him.”

“And I told him we should just stay here. I don’t know why we can’t.” Roddy sits down with all the sullenness of a teenager. I withhold a smile but catch Jethro’s eye roll and laugh.

“I know we can, Roddy, but sometimes it’s nice to be apart. Ben and I are still new, and maybe living together is too soon.” It sounds like Jethro has explained this to him already. Maybe he’s right, but we won’t know until we try it.

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“Then you can go home when you want, but I’ve got my room here. You can both go to your place when you’re fed up with having quiet sex. Which you don’t, by the way. I’m gonna need earplugs or some noise-cancelling headphones.”

We both crack up laughing. My cheeks heat a little at the thought of him hearing us. But I reckon he heard and saw way worse than us. “He’s got a point.”

“Fine.” Jethro throws his arms up, exasperated.

I step up behind him and wrap my arms around his waist, resting my chin on his shoulder. “That’s what I like to hear, such enthusiasm and happiness.”

“Fuck off,” he grumbles, but he’s smiling, and I kiss his neck.

“Can we eat now?” Roddy moans. “I’m starving.”

It amazes me how he can go from literally starving to complaining that his dinner, probably his fourth meal today, is late. “Anything for you, son.”

The word slips easily from my lips. The room goes still, like frozen in time. Screeching of the chair on the tiles breaks the silence, and Roddy rushes up to me, wraps his arms around my waist, and buries his face in my chest. Jethro moves behind him, and we all stand in a hug, crying as we recognise the new chapter of our lives. In such a crazy short time, we’ve become a family.

“Come on, then, before you waste away, but you two are on washing-up duty.” I wipe a hand down my face, emotion coursing through me.

“Can I cook tomorrow?” Roddy uprights his chair and sits down again.

“I’m sorry,” Jethro says when we get into bed. “I didn’t mean it to sound like I didn’t want to live with you. I was more cross that I didn’t see that I may have needed more rooms.”

“No one could have expected to have a boy in desperate need turn up at the door. I get it, though. And you’re right that we may need some time apart. Late nights and busy schedules can lead to tension. Can we agree to talk through anything and not to get pissed off without discussing the problem? Probably a good idea to say the same thing to Roddy too.”

“Yeah, I like that. What do you think we should do about school for him? I doubt he’ll want to go back and be two years behind his peers. He does need more education, though, even if it’s only maths and English to start. I think he’s clever, but I’m not sure how he’ll cope in a classroom.”

“We should talk to Trent, Merlin’s boyfriend. He was a secondary school teacher. Science, I think, but he may know what we have to do. Maybe online classes? I haven’t a clue.”

“Good idea. It’s a good job you know everybody.” Jethro kisses me, then pulls away. “We should order those headphones.”

“Tomorrow.” I laugh and kiss him back.

“How did it go?” I ask Roddy as he comes into the café kitchen. My fingers still in the bowl of cake mix. I don’t like the frown on his forehead. “Roddy, what happened?”

“Nothing, nothing happened because I’m stupid and thick and don’t know anything.”

He slumps down on the stool by the icing table and sways from left to right, despondency written all over his face.

I wash my hands of all the flour, pull the other stool up, and sit next to him. I lay my hand gently on his head, which rests on the table. “Okay, first of all, you are not stupid or thick. You’re an intelligent young man who can do anything he sets his mind to. And second, you know plenty of things. What were the classes today?”

Trent has been giving Roddy tutor sessions for two hours twice a week, and this is only week two. Jethro has talked to Trent, who has had nothing but praise for Roddy and said he’s coping well.

“English. It’s the books. I don’t understand them. It’s all too wordy, and I’m not good with words.” He huffs out a long sigh as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders. I feel sorry for him and understand him. I was never that good at English Lit.

“What book are you reading?”

“Animal Farm and it’s dumb. Why the hell are animals important?”

He’s got a point. I didn’t like that book, and what happened to Boxer still haunts me after nearly twenty-five years. “I read that one too, so maybe we can work through it together. I remember parts of it, and we can get a study aid book too. You don’t have to push yourself. You’re two years behind with schoolwork, but you’re years ahead in life experiences. You’ll be able to use that to understand the story.”

I wrap my arm around his shoulder and give him a hug. He relaxes and leans against me.

Another deep sigh escapes him. “Why aren’t all dads like you and Jet? My dad never

helped with anything. He was mean. You two aren't mean. You're kind and funny and everything."

Just like that, when I think he can't say anything that will break my heart, he comes up with something new. "Do you want to help me with the muffins for tomorrow? Then we can take Hope for a walk on the beach."

He sits up straight. "Yeah, that would be good."

As soon as I get him weighing and measuring, he tells me why he's finding it difficult with Trent. By the time we've finished walking on the beach, we've worked out a plan of action. Roddy smiles when Jethro walks towards us. Isla has raced ahead to the sea and Hope.

Jethro hugs the still-skinny kid and kisses the top of his head. "You look happy," he says. Then he tugs at my hand, and I get a proper kiss, not too over the top but enough to set the fire in my belly to a slow burn, a hint of what's to come later.

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“I made blueberry and triple chocolate muffins all by myself. They look amazing. Ben says they’re good enough to go in the cabinet tomorrow. He’s putting a ‘made by Roddy’ sign. How cool is that?”

“I hope you’re getting paid for your slave labour. You should get the going rate.”

Roddy spins around, walking backwards. “Do I get paid? That would be awesome. I’ve never had money before. The odd quid here and there when I begged. I’ve never earned any, though. Cool.”

“How about you get the money from the muffins? You’ll earn more that way.”

“Yes!” He jumps up, punching the air with his fist.

We let him take the leads of both dogs, and he walks ahead of us. I grab Jethro’s hand, revelling in the warmth of his strong hand around my own. “Is this what you wanted when you came back here?”

“Which part? Because walking here with you is the best feeling in the world. It’s better than I imagined because I didn’t get just you but also the friends I left behind.” Jethro smiles freely, his eyes bright with happiness.

“What about him?” I gesture at Roddy. “Because he’s not going anywhere.”

“No, he’s not. I think I met him for a reason. He’s meant to be here with us. How do you feel about adopting him?”

“You’d better marry me first.”

“Are you going to open it?” I ask Roddy. His finger hovers over the Enter key. He’s worked so hard, even though it was a struggle at times. The truculent teenager came out on more than a few occasions, but I enjoy seeing the emotions of a person his age. Such a difference from the worn-out, street-smart kid he was when I first met him.

“Go on, son. You don’t have to be worried. You did all the hard work.” Roddy turns to Ben, my husband, and officially his dad. I’m his dad too. Asking him if he would be interested in becoming our son is a memory I’ll never forget. Nor will the conversation our solicitor had with his biological father. He wasn’t happy with the idea until we suggested—a veiled threat, really—that we might involve the police and tell them of the abuse Roddy suffered. After that, it was plain sailing. We both took Ben’s surname—Jerrick. I was more than happy to get rid of Palmer and the memories of my father.

“Okay, I’m going to do it.” With a satisfying prod on the key, Roddy’s results came up. “Holy shit! I passed them.” He beams at me, then looks back to the grades. “Two sixes for maths and science, and fuck me, a seven in English. Maybe the books weren’t too bad after all.”

“Congratulations! That’s fantastic, Roddy. I’m so proud of you.” I hug him. Ben grabs him from me and does the same.

“We need to celebrate. What do you feel like doing?” Ben asks.

Roddy’s cheeks pink. I already know what he’s going to say. “I’ve kinda made plans to see Luke. Is that okay?” When Roddy would come to the surgery, the two men started as friends. I’m not sure when it changed into something else, something more. We never discussed his sexuality. I had no clue about his preferences; it never felt important to ask.

“Of course we can do something tomorrow. We can go out for drinks after work,” I say. “Go and call Luke. He’ll want to know your results.”

The fact that he’s eighteen, coming up for nineteen and only doing three GCSEs embarrassed him, but he’s decided on going to the same catering college as Ben and needed to get some exams under his belt. He has a talent to rival Ben’s, which means I never go hungry, and neither do the staff at the surgery. Maeve still complains that she’s always putting on weight when Roddy brings in new samples for her to try.

After Roddy goes to his room, Ben reaches for me. “I felt like I aged ten years waiting for him to press the key.” With his arms wrapped around my neck, we line up chest to chest and hip to hip. The passion and love I have for him has never waned. If anything, it has got stronger. “We can do some celebrating ourselves. If he’s going to be out for the night, we can be as loud as we want.”

He tilts his hips forward, pressing his growing erection against my own. “Hmm, I like the sound of that. What time do you think he’ll be gone?”

“Can’t you two wait till I leave?” Roddy grumbles, but he’s grinning. “I’m going now. I’m staying at Luke’s tonight. And don’t ask. You know the answer is yes.”

“There’s nothing embarrassing about being safe and prepared,” Ben says, knowing how much this winds him up.

“When it’s your dad asking, then yes, it’s embarrassing. Have fun.”

“You too. And, Roddy...” I wait for him to turn back. “Well done, buddy. Go have fun, but be home by ten tomorrow morning, please. There’s something we need to show you.”

“Do you want a lift over?” Ben asks.

“Um, no, it’s okay. I can walk.” Roddy passed his driving test in the spring and has been saving for a car so he can get back and forth from college to here. He works in the café at the weekends, and he wants to see Luke.

“Okay, see you tomorrow.” I follow him to the front door. “What are you doing?” He gives us a weird look. “Why are you grinning? Stop it. It’s creepy.”

We wait behind him when he opens the door, then stops. “What the fuck is that?” He spins his head around so fast I’m surprised he hasn’t hurt his neck.

“What?” Ben asks innocently.

“That!” He points. “That car!”

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The big blue ribbon on the little bright red car shines in the sunshine. “Oh, that. It’s for you. Congratulations.” He holds up a set of keys.

“Oh my god, you are the best dads in the whole world. Really, though, this is just for me? I don’t have to share it with you?”

“Nope, just for you, but please be careful. Don’t have the music too loud, and speed limits are there for a reason.”

Both Roddy and I roll our eyes, but Roddy’s lost for words. He looks at the car again and shakes his head. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you.” His voice is low, croaky with repressed emotion.

“Oh, I don’t know, set off to travel over five hundred miles in the winter to find us. We are the lucky ones.” I let him hug me again, his head against my chest as he has a cry. He hates being reminded of his past, but it’s the past that brought him here and made us the luckiest dads alive.

“Thank you,” he mumbles, then straightens and wipes his face. “Luke won’t believe this.”

We watch him drive away. I see the concentration on his face. He’ll be okay.

“Now back to us.” Ben grabs my hand and drags me to the stairs. “It’s time for some loud and messy sex.”

“Amen to that.”

When I put the phone down, Jethro's watching me. "What was that about?"

"It was the solicitor who helped us with Roddy's adoption. He works for the social services sometimes, dealing with the crap we had. He's been handed the case of a teenager, one who had the same sort of life as Roddy." Fury flashes over Jethro's face as if he'd been electrocuted. "He wants to know if we would be interested in fostering him."

"How old is he? I mean, it doesn't matter, but did he tell you?"

"He's fifteen. He's in a children's home but needs to be somewhere away from other kids. He isn't coping there."

"Where's Roddy? Is he at Luke's? We need to talk to him about it. We're only just getting our house back, with Roddy at college in the week. Do you think we should?"

"Can you imagine leaving him there?"

Jethro shakes his head. "No, but it's a family decision. I'll call Roddy."

As Jethro calls our son, my mind is back to Roddy and the state he was in when he got here. How nervous he was around everyone he met. He would hide food in case he had to leave so he'd have enough to eat for a while. I doubt this kid has made the ridiculously dangerous journey Roddy did. But kids will do desperate things in desperate times.

"He's on his way back."

When Roddy joins us, I tell him what I know. He's tormenting his bottom lip with his finger and thumb, something he hasn't done for a long time. "What do you want me to say?"

“We want your opinion, Rod. This is a family decision because it affects all of us. We don’t know how he’s coping mentally or what state he’s in physically. But the solicitor called us for a reason. He thinks we have something to offer this boy.”

“I don’t see how you can’t. He needs a safe home, and this is the safest I know. You helped me, and I thought I was a lost cause. Maybe he feels the same way too.”

“You’re right, but you were never a lost cause.”

“I felt I was.”

“Okay, I’ll call the solicitor back and set up a meeting.”

Roddy shakes his head.

“What?”

“If they need a safe place for him this urgently, they’ll be bringing him here tonight. I’ve read about this happening to kids.”

“Seriously?” Jethro says. “Are we going to say yes? I mean, it’s only to foster, right?”

I don’t think so. If the kid needs a good home, and if he likes us, obviously, our house will be his forever home. Jethro has a heart of gold and will always be grateful for his mother’s only decent act of stopping his father from throwing him out. This is his way of paying it forward. His heart is too big not to give one hundred per cent of himself.

“Right.” I open up my phone and call the solicitor back. Roddy and Jethro stand together, looking like they’re holding their breaths. “Mr Andrews, it’s Ben Jerrick.”

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“Thank you for getting back to me so promptly. Have you come to a decision?”

“We have, and yes, we’re willing to help.” A whoosh of breath escapes me as I listen to his instructions.

Roddy was right. At six o’clock, there’s a knock on the door. Jethro gives my hand a squeeze and opens it. In front of us is a scared-looking kid, looking two kind words away from breaking down.

Roddy steps forward. “Hey, it’s Connor, right? I’m Roddy. These”—he jerks his thumb over his shoulder—“are my dads. They’re cool.”

The lad lifts his head, surprise flickering in his eyes. “Dads?”

The man with him places a hand on Connor’s shoulder, and he flinches but doesn’t move away. “Shall we go inside?”

We let them in. Roddy falls in step with the boy, and I don’t think I’ve ever loved him more.

The social worker seems to be in a hurry to leave. After giving us a quick rundown of Connor’s background, he gives Connor a brief smile and leaves.

“Are you hungry, Connor?” I ask, going to my default of trying to feed everyone.

“Conn,” he says softly. “I don’t like Connor.”

“No problem. Why don’t you come into the kitchen? And I can find you something to eat. What do you like?”

“Anything. I don’t mind.” His voice is so quiet. “But I like burgers.”

“Perfect. I’ll make some. Roddy will have some too. He’s got hollow legs or something. Maybe because he was so thin when he came to us.”

“Was he like me?”

“You should ask him about his story. It’s not mine to tell. You’re safe here, though. In case you were wondering.”

Jethro walks in and smiles at Conn. “Would you like to see your room?” We sold both our houses and bought a bigger one. I wanted a fully equipped chef’s kitchen, and we wanted more and bigger bedrooms. Less need for noise-cancelling headphones, Jethro said, poking fun at Roddy.

“Does it have a lock?” he asks as they walk away.

I hate the thought of why he needs that. I make the burgers and wait for them to come back.

Conn’s eyes go wide again when he sees the meal I’ve made. “Whoa, that’s amazing. Do you make them, like not from the freezer?”

“Dad’s a chef, and I’m at college learning the same. You’ll never go hungry here.” Roddy sits down at the table.

“Why do I have to go to school? I hate it. I always get bullied,” Conn grumbles as we look at the school uniform site. This is a new school for him, and as much as he’s

settled in with us, he's still nervous around strangers and hates any kind of raised voices or shouting or loud noises.

He's been with us for two weeks now, and he's doing okay. The first couple of nights, he had terrible nightmares, and we had to ask him not to lock the door. He had a mini tantrum over that, but he agreed in the end because he understood we only wanted to get to him if he needed us. He eats anything and everything we give him, but he hasn't quite got used to the open larder and that he can grab what he wants.

"It will be fine. It's not a huge school, and both Jethro and I went to it. Admittedly, a very long time ago, but Luke went to it too."

Conn has attached himself to Roddy as much as he can and loves hanging out with him and Luke. "Fine, but I'm not wearing those trousers. I want the skinny-leg ones."

A week later, the three of us walk into the secondary school. The same one Jamie worked in all those years ago. "Are you sure you want us to come in?" Jethro asks.

"Yes, please," he says, looking a little pale.

The headmaster greets us. With him is a man I never wanted to see again. "This is Mr Hill. He's head of your year and your tutor group. I think you'll get along well in his class."

Instead of saying hello to Conn, Jamie is staring at Jethro and me. He looks me up and down, then focuses on my wedding ring. A blush runs up his neck as he catches me staring back. Like a switch flicked, he turns to Conn. "It's good to meet you, Connor."

"It's Conn," Jethro and I say at the same time.

“We’ll see you this afternoon, Conn. Have you got everything, your phone and keys?”

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He rolls his eyes the way Roddy does, but his smile gives away how happy he is with us. My heart swells with love for the boy.

“I’m guessing that Mr Hill happens to be the ex?” Jethro chuckles as we get back in our car. “He didn’t look very happy with us.”

“As long as he’s good with Conn, I don’t care.”

“I now pronounce you husband and husband.”

I’m on my feet, clapping and whistling as Roddy and Luke kiss for the first time as a married couple. Ben is wiping his tears away as the two men make their way back down the aisle.

I grab Ben’s hand and pull him close for a kiss, then wipe my eyes.

“You two are such saddos,” Conn says as he walks past.

The young man who turned up a nervous, frightened fifteen-year-old is now our son. We adopted him a year after he came to live with us, and he’s following in my footsteps and is studying to be a vet. He has both boyfriends and girlfriends, thankfully not at the same time.

Ben stands next to me as everyone leaves to congregate outside in the gorgeous summer sunshine. I wait until the room is empty, then take stock of my surroundings. A laugh bubbles through me.

“Why are you laughing?” Ben asks.

“I’m just thinking of my old man and how he would feel knowing his gay son is at the wedding of his gay son just feet away from where he tried to beat it out of me. I hope he’s rolling in his damn grave or burning just a little more in hell. Because right here, right now, my life is coming full circle.”

“I love you, Jethro Jerrick.” Ben kisses me but is smiling against my lips.