



Blindsided By You

(Heartlands Rugby #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: She makes the rules. He wants to break them all.

JENNA

I have rules. Don't mix business with pleasure. Don't fall for nice guys who'll break my heart. And absolutely don't get involved with my father's rugby players—especially not my best friend's younger brother.

But Geordie MacDonald isn't the sunny little boy who once trailed after me through Cluanie anymore. The man who's returned from the oil rigs is all quiet confidence and capable hands, with a golden heart that makes my carefully constructed walls crumble.

Our attraction was supposed to burn out quickly. A secret fling to get each other out of our systems. Yet as autumn deepens in the Highlands, so does our connection—one that could cost him his place on the team, and me my hard-won independence.

GEORDIE

Eight years away taught me how to survive harsh conditions, but nothing prepared me for the storm that is Jenna Sharpe. My sister's best friend. My coach's daughter. The woman I've wanted since the first time I laid eyes on her.

She says we're just having fun—that's what she insisted that first night. But there's nothing casual about how I feel when she's in my arms. Now I'm playing the best rugby of my life by day and sneaking through town to be with her by night.

In a place where whispers travel faster than rugby scores, keeping us hidden might be impossible. But revealing what we are could destroy everything we've worked for—and everything we're beginning to feel.

Some games aren't played on the field. And some hearts don't follow the rulebook.

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GEORDIE

“Right lads, look lively. Five laps should do it.”

Coach’s gnarly face stretches into what passes for a smile as the team sets off. I hear muttering from some of them. Five bloody laps. He’s already trying to kill us at the first practice.

Jogging at the back of the bunch of rainbow-clad men circling the rugby field, a shiver ripples through me. We should thank the old bugger for the extra-long warm-up run. Our colourful practice jerseys aren’t standing up too well against the unexpected chill on this August evening.

The country is in daylight time, so five-thirty sunshine jabs at our eyes. It should be balmy, but welcome to summer in bloody Scotland. Today the wind off the nearby mountains cuts through me, reminding me I’m back in Cluanie, on the edge of the Highlands.

My homeland is welcoming me back with a sharp slap of the changeable weather—the main topic on the minds of everyone in this part of the world. Walk into any shop in this wee town and you’ll hear all the old biddies, and even more frightening, the young people too, harping on about the latest forecast .

Down in the Timor Sea, where I spent the past two years, the brutal heat of the tropics never lets up. Every frigging day is the same as the last. The only time anyone on a rig gives a toss about the weather forecast is when a tropical cyclone blasts through.

I'm not afraid to admit to being shit scared during those storms. There's nothing like being trapped on an offshore oil rig in the middle of nowhere at the mercy of an angry sea to remind you just how insignificant you are. Lying in my bunk with the wind screaming, all I could do was hope the anchors held and we wouldn't be tossed like driftwood on the crests of towering waves, and wish myself elsewhere.

Be careful what you wish for they say. While I'm glad to be back on dry land, and in a climate more to my taste, landing back in my hometown, living with my parents isn't exactly what I imagined. But here I am and it's not all bad. I get to do the thing I love most again—play rugby.

“Shit, MacDonald, is this what you guys call summer? It's cold enough to freeze the tits off a bull.”

I grin at Nathan Wilder, the guy at my elbow giving me shit. I met him three weeks ago on my first day on the new job, and his Kiwi accent alone would make him stand out. But it's the stream of outlandish sayings and creative curse words that pour from his mouth that make him so damn likeable. He certainly displayed his full repertoire in our first conversation on that call-out to MacFarlane's distillery.

While Nathan paced and muttered, I wrestled with a malfunctioning temperature control system, attempting to chase down an elusive electrical fault. Determined to not face defeat on the first day back on my home turf, I persevered and won. Nathan's relief matched my satisfied grin at coaxing the system back to life.

With the control unit fixed, he quickly offered to shout me a beer at The Railway after work. An instant bond sprung up between us, and, nudged along by our shared love of rugby, has grown into friendship. He's a newcomer to the town, and after so long away, I might as well be.

Now we've both made the cut for the Cluanie Rugby Football club's 1st XV team, we

naturally drift together at the back of the pack on this first practice night.

Our footsteps pound in time on the firm ground. The locals comment daily on the drier than usual summer, disbelieving smiles as they wake up to yet another day without rain. It might make them happy, but the dryness has left the field like concrete. Can't say I'm looking forward to the first few tackles. It's been a while since I put my body through this sort of punishment, but I'm prepared to lay it on the line for the game. Although this is amateur rugby, my own determination and our new coach's expectations demand it.

Though my returning fitness means I could easily put on a burst of speed and catch up with the guys at the front—the ones I know from my rugby playing days as a kid—I stick with Nathan. I'm keen to help him find his place in the group.

As we round the dead-ball line, past the goal posts, all heads turn towards the edge of the field. Our coach, Robbie 'Razor' Sharpe, stands on the twenty-two mark, sizing up his new team with a critical eye, but it's the movement behind him that catches our attention.

A woman appears from the carpark, and Robbie's eagle eyes follow our gaze. The terse line of his mouth softens into a rare smile. It's his daughter, Jenna .

She's wrapped in a long padded jacket with a fur-lined hood. A good choice of clothing for tonight, even if it is summer. One hand clutches the collar tight around her neck and mouth, while she hands her father an envelope with the other. Sensing twenty pairs of male eyes on her, Robbie turns to us with a withering glare. We get the message. It's 'Eyes front, boys'. Coach Robbie's daughter is not for us lower lifeforms to gawp at. Or ogle.

Though how we're supposed to avoid it at Saturday night's team-building exercise—otherwise known as a party—at their house is beyond me.

It must look hilarious to anyone watching. Like soldiers on parade, no one dares to look anywhere but straight ahead when we're all dying to check out Jenna Sharpe.

I know what she looks like. Well, what she looked like as a teenager. I saw her often when she hung out with my older sister Rachel, and I dragged my feet into her mother's piano studio for my weekly lessons.

Although it's risky, my curiosity about this grown-up Jenna gets the better of me, chancing a sneaky glance as I come level with her. Fortunately, Robbie, distracted by their conversation, has his back to us. Her eyes, the only part of her face visible above the collar, dart my way for a moment. They're still the same chocolate brown I remember, with the kind of warm depths you could lose yourself in.

Even as teenagers, Jenna and my sister Rachel wore their confidence like armour. Everyone in Cluanie knew they were destined for more than our dead-end town. Although they gossiped about boys like the other girls, they also plotted their escape to university and careers in London, while perfecting their accents to hide their small-town Scottish roots.

Sure, they roamed the streets at a loose end like all teenagers trapped here; hanging out at the skatepark watching the boys ride the makeshift ramps someone had banged together, feeding coins into arcade games at the chippy, sprawled on the grass down by the loch, working on their tans. But there was always something different in how they carried themselves, as if they were just passing through a place that couldn't contain them.

I must have been damned annoying, like a stray dog that keeps following you around and you hope it finds its way home before it ends up at your house. Rachel wasted no time telling me to piss off when I'd turn up on my bike, just 'happening' to find myself in the same place as them. Equal parts embarrassed by her kid brother's presence and worried I'd dob her in to Dad for smoking round the back of the rugby

club rooms or drinking beer with Kyle Stewart and his mates in the carpark at the top of Bourke's Hill. I'd never have done that. Even as a little kid, I knew Rachel and I needed to stick together for any chance of peace in our household.

Jenna, always at her shoulder, had an undercurrent of softness my sister lacked. To Rachel I was her irritating little brother, whereas, maybe as an only child, Jenna cut me some slack. Whatever the reason, she smiled more, laughed easier and didn't seem bothered by me hanging around.

The years in the cut and thrust world of sports PR have apparently toughened her. She's got quite the reputation if the gossip at the pub is anything to go by. Yet watching her now, across the field, I wonder if that gentleness still exists under the professional veneer she's cultivated, waiting for someone patient enough to uncover it again.

When our eyes meet, something flickers across her face—recognition, perhaps curiosity. That same smile seems to hover beneath the hood. I'm drawn to this adult version of Jenna; intrigued by the woman she's become beneath the enormous jacket she's wrapped in against the Cluanie chill. Maybe I could grab a few minutes with her, a chance to catch up on old times.

But now's not the time, because, as if he possesses a sixth sense, Robbie's gaze whips back to us and I jerk my eyes away from Jenna's, focusing on the head of the guy jogging in front of me.

Besides, what's the point, really? Women like Jenna don't let guys like me near them. My sister makes no secret of the fact she's holding out for Mr Big, not just Mr Right. A capable career woman wants to find her equal, some guy with a business degree and a suit, not a trade school graduate like me, who's found his level working for a small town electrical company.

“Fuck, Geordie, watch what you’re doing, man.”

It’s too late. I crash into Nathan as I attempt to sidestep the pack, which has come to a halt in front of us. Jenna disappears back to the car park as Razor strides onto the field. His scowl cuts through my embarrassment.

“Time for a word, lads,” he growls.

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JENNA

My body leaps at the unexpected thunder of a fist on the bedroom door. My hand skews upwards, the perfect sweep of brow pencil with it.

“Shit.” I glare at the charcoal streak marring my forehead. A lopsided cartoon character stares back from the mirror, one brow raised in perpetual surprise. “Shit,” I repeat, yanking open my dresser drawer, fingers scrabbling for makeup remover.

A racket of voices, music, and laughter tumbles into my room as the door swings open without invitation. I bristle with indignation. There’s a perfectly good downstairs bathroom. Stray visitors should not be invading my space. This party was a bad idea. I told Dad we should have used the club rooms instead of letting people roam through our home. It doesn’t matter that I know a fair few of them—it’s too soon.

I tense, swivelling towards the intruder, a polite but firm protest ready on my lips. The words dissolve when my father, Robbie Sharpe, appears around the corner, his dark curls peppered with silver, hawk-like nose preceding him .

“Mind if I leave Andy up here with you?” Dad asks.

Amusement creases his face. The scruffy black dog tucked under his arm—all pointy ears and whiskers—mirrors my father’s expression. They could be twins, except for the pink tongue lolling between Andy Murray’s moustached lips and his excited panting. He writhes in Dad’s grasp, desperate to reach me.

Andy and I are sort of mates. Lucky he likes Dad and me, because the grumpy arsehole hates everyone else. Even then, I suspect pompous Andy only tolerates us because we feed and walk him. Not like he has much choice of servants these days. He was Mum's dog, and she was his angel, his defender, his everything. Now she's gone, and he's stuck with us.

"Little bastard's already nipped two people," Dad says with thinly-veiled pride. The gleam in his eyes is no surprise.

Dad's always considered dogs like Andy a poor example of the species. Not much use for anything except a household decoration. "Just a bloody meat-eater," he'll mutter whenever he spots one perched under a pub table. He's always looked down on the owners of small dogs with disdain, Mum being the sole exception. Now that Andy has proven himself as a household protection device—albeit poorly calibrated—he might have finally secured his place in the family.

"Who did he get?" I ask, hoping it wasn't one of the wives or girlfriends. With their slim ankles teetering in ridiculous heels, WAGS would be easy game for a snappy Scottie terrier.

"Kyle Stewart," he says. "Dog's pretty much on the mark there. Just as long as it doesn't get infected and put him out for the pre-season friendlies. Cocky bastard, but we need him."

I can understand Andy's choice. I think if I had to choose a victim from a room full of people, Kyle would be high on my list of targets, too. With a reputation tarnished by memories of him sleeping his way through every girl in our form class—to my eternal shame, including me—I can't imagine he's sufficiently changed.

I breathe a silent thanks to Andy on behalf of myself and all the other deluded teenage girls who fell prey to his charms. Kyle is good-looking, witty—kind even,

behind the arrogant veneer—but with the sex-drive of a tomcat. He’s one of those guys who makes you feel like the only girl in the world when he’s with you. But harsh experience taught me—and all the others—that rather than basking in the blazing heat while his attention was upon me, I really should have worried about what he was up to when it wasn’t.

“I’m impressed. Good boy, Andy,” I croon and the dog wriggles his whole body with pleasure.

“Then, for some reason, he took a dislike to Geordie MacDonald.”

“No,” I say horrified. “Not Geordie?” How could anyone take a dislike to Geordie? Apart from a glimpse of him at practice the other night, I haven’t seen my best friend Rachel’s younger brother for years, but I still think of him as the sunny kid who trailed along behind us all over town.

Sure, we were mean to him, as befitted his lowly status—after all, he was six years younger—just to shake him off. But like Teflon, he deflected it all, blinded by his adoration of his sister. And while it was rather annoying when he spied on us down at the loch-side reserve, watching us kissing boys and smoking, he was easy to forgive. Without a sibling of my own, I suppose I had a high tolerance for my surrogate kid brother .

I can’t imagine fully-grown Geordie to be any less likeable than ten-year-old Geordie. That bloody dog definitely needs reprogramming.

“I take it all back, Andy. You’re a little shit. Bad, Andy,” I scold. His enthusiastic squirming makes it clear he has zero comprehension of the word ‘bad’. Mum’s overly-indulgent dog-parenting is precisely how we ended up here.

“Och, it’s all good,” Dad says. “No blood.”

Just as well—we don't have Doc and a string of team medics at our beck and call these days. This isn't a professional rugby outfit, just a small-town club with limited resources and a handful of enthusiastic volunteers.

"Give him here," I say, reluctant to be Andy's minder, but opening my arms anyway. Sometimes you've got to take one for the team. Literally.

I press the thrashing beast to my chest. His wiry coat—perfectly matching his bristly personality—feels like cuddling a kitchen broom. He struggles free, launching himself towards the bed. I sigh as he dances across my pristine white cover, leaving dirty smudges. After celebrating his conquest of the bed, Andy rotates in ever-decreasing circles before finally settling on my pillow.

I groan. He's not only nippy; he's also a whiffy wee beast. I'll be drifting off to sleep with his reek in my nostrils. Might be a good night to load up on the alcohol—for sedation purposes, of course. Though I won't complain if it also blurs the painful edges of this first proper public appearance since Mum died. Sure, I've scurried in and out of the local shops, had a drink at the pub with my friend Rachel when she was here a couple of weeks ago, but I haven't faced a crowd since the day of Mum's funeral, six months ago. After we laid her to rest in the small kirkyard of St Andrew's, most of the town followed us back here for the wake. Now there's a different sort of gathering below, but I still don't want to face it.

"You OK love?"

I treasure Dad's crackled voice—gentle with me, scathing with undisciplined players. He reads me just as he reads them. That's his coaching superpower: drilling straight into a person's heart. Rugby players never see it coming, but it's how he transforms the merely talented into the spectacular.

"Yeah, Dad. All good," I try to lie. "I won't be long. Just putting on the war paint."

His deep, gruff laugh massages my ears; a sound I've heard too little lately.

“You don't need it for that lot downstairs. No one to impress there. They all know you.”

That's precisely why I do need the mask of makeup. Too many of them know me too well. I need to go out there with the same aura of confidence I used in my past life against wily reporters, intent on confirming the dirt they've dredged up on a player—because if I let it slip, it's not some wayward rugby jock exposed. It'll be me, raw with the truth: I neglected this place, these people, and worst of all, I abandoned my mum. A choice I can never undo.

Noisy chatter from the crowd taking over my home drifts upstairs. I can't suppress a smile as the chorus of male voices stirs warm nostalgia. I dab makeup into the faint creases bracketing my mouth. I've lost count of the rugby team parties in my life, but I still remember the first .

I was five. Mum bathed me early that night, tucked me in with her usual goodnight kiss to my long, witchy hair, but left without our bedtime story.

Lying in the soft glow of my Spiderman night light, I tracked each arrival. Car doors slamming, heavy footsteps on the path, knuckles tapping or fists pounding the front door. Then raucous laughter, hearty greetings, back-slapping and blokey banter. Through it all, my parents the constant backdrop: Dad's raspy voice cutting across the chatter, my mother's indulgent chuckles as young men invaded her house.

Sleep was impossible. How could any child doze off amid booming voices and clinking glasses, all pulsing to the beat of rock music? Snuggled under my plush blanket, I could think only of sausage rolls, their warm, crisp pastry aroma having filled the house all day. And those perfect little pies—dark peppery mince nestled beneath flaky layers. As Dad's team devoured the feast downstairs, my rumbling

stomach reminded me of my five o'clock dinner, served early so I wouldn't be underfoot.

The door creaked open. A large hand clutching a plate appeared, followed by the cheeky face of our neighbour's son, Dean. A gawky teen with a curly mop of too-long hair and pitted skin—he would later become the local club's star winger. But then, he was just the friendly kid next door who sometimes kicked a ball with a rugby-obsessed little girl, showing kindness to the lonely only child from the other half of the semi-detached.

"Sssh," he said, finger to his lips. "Present from your dad." My eyes widened at the mountain of food. He nudged Spidey aside and slid the heaped plate onto my bedside table. "I'll collect it later. Best your mum doesn't know, eh?" he added with a conspiratorial grin .

Even then, Dad and I had our connection—partners in a world Mum never fully entered. Behind these sweet memories from his early coaching days, lurks an insurmountable sadness. Mum's gentle, stabilising presence is gone. Death stole her unwavering support for Dad's legendary career—and for mine, when I followed him into professional rugby with my PR skills. She championed us both unhesitatingly, even when our work took us far from her—her presence distilled into phone calls and FaceTime.

My bedroom door glides open again. It's vastly different from my childhood bedroom's, this one all modern lacquer and gleaming brass. As Dad peers around the corner, my nostalgic musings sharpen the changes in his face: fifty-eight years of battling laughter lines and frowns, now overtaken by grief's deep furrows.

Big softie that he is, he steps inside the room, placing a water bowl and a plate of kibble on my bathroom tiles.

“Thought he might need this,” he says gruffly.

“Thanks Dad,” I say as he slips back out. I glare at Arsehole Andy sprawled on my pillow. Definitely not the pleasant and gracious ambassador for Scotland that his namesake is, but it seems I’m stuck with him.

I return to fixing my face. I’m dreading this party, but I can’t let Dad down. My hand trembles as I attempt eyeliner. Thank god for long lashes that don’t require a steady mascara brush. With no time for a jaunt to Edinburgh, I’d risked having a lash tint and brow wax at the little local beauty salon. An entrepreneurial young woman named Daisy has set up shop in the main street. She’s done a remarkable job for only twenty-five pounds. Perhaps I’ll offer to help promote her place. Selfish, really, since I need her business to survive .

Neat black flicks in place, I reach for a narrow vial. I untwist the lid, and roll the small ball across each thumb before pressing them to my temples. The aromatic herbal oil soothes instantly, the gentle massage casting a protective spell against the possibility of a migraine. Ironical that after conquering the debilitating headaches of my youth through years in a high-pressure career, they should resurface the moment I’m free of it.

Normally, I’d avoid the heavy incense wafting from the town’s new-age shop, but wandering in there by chance last week worked in my favour. My hands had gravitated toward the herbal headache remedy. I bought the vial on impulse—I’ll try anything to avoid old Doctor Metcalfe’s anti-inflammatory injections in the butt. I make a mental note to thank Rain, the hippie-looking owner who recommended it. Unexpected wisdom lurks behind her wild grey mane and enigmatic smile.

I grab a bright red lipstick—far more jaunty than I feel—and paint on courage, coaxing my lips into a confident smile. Not yet ready to brave the noise below, I sit for a moment. I study myself in the mirror, silently summoning the strong, competent

woman I see reflected there to step forward and face the evening.

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GEORDIE

The room heaves with bodies, the air already thick with banter and the smell of beer. I swipe a bottle of Tennent's lager from a tub of ice on the table and head to the corner where Connor, our captain, has settled his bulky frame into an available armchair. Kyle leans against it, his face already flushed with alcohol.

No judgement there. I intend to catch him up. That is the point of tonight's party: a chance to get pissed, talk shit and have a bit of a blowout before the start of the season. For sure, we're only a small-town club team, but where local honour is at stake, we take the game seriously enough to pull back on the booze for a few months. That and the fact our new coach is known to be unforgiving of pissheads. None of us want to catch a taste of his displeasure, nor do we want to let down a guy who's put his reputation on the line for us.

I'm the baby of this group. But that's the strange thing about growing up in a small town; the normal lines between those of different form classes and sports teams become blurred. Holding on to some immovable age-determined class system doesn't serve you well when you need a team of fifteen players and there's only so many to go around. So despite six years between me as one of the youngest and the elder stalwarts of the team, like Kyle and Connor, there's always been an easy camaraderie between us. I've missed it.

"Well, if it isn't Geordie fucking MacDonald," Kyle says, looping his free arm around my shoulder. I've forgotten just how lanky he is until standing here beside him. Handy for a copper to be tall, intimidating—and also since he plays at lock in the team; with his height in the lineout we're always at an advantage. "Fuck, it's good

to see you. About fucking time. How long have you been back? At least a month and not once have you dropped by the station to see your old buddy Kyle. You slack bastard. Still a fucking useless prick, like always.”

“Good to see you too, man,” I say, unable to suppress a grin. “I can see you’ve managed to retain your extensive vocabulary while I was gone.”

“Fucking oath,” he fires back, his arrogant smirk splitting his face.

Kyle’s stint in the army equipped him with many skills, including the ability to embellish every sentence with at least one offensive word. I wonder how he managed to rein it in after leaving the military to take up a role as a government minister’s personal protection officer. Hopefully, he still can, since now, at the age of thirty-four, he’s embarked on his third career, joining the police and returning to his hometown. From all accounts, he’s thriving in the job. Being a big fish in a small pond suits Kyle’s need to be the centre of attention.

“Missed you at first practice the other night,” I say. As a local copper, Kyle’s job gets him a free pass the rest of us dare not hope for .

“Yeah, work,” he sighs. “Some dumb fucks rolled their car up on the road to Buchanan House. That’s my excuse. What’s yours for not calling by?”

“Yeah, I know.” He’s right. I’ve been slack. “I should have caught up sooner. But I didn’t expect to walk into a shit storm when I got home. Things were pretty wild, but I think it’s sorted.”

Mum’s heart attack blindsided us all. She’s always been the backbone of our family. A nurse by trade, the nurturer. Dad was totally lost, thrust into the role of caregiver. Way out of his comfort zone—the small-town lawyer more at home with legal briefs than shower benches and walking frames. Not that I’m exactly suited to it either, but

arriving home the day after they discharged Mum, I could offer some welcome practical and moral support.

While it looks good on the outside—Mum’s gang of friends all think I’m the model son—the family drama wasn’t the reason for my return, just convenient timing. I bask in their approval. It’s a rare feeling to be considered anything other than the bad penny who turns up from time to time. Believe me, while it lasts, I’m not letting on that I came back simply because I’d had a guts full of life on an oil rig.

The money was brilliant, but that was about it. After my first six-month contract with an Aberdeen outfit, I thought swapping the brutal iciness of the North Sea for tropical heat down in Asia might be a smart move. For a few years, it sort of was, but that last stint on the rig in the Timor Sea finished me off. While it left me with a well-stashed bank account, it also made me finally realise how unsuited I am to that life, drifting around the world from one contract to the next .

Not that I’m sure how well fitted I am for this one, either. Being a guy of twenty-eight living at home with his parents isn’t exactly what I dreamed of. Nor is using my electrical engineering skills to coax unruly farm machinery back to life or keep the plant up at the distillery running smoothly.

Still, at least here I’ve got my mates. Stomping around a rugby field with the guys you’ve known since you were a little kid has a nostalgic appeal. Christ, I’m getting sentimental in my old age.

“Hey, look at this, mate.” Kyle leans down and pulls up the hem of his jeans, revealing an evil-looking row of teeth marks. “See what that fucking dog did to me? Little bastard. If it hadn’t been for Razor hot on his tail, he would have got a kick up the arse.”

“Don’t feel special,” I say. “Bastard got me too. Just lucky I had these on,” I say,

lifting the edge of my own jeans to reveal my favourite tan leather boots.

“Yeah, if I’d known strolling around in a cowboy outfit would save me, I might have rounded up one for myself.” Kyle takes another long swig of his beer.

I accept him giving me stick good-naturedly. So what if I gravitated to the same off-duty uniform as my American workmates on the last rig? Reaching for any combination of the jeans, plaid shirts, and boots that fill my wardrobe neatly solves the problem of what to wear for a guy who doesn’t want to give too much thought to decisions like that. I draw the line at double denim and Stetson hats, but this outfit is comfortable—and provided an unexpected armour against the small black canine guided-missile who thought he might try out his jaws on my ankle as I came in the door .

“Well boys, I never thought I’d see the day.” Kyle grins around the circle of men. “Razor Sharpe lining up to chase our sorry arses around a paddock.”

We’re all a bit star-struck, to be honest. Not every day a local hero turns his back on the national stage to land in a small town like this one.

“Still remember watching him run out of the tunnel that first time at Murrayfield.” Fraser Sinclair turns back from where he’s been admiring the wall of framed awards. “God, I must have only been about four or five. We were all lined up in front of the telly, too scared to even breathe out of turn in case we interrupted the game. Dad was beside himself that a guy from his class at school was wearing the navy jersey. He’s a bloody legend, that bloke,” he adds with an awestruck nod towards the man himself.

Despite his pretty face, Fraser comes from a long legacy of what they refer to around here as ‘hard men’. The tough guys, the enforcers on the rugby field. Softly spoken and mild-mannered, you’d never guess how he morphs into the bloody Incredible Hulk when he ambles out through the players’ shute. Good old Robbie ‘Razor’

Sharpe, our coach, is a man of that ilk. Or was.

“Yeah, might have been only three caps, but the way my father tells it, you’d swear it was a hundred,” Brodie grins, while surveying the platters on the table with a critical eye. He works as a chef in the posh restaurant up at Buchanan House, and you can tell he loves it, but not so much that he’d put it second to rugby. Somehow he’s scored himself a deal where he doesn’t work Wednesdays and Saturdays in footy season. He must be some fucking chef to dictate his terms like that .

“So how come Razor didn’t go further?” Nathan asks, while scooping up a giant handful of crisps, the only thing that looks like regular food at this party.

“Head-high tackle,” Brodie says. “Fractured skull. You see that hearing aid he wears? Not old age. So yeah, he had no choice—had to come off the field for good. Even then, they knew one too many concussions could fuck you over. But he loved the game too much. Coaching drew him in.”

“I feel for the guy,” Fraser says, “but you still can’t help but wonder if in the end Scottish rugby was the better for it. Five championships back to back. You can’t argue with that.” He points to the trophy cabinet in the corner with its gleaming silverware.

“Maybe the man upstairs saw he had a higher calling,” Kyle quips. “First as coach of the Highlanders, followed by the illustrious position at Cluanie R.F.C. where he’s about to lead the team to their first divisional win in seven years.”

“Yeah, guess he saw the light—like you, mate,” Brodie quips. “Centre of the universe, this is. Why the hell would you want to be anywhere else?”

There’s a hidden question in Brodie’s winding up Kyle. No one expected he of all people would come back here to sleepy hollow Cluanie. After his war hero medal,

and then a citation from the Queen for heading off an attempt on the life of the government minister he shadowed for two years, investigating shoplifters and issuing speeding tickets doesn't offer much opportunity for the limelight. But Kyle brushes it off with a grin.

"Saw the interview," Kyle says, with a nice deflection. "Seems the man had a hankering for grassroots rugby. Back to the heartland. More challenge in whipping a group of motley bastards like us into form, than simply marshalling the talents of rugby gods like Webster and co."

"Wonder what his secret is?" Fraser says. "God knows, he's going to need something if this team has any shot at the trophy."

"He makes no secret of it." Connor looks up from where he's been quietly picking at the label of the bottle in his hand. Our team captain is the strong, silent type. When he talks, people listen. Connor Murray is one of those guys who commands respect just by being who he is. A natural leader. "Razor has this theory," he says. Winning is about team culture. Team culture is about love. You know, building those bonds between people. So out on that field, you're not individuals. You're a unit. Like a family. And you will do whatever it takes for that family."

"Well, you know I've always loved you guys," Kyle scoffs. He slaps one arm across my shoulder, the other over Brodie's, and we laugh alongside him, but I can see the guys are all intrigued by the thought.

"Maybe there's something in it," Nathan says. "Certainly worked for Graham Henry." There's a touch of awe in his voice as he speaks of his own country's rugby elder statesman. "Read his book, and I'm sure I saw the 'l' word somewhere. Can't argue when it comes from an All Blacks coach with eighty-eight test wins and a Rugby World Cup."

“Yeah well, you might be right, Kiwi boy,” Kyle says, looking thoughtful. “So, who are you backing next weekend?”

“Scotland,” Nathan answers without hesitation.

“Traitor,” Brodie, grins.

Nathan flips him a finger and grins back. “Arsehole. Let’s face it—it’s a no-win situation with you bastards. If I go for Scotland, I’m a traitor. If I say New Zealand, you’ll accuse me of disloyalty to the country that took me in.”

“Or maybe win-win,” Fraser offers. “A bob each way. Back whoever is ahead.”

“You offering to put up some money?” Nathan quirks a teasing brow.

He’s a good bloke, this New Zealander. Beyond exercising my skills as an electrician, we’ve spent a lot of time together these past weeks, sinking a few pints. God knows it’s been a relief to escape my father’s judgmental glare for a few hours in the evenings.

“So look at this,” Fraser says with a resigned smile, nodding towards the noisier half of the large lounge where tinkling female laughter tumbles from the group of our paired-up teammates.

Robbie Sharpe is winning over the wives and girlfriends with his wit and charm, while their partners look on indulgently. That’s another thing he’s made a name for in his professional coaching days—involving the players’ families, making them seem like an extension of the team. Happy families equals happy players equals happy team—and happy teams are winners.

“The haves and the have-nots,” Fraser says. “Us being the have-nots. Not a wife or

girlfriend among us.”

“Unless exes count,” Nathan says with a bitter laugh.

“You were married, mate?” Fraser probes gently, already tuned in to the air of hurt surrounding Nathan’s words.

“Yeah,” Nathan says. “Eight years and a child later, and she walks out on me. At least one good thing came out of it.” He pulls out his phone, and there on the lock screen is the smiling wee kid, dark-haired and the spitting image of the guy holding it out, with the same sunshine smile Nathan’s had on his dial every time I’ve met him, except for just now with talk of his ex. “It was worth every excruciating minute of it for her.” And it’s just like someone turned the lights back on as that easy Kiwi grin spreads across his face.

“Doesn’t look like we’ll be doing anything to rectify that problem tonight at least,” Brodie observes. Of course, there isn’t an unattached woman in sight. “Unless someone is brave enough to hit on old Robbie’s daughter. I presume she’ll put in an appearance.”

After seeing her at the practice ground on Wednesday, with those beautiful eyes and the hint of a smile—a smile I’ve been pretending was just for me—seeing Jenna tonight is as much of an attraction as the food and booze and a chance to hang out with my mates.

“Yeah?” Nathan says, with a hopeful brightening of his face. Like me, he’s in the middle of a very long woman-drought. “Know anything about her?”

Kyle leans back with arms folded as if he’s been waiting for this exact opening. I hold back. I know more about Jenna Sharpe than most of them—but it’s not the Jenna she is now. She was one of my sister’s closest friends, although careers have driven

them along different paths since leaving Cluanie. With six years between us, both she and Rachel always adopted the expected public disdain for younger brothers. It's all back in the haze of childhood now, but again, that memory of Jenna often being kinder to me than my sister, even in front of other people, jumps forward. I'm totally ignorant about this grown-up Jenna Sharpe, but from the look on Kyle's face, I know that's about to be corrected.

"She was in my year at school." He drains his beer, obviously enjoying a chance to hold the floor.

I don't like the way Kyle says that, a disturbing smugness about him that suggests more. I don't want to know. I like Kyle, but his reputation with women goes way back, and it's not pretty. I really don't want to think about the possibility that Jenna, or my sister—I inwardly shudder at the thought—feature on Kyle's lengthy list of conquests.

"Went off to uni and never came back," he continues. "A few years after she graduated, she went to work for her father's team. Followed him back here when her mum got sick—and then, of course, passed away. Pretty sad, eh?"

Everyone is aware of Razor's highly-publicised loss. After all, that's what triggered him to chuck it all in and choose life back here in Cluanie, rather than take on the challenge of leading his Highlanders team to a record-breaking sixth consecutive championship win.

"You've been stalking this Jenna, have you Kyle?" asks Brodie, stuffing what looks like a fancy sausage roll into his mouth.

"No," he says. "You forget—I do detective work for a living, mate. Didn't see any harm in doing a little background checking. Find out more about what we've all signed up for."

“Ahh, I see background checking. Not checking her out?” Fraser needles at him.

“Yeah, OK, you caught me.” Kyle raises his hands in surrender. “And why wouldn’t I check out the new girl in town a little? Although from what I’ve heard, it will be a brave man who goes there.” He smiles enigmatically as we hang on his words.

“Come on, spill,” Brodie says.

“Well, there was a bit of an incident. Seems the one time in his life that old Razor lost his cool in public was over his daughter. After-match function, one of his players apparently got a bit handsy with young Jenna and found himself slammed up against a wall with hands locked around his throat. Someone just happened to film it—as they do—and it was all over the internet for a few hours till the PR people made it go away. But if you know where to look, you can still find it. Believe me mate, do not go there.”

I take the warning. My outgoing nature has got me in exactly that sort of shit before. Stop on impulse for a friendly chat with a pretty girl and next minute you’ve got an angry father throttling you—or brother, boyfriend, husband—I’ve met them all over the years and it’s no fun. I’m a good talker, but you can’t always talk your way out of that. Plus, I don’t want to shit in my own nest.

Being back with these guys, playing together again, is just the antidote I need for the untethered life I’ve led, and a way of easing into acceptance that I’m back here in my hometown. The place, I said, in my boyish bravado, I’d never come back to. No, there must be less complicated women to get involved with, even here in this little hole, without risking the wrath of Razor and losing my place on the team, if not my life.

Besides, this is Jenna, and my sister would definitely have something to say about that. I’m not sure my sister’s friend is a safe territory to venture into, even now when

the age difference between us is no longer relevant. There's history there that also makes this woman off-limits.

And then, as if on cue, a hush falls across the crowd. The muted yellow lamplight seems to brighten as we jerk our heads up from our conversation. Every eye in the room turns in one direction. Jenna Sharpe stands at the top of the stairs, paused like a princess about to make an entrance at the ball. Except she's not wearing a ball gown, and I doubt she could look any sexier if she did .

The teenage girl I last saw in shorts and t-shirt lounging on the sand at the little beach down by the loch—she's long gone. In her place is a dark-haired woman with brown almond eyes set in smooth honeyed skin. She's in a pair of jeans that fit her ample curves, leaving nothing to the imagination. The shiny emerald green top, slashed in a deep v, reveals a peek of cleavage.

I'm reminded of my father's less than subtle attention to Nigella Lawson's cooking show. He always says it's a compliment to my mum that the only women he ever looks at all have her shapely outline. I've inherited his love for a decent set of curves. It's the only thing I've got in common with the bastard.

We all stand there like idiots, the less discreet with mouths dropped open. Jenna is fucking beautiful. Sometimes life really sucks. The first woman to truly catch my eye in ages, and my sense of self-preservation screams at me to stay away from her.

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JENNA

The crowd below me is a blur, and I waver in my glossy patent heels. But it's too late to turn and dive for the safety of my bedroom. There is a hush in the room and every face turns towards me. And then a disturbing and surreal sound—applause.

At the foot of the stairs, a young woman in a tight sequined dress—sequins? Really? For fuck's sake, this is Cluanie—slaps her palms together in polite applause that spreads like a ripple across the room. I swear I've never felt so embarrassed in my life. Not even when I walked on stage beside Dad to support him, when he received the Coach of the Year award, with a bit of loo paper stuck to my Jimmy Choos. Whenever I see the footage, I still cringe at that nasty piece of glaring white tissue lodged on the leather sole of my first truly excessive footwear purchase.

I plaster a smile on my face. Get it right Jenna. Just enough to look modestly appreciative, but not too much, or you'll appear smug. Mustn't look like I expected this.

I grip the banister on the way down, careful not to slither off the carpeted edge of a stair in my unsuitable shoes. Now is not the time to make a spectacle of myself, even in front of what appears to be a warmly welcoming hometown crowd.

“Jenna, darling, you look gorgeous.” At the foot of the stairs, Laura Darby folds me into her embrace. She never notices my awkwardness with hugs. As always, she presses my angular shoulders against her ample bosom, and tonight it's surprisingly comforting.

Laura is the gracious first lady of Cluanie Rugby Football Club. Her husband, Grant, as President, is still in disbelief that someone with Dad's pedigree would step up and volunteer to coach the first division team. And Laura, mother to four big strapping boys, perhaps seeing the opportunity for a daughterless mother and a motherless daughter to build a relationship, has taken me under her wing. My normal resistance to any form of mollycoddling slips away in her presence.

It's not quite a receiving line, but Laura sweeps me along, as I'm greeted by one woman after another. She has an innate sense of the hierarchy of this social situation, first introducing me to some of the older wives and girlfriends who have come along to support their men.

Not that any of them would have missed it. There's not much to do in Cluanie on a Saturday night. A party with free booze and free food—even if it is the slightly suspect posh fare Dad requested—is an irresistible attraction. The dazzle of cocktail dresses, heels, and make-up suggests it's also a rare opportunity for these women to put on their glad rags and have a little fun.

I suppose I expected hostility from some of them. After six years' experience on the pro rugby circuit with the Highlanders, I've learned that WAGS are an odd bunch, often insecure and rarely welcoming to other women. No matter how hard I tried to project an air of professionalism, most didn't understand that my interest in their men wasn't to fuck them, but simply to make sure they didn't fuck up. Or if they did, to cover their dirty little tracks. It was my job to ensure player trysts with women in airport bathrooms didn't hit the media, not leap in there with them.

Perhaps that was another reason they didn't trust me—the suspicion I knew things about their husbands and boyfriends that they didn't. In many cases that was true, but I couldn't tell them, much as sometimes I'd have liked to. Spending my life surrounded by men, I've come to realise overall they're an untrustworthy species.

But here, no one seems to herd their guys away from me, or stare me down with pouts of collagen-filled lips or challenging glares from beneath heavy fake lashes. Of course, it might be sympathy. They all know about Mum. Or maybe it's because they don't feel threatened by a thirty-four-year-old with crinkles at the corner of her eyes and the hint of a furrow between her brows.

Perhaps they see no competition from my big butt on display in tight jeans. But then, as always, I think of Kim Kardashian's highly-lauded curvy arse and push away any doubts about the attractiveness of my own. I may not be able to balance a glass of champagne on it, but the taut outlines show the results of my daily workout—although that's always been more a way of keeping my sanity intact rather than a desperate desire to make my body into something it's not.

Travelling with a professional sports team, I never lacked access to the gear, and even now back in Cluanie, Dad's set up an entire gym room in one corner of this vast house. That room has been my refuge in the dark days since Mum died. I haven't let things slip. So, while I know I'll never be small, either clothed or unclothed, I'm not dissatisfied with my appearance.

We weave our way through the room, finally stopping in front of the woman Laura evidently considers the least of them—just a girl, really—the one who started the applause. She's wide-eyed and long-lashed, like a cute blonde doll. Tiny, she looks adorable in her pink glitter-ball of a dress.

“Hi Jenna,” she says, extending her hand and clasping it over mine. “I've been so excited to meet you. I'm Skylar—Brandon Smith's girlfriend?”

She casts a proud glance towards where Brandon is chatting to a group of the older guys in the team. He's an anomaly. Most young people can't wait to get out of Cluanie. The moment they've got their high school exams done, or sometimes even before, they're hurtling out of here with barely a backward glance. Yes, I was one of

those, too. I'm a cliché. Some come back, but usually not till they've put a good few years between them and Cluanie, or something unexpected forces them to return home. Me again.

But here's Brandon, nineteen years old, professional teams waving attractive contracts in front of him, and yet he brushes them away. I don't understand what is keeping him here. Maybe this is it—young love.

"Oh, yeah, Brandon," I say, "He's our star player, for sure."

It's a sincere compliment. Dad couldn't believe his luck when Brandon rolled in on his first night at the club. I saw Grant Darby's grin, and his quiet aside, "Don't question it, mate. Just accept that sometimes the man up top is smiling down on us."

"Well, I think you're a star," the girl says quietly, a small flush of embarrassment on her face. My god, I realise this kid is fan-girling—over me. I've seen admiration for my work before—after all, I'm very good at my job—but never this adoration from a stranger.

"I've read all about you, seen you on telly, followed the things you've done. If I could only hope to achieve half of what you have, I'd be happy."

"So, you want to go into PR?"

She nods. I can't imagine this innocent baby has what it takes to survive in the world I inhabit—inhabited, I correct myself. This year's leave from my position at the Highlanders has given me breathing space. Setting up my own little sports PR company in the interim has taken my mind off the grief, and allowed me to be selective with my clients. Already it's less brutal. But I learned from the years of long hard slog, a struggle that's also given me a very thick skin—one I doubt this gentle kid could ever develop.

“I do,” she says. “I made sure I took all the right subjects. I’m just waiting for exam results for my Advanced Highers. I’m going to work for a year—doing nights waiting tables and in the kitchen at The Railway. And then next year I’ll go to university.” Her face is brimming with hope, so damn eager. Did I look like that once? “And,” she says, swallowing, looking up at me from under a nervous flutter of charcoal lashes, “I was wondering...if you might...take me on. Not paid, I mean,” she rushes to add. “Just work experience. I’ll do anything. Make you coffee, do filing, run errands. Just a chance to see what you do firsthand.”

I’m a little in awe of this meek-looking kid. Maybe she has got an inner grit there, just wrapped in a sweet, pretty package. At eighteen, I certainly wasn’t brave enough to do what she’s doing, and back myself like this .

I can’t turn her down, not in the face of that earnestness and sheer guts. I’m not swayed by the fact she got an entire room full of people to applaud me like I’m the bloody Queen. It’s the realisation that up till now I’ve only taken from others—learned from their knowledge and experience—and maybe this is my chance to give something back.

“Skylar, that would be great.” I offer her my most encouraging smile. “How about you pop in here and see me on Monday? Do you see that little summerhouse just past the pool?” She follows the direction of my gaze past the enormous pool lit up like some resort on the Riviera, towards the place I spend my days. It has a cosiness about it that is lacking in the rest of this mansion Dad has bought. “That’s my office. Follow the path around from the front entrance, and you’ll find me there.”

Still overwhelmed by her blind adoration, I pull away, muttering excuses about other people I need to catch up with.

As I cross the room, trying to look purposeful, though unsure of exactly where I’m headed, I’m sure I hear Kyle Stewart say the words ‘nice rack’. His knowing grin

meets mine, and I'm convinced he's talking about me. If it were anyone but Kyle, I might take it as a compliment.

Instead, I feel an urge to go over there and slap him, but Dad would never forgive me for wrecking his party and I'm not about to give Kyle any opportunity to get any closer to that nice rack. He got those big hands on my tits—and fuck it the rest of me—when I was an easily impressed teenager. I'm not going to offer him the opportunity to ogle them at close range now.

I take an angry swipe at a glass of bubbles and head for the kitchen. In our old house, the kitchen was always a sanctuary. In its homely space, Mum bustled around, sometimes elbows deep in flour at the wooden bench top, or wrestling a roasting pan into the old Aga. The kitchen was her happy place, as well as the home to plasters for grazed knees, hot chocolate to soothe a sleepless child and an endless supply of love.

This kitchen bristles with the clatter of dishes on granite bench tops. Catering staff from Buchanan House move in an elegant dance balancing trays of fancy canapes—the kind of finger food my dad would have once scoffed at. How far we've come, and there's an uneasy sense that the change isn't for the better.

I gulp the champagne, and the rush of bubbles fills my stomach with a pleasantly soothing fizziness. The effect doesn't last.

While this kitchen is alien to that past version of myself, foreign to the nostalgic memories of my childhood, it still hurts that Mum isn't in it. Even if she had buckled to caterers invading her space, she'd have been here in the thick of it, ordering them around. The stab of pain at her absence is too great and I snatch another champagne glass from a tray, beating the surprised young man carrying it to the door.

I flee onto the terrace. Late summer in Cluanie carries a strong breath of winter. Out here, the chilly air soothes the flickering threat of migraine. Alone. Peaceful.

No, not alone. The man at the end of the pavers staring off into the manicured garden swigs from a beer bottle. There's something familiar in that mess of golden curls. Not so much the plaid shirt, or the chunky heels of a pair of boots visible below his jeans—no one in Cluanie dresses like that. Looks like the star of one of Dad's favourite old spaghetti westerns has ridden into town .

I stop, thinking to seek solitude elsewhere, but he's heard me. As he turns, a soft smile slides across his face—Geordie MacDonald, looking none the worse for Arsehole Andy's attack. He strolls towards me, the smile morphing into a genuinely delighted grin, white teeth glowing in the dim twilight.

“Jenna.” His deep mellow voice is at odds with the high-pitched child's cheeky teasing of my memories; a voice that triggers something liquid inside me, like the delicious warmth of a hot mocha. “Good to see you.”

He closes the gap between us, abandoning his beer on the table, and two strong arms fold around me. I relax into his broad chest, all my sharp corners falling away with a hug that feels like home. I don't fight it, my instinct to draw back unexpectedly subdued. When he gently releases me, the coolness of the evening air is suddenly unwelcome, like it's fought its way between me and the very thing I need. I tip my head up to meet a pair of kind eyes, a greyish blue. I'm acutely aware of his broad hands still resting on my forearms, warm and steady.

“I'm so sorry about your mum.” His eyes hold so much genuine empathy. This isn't just platitudes, someone saying the scripted lines. “She was such a lovely lady. I would have come to the funeral but...”

“Thanks, Geordie.” He's the first person brave enough to mention her tonight. The instant sharp slash of grief is soothed by the warm knowledge that here's someone else who knew her, too; really knew her; and therefore someone who understands my loss.

After all, he spent many hours with her in the little music room out back of our old house, the sunny space I always picture Mum in when she comes to mind .

Geordie wasn't one of the kids who begged for piano lessons. He, and Rachel before him, were the kind who suffered it, victims of a parent who projected his need to be a cut above the rest onto his offspring. Unlike Rachel, I believe Geordie had some talent. That didn't stop him zooming out of there the moment the weekly lesson was over. I'd see his blonde curls disappearing out our front gate, bobbing along as he literally danced in celebration of his freedom.

But even with Geordie, mention of her still hurts; I move on quickly.

"Yeah, Rachel said you were down in the Pacific somewhere?"

"The Timor Sea. Sounds exotic, but hot as hell. Shore leave in Darwin—Australia—where every bloody animal wants to kill you, and some of the locals are pretty feral too."

He laughs, a light, unfettered sound, like he's broken free of all the world's worries. How wonderful to just walk away from a job that no longer brings you joy. I've walked away from mine, too, even if it's only temporarily . While I had no choice but to take leave from the Highlanders—with Mum sick, I did it without question—the fact I've barely given it a backward glance makes me wonder. Have I also broken free from something that no longer brought me joy? If so, maybe I shouldn't go back.

"More feral than Cluanie?" I toss back with a smile.

"Way more," he grins. "I'm not sorry to have left it behind. The day came when here just seemed the better option."

"And how's your mum doing?" I have fond memories of Aileen MacDonald. Just as

my mother always gave her kids' friends a warm welcome, Aileen was completely unfazed by Rachel and me living between our two houses. "I hear she's improving."

"Yeah, she's good," he says. "Still struggling a bit with being on the receiving end of the nursing rather than the one doing it, but yeah, she's getting there."

It's as if some maleficent being has turned its evil gaze on the good mothers of Cluanie this year. First my mother's cancer, followed by Aileen's heart attack; the shock has left our little town reeling. Selfishly, I hope the beast has moved on to other hunting grounds.

"She'll be up to having visitors soon. You should pop in and see her. She'd like that."

"I will," I say, echoing the promise I've already made to Rachel.

"She still tires so easily. Maybe give it a week or so."

He picks up his beer, throws his head back, and takes a long swig. I can't help but follow the swallow rolling down the smooth golden line of his throat.

"So, here we are then," I say. "Back in the hood."

His eyes lock onto mine for a moment, then drift to my mouth. It's noticeable in the dip of his head because little Geordie is not so little anymore. Taller than me, but not too tall. An upper body that suggests strength without bulkiness. A leanness indicating the agility essential for speed and rapid directional changes.

With the practised eye I've developed shadowing my father, I assess he's pretty much perfect for the position Dad wants to play him in, at flanker. It was Dad's own position, so although he'd never admit to it, he sets the bar extra high, especially for the guy on the blindside. He'll ride their arse hard if they don't live up to his exacting

demands.

As if sensing my scrutiny, Geordie jerks his arctic blue-grey gaze back to me. My eyes meet his odd, glassy stare. He blinks, drawing my attention to his lashes so thick and long, the kind that girls spend large amounts of money acquiring by artificial means. I'd never noticed how beautiful his eyes were before, but then you don't tend to stare into those of your best friend's kid brother. Until now; and he's no kid.

"Yeah," he says, "I certainly never expected to choose life in Cluanie. Who'd have thought?"

"And you're working with Sparky? That would be an experience in itself."

"That's one way to describe it," he chuckles, a slight huskiness that is undeniably and surprisingly sexy. I wonder if he knows it? Probably not. There's still a hint of the guileless kid in his gaze. "Never a dull moment with Sparky around. Just as well, as the work is fairly run-of-the-mill."

His eyes drift south again, and nervously dart back to mine, and I get it. I realise this weird thing he's got going on—he's trying very hard not to look at my chest.

"Good man, Geordie," I mutter under my breath, appreciating he's making an effort when so many other males don't bother to hide their desire to ogle.

And then my mouth falls open in a startling whirl of horror and confusion. I don't know what's worse; the thought that I've acknowledged the kid I haven't seen for almost fifteen years is now a man—and a very attractive one too—or that I've spoken out loud. What the hell is wrong with me? Guarding my thoughts and choosing my words is second nature to me in my work. And now it's not. Not with Geordie.

"What was that?" He frowns, and an adorable little crease furrows at the top of his

nose. I have the ridiculous urge to kiss it away. Perhaps it's the champagne making me a little crazy .

I'm not sure Geordie's question and his confusion is because he heard what I said, or because he didn't, but I'm saved either way when Connor Murray appears behind him.

Now that's a good man, too—not that I'd ever cast lustful eyes in his direction. He was a mate of sorts back in high school and even now I see him firmly fixed in the friend zone. Just as I should be shoving too-damn-handsome for his own good, sweet-natured Geordie MacDonald solidly there alongside him.

“Hey, Geordie, Jenna. Better come in, eh?” Connor angles his head towards the brightly lit lounge. “Your old man's about to make a speech.”

We follow him inside, where Dad stands on the third stair, an adoring audience arrayed below with all faces turned towards him. Geordie and I tag onto the back row. It's squishy and, as we edge in closer, our hands touch, and a sensation races up my arm like an electric shock. What the hell is wrong with me?

Noticing me standing on tiptoes, trying to look beyond a line of people all taller than me, Geordie ushers me across with large gentle hands on my waist. Now I've got a clear line of sight, but also, as I tuck in front of him, there's an acute hyper-awareness of his light lingering fingers, his breath brushing across my hair, and the heat of him, even though there's space between his body and mine. I inhale deeply, checking. Yes, indeed, that intoxicating mingling of masculine musk and the citrus scent of a freshly-showered body, with an underlying hint of spicy liniment, emanates from him.

This is wrong on every level: best friend's brothers are off limits, especially younger ones; Dad's players are definitely off the menu, although I wonder if the rules still apply outside of a pro team .

I force myself to focus on my father's lips moving, although I don't hear a sound, apart from the stern warning my brain issues to my body, telling it the nine-month man drought is not a valid excuse for this sudden and inappropriate fixation on Geordie MacDonald.

I argue back against the cautious part of myself. This is more than a physical pull. Yes, the boy I knew has morphed into an undeniably attractive man, but there's something else. After only a few moments of talking to Geordie, for the first time in ages, I feel more like my old self. It's as if he sees me as the Jenna I used to be, young and full of promise, the world at my feet, not this weary version of myself going through the motions. It's like a hit of some drug, instant, addictive.

"Jenna," Geordie hisses in my ear, bringing me back to the horrible realisation that all eyes are upon me for the second time this evening.

"Come on love, don't be shy," Dad says with a grin that looks a lot like the old Robbie Sharpe. I can't recall the last time I saw that expression. I've rarely glimpsed his happiness at anything since Mum got sick. He extends a hand towards me and the crowd parts to let me through. I make my way to join him, with the memory of Geordie MacDonald's touch, those long fingers searing the skin of my waist, even through the glossy satin fabric of my top.

GEORDIE

I've a strong urge to fight my way through the cluster of people crowded around Jenna and her dad, but hold back. There's a ring of smiling faces now, but I swear during her little speech there was hardly a dry eye in the house.

Can't blame them. It got to me too, listening to her thank everyone for coming, while acknowledging the gaping hole left by her mother's death. I'll admit it took all my willpower to not let the sad knot tightening around my own throat leak out in a tear. According to my father, I'm soft. Guess he's right, but I try not to see it as the flaw he does.

Meanwhile, Jenna stayed cool and composed. I suppose it's those skills honed in the glare of the media keeping her upright when most might have crumpled. She knows how to say the perfect thing in the moment, even tonight when it's so intensely personal.

My sister has that skill too, but where Rachel projects a brash, uncompromising 'don't fuck with me' attitude, with Jenna it's the sort of composure you admire, seeing her keep it all together, while allowing enough of a glimpse of the devastation at losing a parent show through so she doesn't come across as hard or unfeeling.

Touched by her words, the guests all want to gather around and reassure her; volunteer support while she adjusts to life without her mum; offer anything that might help ease the loss that dragged her back here to Cluanie.

Yes, I want to do that too—promise her she's not on her own—but I also want to

have Jenna all to myself, not with an audience of nosey locals hanging on my every word. For the first time in ages, there's a woman I'd like to get to know better and I'm not having the small town gossips nix it with their chatter before I've even started. By the time dessert's served, half the town will have me proposing and the other half planning the wedding reception.

It's not just what Jenna says that pulls me in. Yeah, she's also stunning, but this isn't just a passing spark of attraction. There's something beneath that polished, controlled exterior—something raw, like she's holding back more than she lets on. She let something slip out on the terrace, just for a second, but it was enough. It hit me deep, stirring up this fierce protectiveness, like the roles had flipped and I was the older one now. Maybe that's why I pulled her in without thinking—to hold her for a moment, let her feel it. She's home. She's safe. I've got her.

I always liked Jenna. Somehow, despite me being an irritating little shit, I'm pretty sure she liked me, too. I just hope that hasn't changed, because I'd really like to steal a little time with her tonight, if I can pry her away from all these well-wishers.

It's a dangerous move for sure. Can't let her father notice me paying her too much attention, otherwise my rugby season will be fucked before it's begun. For Coach to think I'm hitting on his daughter would be a disaster. Playing rugby for Cluanie R.F.C is the only thing I can truly say I love about this town. I totally believe his threat to bench anyone who goes near her—but if he doesn't know, there's no reason for him to follow through on it.

I grab another beer from one of the overstuffed tubs. The guys I was with earlier have drifted back to the same corner of the lounge, locked in a loud argument, their laughter cutting through the room. The whole group erupts at a smartarse comment from Brodie. It's tempting to rejoin them, but Jenna won't be heading that way—not with Kyle holding court over there. I caught the look she gave him before, and there's no way she's putting herself in his orbit. He's got history with half the women in this

town, and the rest know better.

So instead, I linger on the edge of the room, waiting, hoping the tide of people will eventually push her my way.

She moves through them like it's second nature—a light touch on a shoulder, a dip of her head, a quick, easy laugh. I guess this has always been her world. Events, parties. Her work has only made her better at it, gliding between old friends and total strangers like there's no difference. Not like me. I hang back, hover on the edge, waiting to be sure I belong.

She stops to chat with a sweetly smiling kid—Skylar, yeah, that's her name. Tiny blonde thing who's always trailing after Brandon Smith. She looks like any other teenager dressed up for a night out, sparkly dress, bare legs, but there's got to be more to her. Rumour is Brandon turned down a pro contract just to stay another year for her. If that's true...well, maybe love makes you do stupid things. Me, if I'd been good enough to play professionally, I'd have signed my name without a thought .

Jenna catches my eye while she talks, and I tell myself that look means she's coming my way soon. I can be patient where she's concerned. I'd wait all fucking night for a chance to talk with her some more.

Finally, she gives the girl a small smile, squeezes her shoulder, and then—just like that—she's walking my way.

I want to get her alone. Out there, on the terrace, when it was just the two of us, something arced between us. And I want it back. But in here? No chance. Not when she's the centre of attention, not with a dozen club committee wives waiting to interrupt. If I can get her out there, just for a few minutes, maybe I can find whatever that was between us.

As Jenna's eyes meet mine, I jerk my head toward the terrace. She lifts her brows in acknowledgment, snags a glass of bubbly, and falls in step a few paces behind me. I try to play it cool, like I'm just slipping out for some air, but my feet move too damn fast. I flick a glance over my shoulder—no one's noticed. Meanwhile, Jenna, a few steps behind, has perfected the art of looking unhurried. Perfection, that's her.

Right now, the little guy on my shoulder—the one who's been there all my life, keeping me on the straight and narrow, urging me to take the safe path—isn't just whispering; he's losing his mind. Telling me Jenna's my sister's friend. Coach's daughter. Reminding me exactly what her father does to guys who lay a hand on his girl. I not only ignore his words, I swipe that fucker away and head on out to the terrace.

Besides, I'm not about to hit on Jenna—not tonight, not when the past six months must feel like a weight she can't shake. I'm not saying I wouldn't, not some other time—she's gorgeous and whip-smart, and any guy with a pulse would be tempted—but not tonight.

The scent of Cluanie hits me the second I step through the door—wood smoke floating on the night air. That's a summer evening in my hometown, where the chill taints the twilight the moment the sun disappears and fires crackle in hearths year-round.

Outside, I slouch into a wicker chair by the pool, one of those seats that promises comfort but delivers regret. It's definitely not made for a guy my size, so I'm forced to stretch out my legs in front of me, ankles crossed.

Jenna takes a seat next to me, the chair hugging her shapely denim-clad arse as if it was made for her. Her eyes flick to my feet, the corner of her mouth quirking up in amusement.

“What?” I say, and her smile widens.

“The cowboy boots,” she says, shaking her head with a giggle. “Not what I expected.”

I glance down to where my jeans have ridden up, showing off the tan leather of my favourite boots.

“Comfortable. All those cowboys sure aren’t wrong.”

“I thought you were on an oil rig, not a ranch.”

“Yeah, I was. These aren’t my work boots.”

“Your going out ones?” She raises a brow.

“Yeah, special.” The tooled leather is damned nice. Cost me a fortune, too. “My roommate on one of the rigs invited me home to Fort Worth for Christmas. Took me boot shopping. So damn good I bought a few pairs.” Her eyes sparkle like she’s about to take the mick about my footwear choices. “You don’t like them? ”

“No, they’re nice.” She stifles a laugh. “I just never pictured myself sitting on my terrace in Cluanie with a guy in cowboy boots. And definitely not Geordie MacDonald in cowboy boots.”

“Well, I’m damned glad I wore them tonight. Saved my ankles from your father’s bloody dog. Little bugger had a go at me.”

“Yeah, I heard. Sorry.” She casts me an apologetic look. “And Kyle too.” She shrugs. “Not sorry.” We both burst out laughing.

“Yeah, Kyle brings it on himself,” I agree.

“Actually, he was Mum’s dog.” Her face softens, laughter fading as her eyes mist over. Despite the brave front she put on earlier, the pain is still raw, just beneath the surface. “Poor Andy. He’s not coping too well with the change.” A single tear slips onto her cheek, and she scrubs it away with the back of her hand.

“And you?” I keep my voice soft. I don’t want to push, but I want her to know I care. “How are you doing?”

“Not great either, to be honest.” The confidence from earlier is gone. Her voice, thinner now, cracked at the edges.

“At least you’re not going round biting people.”

Her mouth twitches, then she shakes her head. “No, not yet.”

She could sink her teeth into me any day—not that I’d say it out loud.

Jenna drops her gaze, twisting a ring on her finger, her teeth catching at her lip. I watch her hesitate, weighing something in her mind. On impulse, I reach out, laying my hand over hers, offering a gentle squeeze.

I can’t imagine what she’s been through. One minute, she’s running PR for a pro rugby team—jetting across the UK, a big office at Highlanders HQ in Glasgow, probably a slick city apartment too. Working alongside her dad, who she’s always adored. Then, in the blink of an eye, it’s all gone.

Suddenly she’s back in Cluanie, living a nightmare—her mum sick, then gone in just a few months. And now she’s in this house, big enough to fit a rugby pitch inside, rattling around with only Razor and that evil bloody dog for company.

How the hell did Fiona Sharpe cope? With her husband always away, her daughter too. Alone in this mansion—surely she was lonely? Maybe that’s why she got the dog. Probably why he resents all these strangers invading his space, the little fucker nipping at people to make his point.

As if she’s read my mind, Jenna waves a hand at the house. “And then Dad does this. Rips Andy out of the only home he’s ever known, sets us up here. It’s so big, I even get lost sometimes.”

“It’s impressive,” I say, although I’m not sure it’s a compliment.

“When Mum was in hospice, Dad got it in his head to buy her a new house. Thought we’d all move in, start fresh once she got better. He couldn’t face the truth. Guess he was trying to make up for always being away.”

I don’t speak. What the hell can you say to that? Razor comes over as a tough old bugger, but man, he’s been through some tough shit. No surprise it had him making crazy decisions.

Jenna exhales a deep sigh. “Do you ever look back and wish you could make different choices?” She doesn’t wait for my answer. She already knows hers. “God, I do. I could have come home more. What would it have hurt? To skip a weekend clubbing in Glasgow and come home instead? Two hours in the car. But before she got sick, I came home what—maybe two or three times a year ?

“And I could have called her every day, instead of once a week. It was always Thursdays at two—before her piano students. Like she was just another task on my to-do list.”

She presses her lips together, closing her eyes for a moment. A deep furrow between her brows. The weight of regret sitting heavy on her shoulders.

Her words hit close to home. Sure, I've been thousands of miles away. Ducking home for a weekend was never an option, but I know, even if it had been—like Jenna—I wouldn't have made the effort. Not with my father waiting to pounce on me the moment I walked in the door. At least this time, with Mum sick, he's been less ferocious, his mind on her, not on how useless his son is.

Jenna's guilt triggers my own. My mother deserves better. It's not her fault Dad hates everyone but her. Jenna's weekly phone calls home seem a pretty damn good track record; something she should be proud of. Me, I might have phoned Mum no more than a couple of times a year, outside of her birthday, Mother's Day, and Christmas.

A trickle of hot shame creeps through me. I've been a slack bastard and I have no excuse for lumping my mother in with the bad feelings that even mention of Cluanie always stirred in me; feelings that stem mostly from my father. Unlike me, Jenna has no reason to be ashamed.

"But you did call her, Jenna. I bet she looked forward to Thursdays."

Her smile is sad. "She did. I swear most weeks she'd made a list of things to tell me—who'd just had a baby, who'd moved away or moved back—the latest gossip, even if I didn't know who the hell she was talking about half the time. Someone's mother, brother or great aunt. She knew them all." We both shake with laughter, knowing how the jungle drums never stop in this small town. "Sometimes we'd spend an hour. Might have been longer if she didn't have some kid knocking on the music room door."

"There you go," I say. "Your Mum knew how much you loved her. I don't doubt it. You shouldn't either, not even for a second. I think it's human nature to look back and wonder if we should have done something different. We all have regrets about the things we've done or haven't done, but you can't change the past, Jenna. Just remember the good bits and keep moving forward."

The words are as much for myself, as her.

“Listen to you, Geordie MacDonald,” she says, her voice soft. “All grown-up and wise, too.”

“Well, I don’t know about wise,” I laugh. “No one’s ever called me that before. But you know, if you need someone to talk to, someone who knew her—and if it’s too hard to talk to your Dad—I’m here, for what it’s worth.”

“It’s worth a lot, Geordie,” she says. “Thank you.” She pauses a moment, looking at me, one dark brow softly arched. “Maybe we can get a drink sometime?”

“I’d like that,” I say. The offer of a listening ear was genuine, with no expectation of anything in return, but there’s a selfish part of me whooping in pleasure, knowing I’ve opened up a way to spend more time with Jenna. It urges me to make damn sure by getting her number. “I’ll text you. Or you can text me when you’re free. Here, give me your number.” I pull my phone from my back pocket and pass it to her.

There’s something totally captivating about Jenna that urges me to shove aside all the reasons she should be off-limits. I’m trying hard to keep a smug grin off my face as she takes my phone and taps in her number with shiny red pointed nails.

I shiver at the sight of those nails, imagining how they might feel raking down my back. My mind descends into another bout of filthy thoughts. I shouldn’t be having those thoughts about my sister’s friend, worse still my Coach’s daughter, because from thoughts come actions. Acting on those thoughts could well see her father tossing me out of the team, taking away my rugby—the best thing that’s happened to me lately—and I can’t imagine how I’ll survive Cluanie without it.

Still, the moment my phone’s back in my hand, I fire off a text to her number straight away. If she sees a message from me there, perhaps she’ll actually make good on the

suggestion. I'll be waiting, even if meeting up with Jenna is probably the worst idea I've had in a long time.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am

JENNA

A slushy slurping noise drifts upwards from the floor beside my bed. I force open gritty eyes and lean over, already suspecting the source from the faint whiff in the air. And I'm right.

Despite my room being a no-go zone for an entire day yesterday, while I zonked out on high-powered migraine meds, somehow this morning wily wee Andy has managed to sneak his little body inside. No doubt he wheedled his way past my father. I heard Dad pop his head in earlier, as he always does, checking in to see if I'm winning the battle against the stabbing headache and swirling nausea.

I may have defeated the migraine, but I'm not betting on a win over Andy, though. He's lying on his back, his little front paws clasped tight around one of my favourite fluffy slippers. His eyes scrunch tight with pleasure, his wee lips fastened onto the shaggy faux-fur as he makes contented sucking noises.

This is not the first time he's got his sneaky paws on my slippers. My theory is he was taken off his mother too soon, hence his need for a surrogate. He kicks his little back legs in happy circles, keeping time with the rhythm of small grunts as an imagined stream of warm milk trickles down his throat.

I definitely don't have the physical or mental stamina this morning to fight Andy for the slipper, but I'm not prepared to let him have it either. I love those slippers. Instead, I create a diversion using another of my possessions he's developed an obsession with.

The baby haggis soft toy I bought to complete my outfit for a Burns Night party last year looked super cute tucked under my arm. In reality, haggis sounds like some gross medieval method of execution, where an unsuspecting sheep has its heart, liver and lungs chopped into little pieces before they are stuffed back into its stomach with some oats, onions and a bit of seasoning.

I've never eaten it and never intend to. Call me disloyal to my heritage. I don't care. But I'm more than happy to join in the imaginative Scottish craze of pretending the haggis is a wee furry animal, bred for the table as well as hunted in the wild. I liked my funny little haggis toy so much it has occupied a spot on my bed ever since.

The instant he spotted it, Andy snapped into terrier mode, desperate for the kill. I'd be sad to see him succeed, but I'm not so attached to the toy that I won't sacrifice it for the sake of saving my slippers. I snatch it off the pillow next to me and toss it across the room.

Andy's eyes snap open in recognition as it hits the floor, and he's off. I swoop down to pluck the sad, damp, sucked slipper and its undamaged mate from the floor. Hearing my squeal of delight, Andy skitters to a halt just short of the haggis, and narrows his eyes, realising I've duped him.

I wouldn't put it past the wee terror to launch himself at the slippers, so I slip them on my feet. If he does, I'll have a better chance of kicking him away. I'm not normally the sort of person who would kick a dog, but I feel justified if said dog is Andy trying to do me damage—after all, self-defence is a legitimate argument.

Andy seems to admit defeat, turning his attention to the haggis. Deciding that getting out of his range is the best idea, I cross the floor. Reaching for my dressing gown, I keep one eye on him just in case he decides to try a sneak attack. I value my ankles too much to risk his nasty little teeth wrapping around them. Realising I'm leaving, he springs to his feet, trailing behind me like he always did with Mum. I'm a poor

substitute considering how lukewarm I am about the dog, but I'm all he's got, and for Mum's sake—and maybe for my own healing too—I vow to try harder with him.

Downstairs, the house feels unnaturally quiet after Saturday's festivities. A blanket of sad emptiness hangs across the enormous lounge that just days ago buzzed with laughter and conversation. I enjoyed the party more than I expected, and now the contrast only emphasises what's missing.

The rhythmic tapping of keys drifts from Dad's bedroom. No doubt he's on the BBC Sport website, poring over match reports with the intensity of a man who's lived and breathed rugby his whole life. It's overlaid with vague muttering, probably him voicing his disagreement with the analysis of a game.

Rugby is the only thing that's dragged my father into the digital age and even then he seems to both love and resent how it's taken over from listening to the radio or leafing through the sports section of a newspaper, a pleasure he still insists on even if the news is out of date by the time it gets into his hands.

I pour myself a cup of tepid coffee, a familiar loneliness settling in me as I survey the stark white kitchen. Even though I chose to take this year away, I still miss the bustle of Glasgow and the craziness of Highlanders HQ. I miss my apartment and its view of the Clyde, and meeting my neighbours on the stairs. I miss lunches in cafes, and clubbing on weekends. But for now, there's no time to mope about what I'm missing out on, but focus on what I have.

It's been ages since I've had the luxury of calling in sick. At my job in London for Imagine PR, with one phone call I could hand off most things. However, once I stepped into the media management role with Dad's pro team, I became indispensable. Like the players who'd rather quietly tape up than admit injury, I pushed through illness, never one to make a fuss, showing up as my usual efficient self even when fuelled by ibuprofen and caffeine.

Now, as I experiment with this little one-woman PR business, it's even more important I show up. If I don't do the work, no one else will. Besides, I'm loving it. The chance to represent who I want instead of who I have to, and the interesting range of clients, not limited to male rugby players, is feeding an unmet need I never knew I had. When I return to the Highlanders in November, it will be on the understanding I still get to keep this going on the side. With Andy at my heels, I shuffle across to the summerhouse, flick on a light and slide into my desk.

I'm buried in the most important task of my week, when the door swings open and my father steps in. To combat the cold, he's wearing leggings under running shorts, a thermal top, and a beanie on his head, ready for his daily run. Dad doesn't take advice from many people, but he's listened to his doctors. If he wants to overcome the battering his body took as a young man, back when the game wasn't so safety conscious, and reach old age in good health, he needs to do his bit. Plus, he thrives on knowing that while he can't keep up with his young players, he's quickly able to cover the field, getting up close to a rucking pack or a rolling maul. I've watched him give coaching messages in person with an intensity he couldn't deliver from the sidelines.

"Sure you're OK love? You don't seem like yourself at all."

Dad's thick salt-and-pepper brows furrow in concern. He's not one for fussing, so I read this as a definite sign that I look as bad as I feel—and I feel like shit. The post-migraine fog has yet to lift, and until it does, I worry the pain will grab hold of me again and rip away another day of my life.

"I'm fine Dad," I say, although I can see why he's come to the conclusion I'm not. I must look a wreck.

I sit at my desk in a pair of Wonder Woman pyjamas, the bright slippers capturing my feet in a warm hug. Of course, one is a little worse for wear after its earlier ordeal

with Andy. Numerous tiny damp dreadlocks nestle amongst the formerly sleek fibres, but the damage isn't terminal.

My face is flushed; the room is too warm. Frost in August isn't unheard of in Cluanie, but seeing the delicate white dusting across the lawn still triggers an unwelcome reminder that winter's never far away up here, even though it's accompanied by nostalgic memories of sliding across icy grass in my childhood rugby games. This morning I cranked up the heater to push off the chill, but now the heat I sought when I first came in here is making me nauseous again .

"You know there's no reason for you not to have another day in bed," he suggests. "Better to be properly well than trying to work and do a half-arsed job."

It's the same wisdom Dad's always applied to his players. No one goes back on the list unless they are fit to do the task he expects of them. This time he's wrong. There are two very good reasons that I need to be here, match fit or not.

"No Dad, really I'm good," I say, mustering a smile.

After losing too much of my twenties to these debilitating headaches, I've finally got the migraines under control. My daily preventative meds run the offence and the newer, more effective drugs are ready on the bench if one breaks through the defensive line. I have this ridiculous fear that should I offer up a second day, the migraine monster will become greedy and, before I know it, I'll be back to the bad old days.

However, the document open on my laptop is the other more pressing reason for keeping upright.

"I need to go over this proposal for Quinn," I tell him, unable to keep the enthusiasm from my voice despite feeling like death warmed up. "I've got a zoom with her this

afternoon and I want to be prepared.”

There must be something in the water in Cluanie. We’ve produced more than our share of outstanding sports people, the man standing in front of me included. But it’s not because she hails from my hometown that I’m desperate to add Quinn Jamieson to my stable.

I’ve made a name for myself in a male-dominated sport, which means my first few private clients are all guys. However, women’s sport is on the rise and I want to be part of the new wave as we no longer play second fiddle to the men. To have this world class triathlete sign with me would be a victory not only professionally, but personally.

It’s heartening that she and I are the same age. Many thirty-four-year-old athletes are facing the cold hard reality of a body punished by sport and looking for an exit strategy. They’re forced to bow out gracefully and accept the narrowing of their world while younger rising stars, hungry for success, shove them aside. Quinn is at her peak and shows every sign it’s not just a spike with her career all downhill from here. She offers a small beacon of hope that maybe, just maybe, my best years aren’t all behind me, either.

“I suppose it’s a bit rich me telling you to take it easy.” He’s notorious for not calling in sick, even one time when Doc threatened to handcuff him to his bed. “Sometimes I wish you weren’t so damn like me,” he says with a wry curve of his mouth. But I know it’s not true. “Well, make sure you pace yourself.” Like he doesn’t know I only have one speed—and it’s full on. “I’m just off for my run, and then I’ll stop in at Grant’s office. Promised I’d go over a couple of things with him. Some ideas I’ve been mulling over.”

Poor Grant. How the man even gets a single spreadsheet finished, I don’t know. I assume he’s got a team of junior assistants who pick up the slack while he’s deep in

conference with Dad. They must shudder when he steps in the door of Darby and Keene Accountants. My father forgets he's not dealing with professional administrators who are paid to listen to his latest musings on the state of the game and rugby politics.

"Take care, Dad," I say. "Early frost. Could be some ice on the pavements. "

He pulls his beanie down hard, stepping out into the clear sky, where the fog has peeled back. It's going to be a beautiful day, although still too bright for my over-sensitive eyes. He breaks into a jog, his breath misting a little, and disappears with steady rhythmic footfalls across the concrete paved courtyard.

I lean forward at my desk, head cupped in my hands, fingers rotating across my temples in a delicate probing massage. I breathe in, right into the depths of my stomach, allowing the air to sweep through my body with soothing tendrils, and then out again, in a slow stream, seeking out the tiny bits of the miasma of migraine that linger. In—hold—out; and repeat.

The well-practised mantra helps me tap back into simply feeling normal. It's bliss after the painful hours of early Sunday followed by the dull, heavily-sedated sleep that, while it is my saviour, comes with a price. It's like having a hangover without the pleasant memory of the alcohol to compensate.

The door swings open and I raise my head, expecting to see Dad returning with some reminder or further sage words of advice. But it's not. My witty comment about his over-protectiveness withers on my lips.

I blink, unsure if this is some fever dream, as bottled sunshine walks into my office clutching a tall takeaway coffee and a full-wattage smile. It's my fangirl. What was her name? Taylor? No—Skylar. Her smile wavers a little in the face of my frown. I'm told I look downright intimidating when I'm thinking.

“Skylar,” I say, forcing a bright tone and hoping my face complies with the order to follow. “You’re here.”

OK, maybe normal isn’t quite in the building yet; but even normal me isn’t so good at welcoming small talk. I’ve lived in the world of men so long, I’ve had too little practice in the warm fuzzies that oil the wheels of feminine conversation.

“I brought you a coffee,” she says, thrusting the cup at me. “Figured everyone needs a coffee on Monday morning.”

“You figured right. That’s exactly what I need. Thanks.”

I stretch out my hand in gratitude, folding my fingers around the waxy paper cup. Its warmth feels good, soothing against the residual tension of the headache I’m still holding in every part of my body—but not as good as the smell that drifts towards me.

Maybe I’m hallucinating. Maybe I’m not in the arse-end of Scotland. Maybe it’s not Monday morning. Maybe I’m not facing the spectre of my migraines coming back in their life-sapping ferocity. The aroma begs my mouth to taste, to confirm what I suspect is true.

“Where the hell did you find a toffee nut latte in Cluanie?” I say as the first sip of hot, sweet deliciousness passes across my tongue.

“It’s not what you know, but who you know,” she says with a wink.

“Maggie at the Co-op?” Her face falls just a millimetre knowing I’ve guessed her secret supplier, then lifts back to high beam. “I heard a rumour she was planning to expand the offerings.”

The town is growing with all the work-from-home people who've relocated from cities to smaller rural places. People like me. Smart locals like Maggie know there's money to be made in feeding their caffeine addiction, the lifeline of a city worker.

"I hope it's still OK," she says. "You said, on Saturday night—"

"Of course it's OK. I remembered. You want to work for me."

"Not work, volunteer. A sort of internship?"

"Skylar, I'd love to have you, but on one condition. It's a paid internship." I won't profit from this girl's enthusiasm .

"That's very generous," she says, and I note she knows when to be gracious and accept a sincere offer without a fuss, showing unexpected maturity. "When can I start?" She's trying to suppress her puppylike eagerness, and it's heartwarming.

"You can start right now. See this folder. I need three copies of what's inside, bound—that's this machine here." That will be the acid test. The damn binding machine hates me with a vengeance. If she can work out how to use it without it chewing the edges of freshly copied documents, spitting them out with ragged toothmarks, then she's a keeper.

"And then, this is a list of Twitter accounts. Jump on here," I pull Twitter up on the iPad, "and screenshot any tweets that mention them from the last three days."

"Got it, boss," she says, offering me a salute and a grin.

I gather myself from my desk, trying to appear nonchalant as I reveal the full extent of my Monday morning slovenliness. Skylar tries to look equally unsurprised as she takes in the sight. Her new boss is wearing superhero pyjamas and slippers that look

like twin bright pink Highland coos, one of which is going through a reggae phase. Meanwhile, my hair resembles something from The Walking Dead.

“I’ll be back in half an hour. Need to deal with this.” I point a finger at my lank hair.

In the shower, I melt under the soothing water. Rain from the large showerhead cascades over me, little rivers washing away the fog from my brain. Multiple jets massage my back and legs, while a fine mist drifts around my shoulders in a warm cloud.

I breathe a sigh of gratitude that the excesses of this house extend to the bathrooms. The vanity of a failed businessman, many features of this sumptuous home are wasted on us, but here in the shower, I’m glad of his need to do everything on an impressive scale.

The oversupply of space within these walls may also prove useful if Dad continues to invite big groups of people over, like the almost one hundred at Saturday night’s party. I blame that for the migraine. Too much peopling often beckons in my headaches. Although, besides the stress of facing them all, a few positives came out of the evening.

Skylar for one. I hate to admit it, but the rapid success of my new solo business venture is putting me under pressure. I’m used to having a team of assistants to step up when necessary. I’ve missed that. But perhaps not any more. If this girl has even half the potential I sense in her, she’s just what I need.

And it was good seeing some of the old familiar faces. Maybe not Kyle Stewart. That brought up memories of a version of myself I’d rather forget. But having a chat with Connor, still just a big-hearted teddy-bear, spoke of possible connections, of renewing friendships that my life lacks. And alongside the warmth at thinking of Connor comes another warmth, one that has a slightly disturbing edge to it and

Geordie MacDonald's face smack in the middle.

Although I didn't talk to Geordie for long, the entire time, something hung in the air between us. While he still has the same sweet sunny nature, little boy Geordie has grown into an attractive man: body filled out, gangly limbs replaced—long muscular denim-clad legs, toned arms under the close-fit plaid shirt, strong golden-haired forearms—but the same wide blue eyes, unruly curls, and easy smile.

I shiver at the memory of his large, firm hands on my waist. What the hell is wrong with me? I'm having very hot, very sexual thoughts about my friend's not-so-little-anymore brother. Could be the migraine.

Migraines will do that to me. My body innately knows that release offers relief. Ask Dr Google and he'll tell you the same: orgasm can cause or cure migraine. In my case, it's the latter. Sometimes, wavering between my meds in the left-hand bedside cabinet and the vibrator in the right, my hands seek out its black satin bag and opt for a natural remedy.

Much as I'd like to do that now, and let my fingers wander down to the little tingling bundle of nerves between my legs, I don't. I fear the images that would undoubtedly accompany such pleasure. I can't encourage thoughts of Geordie in that way. They already swirl too close for comfort, and I need time to process exactly why they've invaded my life before I even begin to consider the consequences of acting on them.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am

GEORDIE

Tying rugby boots on is like a matey, back-slapping hug from an old friend. Even this pair, pretty much new, having only carried me through one practice, not yet christened with even a pre-season friendly match; they still feel good. It's been too long. I've loved this game since I was a little nipper running around in the frost. There's the brotherhood, of course. Most men like to run in a pack. Maybe it speaks to some long-buried tribalism; the blood of ancient clans pulsing in our veins, drawing us together. I know when I pull on my blue Cluanie R.F.C. jersey I feel part of something special and important—bigger than myself.

Beyond the team spirit that I thrive on, rugby was also a refuge for a kid who struggled with school. This game is something I'm truly good at. I'll never run onto the pitch at Murrayfield in the navy national jersey, but I know I'm an asset to this club team. There's a bitter irony that the learning disability which denied me a smooth passage through school and made parts of my life difficult may also have given me the spatial abilities to understand the game with an ease others lack .

I've heard people talk about the gift of dyslexia. Not sure I'd speak of it in quite such generous terms, but there's a little bit of truth in it. While a dyslexic brain struggles to process some types of information, it eats up others.

For me, the moment I step onto the pitch, my brain transforms into a hungry gatherer of clues, relentlessly scanning the field, monitoring the location of other players, analysing the shifting patterns of bodies flowing across the space. It effortlessly anticipates where the next gap will open up. From body language alone, it predicts the movements of my teammates and opponents. It looks for the next tackle, the next

kick, the next pass.

At tonight's practice, as we prepare for a friendly tussle against our second division team, I'm already eager to unleash its capacity. I sense a tingle of electricity, the spark that will ignite when I step out of the change rooms and my brain fires into life. Even knowing it will have to endure an hour of sprints and endless sets of press-ups, boring drills and repetitive rehearsals of set pieces before we get into proper play, it's ready.

"Raring to go as always, I see." Nathan Wilder slings a sports bag on the bench beside me.

"Yeah, knocked off early. How's that temperature unit going? No problems?"

"All good," he says, as he strips off a shirt and tugs on his practice jersey. "Though it's old. That electrical fault you fixed? Seems to me it was simply a sign of more to come. I'm going to have a word with the boss. Time to invest some more in the plant."

"So you can get back to focusing on making the whisky, not worrying about the thing keeping its arse warm. "

"Exactly. In the meantime, I expect you may well need to become close friends with the damn thing and give it a nudge along." He pauses to pull on his practice shorts. "Speaking of friends..." He raises his eyes from where he's been adjusting the ties at his waist. "So, Mac, it seems you're a bit of a dark horse, mate." Nathan lifts one of his dark brows and offers a teasing smirk.

"Your point is?" I toss back the question, my brows tugging down in a mystified frown.

“Jenna Sharpe. All the talk of her on Saturday night and you didn’t say a whisper. Then next thing I glance out a window and spot the pair of you cosied up like old friends. Or is it more than old friends?”

I feel a full on rush of warmth from my neck to the roots of my hair. The secret heat invading my body every time I’ve dared to think about Jenna since seeing her again on Saturday is now displayed on my face for the world to see. Well, only Nathan, but I’m not even ready for him to know the truth of it. Too late. Betrayed by my face.

“My older sister’s friend,” I say. “Not mine.”

“Really? Not even a high school crush? No teenage beating off under the bedsheets thinking of her?”

“Fuck off, Wilder,” I scoff, while shuffling uncomfortably at his taunting.

He’s hit a little too close to home. I can’t deny Jenna’s been in my thoughts, but I’m not going to admit to her presence in the shower this morning being the perfect accompaniment to the frantic rhythm of my hand. Nathan’s become a good friend, but not so good that I’m ready to discuss the subject of having a wank while imagining my sister’s friend .

“Hell, she left Cluanie when I was twelve. I hadn’t even noticed girls back then.”

That part isn’t a lie. I was a very late starter. Perhaps it was some self-protective mechanism. The lack of confidence, the low self-esteem spinning off from my dyslexia—not that anyone had put a diagnosis against it back then—meant I was probably closer to fourteen when I dared to return any interest girls showed in me. Of course, I was no stranger to wet dreams and early morning hand jobs. I joined in my mates’ dirty conversations; trading stories—mostly fictional—and eyeing up the possibilities. But I’d never touched a girl, let alone kiss one until some mutually

clumsy slurping of lips with Kristie Carter out back of the gym after the school social at the end of my S2 year.

“Surely you were old enough to notice your sister had hot friends?” he says.

“Nope, not old enough for Jenna,” I reply. “Six years between us. She was never on my radar. As I said, she and Rachel went off to uni when I was twelve. And from then I’ve barely seen her.”

The odd glimpse of her in the street if she was home around Christmas or New Year. A couple of times she breezed in and out of her parents’ house while I was at piano lessons. Apart from those few times, Jenna’s been a stranger to me. Which is why this sudden attraction, spurred on by an unexpected feeling of connection between us in two short conversations at the party, has blindsided me, catching me unprepared. And Nathan, the canny bastard, has shone an unwelcome bright spotlight on it.

“You’re old enough now. ”

I close my eyes. Right this moment I’m regretting my bromance with Nathan Wilder. Already he knows me too well. Might as well concede defeat.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I groan.

“Yes, I knew it,” he says with a fist pump of triumph.

I glare at him, while warily scanning the changing room, and relief floods me as I realise there’s no one in earshot. We’re early and everyone else is late.

“Shut the fuck up, Wilder,” I caution. “Unless you want the next party you go to, to be my wake.” I’m too young to die.

He drops his voice.

“Honestly, mate, don’t let that put you off. I say go for it. Come on, even old Razor can be won over. And anyway, isn’t it about time she bucked her father’s orders? I mean, how old is she?”

“Thirty-four,” I say miserably.

Part of me wants to defend Jenna. He’s right, she shouldn’t be letting her old man rule her love life. She’s smart, strong, independent. Hell, if she wants to start something with a player six years younger than her, then she should. But would she? And even so, could she ever put aside memories of a geeky, awkward kid to see this guy as a serious contender?

“Really? I’d never have guessed she was older than me.”

No one would. Her skin glows, her hair a shiny dark curtain framing it, and those deep soulful brown eyes. Then there’s that body, the glorious tits barely hidden by a skimpy bit of green fabric, and denim painted over the sort of rounded arse that would fill my hands so perfectly. She’s like a walking Sports Illustrated cover girl, before she’s taken her clothes off .

“But shit.” Sympathy is written all over his face. “You have to feel sorry for the girl, in her thirties, with an overprotective father still hanging around. That pep talk he gave us—sounds like he considers her out of our league.”

Well, he might be right on one count. She is so far out of this man’s league. I’ve got nothing to offer a girl like Jenna. It’s as if Nathan has read my mind, and like a good friend, he leaps in to boost me up.

“You’re a good bloke, Geordie. After all the years she’s spent hanging around with

the pro guys and their big egos, someone like you would be a breath of fresh air,” he says, all joking swept aside. His confidence in me triggers a surge of hope where up till now there’s mostly been despair. I’ve turned it over in my mind, measuring myself and what I have to offer against what Jenna deserves and falling well short. Nathan’s encouragement suggests this might not be a futile quest. “Mate, if you want to go there, I say do it. Don’t let Razor scare you.”

“Bad advice there, Wilder,” Connor says, sliding in through the door. I freeze, thinking he’s heard too much. “We should all be very bloody afraid of him. But especially you flankers. He’s been chewing my ear about better clearance from the ruck. Reckons it’s the first thing we need to work on. And when he says we, he means you.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. Connor has no idea what we’re talking about. I can cope with Razor being on my case when it comes to rugby. The thought of what we might be capable of under his leadership is one thing that’s keeping me from turning tail on this decision to return to Cluanie. I’ll meet any challenge he throws at me head on.

But I’m far from sure I’d go head to head with him over Jenna. Not unless I’m absolutely sure there’s hope for me in pursuing her, and I’m a long way off even daring to assume she’d entertain interest from me.

“So, Connor, as captain, you must know him better than most of us. Does the man own a gun? Like a shotgun, perhaps?”

I could throttle Nathan Wilder and his goofy fucking grin. I know, despite my obvious discomfort, he’s about to bring Connor into the loop.

“Fuck no,” Connor says with a frown, still oblivious to where this is headed. “He might have rubbed shoulders with the nobs, but do you really picture him running around in tweeds at shooting weekends?”

“There you go, Mac.” He pats my shoulder. “As long as you can outrun him, you’re safe.” He turns to Connor with a delighted grin. “Our boy Geordie here’s got the hots for Jenna.”

“No surprises there,” Connor says with a huff. “It might have been dark outside by the pool, but I’m not an idiot. Could tell I interrupted something.”

“You interrupted nothing,” I protest.

“Oh, I saw her face, mate. That was definitely not nothing.”

The thought that Jenna might have even the slightest interest in me is like the grateful thunder of hot water on skin after a game. I allow it to wash over me, let its warmth seep into my bones while attempting to keep my poker face. Not that it’s likely to pass the scrutiny of these two. Nathan, the man from down under who possesses the heart of a sensitive new age guy under his typically blokey Kiwi demeanour. And Connor, who has always made captain of every team he’s ever been in, is known for his ability to read his teammates as well as he reads the game. Plus, he’s known Jenna for as long as Rachel. If he says she was giving me the look, then I believe him.

“You reckon?” I say, cautious optimism pushing past my ever-present clawing doubt.

“Yeah, I do,” he says. That’s two votes for me and none for my scathing inner voice.

“But go easy. Take it quietly,” he suggests. “Not because of her father, though.”

“Believe me, this is also my sister’s friend here. I have no choice but to do otherwise.”

“Yeah, that’s another angle to consider. But no, that’s not it either. There’s some history there. Jenna comes with a ‘handle with care’ label.”

I have no idea what the fuck he means by that.

“She was engaged. Way back, before she joined the staff at the Highlanders. The guy bailed on her, right before the wedding. I thought Rache would have told you, man. She would have been lining up as chief bridesmaid for sure.”

I feel stupid. Ignorant. Has Rachel ever mentioned anything about Jenna to me? Or did she not bother, thinking it wasn't relevant? Or was I too caught up in myself, and zoned out while she prattled on, as I tended to do? Should have paid more attention, Geordie . I chide myself.

“Nah,” I say, feeling like a dick. “Rachel and I didn't talk much for a while there.” Like for about two years. “Nothing bad,” I add. “When I was down in Brunei. Kind of dropped off the earth a bit.”

Long stints on a rig and shore time in Bangkok, I'd immersed myself in booze and pretty girls who didn't care too much about whether a guy could string a sentence together, just whether he had the money to pay. I'm not proud of the way I so easily slipped into the mould of the average young rig worker, but in my defence I was twenty-two, a kid with more money in my pocket than I'd ever expected to see in a lifetime, especially for a person with my limitations. I don't want to dwell on it, shame rising in me even now.

“Fuck, I had no idea. He must have been a real dickhead.”

“Apparently,” Connor says. “So don't you be one, OK?” He cuffs me across the head.

“Believe me,” I say, “if—and I still think it's a very big if—she has the slightest interest in me, I will be going very carefully. Otherwise, Razor and Rachel will have to fight it out to see who gets the satisfaction of killing me slowly.”

There's the pad of large feet in the passageway, and Kyle lopes in, ducking his head to clear the door.

"Evening, gents." He dumps a gear bag with a heavy thud, unaware of his interruption. Thankfully, even Nathan understands it's time for this conversation to end.

My brain is racing a million miles an hour after Connor's revelation. As the rest of the team pour in from their jobs, elbowing each other and talking shit, and the changing room fills with their banter and the clatter of studs on concrete, I sit, physically a still point in the swirl of activity, but mentally a spinning tornado of hope and fear, optimism and doubt.

Despite what my mates might think, I'm sure this thing I've got for Jenna is more than a sexual attraction. OK, I'll admit there's plenty of that. She's so fucking beautiful. My brain overloads every time it recalls the image of her standing on the stairs, that satin skin peeking from the v of a green shiny top offering a tantalising hint of rounded breasts framing a sweet slash of cleavage; and tight jeans flowing over her curves, leaving little to the imagination. Naked, she'd be a goddess.

But I've grown beyond only wanting attractive outer packaging. Somehow between two brief conversations on Saturday night, and the avalanche of childhood memories roaring down, burying me in thoughts of every other conversation we've ever had, an obsessive need to really know Jenna—the person, the woman—has taken hold.

Like all young men, once I was perfectly happy with a pretty girl. Now I need more. Not just a girl. Not just a bit of fun. I want a woman who has layers and depths to explore. Someone who I'm secure enough with to reveal my own feelings, hopes, dreams—even my insecurities, of which there are many.

This new self-awareness is frightening. Perhaps it's because I've spent most of my

time in a bloke's world up till now. Most men don't dwell on these things. They definitely don't discuss them. And they sure as hell don't own up to feeling this way. I've toyed with the idea of bringing it up with Nathan. He's got far greater experience of relationships than I have, even though his most significant one imploded. Still, he might be a good sounding board.

"Geordie," Kyle barks. "Move your arse. Not the time to be taking a moment."

Five-thirty on the dot and Razor has no tolerance for lateness.

I stand and move mechanically, the harsh clash of my studs on the floor a jarring echo in the now empty room. Meanwhile, in my head, my mind has calmed. The decision to talk to Nathan some more offers a way forward, while the need to focus on the familiar routines of practice offers a reprieve from this onslaught of new and disturbing emotions. I jog out into the sanctuary of the floodlit field.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am

JENNA

“White chocolate mocha?” I inhale the aromatic steam with an appraising sniff. This has become our daily game. Skylar arrives with coffee and I try to guess which decadent version of my compulsory morning caffeine hit she’s chosen to start my day.

“No way. You’re getting good, Jenna. Three out of four this week,” she giggles.

“You’re the best, Skylar.” I take an appreciative sip and let out a small hum of pleasure at the sweet warmth on my tongue. “What did I do before you?”

Her eyes dance in delight, and the rosebud pink of her cheeks blooms a little brighter at my praise. It’s not a hollow compliment. She’s earned it—and not just for her intuitive grasp of my need for coffee to kick start the day, and the creative way she fills it.

Every morning without fail, Skylar is here at my makeshift office in the summerhouse by nine, patient and uncomplaining no matter what menial task I throw at her. This young woman has every bit of the potential she recognises in herself and more. Today I’ve made a decision that will bind her immediate future to mine .

“So, before you start on drafting those Instagram posts for Quinn, take a look at this.”

I slide the papers across the desk towards her. Skylar arches one blonde brow, drops into the chair opposite me, and begins to read. Her eyes widen as she understands what I’ve placed in front of her.

“This is a contract.”

“It is. Skylar, you’ve wasted waiting tables at The Railway. Though I’m fine if you want to keep doing that too,” I add quickly. I know she’s set some big financial goals for this year and I won’t be the one to put the brakes on them, even if it does involve nights in the local pub delivering plates of haddock and chips or pizza to slightly tipsy locals. “But, as you know, I’ve got a string of new clients coming on board, and much as I hate to admit it...” She grins at me, anticipating what I’m going to say, and how much the admission costs me. “I need help.”

She covers the ground around the desk in seconds and flings her arms around me. Her embrace sends a flood of unfamiliar, although rather pleasant, emotions through me and I hug her back, relishing the satisfaction that I’ve done a good thing here. Somehow I’ve become a hugger and I’m surprisingly OK with that.

“Right,” she says, finally loosening her arms from around my shoulders. When she pulls back, glistening pearls of happy tears dot her cheeks, and she brushes at them. Mirroring her action, I swipe a finger over my own cheek and confirm there’s also a warm bead of emotion sliding down my face. I’ve become a happy-crier too. I see her sympathetic smile. “I suppose I need to sign this before you change your mind.” Teasing dimples tug at her mouth.

“Zero chance of that,” I say, flicking away another tear. “But yes, sign it quickly, so I can relax. I can’t afford to let you get away.”

The smile doesn’t leave her face as she scrawls her name and slides the paper across to me.

“Thank you Jenna,” she says. “I won’t let you down.”

“I won’t let you down either,” I say. “You’re going places. This is only the start.”

“Did Wonder Woman have a sidekick?” she asks, pressing a candy-pink nail to her lips. She tilts her head towards the large picture I’ve given pride of place on the wall behind me. It’s a bright pop art piece by a New Zealand artist. The moment I saw it in the window of a gallery in London, I had to have it.

My childhood superhero obsession hasn’t gone away, rather narrowed its focus. My all-time number one now watches over me, reminding me of what I can be. It’s Linda Carter’s image I see in my mind when I need to dig deep, to find strength and face whatever villain crosses my path. Sorry Gal Gadot, you’re beautiful and gutsy, but it will always be Linda I picture when I have to go into battle against some scumbag journalist who wants to crucify an athlete, or when online trolls are slinging undeserved shit.

I’ve learned when life gets tough, if I put on my metaphorical Wonder Woman outfit, complete with ‘bracelets of submission’, I’m powerful. Not that I’d ever attempt to actually pour my body into a pair of Linda’s blue satin star-spangled pants. Or attempt to confine my middle with a wasp-waisted band of gold. Although I do think my boobs would look rather spectacular peeking out of the top of that red corset.

“No,” I say. “She always works solo.” I look at the bright face of potential in front of me. It’s like seeing a version of myself with a softer edge, and another set of talents that I lack. “She does have allies though,” I add. “People with superpowers that complement hers. Sometimes they’ll work alongside her. But as an equal, not a subordinate.”

She dips her head in a shy smile, pale eyelashes flickering and the faint flush that always lurks just beneath the surface pinkening her cheeks. The subtext in my words isn’t lost on Skylar. She’s far more astute than anyone who looked at her cherubic face would assume. She holds her superpowers lightly, but they’re there. And underneath, she’s got a strength that may be her most powerful weapon because no one suspects it exists. I feel a twinge knowing I too was guilty of prejudging her.

“Thank you Jenna,” she whispers, and I feel another prickle of tears. Twice in one day and it’s not even ten o’clock.

She takes her place at the small desk I’ve added for her. The summerhouse isn’t really big enough for all the stuff I crammed in when converting it to my office. However, I was determined to make it work, craving the airiness of its tall windows, the soothing view of the pool and gardens, and the escape from the lonely cavern of the ridiculous house towering behind it.

In the past, I always liked my own space, preferring solitude and silence as an antidote to the barrage of people and noise that assaulted me whenever I stepped outside. Media management is a frantic world. But somehow here, things have changed and so have my needs. The cosy elbow-to-elbow feel seems to work with Skylar. Already, I’m finding it hard to imagine the day without her companionable presence.

“Oh, and I’ve sorted this,” she says, pointing at the blackened electrical socket by her desk. The shadow marring the white painted wall behind it remains as evidence of the puff of smoke and crackle of sparks that leapt from it when Skylar plugged in the paper shredder yesterday. “Sparky said he’ll send someone over first thing.”

“Great, thanks for that,” I say, impressed with her initiative. “As your new employer, electrocuting you would definitely not be the best start.”

In more ways than one. I’ve made many hiring decisions before, but this is the first time I’ve chosen someone just for me, and who I’ll be paying. She’s worth every penny. And despite our new employer-employee status, I feel like Skylar and I have something more growing here. Teacher and student? Mentor and protégé? Or even friendship. Whatever it is, I don’t want to lose her, especially not fried by faulty electrics.

I settle back to tackling my first challenge of the day: a campaign to lift the image of a rather testy young golfer whose game is falling in direct correlation to a series of newspaper articles filled with nasty half-truths about the state of his marriage. It saddens me, as he's basically a nice guy, but socially inept and definitely not media savvy. It would be a much easier world if sporting prowess came with the ability to schmooze preloaded. But then I wouldn't have a job.

An hour later, I'm startled from my work when Andy leaps to his feet, going from snoring loudly, deep in sleep, to raging beast in seconds. I look to the door and see Geordie MacDonald standing outside and I'm suddenly not quite so sure about the wisdom of letting Skylar take initiative.

He pushes open the door with a cheerful "Morning, ladies," but catching sight of Andy, slams it shut before the dog can get to him. Andy bounces off the glass, stunned for a moment, before leaping to his feet, barking wildly .

Skylar, in her usual no-nonsense style, whisks him into her arms. Andy immediately abandons his seek and destroy mission and begins licking her face. If I've become a little obsessed with Geordie MacDonald this week, it's nothing compared to the insta-love that Andy has for Skylar. Although I have to confess, licking Geordie has come to mind a few times... I shake my head, trying to release the image before I have to face him.

"Andy, Andy, Andy," Skylar croons. "How about I take you for a little walkie, walkie, walkie?"

She lets herself out of the small side door and heads towards the house, still murmuring Andy's favourite word like an endearment and leaving me to face Geordie alone.

"All clear?" He steps into the room and it immediately feels crowded. "What is it

with that dog?”

“Blonde men,” I explain. “He’s managed to combine canine sexism and racism in one scruffy black package with a nasty set of teeth.”

There’s been a parade of strangers through the house since Mum went. We’ve spent months trying to figure out some trend in poor misguided Andy’s attacks. An analysis of his hits shows a clear pattern. But while blonde men might not be Andy’s cup of tea, I can’t help but think they might be mine. Well, one in particular.

“OK,” he says. “Next time I’ll be sure to pull on a beanie. Easier than a sex change. So tell me, what’s the problem?”

I show him the black marks around the power socket. “There were actual sparks,” I explain. “Gave us a huge fright.”

“Well, you were right to call me,” he says. “I’d say that underneath all the window dressing in this house, you might find this isn’t the only shonky piece of wiring. I’ve seen it before. Big flash house, no expense spared. But behind the owner’s back, the project manager cuts corners. Only on things that can’t be seen. Makes a bit more coin on the deal by doing things like employing cheap tradesmen. By the time the problems come to light, they’re all long gone.”

“You think so? The whole house might have faulty wiring?” I imagine Dad, Andy, and I perishing in an electrical fire, shuddering at the thought of choking smoke and fast-moving flames.

Even five years on, the Grenfell Tower tragedy is etched in my mind. They say it started from a small electrical fault in a refrigerator—probably no bigger spark than the one that leapt out at Skylar yesterday—and ended with so many deaths and injuries. I was in London for a meeting and vividly remember wondering at the

source of the plume spiralling up into the pale sky while out on my early morning run in Kensington Park. Already at six a.m. the faint smell of smoke hung in the air. When I got back to the hotel, every television channel was covering it; the horror brought into my room. I still shudder at the thought.

“Could be,” he says. “Hard to tell without taking a proper look.” He softens, noticing my distress. “Look, how about I fix this first? Then, over the next few weeks, I’ll go through the house and check everything.”

Relief washes over me. “That sounds like a great idea. How soon could you start? I don’t think I’ll sleep knowing the place might go up in flames.”

“You’ve got working smoke alarms?”

“I think so,” I say, though I’m not at all sure. My face must give me away because he doesn’t look convinced either.

“I’ll sort this out first, then do a quick check on the alarms before I go.”

“Thanks, Geordie. I really appreciate it. You know how people have that one way they absolutely don’t want to die? For me, it’s fire.”

“Not a problem,” he says. “I’ll just shut off the power at the mains before I touch this.” He nods at the faulty socket. “Don’t fancy lighting myself up. Think I saw the box on the wall by the pool?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

I watch him walk the length of the terrace, tool belt slung low on those slim hips, drawing my eyes to places I shouldn’t be looking, but I can’t help myself. When he heads back my way, I drop into my chair, eyes fixed on my computer. I try to

concentrate, but my laptop is dying—I forgot to charge it overnight. I could go across to the house for the charger, but there’s a reason I don’t want to leave.

Geordie returns, sets a plastic toolbox on Skylar’s desk, and rummages inside. In the tight space of the office, he seems to fill the room—not just with the solid presence of his body, but with the fresh citrus scent of his shower gel and the low hum of his voice. (Is that Pearl Jam?) His nearness is both exciting and unnerving. He lowers himself to the floor, long fingers deftly working to pry the plate from the rogue socket. No wonder he had a talent for the piano.

Another one that got away.

Mum had high hopes for so many of her students, but often the best and brightest didn’t see it through. The boys, in particular, gave up early, convincing their parents the piano wasn’t suitably masculine. They either abandoned music altogether or traded it in for something sexier—a guitar, a drum kit.

Watching Geordie now, deftly pulling at wires, twirling a screwdriver like a baton, I muse on other possible talents those lithe fingers might possess. There’s something very wrong with this, but I don’t try to fight it. I can’t help but wonder what else those hands are capable of. I shouldn’t, but I do. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I have no intention of making a fool of myself.

Still, those hands.

They felt so damn good on my waist—gentle, yet commanding. An intoxicating combination in a man.

“I had a good time on Saturday night,” he says. “Your Dad knows how to throw a party.”

“Years of practice. We used to have a lot of parties in our old house. When I was a kid.”

The house I still think of as home. Not this one, yet. And maybe it never will be. Still, leaving it won't be easy; not leaving Dad all alone. I may have only a few months before I need to face that prospect, if I go back to Glasgow in November, as planned. Or I could turn my back on my job, stay here and grow my own client numbers into a fulltime business, then it gives me more time to make sure he really is managing. But then what? How long do I stay? If I meet someone—if I want to move in with them—what happens then? Would I move a boyfriend in here instead? Just as well there's no one in my life right now—no one at all, not even casually, for almost a year. I bring my mind back to the document on my screen, shoving all these dilemmas aside. I'll have to deal with them sometime, but not today.

Geordie leans back, peering at the wires in his hand, practically under my desk. My laptop dies, so I shuffle papers, pretending to be busy while acutely aware of his back brushing against my legs.

“And the trip to the big smoke this weekend, too. You organised it all I hear? ”

“Not much choice in the matter—Dad insisted. And told Grant the club could pay for it. Essential team bonding. It was a little last minute, but it's all come together.”

“The guys are looking forward to it. Scotland versus the All Blacks at Murrayfield. No matter which way it goes, it'll be a good match.”

“It will be.”

“You're coming too? A rose amongst the thorns?”

“Unavoidable. I would never leave Dad in charge of twenty guys. Not off the field.

On it, he's your man, but off—you'd be lucky to make it to the match. But yeah, it'll be fun. I'm used to being an honorary guy. With the Highlanders, it was pretty much just Dad and me. A few female physios. I can hold my own."

"I bet you can." He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me where his back still brushes my calf.

I like the proximity—but how much I like it is disturbing. I push up from my chair, thinking to put some distance between us—well, as much as is possible in this tiny space. It seems like a good idea, until, sensing my movement, he swivels his head. As I edge past him to place a folder in the filing cabinet, I'm hyper-aware of his eyes level with my legs.

The skirt I chose this morning suddenly feels too short. I feel naked. Exposed.

And I don't mind at all.

Instead, vanity flares—knowing he's getting an eyeful of legs sculpted by relentless leg presses and hours on the stair climber. I'm enjoying his heated gaze, wanting it to be more, maybe a hand sliding along my skin, maybe even venturing higher.

But my flush turns from faint warm pink to a surge of ruby-red heat when his gaze travels downward, landing on my feet .

My slippers.

Fluorescent, fuzzy, utterly ridiculous.

It's a holdover from my early days at Imagine PR, when I first discovered the joy of slipping off my power heels under the desk in favour of something more comfortable. Back then, I knew how to make a discreet swap, maintaining the illusion of

professionalism.

Too late now. No salvaging this. Geordie's gaze flicks back up, long lashes shadowing eyes bright with amusement, dimples pressing into his cheeks.

"Getting to know you all over again definitely has some surprises," he says, grinning. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

He taps one slipper affectionately, and the simple gesture—casual, familiar, but also intimate—fills me with warmth. Despite knowing so little about each other now, despite our history being mostly fragments of past versions of ourselves, there's an ease between us. A glow. I can't deny the happiness that spins off of it.

As Geordie declares the power socket safe, packs up his tools, and heads into the house to check the smoke alarms, it's all I can do not to follow.

Just to soak up a little more of him.

This is already getting out of hand. And we've only just begun.

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GEORDIE

At five to nine on Saturday morning, I'm the last one on the bus. Fussing over Mum like an overprotective granny has made me late. Ready-to-eat meals for two in the freezer. Dad-proof instructions tacked to the fridge. Piles of freshly chopped firewood stacked by the hearth. A last-minute refresher course on working the new television and getting the game live. Hopefully, he can follow my instructions.

For an intelligent man, it's beyond me why technology baffles my father, or why he treats cooking like a dark art. I just hope he gets the television right. Mum's almost as excited at the prospect of spotting me in the crowd as she might be if I was running onto the pitch to face the mighty All Blacks.

If I thought I could slip past Coach unnoticed, I've got another think coming. My mates greet me with a chorus of catcalls. Fortunately, Razor just glances up, giving a nod as if mentally counting the last of his charges on board is his final responsibility for the day, then returns to his newspaper. Or maybe he hasn't noticed me at all. Maybe he's found the article Dad read aloud over the breakfast table this morning, where they're talking up Scotland's chances of a win tonight. Whatever the reason, Razor seems in a good mood.

I scan the length of the bus. It's spacious and way more luxurious than those of my rugby playing youth. Appropriate for the team destined to win the County rugby competition this season with the famous Robbie Sharpe at the helm. Ours.

Halfway down, I spot her. Jenna. Sitting alone. Alone . No one beside her, across the aisle; hell, not even in the seats in front, or behind. As if she's a bloody leper and

they've fenced off the space around her to keep from catching her disease.

Razor spelled it out the first day she showed up, leaning on the fence at the practice field. Back then, wrapped in a big padded jacket, hood up against the unexpected August cold, she might as well have been wearing a Scottish version of a burka. The layers gave no hint of the spectacular curves beneath.

As she glanced across at us, while handing her father some paperwork, was it only me who suspected those eyes, like liquid chocolate, offered a promise of hidden beauty? Now they've seen her without the barrier of a puffer jacket, everyone understands the reason for Razor's threat.

"Any of you horny little bastards so much as look at her..." he'd muttered. Staring each of us in the eye, one by one, waiting for us to nod in acknowledgment, his voice rose to a vicious growl. "Let's make one thing clear. Just because Jenna's not paid club staff like at the Highlanders, it doesn't mean the rules don't apply. She's off limits. Bother her, and you'll answer to me. Touch her, and you're off the team."

His words echo in my brain. I shove them aside. Plenty of spare seats, but I know exactly which one I'm taking. If the universe hands me an opportunity to sit next to the woman I've obsessed over for a week, I'm not going to spit in its face.

On Saturday night, I thought I imagined it at first—the flicker of interest in her eyes. Then Connor interrupted before I could push beyond small talk. But inside the house, the connection remained. She hadn't flinched away from my touch, accepting my hand at her waist, my thumb grazing the top of the rounded arse that's since featured in my dreams. Imagining it pressed hard against my stomach as I stood in the shower...

I force myself to stop. These are not helpful images at this moment.

Beyond the sheer, crippling sexual attraction and my hope for something deeper, Jenna stirs something else in me. She tries so hard to be fiercely independent—and she is—but I feel an instinctive need to take care of her.

It was there from the start. Seeing her raw grief when we spoke of her mother. The sadness, regret, and guilt she shared when I got her alone again. I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her it would all be okay.

Then at practice, when Connor spilled the details—jilted a week before her wedding by some bastard who probably traded her for someone else—I had the urge to hunt the fucker down and rip him apart.

And on Thursday, in her office, when I saw her distress at the dangerous faulty wiring, I knew there was this small thing I could do. I don't have much to offer, but I'm a practical man. I can keep her safe. I'd never let harm come to her.

This is new territory for me, but the speed and depth of what's overtaken me says I shouldn't ignore it. If this woman provokes something different in me, that's every reason to go after it and see where it leads.

No way am I letting her sit on this bus alone today, everyone treating her like she's got the plague because her dad still thinks she's thirteen, not thirty-four. Because he's made sure no one else will take this seat, but then abandoned her to sit on her own all the way to bloody Edinburgh. The least the old bastard could have done was sit with her. I'm hoping that either he doesn't notice, or he trusts me more than the rest of them, given Jenna's history with my sister Rachel. It's the latter that's more likely to save me.

Taking this seat beside her is impulsive. Risky. But I'm not passing up the chance. I catch Nathan's eye and he gives me an encouraging wink. It was a relief to have a man-to-man on the subject of Jenna in a back booth at the Railway last night. His

advice was the same as at practice on Wednesday: if you feel that way, go for it, so I am.

I pause to sling my bag in the overhead locker. It seems only fair to give her a chance to veto the move. Also dangerous. It gives her the chance for public rejection. My heart crushed in front of the lads, my humiliation relived in endless retellings. But if she doesn't? This could become the stuff of a different type of retelling—the day I hooked up with your mother; kids, that's where it started. Crazy thoughts.

I'm prepared to gamble everything on this move.

I have no idea what's come over me, but ever since the party, all I can think about is a future with her in it. It's as if Cluanie, having lured me home, now plans to chain me here—with Jenna as the most unexpected and welcome jailer. When I arrived back, I thought I'd be here a few months, maybe a year. Now I have no desire to leave the place that has her in it .

As I hover in the aisle, there's the added danger that her father, seeing what I'm up to, will launch himself from his seat, march down here and rip my arms off, snapping them like twigs right at the place where my unworthy shoulder is about to brush that of his precious daughter. Fortunately, he remains oblivious, eyes locked on the newspaper. One lift of his head and a glance in the driver's ample rear-view mirror and it's all over—but luck is on my side. He doesn't notice the guys all holding their collective breaths. I'm holding mine too.

Jenna smiles up from her phone and I take that as permission to get my obvious body into the seat next to her before her father leaps up to object.

“Hi, I'm Geordie, you might remember me...” I slide into the seat, realising this is going to be torture. The seats are generous, but it's near impossible for my broad body not to spill over into her space. My hip grazes the curve of her thigh. I swallow

down the sudden pang of wanting more. She doesn't shift away. Doesn't angle herself like you would with a stranger.

"Hmm, I'm not sure," she says, pressing a finger to her lips. A barely suppressed smile tugs at the corners, threatening to unleash the cute dimples she hides well behind an often serious expression. They are the reward for the patient and the fortunate. Today I'm both, as the little hollows twitch with mischief. "Something about you looks vaguely familiar." She gives up on the deadpan face, laughter spilling out. "I know! It's the village stalker from my teens."

"Oh, come on," I groan. "I wasn't that bad, was I?"

"Yes, you were. How many times did I catch you peering through bushes? Peeping round corners? Geordie, you were everywhere. Really, I thought you had a career in MI5, although you'd have needed to up your covert surveillance skills."

I frantically try to recall just how annoying I was towards my older sister and her friend all those years ago. Not too bad, I hope. I'm desperate for this version of Jenna to like me. This me, not the painful kid brother hanging around, desperate for her and Rachel to notice him.

"To be fair," she says, choking back a laugh. "Rachel and I were rather obnoxious teenagers. Strutting around Cluanie thinking we were queens of this little patch. Probably unfairly mean to everyone else, including you."

My impulsiveness has landed me in a situation that I have no match plan for. I wasn't expecting her to drag up the kid I was. Highlighting the age difference between us isn't going to help nudge this rekindled relationship in the direction I'm hoping for.

"Nah, I'm sure I deserved it. Annoying was my specialty back then."

“Perhaps,” she says, and we both know the truth of it. I was an irritating little snot, but she doesn’t appear to hold it against me. “Hey thanks for this work on the electrical stuff,” she continues. It’s good to return to the here and now. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have slept properly. Do what needs to be done. Whatever it costs, it’s worth it.”

“No charge. It’s the least I can do for you and your dad.”

“Geordie, you don’t have to,” she says, brown eyes softening. “We can afford it. We’re not short of money, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“I want to,” I say, my voice low, responding to her nearness. “You’ve been through the wars. Call it my chance to offer a bit of TLC. ”

“Thanks,” she says. I hear the sadness there. “It’s been a shit year. Mothers, eh? You never expect you’ll be the one who looking after them? But I’d give anything to still be doing it, if I could. She went so fast.”

The undisguised grief in her eyes makes me regret veering into this territory. But when she places a hand over mine, I see that she appreciates talking to someone who knew the woman she lost.

“And I’m so pleased your mum is going to be OK,” she says. “She’s lucky to have you all behind her. I saw Rache when she was here. She said the home support plan is going well.”

“You saw Rachel?” I echo stupidly.

Three weeks ago, Rachel finally dragged her neglectful arse up from London for a few days. Fixated on how easily she could have come home over the years, I didn’t exactly invite small talk. I had no idea where she went or who she saw in the brief

times when I begrudgingly let her off the hook from Mum-minding duties.

Guilt prickles. I was hard on my sister, and that wasn't really fair. With a jolt of unease, I realise my so-called good luck—being the one here when Mum and Dad needed me, has led me to take moral high ground. A position I don't deserve. I need to smooth things out with Rachel when I next see her. Or sooner.

This bitterness towards my sister that's sprung up in the midst of Mum's illness doesn't sit well. Resentment would be a completely natural response to the place she's held in our family all these years. The golden girl. The one who followed the expected pathway—top marks at school, a law degree from King's College in London, with honours, a stellar corporate career. I should envy my sister. She's all the things my father wanted and everything I'm not .

In a way, though, her success has worked in my favour. Her exam marks, scholarship wins, glitzy job offers, and now high-profile court cases, all provide a handy diversion for my father's judgmental eyes. Sure, she's set an unattainable standard of what a MacDonald can achieve, but I was always going to fall short of the mark. I've never begrudged her the place on that pedestal.

I just wished that, being the nearer child, she had checked on Mum more often when I couldn't, but I have no right to punish her for not doing so.

“We talk every week, you know.”

“Every week?”

I want to slap myself. Why is it only lame repetition of her words seems to be the only thing I'm capable of in Jenna's presence?

Up until a week ago, I had no idea Rachel and Jenna were still friends. Seems they're

very good friends. Then again, Rachel and I have been strangers to each other for years. And the distance between us? That's on me.

When I first moved overseas, Rachel texted often. My frequent lack of response—not out of malice, just my usual half-arsed approach to life—made them dwindle to almost none. A ‘Happy birthday’ here. A ‘Well done’ there, as she climbed higher up a ladder I’ll never even reach the bottom rung of.

Not wanting to look the arsehole brother I am in Jenna’s eyes, I smile, making a noise that suggests I know they keep in touch.

“Yeah, I told her we caught up at the party. Hey, I know. I’ll send her a picture.” Jenna rummages in the bag at her feet and pulls out her phone. “She’ll think this is funny.”

I doubt funny is the word Rachel will use. I can’t imagine her being thrilled at her kid brother hanging out with her friend. And if she knew where my intentions lay, well, that could get ugly. But Jenna knows my sister better than I do, so I go with it.

She leans in, wrapping an arm around me, and raises her phone. Even sitting chastely next to her, the smell of Jenna Sharpe is delicious—like the inviting, yeasty pull of fresh bread from a Subway store. Up close like this, the need to have her, to taste her, is overwhelming and I’m drawn into that warmth.

With a start, I straighten. Christ. I need to kick these eating metaphors to touch. They’re leading in a very dangerous direction. I need to stop before the lustful images in my mind spill onto my face for all the world to see. Well, for my sister anyway, and that would be almost as bad.

I crack a goofy grin. I can’t help it. The crazy whirl of emotions twisting my face makes me look like a right dick in the picture. Part nerves at Rachel seeing this, part

triumph at my arm around Jenna's shoulder.

The photo vanishes through the ether on Snapchat. Pretty sure that's the one that disappears after a time. A shame. If things go south, I won't even have a souvenir to prove this moment happened. Or to cry over later.

"So, Geordie MacDonald," she says, grinning. "Who'd have guessed we'd find ourselves all grown up and back in Cluanie? Tell me, what have you been up to? I don't want to hurt your ego, but you haven't exactly been part of the conversation between Rachel and me."

I gather my thoughts. An opportunity here if I can string together a coherent answer. Maybe I can prove Jenna hasn't been saddled with a complete idiot for the next half-day on this bus. I'm keen to impress, but I'll take care not to overdo it. Jenna isn't drawn to blowhards. I saw the disdainful looks she threw Kyle's way.

"Rachel doesn't know the half of it anyway," I laugh. "Didn't want to worry her. Or Mum."

"Well, now you absolutely have to tell me. Come on Geordie. What trouble did you get yourself into? Thrown in jail maybe?"

I look her in the eye, saying nothing, while trying to keep my face neutral, but I can't help my mouth twitching in amusement. She's guessed right.

"What the hell, Geordie? Jail? Really?"

"In Brunei."

"My god, no wonder you didn't tell your family."

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. It was only for a couple of hours.”

I’m smiling as I tell the story, but at the time I was shit scared of ending up another foreigner languishing in an Asian jail for something he didn’t do.

“I’d parked my rental car—legally—at the junction of a T-intersection. This local woman came right through the stop sign. Ploughed into my car. I arrived back there at the same time as the police. Well, she said the accident was my fault—if I hadn’t parked the car there, she wouldn’t have hit it. So they took me away for questioning. It all got sorted out. Luckily.”

“Could have done with your lawyer sister there, perhaps?”

“Hell no. If Rachel had been there, I’d probably still be in jail. Her too, for abusing the police.”

“Probably,” she grins. We both know my sister is hot-headed. “So jail, huh? What else? Near-death experiences?”

“Not quite.”

“What do you mean ‘not quite’?” She gazes at me expectantly.

“OK, well, I did come a little bit too close for comfort to a crocodile last year.” Her eyes widen. “We were on shore leave in Darwin, and a few of the lads suggested we go for a round of golf. Pretty tame stuff you’d think, except in bloody Australia. We were having a nice round, just coming up to the eighth hole and there’s a greenkeeper waving his arms at us, and we’re like “What the fuck’s his problem? We paid our green fees” and keep walking towards the hole. Anyway, then he begins yelling at us, but we keep walking, thinking he’s just some crazy Aussie. Until he starts pointing at the little lake to one side. Well, there’s a croc lazing on the fairway, happily sunning

himself. One of the guys had hired a golf cart, and we'd been giving him a hard time, telling him he's a posh dickhead. We were sure glad of it then. So we all leapt in the cart, a couple of us dangling off the sides, and powered our way out of there. Didn't stop to worry about the greenkeeper. Guess he got out alive."

I go on to share more, a potted version of the last ten years. I've visited some remote places, met a wide slice of humanity, and built up a decent bank of entertaining stories from my time ashore in between the monotony of life on an offshore oil rig. Enough to hold Jenna's attention, often provoking her pretty smile and occasionally bubbling laughter.

"Life in Cluanie must be pretty tame by comparison. Not bored with it already?" she asks.

"No, there's enough to hold my interest." I catch Jenna's eye, and she seems to read the underlying message in my words. I see no sign of it disturbing her.

"How about you?" I ask. "Any stories to tell? I know a little of it, given your dad's name was in the papers every other week. And yours sometimes. "

She winces. Clearly feeding the media is one thing, but being in it is another. Probably best I don't reveal my week of internet stalking Jenna MacDonald. What started as an innocent Google search the morning after the party—coffee and painkillers in hand—has become a daily habit. I catch myself doing it on tea breaks. On the couch next to Mum and Dad in the evenings. It's moved past idle curiosity.

Jenna offers me a similarly condensed version of her life beyond Cluanie, leaving out of course, her near-marriage to that tosser, whose name I've found out is Adam. She gives me the lowdown on a couple of scandals—what really went on behind the scenes. The stuff people like her prevent from making it to the public.

“There’s not much call for sports PR in Cluanie,” she finishes, “but I can do that sort of work anywhere when it’s not tied to a team.”

“It’s going well?”

“Yeah, not bad. Better than I expected.”

Too modest by far. I heard her father talking to Grant Darby the other night. Two more high-profile rugby players signed with Jenna this week. While I hope her success only grows, I also hope that it doesn’t push her so high she’s completely out of my reach.

“I thought I’d see if I could get one or two clients of my own, while I’ve got this time away from the Highlanders, and now I’ve got eight.”

I only hear two words: ‘time away’ and my heart sinks. I thought Jenna had left the Highlanders for good, but ‘time away’ suggests she’s going back to the team. To Glasgow. Leaving Cluanie. There’s a sick, hollow feeling in my stomach. I’m sure I heard her correctly, but still I make myself check .

“Time away from the Highlanders?”

“Yeah,” she says. “They gave me a year’s leave. I’m meant to rejoin them in November. Not sure if I will, though. If my own business takes off, I might turn down the offer.”

I already wanted Jenna’s business to do well for her sake. Now I’m praying it does for mine.

My phone lights up, and I glance down at it. A text from my sister.

Rachel: What the fuck, Geordie?

My sister's in an extra grumpy mood this morning. What the hell have I done now?

Me: Good morning to you too, dear sister

Rachel: I saw the picture

Me: And your point is?

Rachel: I saw your face

Me: You have a problem with my face? You don't like my morning face? Have I developed resting bitch face overnight?

I can't resist winding her up some more. I wait for the explosion.

Rachel: I SAW THE WAY YOU WERE LOOKING AT HER

Me: ?????

Rachel: Please tell me you're not hitting on my friend Geordie MacDonald.

My full name. Now she's really pissed.

Me: What if she hits on me?

Rachel: In your dreams. She's not that stupid.

Me: Harsh

Rachel: Truth

And that's it. She goes silent, and it's just as well. Her words wound me more than she could ever know—because I've spent a week wrapped up in the possibility of Jenna .

I never wanted to come back to Cluanie. Even now, it was never intended to be permanent. But the sight of her on the stairs last Saturday night, the brief conversations, the chance to just be near her, like this—all have unlocked something inside me. I have no name for it, no clue why.

What I do know is, I'd endure a thousand lifetimes in my shithole hometown if I could spend just one of them with her. But, as my sister has so bluntly reminded me, women like Jenna don't waste their lives on guys like me. Even if she stays.

JENNA

As the unofficial, unpaid tour guide, I lead the trail of guys into our agreed lunch stop, a little pub on the outskirts of Stirling. Heads turn as we weave through the crowded dining room, curious diners lifting their gazes at the sight of one small woman leading a trail of large, brawny men. I ignore their stares out of long practice.

What I wouldn't give to read their minds. Do they see me as some odd female Pied Piper, charming men instead of rats or children? Or maybe a reverse harem story come to life? Both are so far from the truth. I can't even captivate one man, let alone a whole pack.

Out of habit, I choose a booth near the back for me and Dad. I've always tried to find him a quiet spot when we venture out in public. Not that he was anything other than generous with the fans, who waylaid him everywhere we went, but I made it my job to diminish that where possible, by carving out a rare moment of peace. He slides into the seat opposite me with a grunt. The set of his face tells me he's got something to say. From the frown and the glances across the room at Geordie, I can guess what it is.

"Don't start," I warn before he can open his mouth .

To be honest, I'm fed up with Dad's overprotective behaviour. Maybe because he was never there to chase off boys when I was a teen, from the moment my world and his overlapped once more, he's made up for lost time. I know it was an unwritten rule at the Highlanders: hands off coach's daughter. When a player chose to ignore it, all of us suffered. But this is different. Things have changed and damned if I'm going to

put up with that shit. I'm drawing a line in the sand. I will sit with whoever I bloody well want to.

"Of all of them, though..." he begins weakly.

I cut him off, disappointed at his preconceived notion that Geordie isn't worthy of my company. Cluanie is a small place. He'll have heard talk. Kenneth MacDonald, the town's lone solicitor, has never held back on sharing his low opinion of his son.

"Dad, I'm only sitting with him. Besides, thought you'd have a soft spot for the man who wears number six?" I quip, keeping it light, even though I really want to lose my shit with him.

Geordie plays in Dad's old position, blindside flanker. The best Scotland had ever seen, some said, when my father burst onto the international scene. Not that he got the chance to prove the point.

"But the man's dressed like a cowboy for chrissakes."

Once I got past my initial surprise at seeing Geordie in what he jokingly called his 'Texan tuxedo', I've decided it's kind of appealing. Give me a man in a nicely-cut plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up—my body has declared his strong forearms unquestionably sexy. Then there's the boots that give him an air of command, like he knows what he's about—also an undeniable turn-on for me—and I'm not complaining.

"Would you rather I cosied up to Kyle Stewart? "

From Dad's look of horror, he's just decided Geordie MacDonald isn't the worst option. Cocky Kyle would be any father's nightmare. That shuts him up. He studies the menu with forced intensity, and I do the same.

The truth is, Dad's hit a little too close to home. He doesn't know that since Geordie stormed back into my life a week ago, I can't get him off my mind. These past three hours in his company have zipped by in a blissful haze.

It's not just the intoxicating nearness of a nicely honed, fresh-smelling male body, or the shock of golden curls and blue eyes that dance when he talks to me. I like him. He's kind, funny, modest—all the things that pull me in like a starving bee to a great big sweet pot of honey. Guys like him are my crack. He's exactly the sort of man I'd be married to right now if things hadn't gone to shit six years ago with Adam.

Or maybe not. The things about me Adam couldn't live with—the non-negotiables that prevented him from taking those steps down the aisle; the awareness of my shortcomings he'd let simmer away beneath the surface; the qualities he saw in someone else but not me—they haven't changed...I'm still the same. Jilted bride or abandoned wife? Maybe the latter would have been worse.

At least there was no messy separation of shared assets and parasitic divorce lawyers leaching every last penny from me in my misery. When Adam bailed on me a week before our wedding, Dad took care of everything. He settled up the deposits on venues left unused; cancelled a string quartet for the ceremony, paying him their fee in full. Same with the band for the reception, who pocketed an eye-watering amount for music never played. When we forgot to cancel the flowers, he collected them himself and dropped them into the women's' refuge. He never complained about a single thing, just quietly made my humiliation go away.

He'd have been brilliant in PR, with his skilful handling of such a delicate situation with the least public damage. Thankfully, back then, although of interest as Razor's daughter, I wasn't so much in the media eye. It was like I woke up one morning and a whole part of my life had been erased. The nasty stain scrubbed away, leaving me good as new. Huh. As if.

Of course, some good came from the whole bruising debacle. Three months later the thought of facing a future with happily-married-to-her Adam in it, a wide gold band glaring at me from his left hand every day of my working life, spurred me to set my sights on the Highlanders job. It was for the best in the end. That's what I tell myself. Most of the time, I believe it.

I'm ambushed by images of what could have been sometimes. I shove them away, not letting all the 'if onlys' eat away at me. If only I had realised in time. If only he had given me a chance to change. Maybe I could have. I know it's unhealthy to dwell on these types of thoughts, so I only wallow in them when I'm really low.

If my friends ever found out, they'd tell me my inability to part with the exquisite three thousand pound wedding dress is definitely not healthy. They'd be wrong. I open my wardrobe and look at it often. It's crazy. It hurts, but there's a reason I keep it.

Every time my fingers glide over the lustrous satin skirt, and trace the lines of tiny pearls hand-stitched on the bodice, my heart breaks all over again. But that pain reminds me I feel . Deeply. It's a way of reassuring myself I'm not the cold, emotionless person Adam accused me of being. If I were, I wouldn't stand in my vast walk-in wardrobe and cry .

This week, I've revelled in Geordie's company because the other side of myself is all he sees. Not the ruthlessly efficient, single-minded, driven, and totally fearless business woman, but the softer, kinder side that Adam once loved and then made me doubt even existed.

Geordie sees other things too. The teenager who was kind to an annoying younger brother. The daughter who dropped everything to be with her dying mother. The woman who put her high-powered career on hold to support her father. The motherless child still grieving. The loyal friend to his sister. The older mentor

prepared to give a young girl a hand up.

In his own inherent goodness, Geordie recognises the goodness in me and it's addictive. A nice guy like him actually likes a girl like me. A nice guy like him wants to spend time with me. It's the first time I've felt that way in years, and I want more.

Which is why, as we head for the bus, I seek him out. I'm desperate he doesn't abandon me for his mate Nathan, the friendly Kiwi bloke, or Brodie with whom he goes way back.

"Wanna listen to some music on the next leg?" I offer, hoping to encourage him back into our shared seat. "Downloaded the new Stellar Riot album yesterday. Haven't played it yet." His eyes light up and I hope it's more than the prospect of the music. I want to believe he's pleased I've given him permission to join me. "If you don't mind sharing." I dangle my earbuds. An uncharacteristic shyness grips me. Please let him say yes.

"Thanks," he says. My breath rushes out. "Didn't know it was out. You know I drove my American roommates mad with the last one on endless repeat," he adds with a grin. "I mean, come on, they deserved to hear a decent British band. "

We like the same music. It feels like the universe just scrawled another big tick beside Geordie's name on the list of guys that have caught my interest lately. Never mind that it's the only name on the list.

I slide into the seat, enjoying the feel of his large body tucking in beside me, and the brush of those long fingers as he accepts the ear bud. Soon we share twin smiles of delight at the pulsating music feeding directly into our heads. The y-shaped wire tying us together coaxes my smile even wider. It mirrors the invisible bond I feel growing stronger as the miles roll by.

At the hotel, I reluctantly hand Geordie over to his brother from another motherland, Nathan Wilder. It makes sense these two would pair up—the laid-back Kiwi boy shares Geordie’s easy-going approach to life and ever-present grin. They’ll make a formidable pairing on the field as they manage the almost living, breathing beast that is a rucking rugby pack between them. They’ll be perfect roommates tonight, too.

This pre-season social trip is a good chance to test hotel room combinations for the odd away game. Dad’s already paired up with the Club President Grant Darby, who was waiting for us, after driving down yesterday for a work meeting. They’ve disappeared into the bar and I leave them to it, while I herd the guys to their rooms.

Getting the right match ups is important. Although I haven’t spent the time with these players I’d normally have with a pro team—and working out compatible roommates wasn’t my job at the Highlanders—I know what’s needed. A bit of local knowledge has come in handy, and I think I’ve set up sleeping arrangements that will keep the peace.

If it weren’t for the embarrassment of making the request, I’m sure Geordie and Nathan would have come to me, like two small boys on school camp, asking to room together.

Connor, as captain—and quite frankly, the most sensible one of the lot of them—is a natural choice to keep an eye on young Brandon. Not that I’m worried the guy will get drunk and do the dirty on Skylar. He seems a good kid, and he’s besotted with her. It’s a useful situation, really—Skylar binding him to Cluanie—because he’s the team’s secret weapon. Until we reveal him at our first pre-season friendly next weekend. A fullback with a deadly accurate boot and I’d bet a hundred pounds he’ll be the first points-scorer of the season.

Fleet-footed Brodie, and quiet Fraser Sinclair—who apparently transforms into a beast when he ties on his boots—are another natural pairing. Along with Connor,

they'll ground the team with their elder statesman status, having played for Cluanie since they were five-year-olds.

Kyle Stewart saunters past, an arm clapped around the shoulder of another younger player. For his roommate, I picked someone steady, despite his age, and I'm trusting Dad's judgment on this one. He swears Kyle is a reformed character from the teenage boy I knew. Not enough to trust him near me, of course, but according to Dad, his time in the army in the hellhole of Afghanistan, and then a stint in close personal protection, has shaped Kyle into a new man.

That's just as well on two counts. Firstly, it wouldn't do for Cluanie if he tarnished the friendly, helpful reputation of the local coppers with his antics. Second, the younger men in the team thrive on good mentors.

Dad's nuanced understanding of the dynamics of team culture comes from keen observation and subtle manoeuvring of people on and off the field. That's what makes his teams into champions. He's rarely wrong about his players, and I'd hate Kyle to stuff this up. Having Razor Sharpe show faith in a man is a precious gift, one I hope Kyle doesn't throw back in his face.

A helpful porter hovers, eying my compact bag with surprise. I've learned how to travel light.

"Thanks, I'll be fine," I say as he reaches for it. "Front bar, four o'clock," I call to the guys assembled in a scrum by the elevator. I'll dish out tickets there before we set off en masse towards the hallowed ground of Murrayfield. It's a bit of a walk, but the brisk air will be a welcome refresher on the way back tonight.

"Got it, m'am." Kyle snaps off a sharp salute with a grin.

The others laughingly mimic him, and I can't help but smirk back. They're good

guys, these men of Cluanie, perhaps even Kyle.

I turn and head for the opposite bank of elevators that will take me to my lonely room in the left wing. In my other life, I'd be in that huddle, my room close enough to the team in case I was needed. There's been more than one night I've sat in a hotel room, clothes dragged on in a hurry, a veneer of professionalism pulled over a still sleep-weary body. It's incredible how the threat to a player's reputation, or the team's, can ignite the brain to suggest solutions, even if it's two a.m.

Tonight, there'll be none of that. I'm just the travel agent. I drag my little carry-on case behind me across the marble foyer, the clatter of plastic wheels my only companion, while the group of men opposite trade happy banter.

Tonight I'll sleep uninterrupted. A simple fact that emphasises how much my life has changed. Jenna Sharpe, the professional, isn't needed by this team, my talents in wrangling the media redundant.

Tomorrow I'll wake up alone. Another simple fact that shows in some ways nothing has changed at all. There's no one here who needs Jenna Sharpe, the woman, either.

JENNA

I stand on the carpeted steps at the side entrance of the cosy bar area, arms extended, doing a fair imitation of Edward Scissorhands. In each hand, I clutch a fan of tickets for tonight's match. If Dad had got his act together and outlined the full details of this team-bonding scheme a bit earlier, I could have purchased a nice neat block of seats right on the halfway line. Instead, we've been left with the rats and mice, two here and three there—the only ones I could get and still seat all of us in our preferred area of the main stand.

Pairing everyone up for the hotel rooms was simple. But sorting twenty-five people into a crazy patchwork quilt seating plan seemed a logistical nightmare that I really didn't need to face. Dad agreed, saying that, in fact, a random seat assignment would work well. Rather than placing the guys in their usual social groupings, this lucky dip might forge new connections between players.

I have to admit it's a good idea, and the guys seem open to it. I haven't heard any grumbling. The novelty appeals. Of course it would. I've learned that often, by treating men like the eager little boys that still lurk beneath their adult bravado, I can get them onside with whatever is needed. What kid doesn't like a lucky dip? They press forward, snatching them from my hands and then wave them around, trying to work out with whom they'll spend the next few hours, amongst their raucous laughter and winding each other up.

Earlier, I picked out two tickets for side-by-side seats, and set them aside for Dad and Grant. So once the rest of the team has taken theirs, I'm left with just one—mine. I hope it matches with Geordie, but I'm not trusting the universe to send him my way.

After all, she's been fairly generous with him so far.

I also hope it's anyone but Kyle. I may be judging him unfairly, but I'm pretty sure I won't enjoy the thrill of the match as much with his presence at my side. I'm quite adult enough to cope with guys from my past popping up in my life (Adam excepted), but I haven't quite moved on from the small rush of shame that nipped at me when I first saw Kyle at the party.

I cringe at the memory of us, aged seventeen, having messy, awkward sex in his bedroom while his parents watched television downstairs—two fumbling teenagers experimenting with interesting possibilities for mutual pleasure from their blooming bodies. I don't think I've forgiven him for how quickly he found another girl to join him under the patchwork bedspread his granny made him. Yes, I'd rather not spend two hours elbow to elbow with Kyle.

Brandon Smith saunters towards me with a smile. His kind eyes, blue-grey and soulful, remind me of a younger Geordie—another thoroughly decent young man. Although protective of Skylar, he respects her, showing sensitivity to her needs with a maturity most guys his age lack. She's a lucky girl to have met a nice lad like him so young, and to know he's prepared to stick around Cluanie for her. He waves his ticket at me .

"Looks like I get to sit with the boss lady," he says, with a wink, then drops his head a little shyly, as if unsure he should really joke with me like that.

I loop my arm through his and laugh reassuringly. This kid is cute.

"Looks like you do. And it also means I'll be able to tell Skylar, hand on heart, that I personally kept you out of trouble. I'm not sure I could stick with 'what happens on tour, stays on tour' where she's concerned," I warn.

He actually giggles, which only endears him to me even more. As Skylar is dog-sitting Andy for us—not many possible candidates for that job—the least I can do is boyfriend-sit for her. We stroll from the bar, prepared for a big night.

Inside the stadium, the air crackles with anticipation. It's early in the year for an international test match, and although the evening is cool, at least it's not threatening snow like the last time I sat in these seats. Fortified with cartons of steaming hot chips and cold cups of beer, Brandon locates our row and I follow him in. While not seated next to Geordie, he's one row back and a few along, perhaps offering the chance of conversation.

We are reasonably early for the game, but even so, our seats are the only ones not yet filled in the row. The seated spectators all stand, smile, offer greetings and politely allow Brandon and me to pass. Except for one, and I inwardly groan as I realise the man sitting staunch and unmoving is my neighbour for the next couple of hours. I struggle past him into my seat.

“Hi,” I say. “I'm Jenna. Good night for it, eh?”

This is the normal social expectation at the game; while you're not aiming to become instant best friends, there's always a small connection established, acknowledging our shared reason for being here. The wiry older man grunts what might be a word, or could simply be a huff of disdain. He barely takes his eyes off the pre-match entertainment.

On the pitch, three kilted drummers in leather jerkins wield drumsticks like Viking axes, the vibration of each beat resonating through the stadium. Two pipers stride from side to side, lungs blasting into their wailing instruments. Their pounding fusion of traditional Scottish music and hard rock is invigorating. However, I sense the man isn't so much transfixed by the sound, but intent on ignoring me. His wife leans around him.

“I’m Nora and this is my husband Duncan,” she says, with a timid smile.

I smile back, trying to offer her encouragement, or perhaps courage. After all, I only have to sit with the man for the duration of the game. She’s got to go home with him afterwards.

For someone who is about to witness what will no doubt be a spectacular contest, he seems in a foul mood. He snaps at his wife when, after glancing at our food, she suggests they get some, berating her for not thinking of it before they sat down.

She meekly trundles off anyway and returns laden. None of it pleases him. The chips are too hot, the burger cold, and when he enquires as to the cost, he growls about ‘daylight robbery’.

I feel the bright edge of my excitement for the game slowly wearing off with every utterance from his snarling mouth. I pray for the match to start, hoping it will divert his attention from everything he perceives is wrong with the situation—a truly long list of mostly minor irritations magnified through the angry lens with which he views the world .

I try to keep upbeat, talking with Brandon but scared to invoke the wrath of this bear with a sore butt next to me by calling over him to Geordie, who’s only a few along to my left. Just as the pre-game entertainment ends, signalling the teams are due to appear from the players’ tunnel soon, it gets worse.

Directly behind us is a father with three young boys. They are beyond excited at the game. From their chatter, I’ve heard this is the first time they’ve been to a big match. While they’re all wiggle bums, the oldest really cannot sit still. He reminds me of my friend Carla’s son, Noah, a spirited and thoroughly delightful little boy who wears his ADHD diagnosis for all to see. He’s like a perpetual motion machine, and this child is the same.

The gap between one row and the next is narrow, and the child's bouncing body and jiggling legs frequently collide with the seats in front. Mr Grumpy is bearing the brunt of this. His face contorts as colour rises in his cheeks and eventually he can take no more. He turns to the father, who's been doing his best to calm the kid. The dad has offered to swap seats with his son, or change him for one of his brothers, but the boy is reluctant; he insists he's got the best view, and he's not giving it up without a fight. Wisely, his father hasn't looked for one, but now Mr Grumpy is bringing it, anyway.

"Do something about your bloody kid, or I'll come up there and do it for you," he spits. "I didn't pay a hundred and fifty pounds to put up with that all night."

The father looks stunned; the boys scared. We all wait, unsure. And then, from the corner of my eye, I see Geordie rise to his feet. No, no, no Geordie. This man is a ball of tightly wound anger, totally disproportionate to the situation. I'm not sure how Duncan expects anyone to resolve it, but he doesn't appear in any mood to accept a peacemaker. Not even Geordie's special brand of sunshine seems an antidote for the black cloud hanging over angry Duncan.

Geordie steps past Nora, leaning in close to the man and I wince, noting he's within punching range—this guy looks like he wouldn't hesitate to hit someone. Their conversation is muted by the blare of speakers drifting upwards from the field. However, I see the man's shoulders almost instantly relax, and he's soon nodding as Geordie gestures back along the row to where he's just come from. He arrives back at his seat exchanging quick words to a concerned-looking Fraser Sinclair, who is following the events with interest. Mild-mannered Fraser is aggressive on the field, but I doubt he'd have the mongrel to bring to a fight; and let's face it, neither of these guys are the type to get into a punch-up at the rugby, or hit an older man, even if he is an obnoxious dickhead, and even if he took a swing first. Fraser just nods and gathers his beer.

Within minutes, the problem is resolved, and I am in a daze at my good fortune. Duncan and Nora are in Geordie and Fraser's seats, and Geordie and Fraser are in theirs. The game is about to begin and I get to share it with him.

"Good chips," he says, cramming one he's stolen from my punnet into his mouth with a grin.

"Hey," I say. "Leave some for me. That's my dinner."

"No, it's not. I'll buy you dinner at half-time, OK? Hot-dogs or if you're really lucky I might even stretch to a burger."

"Thanks for sorting out that horrible man," I say. With this one small action, he's saved the night.

"Aw, well," he says. "Felt sorry for the kid. That was me at that age. Couldn't sit still for a moment. Drove everyone nuts."

"Yeah, you kind of did," I laugh. He was an active child.

A swallow works down his throat. "Lots of dyslexic kids have other challenges too. I was one of them."

Dyslexic. I'd never heard that before about him, but it explains a lot. I know from Rachel how Geordie struggled his way through school. The stark contrast between his failing grades and her own exemplary record provoked tension in the family.

"But," he says a little too brightly, "overactive kids sometimes grow into half decent rugby players. Besides," he says, diverting the conversation, "the guy was acting like an arsehole, but he's got his reasons."

I raise a brow, curious about what could possibly justify such bad behaviour.

“See his hand.” I follow Geordie’s gaze. I hadn’t noticed the small plastic tube taped to the top of his hand. It’s the catheter of an IV line embedded there. “His wife filled me in as we swapped seats. He’s just come from the hospital. Demanded she break him out. Didn’t want to miss the game. Apparently, the doctors aren’t sure what’s wrong yet. Running tests. So he’s scared. It doesn’t excuse his behaviour, but I get it.”

I get it too. I nod, and turn my eyes back to the field, where movement below us and a roar from the crowd announce the players.

I catch my breath, senses overloading—not from the game, but from him. I’ve watched countless matches, but I’ve never experienced this intense tingling in my veins. It’s nothing to do with the game. I admit it to myself. I’m hopelessly attracted to my best friend’s little brother, and he’s right here, his warm, shiny presence wrapping around me as the sun goes down on Murrayfield and the temperature plummets .

It’s as if the whole ugly situation of earlier never happened. I’m convinced the universe is on my side. Seeing my need to soak up as much of this man as possible, she has engineered the opportunity to do so in a most unexpected way. I’m definitely not complaining. I’d endure a hundred Mr Grumpys for a snippet of time with one Geordie.

Even through our heavy jackets, I’m aware of the heat of his shoulder against mine. I imagine my hands running along the curve of it, tracing his neck, plunging my hands into that nest of curls that peek out of his shirt.

I drag my attention back to the field, joining the enthusiastic applause for our team. The men amble into line, ready for the anthem. A young woman steps onto the

podium. The skirts of her tartan dress, a stylish modern version of a traditional costume ripple in the slight breeze. The familiar first bars of “Flower of Scotland” drift from the speakers, and with a smile and a slight toss of her mane of red hair, she begins. Her voice is high and as pure as a breath of Highland air. The crowd joins in and in my chest a tug of pride mingles with the melancholy this song inspires in every Scot. We sing in memory of our ancestors defeated in battle while below a group of young men gather to engage in a fortunately more benign tussle with a less formidable opponent than a red-coated English army.

Geordie and I blend our voices with the crowd. His is deep and tuneful and I smile, although the prickle of emotion from this song always prompts tears. I’m captivated by the sight of him, the light of the floodlights glinting off his hair like a halo. There is something beautiful and magical about Geordie that keeps drawing my eyes towards him .

A camera pans around the stadium, capturing the singing crowd. I trail its progress on the big screen opposite. It zooms in on a row and suddenly we realise it’s us. We lean in close, laughing and offering an exuberant wave to the world. We look so good together, his blonde curls brushing my dark hair. Just for a moment, I’m disappointed the American kiss-cam isn’t a thing here. Right now, I’d happily kiss Geordie MacDonald on international television for the whole damn world to see.

GEORDIE

I'm lit up with a blaze of energy as we thread our way back through the streets towards the hotel. It takes all my control to amble along normally with the group, Jenna at my side. As she stretches a hand to point at the Saltire flying proudly above Edinburgh castle, in defiance of the Scottish loss, loose strands of dark hair under her Scotland beanie brush my neck. God, my hands long to feel their way into its shiny depths. Her cheeks are flushed pink with the cold and I'd happily offer my mouth to warm those rosy bowed lips.

Everything inside me hums with the need to break into some sort of victory dance, or leap around like an unruly golden retriever, simply because for now she's all mine.

The small detail that our team took a hiding at the hands of the All Blacks pales beside the rest of the evening's events. I spent two hours tucked in close to Jenna, our breaths mingling in clouds; our voices, one moment screaming encouragement in unison at a runaway Scottish try, the next united in some enthusiastic booing when the dodgy French referee dished out an unfair yellow card to our team captain .

We joked around with the kids behind us, who think I'm the best person they've ever met for bringing them back hotdogs at half time. Even grumpy old Duncan and his wife joined in a bit of banter. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun, or felt so happy, or sensed the total rightness of a situation. I hope she sensed it too.

If her constant upward curve of lips, the sparkle in her eyes, and her hand casually buried deep in my jacket pocket—its warm pressure a welcome sensation against my hip as we stroll back through the streets—are any evidence, she may well have.

However, my light-hearted mood falters just short of the hotel. Two young women catch sight of Jenna, and make a beeline for her, waving wildly, their faces lit in wide smiles.

“Jenna! Oh my god, it’s so good to see you.” The woman with a cascade of blonde hair beneath a Highlanders beanie clasps Jenna to her, although I notice Jenna return the hug half-heartedly.

“It’s good to see you too, Amber.”

“You remember my friend, Tilly?”

“Yes, from the opening night of that new club in Argyle Street.” Jenna offers a polite smile to the other woman.

“God, that feels like a lifetime ago,” Amber gushes. “So, I just have to tell you how much we all miss you. Really,” she sighs with a roll of her eyes, “Jamie Sanderson was so not ready to step into your shoes. Roll on November I say.”

She squeezes Jenna’s hand as my heart plummets at the reminder—in three months Jenna will be gone from Cluanie and gone from my life. Unless something makes her change her mind, she’ll be back in Glasgow, back at the Highlanders. I’d like to think that something could be a someone—me, but I’m not foolish enough to believe I alone could compete with the future she’s built for herself there. Still, the thought of letting her walk away without even trying leaves a hollowness I can’t bear. Maybe I’m not enough reason to stay, but I might be enough reason to wonder what she’d be leaving behind. And for now, that sliver of possibility is all I have to hold on to.

Back at the hotel, we merge into the crowded bar. Surrounded by my friends, I’m knocking back the final drops of my first warming slug of alcohol when I realise Jenna is gone. One moment she’s laughing with Connor on my right, while Brodie

corners me to whinge about the disallowed try right on half-time. The next, when I turn back, having tossed in my own share of dissatisfaction at the TMO's decision, Jenna has disappeared.

Back in the big group, she's slipped away from me, and my doubts return. That's me, Geordie MacDonald, great for a bit of fun, but not for a serious relationship. Fine for a brief fling, but not someone you'd attach your life to. Insane as it seems, I think we'd have a chance, she and I, a life together, a good life, if only we could somehow take that first step.

There must be a couple of hundred of us in this room, shoulder to shoulder, doing what Scots do best in defeat: relive the battle in blow-by-blow detail, bolster each other's hopes that next time victory will be ours, and drink.

In the bar pre-match, and during the game, a cool lager matched my thirst. Now there is no question of choosing anything other than a dram of whisky. My face is flushed with the warm buzz as I finish my second and I'm tempted to reject the idea of a third. While deliberating over the wisdom of more alcohol, I scan the room, pretending it's just a casual surveillance of the crowd.

Of course I'm looking for her. There's no sign of Jenna in the crush, and I worry if she's OK in this group of men. Most appear harmless enough, but there's always one or two who you wouldn't want near your wife or girlfriend—or the woman you're crazy about. Although I have this strange urge to protect her nagging at me, I know it's stupid. Jenna can hold her own in any crowd. She doesn't need me to save her. Not that it stops me wanting to.

I'm jostled out of my thoughts by Nathan at my elbow. He's slightly drunk and louder than I've ever heard him. A group of Kiwi supporters are giving him a hard time, reminding him the score tonight shows how unwise it is to have switched allegiance away from the country of his birth, but it's all good-natured. He tells me

New Zealand is a lot like Scotland—except with better weather—and I think the people are a lot like us too. When it comes to sports, we might be bitter rivals on the field, but off it the friendly banter flows as freely as the booze.

I keep one ear on the conversation, dropping in a small barb here, responding to a bit of winding up from the Kiwis there, but my eyes and mind are elsewhere. I'm still looking for Jenna.

When at last I see her, she's at the bar, three back in the queue. Any half decent man would make way for her. I feel like striding over and pushing them aside, easing the way through. However, Jenna's not the sort to want a knight in shining armour, especially here where she doesn't need rescuing. She's navigated nights like this many times. She doesn't need my help.

Again I wonder—what does she need from me? She's grateful for my skills as an electrician. She enjoys my company. I know she appreciated my handling of what could have been an unpleasant blot on tonight's fun with grumpy Duncan. I like to think she got to see my maturity and the way I have with people, old or young. Nora, poor old Duncan's long-suffering wife and that young single dad, coping with three lively lads—they all know I'm a good guy, and I think Jenna knows it too. But I'm not sure she sees me as anything more than an amiable rugby-watching companion.

Aside from the fact her father might kill me, other things stand between us. My past relationship to her, as a surrogate kid brother, for a start. I'm baffled by how to take the steps necessary to get us out of that territory, because right now, thoughts of anything more may well feel almost incestuous to her. In that case, the kind of move I'd like to make would be repellent.

Even if she doesn't see our current relationship as that of family, it's still looking dangerously like it might get stuck in the friend zone. I'm not sure how to get out of that either. I've never had a friendship with a woman. I've lived in a world dominated

by men for so long. Sure, there were a few women on the rigs, but I tended to steer clear of them, a wise precaution when we all lived in close proximity and there was no easy escape if things went wrong.

Having Jenna as my friend would be a rare gift, and one I'd be happy to share with my sister; but I already know it would never be enough. Watching her pair up with some other guy, having to support her choice to play happy families with someone else—I haven't got the strength to live through that.

So, somehow, I have to take action, but discovering just what to do and when to do it is more challenging than if someone handed me a copy of *War and Peace* and told me to read it and write a book review. More frightening than dealing with the twin spectres of Rachel MacDonald and Robbie Sharpe, hovering menacingly at my shoulder, whispering all the ways they're going to hurt me if I hurt Jenna.

Nathan breaks away from his post-mortem of the game with the triumphant All Blacks supporters, and nudges me hard.

"So, Geordie, my man, we may have lost the game, but at least you scored a win tonight."

He wraps a floppy arm around my shoulder and slurs his words. The smell of whisky wafts across. I'm glad I've paced myself, thinking it's wise to keep my wits about me. I can't guarantee I wouldn't do or say something stupid or clumsy in front of Jenna, with too much alcohol on board. While it might give me a shot of courage, it could also leave me depressed and wallowing in my doubts. It has that effect on me sometimes. But Nathan's got nothing to lose. He not only loves to make whisky, he loves to drink it.

"You could call it that," I say. "Not sure time spent in my company has convinced her, though."

“Come on Geordie, the woman thinks you’re adorable. She looks at you like she’s looking at a cute puppy.”

I wince. These words are not the reassurance I’m looking for.

“I was hoping for a bit more than a pat on the head and her telling me I’m a good boy.”

His laughter bursts out across the room, and heads turn. Quiet Nathan transforms into a raucous drunk, but anyone can see he’s of the friendly variety.

“Looks like she might need you to be more pit bull than Labrador right this minute.”

He inclines his head towards where Jenna is now leaning on the bar, waiting patiently for a server to acknowledge her .

The sight of a man draped across her extinguishes all my earlier warm, charitable thoughts about our Kiwi brothers. He’s distinctive by his size and his All Blacks supporters jersey. I see her shake him off, but his arm returns. I burn with rage that he should touch her, and then make matters worse by continuing to do so when she’s made it clear his attention is unwanted.

I’m moving in his direction, but Nathan’s arm shoots out in front of me.

“Down boy,” he says. “She’s got this.”

And she has. With narrowed eyes and a defiant shrug, she flicks him off. Words fly from her mouth. I can’t read her lips, but I can see from the expression on the jerk’s face that she’s put him in his place. He sensibly edges away from her. She turns back to the bar, presses her card to the machine, scoops up two drinks and makes her way to a booth on the far side of the room where her father and Grant Darby are still deep

in conversation. She places the drinks in front of them with a smile as if nothing's happened. In her mind, it hasn't. It's just me who is all riled up and still considering finding that asshole in the crowd and smacking him in the face. Only knowing how unimpressed she'd be stops me.

I watch her stroll out in the direction of the sign that says 'Toilets'. Seeing her casual confidence and quiet competence in every situation reminds me once again: Jenna has her life well under control—why the hell would she want me in it?

JENNA

I'm still fuming as I scrub my hands under the stream of water. After all this time, nothing's changed. Here I am, still the same woman staring back from the bathroom mirror, still getting hit on by jerks in bars. My confidence in my appearance—my unlined face, healthy skin, and curvy body—deflates with each unwanted advance.

Although drunks aren't especially picky. On nights like this, any unaccompanied woman is fair game, a magnet for unwanted attention. Me. I'm pretty enough to catch their eye, but not so pretty they consider I'm out of their league.

It's not that I'm incapable of handling them, or that I want someone to rush in and rescue me. I just wish I was one of those other women in the bar, with a steady man alongside, projecting the silent 'hands-off' message by his presence alone.

I wouldn't admit these thoughts out loud to anybody. Definitely not to another woman. Particularly not a younger one like Skylar. I want her to walk with her head high and the ability to tell a guy to fuck off in no uncertain terms. Perhaps my words are less coarse, but they're equally cutting, and usually prove an effective weapon, although at my age, wielding it has become exhausting.

As I leave the sanctuary of the ladies' loos, I decide not to go back to the bar. From down the hallway in the opposite direction, the distant sound of a piano lures me with the promise of a more gentle world, oblivious to the rowdy aftermath of a rugby match. The rippling notes are a comforting caress reaching out from the past, as if knowing how much I need a little soothing in this jarring present. I instinctively turn towards the melody.

In front of me, the door to the men's toilets opens and a tall familiar form spills out into the passageway, instantly recognisable by his shock of dirty blonde hair. Kyle's face lights up as he sees me.

"Jenna," he says. "Where've you been hiding all evening?"

"As far away from you as possible," I spit.

The words are undeserved, but Kyle has caught me in the wrong mood to play flirty games. I move to step around him and he blocks me. I attempt a sidestep, but he's anticipated this as neatly as he would the evasive footwork of a player on the field. He rests one arm against the wall, blocking my escape and effectively caging me.

"Piss off, Stewart," I hiss, descending to his level with my language.

"Aww, Jen, don't be like that." His face crumples, hurt rising in those hazel eyes. Oh, he's good, this guy, turning it on to make me feel bad for standing up for myself. "Not the way to treat an old friend."

"Don't call me Jen. You weren't my friend then, and I definitely don't want you for one now." He's picked the wrong time and the wrong person for this shit.

He recoils, stepping away from me, arms raised in surrender.

"Sorry, Jenna," he says. I raise a brow, my mouth falling open a little in disbelief at this unexpected apology. "I mean it. I am sorry."

His voice is quiet, actually apologetic. He studies me with an odd intensity, and his expression softens further. I'm not sure I've ever seen Kyle wear anything but the cocky arrogance of a man with a big ego—until now.

“Okay, okay,” he says, taking another step back, increasing the distance between us. “I’ll go. You don’t want me around. I see that. And I understand.”

But he doesn’t leave. He scrubs at his neck and shuffles uncomfortably, his lips drawn in a tense line. He takes a deep, deliberate breath.

“But you should know, Jenna, I’m not proud of the way I was as a teenager. I get it that people who knew me then might want nothing to do with me. And I am sorry. I treated you badly. Not just you. Pretty much everyone. I can’t change the things I did. All I can do is assure you I learned from them. The man you see now isn’t the kid I was back then.”

Innocent eyes meet mine as he runs one hand through the sweep of blonde hair that falls in a perfect curve across his strong brows. In any other situation, the gesture might seem calculated, a sexy ploy to weaken a girl’s defences. An invitation to come upstairs and tangle your fingers in those ‘come play with me’ locks, preferably while he’s got his dick inside you. But now, as he huffs out a resigned sigh, I sense only frustration—with himself.

Giving me a wide berth, he heads for the cacophony of conversation spilling from the bar. As he leaves, his big feet drag a little, not his usual confident strut, and I sense possible truth in his claims. There is an undeniable difference in Kyle. His words alone show a self-knowledge I’d always assumed beyond him. I’d never have predicted he would develop even a shred of empathy for the string of girls he chewed up and spat out after a quick taste. Perhaps he has.

These bewildering moments have thrown me off-balance. One minute, a stranger approaches me with tiresome disrespect; the next, someone I’d least expect shows genuine remorse for discarding me years ago.

How is it Kyle, notorious for using women, sees I can be hurt? While Adam, voted

‘Mr Nice Guy’ by everyone who knew us, couldn’t grasp the damage his leaving would cause. Perhaps his blasé attitude was his way of living with the guilt. Even so, I can’t forgive Adam for what he did, but in some strange way, I think I may have already forgiven Kyle.

The piano player has moved on to a new tune, one I should know—I’ve heard my mother play it—but the name eludes me. Mechanically, I move towards the music, overtaken by a desperate need to solve the mystery, hoping if I observe the movement of hands on keys, it will jog my memory.

I’m also reluctant to rejoin the others. I’m flustered and far from in the mood for conversation. The piano bar offers a hideout where, over a gin, calmed by the music, I can process all that’s happened today; because I realise that it’s not just the drifting change in my feelings towards Kyle at work here. There’s Geordie to consider.

For a whole week now, I’ve tried to deny my attraction to Geordie MacDonald. Who am I kidding? I’m pleased the electrical work isn’t a quick fix and I’ll admit it—Geordie’s arrival these past few days has provided a welcome piece of eye candy. But not only that; inside that beautifully crafted exterior is a tempting soft centre .

Although I know the sneaky admiring glances haven’t all been one way—I felt the heat of his eyes on me—I didn’t want to read anything special into his appreciation of my looks. It’s what guys do, right? So, whenever my traitorous brain has suggested there might be anything beyond his tactful appraisal of my body, I’ve slapped it down hard; reminded myself I’m his sister’s friend, and there’s no way he’d ever think of me as anything more.

But from the moment he slid into the seat on the bus beside me this morning, I encountered a Geordie MacDonald who seemed determined to convince me otherwise. Sure, there was a tentativeness in those first couple of minutes, but still the immediate feeling he was flirting with me. And damned if I didn’t like it. A lot. My

response was instinctive. I flirted right back, and it grew from there.

Tonight was the most fun I think I've ever had at a rugby game; and there have been many over my lifetime. Sure, it's way more relaxing when you're at a match for pleasure and not work—no pressure to do anything except enjoy the game—but there was extra pleasure in Geordie's company: conversation, laughter, shared hugs of triumph and moans of despair over our team's changing fortunes. I want more of that company, more of him, and I don't think it's simply because I'm lonely, or have a man-shaped hole in my life. It's that Geordie fills that hole in a completely unexpected but perfect way.

The feelings that surface when I think of Geordie are like tingly effervescent bubbles rising tantalisingly in a glass of champagne. I've already had a sip, and he's sweet and delicious and refreshing. It's oh so tempting to spend some time with him, see where it goes, but I'm also worried what might happen if I give in to that temptation. Just like champagne, pour it in too eagerly, and it makes a mess .

I don't want to make another mess of things, and especially not with him. He deserves better, and I'm worried what Rachel will have to say if I do. She's my friend, but in her own stiff way, she loves her younger brother. There's always been an underlying protectiveness towards him, not surprising, given their father's attitude to his children, but especially his son. I suspect Rachel may be unimpressed at me hooking up with Geordie, but there's a strong possibility she'd be furious if it went pear-shaped.

The fact I'm attracted to Geordie—and I'd have to be stupid to not see he's attracted to me—is bold and confronting, even frightening, but it also holds an exciting possibility. That's even more reason to linger here a while before taking myself back into his orbit.

“What will it be, miss?” The bartender offers me a smile as I slide onto a high stool at

the bar.

JENNA

I'm not sure what's causing this melancholy cloud—this evening's confusing encounters, the nostalgic music reopening barely healing wounds, or the two gins I've downed; Rachel swears gin always makes her cry.

When the piano player finishes his last piece, an achingly beautiful melody, I raise my hands to applaud, then let them fall noiselessly with sudden awareness I'm the only one about to offer appreciation of his talent. In this room full of couples, focused on each other, his music simply sets the mood for a romantic rendezvous. The piano bar is a refuge for those intent on each other rather than the rugby that is the centre of my world. Sitting there, a lone woman amid all these loved-up pairs, only magnifies my sadness.

The pianist gathers his things and is gone, leaving the bar quickly, as if not wishing to linger for a second longer than he's been paid for. Without thinking, I clamber from the high stool and head for the vacant piano.

As a child, the instrument intrigued me. My mother's love for it was with me from my earliest conscious memories. The sound of her playing (always beautiful) and that of her students (a mixture of pleasure and pain to our ears) was the backdrop for my life until I left home for university at eighteen. Somehow, I thought I would always have her music to come home to. I took it for granted that whenever I returned, it would be there, waiting for me—that she'd always be there, waiting for me. I was wrong.

Seated on the stool, I rest tentative hands on the keys while my brain searches for

inspiration. I learned a little over the years. Like many children, I wanted to emulate my parents, but I chose to follow my father's obsession with sport rather than my mother's passion for the piano. In between the rough and tumble of the girl's rugby team, buried in the thick of practices and games, Mum passed on her love of music to me, but not the practical skill.

I fumble through a few bars of 'Für Elise', every beginner's go-to tune. My lack of innate talent is yet another reminder of how much I'm more like Dad. My mother's clever hands drew music effortlessly from the keys. Even those odd times, where I persevered for a few months to please her, accepting her gentle teaching and studiously practising every day, I still sucked. The piano didn't come naturally to me.

A hand brushes my shoulder, and I falter, turning ready to bark a warning at whatever stray man has dared to touch me. The harsh words die on my lips as Geordie slips onto the seat beside me.

"So, here you are," he says. "I saw that guy in the All Blacks jersey bothering you. And then you disappeared. I was worried."

Safe warmth washes through me. A decent man actually sought me out; someone who cared about where I was and how I was feeling. It is a night for surprises .

"Should have guessed you might be here." He runs a thumb softly across the keys. I shiver, imagining it grazing my lips—or other places.

"You still play?" I ask, trying to stabilise myself with conversation. "I know Rachel doesn't."

Her father's insistence his children learn piano is just one of many things she rebelled against the moment she left home.

He leans into me, his golden curls brushing my hair, his proximity stirring something deep in my centre.

“Now and then. I didn’t always love it when I was a kid. I mean, who wants to do anything just because your father says so. But it’s something I’m glad I learned. Besides, I wasn’t totally awful.” He lets out a low chuckle. “According to your mum, anyway. I don’t think she was just being nice. Anyway, go on; don’t let me stop you.”

I restart, my notes even more stilted under his scrutiny, until I hit the inevitable wrong key. I shrug in defeat and draw back my hands with a frustrated sigh, letting my fingers hang limp in my lap.

“Here, follow me.” He moves his long fingers to rest easily on the keys. “I remember she did this on my first lesson with her. I was only about six.”

It was a little trick Mum used with her smallest students. She’d let them ‘play’ with her, let them feel what it was like to pull music from those keys, and then she’d teach them how to do it for themselves.

“Yeah, she used to do the same with me.” My smile is bittersweet at the precious memory.

I lay my hands lightly across his. They’re warm but not soft—working hands, slightly roughened. A jolt of heat spreads through my core as I imagine them exploring my body. I’ve watched those hands at work, and from the way he so deftly handles the tools of his trade, I sense he’d be good at any use he applied them to. I also like the steady feel of them under mine, dependable, trustworthy.

Geordie begins to play. I let him carry me along as the music ripples effortlessly beneath us. There’s intimacy in our connection. I close my eyes, swaying with the gentle ebb and flow, the liquid notes flowing through him into me. We’re in a private

world, a place only the two of us can go. We are as unaware of the rest of the people in this room as they are of us. This simple tune, banged out by many wannabe pianists, becomes a thing of beauty, swirling around us and through us, and ending way too soon.

I smile up at him, our eyes mirroring mutual satisfaction. No one else shows their appreciation, but we don't need it. We're lost in each other's gaze, the moment and the memories entwining us in who we are and who we were.

It may be unexpected, but Geordie and I, we fit together with perfect ease. This knowledge cuts through the bullshit of earlier, the jerk in the bar, and Kyle. I let it go, and all that remains is the thrilling possibility that the boy I knew has grown into the man I need. The intensity of this revelation is overwhelming and I break away, already unsure and second-guessing myself.

"Can I buy the piano player a drink?" I steer the situation back into the realms of friendship while I try to process what's going on inside of me.

"You could probably persuade me." His slow grin unleashes small dimples. "If they've got a bottle of that poison Nathan concocts up at MacFarlane's. Don't tell him I said it—can't have him getting big-headed—but it's the best."

"Sure," I say, sliding off the piano stool, reluctant to abandon the nearness of him, but understanding it would be helpful to look at what's going on here when not tucked in against his hard body and magnetic warmth.

That resolve doesn't last. Soon we're huddled together in one of the booths, embraced in the hug of old leather and the happy glow of whisky. By unspoken agreement, we avoid the events of our reconnection this past week and reject the traditional rehash of tonight's game. Instead, we dive back into our shared past; summers by the loch and winter bonfires; carolling in the village, and first-footing at

Hogmanay.

“Do you remember the year they put up that enormous nativity scene at St Brigid’s?” he asks, his mouth tipping up in a lopsided smile.

“Yeah, the Catholics went all out trying to outdo the crib at St Andrew’s. And then there was a big fuss when someone stole Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus and left garden gnomes in their place...”

His eyes sparkle with boyish mischief.

“It was me,” he confesses.

“Seriously? Gnomegate was you? Oh my god Geordie, you nearly started a religious war between the two parishes.” We dissolve into cackles, and cop a glare from the guy at the next table whose thin-lipped wife rolls her eyes at us.

“What was that talent quest thing you and Rachel won?” I cringe that he’s bringing that up. Some things are best left in the past. This is one of them, but Geordie sees my uncomfortable look and decides he’s going there. “Cluanie Pop Idol, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I groan. Warm humiliation creeps up my cheeks, and I wish this soft leather cushion could simply swallow me up. “Yes, all right I admit it, I had shocking taste in music, but in my defence, I was only thirteen.” Back when I preferred bubblegum pop to the pounding rock or club music I listen to now. “I’m surprised you remember it.”

“Well, I did have to endure listening to you practise through my bedroom wall for weeks on end. At least you both could sing. And I probably thought S Club 7 was cool back then, too.”

As we revisit our younger days, I'm mesmerised by the deep voice and rumbling laugh that have replaced the soprano tones and childish giggle of those times.

It's part first date, the tingling excitement of our first true alone time, with no one watching, no one listening, and no concern about what an observer might make of this. Yet it also has the feel of an established couple on a date night, escaping the everyday world to reminisce.

I've never had this ease with any man. So much that doesn't need to be said. It's beguiling. There's a sense we've started way ahead of the game here. That, plus the pleasant glow of two whiskies on top of the gin, makes me brave enough to decide: I'm going to play the advantage and see where this leads.

"I think I'll call it a night."

I down the last smoky golden drops, though I could sit here all night, immersed in Geordie. We're the only ones left in the room apart from the bartender, who keeps glancing across to check if we're done. I have a sense we're done talking—with words, anyway.

His eyes meet mine and confirm it. I've tried to pretend I didn't see it, but it's been there all day. Maybe longer. But it's only today I've allowed myself to even think it. Geordie's attraction to me and mine for him drowns out all the voices that say we shouldn't do this. He searches my face, and the answer he seeks, my rampant desire, has to be written there. His eyes drop to my mouth, and his head leans towards me.

"I'll see you to your room, then." He rasps out the words, his voice thick and husky. He swallows and my eyes trace the bob of his Adam's apple, wanting to trail my fingers down his throat, into the curl of blonde chest hairs. I swallow hard as my brain offers up a clear picture of what I know lies beyond.

I've spent enough time in change rooms with bare-chested young men. I'm very aware of the curve of pectoral muscles, the bronze of nipples and the ripple of toned abdominals I'll find when I lift Geordie's navy Scotland rugby jersey. And it takes little effort to imagine the result of wrestling open that bulky western buckle and tugging the dark jeans away from his slim hips.

"Might be undesirables hanging around a hotel on a Saturday night," he adds.

There's also someone very desirable, if the heat blooming low down in my centre is anything to go by. Or the wetness between my legs.

When we get to the door of my room, Geordie shadowing me, I hover the swipe card, my hand trembling. I turn to face him and there's wanting written on his face, but also hesitancy. I know my body is attractive to men, and Geordie's a man who, although he's been discreet, has allowed his eyes to sweep across it many times tonight, just as he's doing now.

Is the slight waver his gentlemanly way? Or fears of what my father might do to him, or what Rachel might say? Or is it that like others before him, he's weighing if getting his hands on the outer packaging is worth accepting what lies inside ?

But Geordie is like a bright flame, drawing my hand towards its warmth with me beyond caring if I'm about to get burned. I do it anyway.

"Come in," I say softly, pushing the door wide.

GEORDIE

They talk about chemistry between people, but I think of it in terms of physics. It started with a tiny spark, charged glances between two almost strangers at the rugby field. Since then, with every look, every word, every brief careless touch, we've chipped away at the barriers of time, space, and history dividing us. Electricity follows the path of least resistance. What was a trickle of current between Jenna and me has built into bold, jagged forks of lightning arcing between us—thrilling yet dangerous, and about to light up the room.

Jenna closes the door and turns, but I'm there. I rest one arm against the frame, trapping her. Her eyes meet mine, liquid brown like melting chocolate. She should have a high voltage warning slapped across her, but I'd ignore it, anyway.

"I'm going to kiss you, Jenna. Is that OK?" My words are hushed, careful, as if I've unexpectedly cornered some exquisite wild creature, and with one too-loud word, one too-sudden move, it will escape .

She nods, a swallow rippling down that pale throat, her eyes fixated on my mouth. Mine twitches in anticipation, my lips pleading to unleash the restraint I've shown. I lick them, my tongue sweeping across, encouraging thoughts of the sweet places it seeks. God, I can't wait to taste her.

Much as I'm desperate for a hit of Jenna, like a new drug holding promise of some mind-blowing high unlike any I've experienced before, I'm not going to rush this. A need to savour the moment overpowers my aching physical desire, an urge to etch it into my brain, as if knowing the memory will be important not only today, but maybe

for the rest of my life.

I memorise the upturned face, a faint sunrise flush colouring her cheeks. The bowed lips, slightly parted, offer a glimpse of her pink tongue resting between them, asking to dance with mine.

The little creases that usually twinkle at the corners of her eyes, and the playful dimples bracketing her mouth, are absent. In between nervous blinks, serious brown eyes rove my face, as if she too, paused in one long breath, is recording every detail of this moment, in the colours of light and shadow surrounding us.

I cup her chin in my hand, the skin there so smooth and delicate. Following the silky curve, my fingers find their way behind her head, the sleek ribbons of her hair soft beneath them as I coax her forward, until warm lips meet mine. My other hand, resting on her waist, encourages her body to follow. It needs little encouragement as Jenna collapses into me; compliant, needy even.

Our mouths comply too, driven to explore. She tastes of smoke, as if the whisky hints of the fire igniting between us. A soft sound escapes her throat, a mewl, and I respond with a moan as she leans into me. I imagined this first kiss to be tender; hesitant, as we took one last look at the line between us, smudging at the edges cautiously, before completely erasing it.

It's a line not only of others' making—her father, my sister, those who would judge the age gap between us—but also one of our own. I sense Jenna found safety in that boundary, protection against possible hurt. God knows she's entitled to be wary after the damage done to her by her shitty ex. Maybe I felt safe on the other side too, without all my shortcomings under scrutiny; a barrier against my fear of rejection.

Now we knowingly step across the line and, free of its confines, everything changes. I tilt her head back, wanting to plunge deeper, wanting more. Our kisses become hard

and desperate, and possessive; lips and teeth and tongues clashing, breaths coming in frantic gasps. There's no finesse—only raw, desperate need.

She grabs at one hand and tugs it down, encouraging me to explore under the hem of her rugby jersey. There's nothing beneath but perfect heated skin, and I splay my fingers over her soft, smooth stomach, working across a surprising ripple of light muscle and up over ribs, finally cupping one heavy hand-filling breast.

She sighs into my mouth as I squeeze, trailing my thumb across the large erect nipple that's pushing against the lace of her bra, and I grunt out a sigh in return as it blossoms under my touch. I want to see it, taste it. I draw my hand down, bringing the other to Jenna's waist and attend to the task of removing her jersey.

I grasp at it, roughly tugging it upwards, desperate to unwrap this unexpected gift. Jenna helps me, raising her arms so I can pull the jersey up over her head. As I fling it to the floor, she steps back, head dipped a little, looking up at me from beneath shyly fluttering lashes as if unsure whether I'll approve .

How could I not? Jenna's body is so much more than my lustful brain could have ever imagined. She's slim-waisted, and broad-hipped, with skin that glows a sun-kissed honey. The shadowy valley of her cleavage only hinted at what lies beneath. Now ripe, luscious tits are revealed. They strain against their white lace cage, spilling over the edges. Generous but firmly rounded, they beg for my touch. The nipples, barely held in place, are bold, a dusky coffee colour with a halo of deep brown.

I lean in, burying my nose between her breasts, inhaling the scent of her skin. The fragrance of frangipani and exotic orchids, with an underlying hint of coconut, explodes in my nostrils. I drift on waves that transport me back to familiar memories of heated tropical nights.

And yet beneath it there's another smell, the unique warmth of Jenna, and I'm fully

aware that tonight I'm in a special paradise, a place I've never been before, somewhere where I might want to stay for a very long time.

Her arms wrap around my neck, hands clasped, their weight urging me down. My hands knead at her tits greedily as she hums her approval against my shoulder. I swivel my head across, taking one nipple in my mouth, at first circling my tongue in lazy strokes, then sucking hard, my mouth soaking the fabric, my teeth nipping. Not wanting to neglect the other of this beautiful pair, I turn my greedy attention to it, and Jenna throws her head back, neck arching with a breathy moan as I thrust the breast up to meet my hungry lips.

My hand snakes around her back, and despite fear my haste will make me clumsy, my fingers deftly unhook the clasp of her bra. I release her nipple from my mouth just long enough for the bra to tumble to the floor between us, freeing the two beauties who I'm far from finished with.

Little sighs of pleasure merge with squeaks of pain as I tantalise and punish in equal measure, delighting in the way she returns the attention. One moment her mouth is hard, sucking at the sensitive skin of my neck, bruising it with her demands, the next sharp neat teeth bite into my shoulder. My skin flames beneath her mouth. I imagine the tiny bruises forming—she's marking me as hers.

Jenna pauses for a moment, and I can almost hear her thoughts. I know I'm in trouble, when her hands rove downwards, tracing the line of my hip bones before busily fumbling at my belt. Frantic fingers work at the buttons of my jeans. My cock swells at every flickering touch, even though there's a layer of heavy denim and cotton boxer briefs between us. I feel her mouth morph into a smile against my collarbone as the fabric parts and her hand works its way under the waistband of my briefs to grip my length with a possessive pressure. She giggles.

“Think I've found what I need right here.”

I break away from my work, lifting my head to face her.

“And what exactly do you need?” I quirk a brow, my mouth falling into a lopsided smirk.

“This,” she says, squeezing my cock for emphasis. “I think it might like to come out and play.” She grins at me, her mouth pink and swollen from my bruising kisses.

This sexy siren woman, beckoning me in, is another side of Jenna I’ve never seen before, and it’s fucking blowing my mind. I want her so bad; but fuck, I need to know she wants it, too. Really wants it.

Much as I hate risking what promises to be the best sex of my life, I’d rather that than tainting Jenna with regret come morning. I’m playing the long game here. If I wanted a one-night stand with her, then fine, we’d just carry on; but I want a lot more than that. If patience is what’s required—even though I can’t imagine this hard-on disappearing for hours unless I get the chance to relieve it—then patient is what I’ll be.

“Are you sure?” It comes out a growl. My voice is not my own. “Say it Jenna.”

I need to hear it. I’m not taking another step towards this danger unless I’m sure she’s fully prepared to go there with me.

“I’m sure.”

Her eyes flicker up to mine, and in them I see that earlier unexpected shyness return, as if asking for what she wants isn’t familiar to her. It damn well is in her work life, but maybe here in the bedroom, she’s not used to calling the shots.

“Sure of what, Jenna?” Her lashes tremble shut, eyes closing against the question.

“What do you want, Jenna? What do you want me to do? Tell me.”

I’m insistent. This is a woman who is always in control. She can demand anything of me and god knows I’ll give it, but there are some huge lines we’re crossing here and she has to tell me how far she’s planning to go. I’m hoping her plans match the pulsing in my pants. The small panting breaths and the tiny jewels of sweat on her lips suggest they do, but I need more than a suggestion.

I can’t help it, and relent, leaning in to kiss her again, sucking in the taste of her. She gives a small moan and pulls back.

“Fuck me, Geordie.”

Her commanding tone is no surprise. I’ve learned Jenna is a woman who gets what she wants. There’s no doubt that right now, what she wants is me .

For the last hour in the bar, the flutter of those dark lashes and the sensuous curve of her mouth signalled where this evening could go if I chose. If I look back over this whole day—perhaps this entire week—the signs were there, coded invitations to seek her out, delve into who she is as a person. Now she’s offering me the total freedom to explore her body; I won’t refuse, even though part of my rational mind screams a warning as to all the ways this could go wrong.

Hearing the unexpected coarse words from her normally proper mouth is an absolute turn on. I stiffen more at the thought of fulfilling that request. At the same time, my brain lurches in understanding. Not ‘make love to me’ but ‘fuck me’, the words a sign she’s cast off the cool professional Jenna the outside world sees. She’s offering me a glimpse of the unbridled woman beneath that controlled exterior. I won’t refuse her command, but still I seek further confirmation. I need to see it in her eyes.

“Look at me when you say it, Jenna.”

I cup her chin in my hand, tilting her head upwards. I crave hearing those words again while she sees the promise of what I'm about to do to her in my eyes.

She does as I ask, brown eyes blazing with need.

“You can fuck me Geordie,” she breathes. “Any way you want.”

With those four extra words, I know what's happening here, and it only encourages my cock to stand at full attention, pressing so damn tight against my boxer briefs it's painful.

Jenna's not in charge here. I am. She's abandoning control, offering it to me. It's dizzying and thrilling.

All my imaginings of succumbing to her—allowing her to use me, accepting whatever direction she chose to satisfy her need—tumble away. Jenna wants me to take her and I'm going to take great pleasure in doing so.

With careful hands, I unzip her jeans and shimmy them down roughly, trying not to pounce on the tiny triangle of lace held up by only a thin string across those sumptuous hips. She steps out of the jeans, kicking them aside, while I remove my own, only pausing to retrieve my wallet.

I leaf through it, finding a couple of condoms tucked in there, and toss them onto a bedside table. Three. Hopefully, it will be enough, but I'm not sure. We've got hours ahead of us, and I doubt once will be enough to satisfy this burning need consuming us.

I tug her towards me, reaching a finger to the wispy lace panties, eager to finish unwrapping the beautiful gift I've been given, as she presses her warm wet mouth to mine. With my hand, I boldly seek the other wetness I can scent drifting from

between those golden thighs, her desire for me tangible in the air.

Greedily I reach towards it, my hand frantic now, desperate to meet her arousal with the pleasure she deserves and I so willingly offer. I rip the white lace aside, a small annoying obstacle removed, leaving her exposed and beautifully naked before me.

She's a fucking goddess of honeyed curves and soft molten skin. I could be hallucinating; the heat, the heavy air, the smells of musk and heady flowers. Maybe I'm back in some tropical hellhole and this is just a vision sent to me in my delirium. But, no, my dream woman speaks—and there's a very real look of shock on her face, jolting me into the present.

JENNA

There's a tearing sound as Geordie's long fingers grapple with the lace. I pull away, staring down at the tiny white puddle on the floor. I was rather fond of that one—pretty and expensive, too—but it's too late now. It's history.

“Geordie,” I yelp out.

“Christ, sorry,” he says, releasing me. A rueful grin, so reminiscent of the boy I knew, breaks across his flushed face. “You did say I could do anything I want.” He huffs out a laugh like he's not at all sorry.

“Yeah, although I didn't imagine that would involve destroying my underwear,” I tease.

“Oh, believe me, it's not only underwear I'm going to destroy tonight.” His eyes darken and his voice drops back to that deep baritone, all man, nothing boyish in the promise. “You wanna get rid of mine, too?” He flicks a finger at his waistband, pulling it out teasingly, and I almost groan at the thought of uncovering what lies beneath, very evident in the solid bulge.

I nod, suddenly a little shy, but I don't hesitate, sliding the boxer briefs off his narrow hips, down those muscular legs to his ankles where he steps out of them. He pauses, as if to allow me a moment to admire him, and shamelessly, I do.

Oh, I've seen it all before. With the Highlanders, I usually kept out of the locker room, but occasionally I'd arrive unannounced on some urgent mission. The boys

were mostly quick to cover up, respectful, understanding I was there doing my job not to ogle them, but sometimes I'd catch an eyeful. Some pants-less and towel-less rugby player, not the least bit modest, standing unashamedly with all his junk on full display, as if challenging me to look down or to flinch away. I'd maintain professionalism—eyes up, locked on faces—carrying on as if I wasn't actually speaking with a naked man.

Tonight, I'm going to savour the beauty of an unclothed Geordie MacDonald standing in the middle of my hotel suite, dominating the space. He's tall, although slightly less than ideal for a flanker—around six-foot, maybe six-one—and long-legged, like a young thoroughbred. My eyes rove up the length of him, taking in the lean muscle, lingering on the large erection, prominent in amongst a nest of golden hair. I swallow at the thought of taking that thickness and length inside me.

I follow the line of hairs upwards, narrowing where it's flanked by taut abs, before bursting into springy curls between well-developed pecs. His broad shoulders and powerful upper body speak of dedication. Amateur player or not, he trains seriously.

I suck in a breath. The realisation I've surrendered control to him fires heat between my legs.

He advances with determination, one hand at my waist, another prowling around my neck, insisting my body meet his. He draws me in, crushing my breasts against his firm chest; the peaked nipples pebbled against my skin, and pressed to my belly, the hard length of him rearing up between us. I shiver in anticipation, want raging inside me like a firestorm. My hands, looped behind his neck, urge him forward, desperate for him to devour me with another kiss.

With mouth locked on mine, lips insistent, tongue probing, he edges me backwards across the room, leading me like his dance partner. As energy rises between us, a sharp current lighting up my every nerve ending, our pace quickens—a slow waltz

transforming into a dramatic tango. My veins pulse and there's an aching burn in my centre. I'm immersed in him, drunk with the taste of his tongue, intoxicated by his smell, the musk of his arousal blending with the freshness of aftershave, and the pressure of his body enveloping me as we stumble and whirl.

Then with an unexpected bang, there's a sudden press of wood behind my thighs. We've come up hard against a desk, but Geordie immediately turns this obstacle into an opportunity, sweeping off a notepad lying there, thrusting a chair aside. He clasps my bum, giving it an appreciative knead, before lifting me onto the desktop.

"You know what, Jenna? I'm going to fuck you on this desk," he growls. "But first, spread wide for me, sweetheart."

He gives me a light shove, and I do as he demands, leaning back, thighs opening before him. I feel wetness erupt between my legs as he gazes down at me, licking at his lips, tongue flickering lazily, as if in contemplation of its next move.

It's the only warning I get before his mouth is on me. Starting at one nipple, he taunts it, while one long finger plunges inside me, the thrust rocking me backwards. I moan as my muscles grab around it, seeking the pressure. He responds with a second finger, twisting and curling to find the perfect spot, leaving me grinding against his hand, writhing in pleasure, as his thumb circles my clit. I'm already chasing the sensation, arching to press closer.

One strong arm wraps around my waist, holding me in place, suspended. The splayed fingers say 'I've got you, I won't let you fall'.

His mouth leaves my heated nipples and slides down my stomach. He kneels before me, as if I'm a queen, him my willing subject. But the roles are reversed here—he's giving the orders, and it totally turns me on. Geordie nips at me, teeth first teasing the crease above my hipbone, then moving to my thigh, deliciously inching closer to the

place where I'm most desperate for his touch.

His mouth descends on my clit, replacing his thumb with an exquisite mixture of licking and sucking, as if he's devouring me. Hands braced on the table, I lean back further, opening my body to him. He hums with satisfaction as I lose control, my voice no longer my own. The feral yowls and mewls only encourage him further. Every time I open my eyes, it's as if Geordie knows, and his gaze flickers up to me. Without missing a beat of what he's doing with his mouth and hand, his eyes are dreamy, as if spellbound.

The heady combination of rhythmic thrusting fingers and relentless mouth ignites my body. I climb higher and higher, my back perfectly arched, ready to dive off the cliff. Finally, I plunge over the edge, allowing a shuddering orgasm to rock me to the core, before I collapse boneless and weak, with only Geordie's arm preventing me from sprawling across the desktop.

Still panting from the rippling waves of sensation, I open my eyes. Geordie's blue-grey ones watch me with a satisfied smile as he withdraws his fingers with a slick, wet sound. I wince slightly, my muscles still clenched so damn tight, reluctant to release the hand that's coaxed so much pleasure from them. He raises his fingers to his mouth, sucking each one clean.

"You taste so good, Jenna." He leans in again and his words warm against my thigh. "Think I want to taste some more. I warn you now, I'll be going back for seconds." His tongue traces my length and my overstimulated nerves respond with a crackle, my legs jerking reflexively.

"You OK?" he asks.

I nod, even though the desk's edge is becoming uncomfortably hard beneath me.

As if sensing my discomfort, Geordie rises and lifts me into his arms. With my legs wrapped around his waist, still chasing friction between us, he spins and strides across the room, carrying me as effortlessly as a tiny doll.

“Changed my mind,” he says. “Seems a shame to waste this big comfy bed, don’t you think?” He smirks, supporting me with one arm while whipping back the covers with the other before lowering me gently onto pristine sheets, cool against my overheated skin.

The bed is enormous, high off the ground, wide and sprawling.

“Fuck you’re beautiful Jenna,” he growls, “and I think you’re going to look more beautiful with this buried inside you.” He fists his cock one stroke, before reaching for the bedside table. He tears open the condom with his teeth before tossing it to me.

“That’s if this is still OK, sweetheart. I’ll stop right now if this isn’t what you want.”

I sit up, giving him a nod. Speech has deserted me as I bask in the afterglow of the orgasm .

“You need to tell me yes or no, sweetheart,” he says. “I can see you like me to boss you around, but honey, there’s one thing you’re still the boss of.”

“Yes,” I manage to say. “I want you. Inside of me.”

I open the condom and lean forward, allowing myself one stroke, feeling his weight, skin so soft yet hard. I unroll it down his length as he groans under the pressure of my hand.

He enters me—tender at first, then forceful. I relish the stretch and fullness as he finds his rhythm. We resume our dance, Geordie the choreographer, dictating the

steps, me following, willing to go wherever he leads. It's a dance of searing heat and reckless want, our bodies moving in perfect time to the music of our pleasure. Then suddenly, there's no holding back, no finesse, just a relentless race to the finale, before he collapses exhausted beside me.

I lay sprawled across the centre of the bed, the body he's tasted every inch of exposed in the glow of the bedside lamp.

"I'll go deal with this." Geordie pads across the lush carpet, hand curled around the condom.

My eyes follow his nicely rounded arse, taut skin, the long, lean muscled legs, the body of an athlete. In all my years of working with sportsmen, I've never once crossed the line, always kept it purely professional. Geordie may be in Dad's team, but this isn't pro sport. The line doesn't exist here, and that thought triggers a rush of exhilaration.

I want Geordie, and for once I can have what I want. One taste of him, and I'm addicted. I want to drink him in completely. Get drunk on him. And I can, knowing there isn't a hangover waiting for me in the harsh light of tomorrow morning.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:12 am

JENNA

I stretch like a satisfied cat in a patch of afternoon sun, except I'm basking in the wonder of this, the warm afterglow of Geordie and me. It's not only the sex, which left me trembling and breathless with its damn near perfection.

There's a connection with this man, and a sense I'm standing on the edge of something exciting, about to throw myself off a great height. It's not the same as the time I actually did that—poised on a bungee platform, anticipating the terror and exhilaration of free fall. Rachel insisted we do a jump when we went on a girls' holiday to New Zealand and damn if it wasn't a thrill, but right now I sense I'm one small step away from a thrill of a different kind.

More like I'm on the side of a pool on a stinking hot day, and having dipped my toes into the deliciously cool water, it's inviting me to plunge in. I want to, knowing it's exactly what I need.

Geordie is what I need—he's kind and funny; and he's caring. He acts like I'm precious to him. I feel as if he wants to look after me, and while the outside world might find it surprising, I like it. I'm tired of being the person worrying about everyone else. I might appear hard on the outside—I've had to be in this job—but inside I'm just a girl like any other who wants to be loved and is soft enough to be hurt.

The question remains—what does Geordie want? And am I it?

I need to know. I wasted too many years with Adam, thinking I was what he wanted,

although I never asked him outright. We met through work, struck up a friendship, and it morphed into more. It was easy. Too easy. We never laid it on the line, ever, not even when we got engaged.

Just like we did with everything else in our relationship, Adam and I simply fell into an engagement. Everyone else around us seemed to be doing it—why not us? And so, one night, sitting in his car outside a restaurant where he'd taken me for my birthday, he said, "I suppose we should get married then," the words matter-of-fact. I accepted his sort-of proposal as evidence I was what he wanted for the rest of his life. I was so wrong.

While Adam leaving me a week before our wedding almost broke me, it taught me, too. In the painful weeks of soul-searching afterwards, I vowed I'd never go beyond something casual unless I had some surety. I'm too old to waste time investing my heart in a relationship where there's no possibility of it becoming something long-term.

As I hear the soft approach of Geordie's feet, I know we need to talk about this. I'd rather the short, sharp heartbreak now; him telling me this was just an enjoyable one-night stand, a bit of fun, rather than carry on, my hopes raised, blissfully ignorant that I'm not end-game material for him.

Even so, I can't broach the subject right away. The demanding Geordie of earlier barking commands at me, telling me exactly what he's going to do to me, and ordering me to do things to him in return, is gone. I liked that Geordie very much, and I want to see some more of him. He's uncovered a new side of me in the bedroom tonight. But this man, sliding under the sheets beside me, is the other Geordie, the soft one. It feels wrong to confront this gentle, smiling man with hard questions.

He lies back on the pillow and I instinctively curl towards him, nuzzling in beside his long body, laying my head against his broad chest, and bathe in the soothing feel of

his fingers as they move to stroke my hair, and the steady rise and fall of his breathing. It's so addictive. I don't want to break the spell, but I must.

I swallow down my fears and prepare myself, although I don't move, staying exactly where I am. I can't look at him, not brave enough to read his response.

Damn it, I should be, but I can't face seeing hesitation in his eyes, or worse still, a lie. Despite my resolve—I told myself I could handle rejection—still, part of me wants something real with Geordie; wants it so badly I'd rather live with the illusion. I speak calmly, although my throat is so tight it hurts.

“So, where do we go from here?”

His quiet laughter rumbles beneath my ear.

“How about nowhere? We stay here like this. Miss the bus home. Take up residence in the hotel. Live on great sex and room service.”

I can't help but chuckle back. It's a tempting proposition.

“Might need a few more condoms. Does that come with room service?”

“Absolutely,” he laughs, and then groans. “Please don't ask me how I know that.”

I don't need to. It's certainly not just his natural ability that allowed him to play my body as skilfully as he plays the piano. His lovemaking speaks of experience. That he's practised in the art of pleasure is no surprise. An attractive young single man, travelling the world; of course there've been women before me. Probably a lot of women.

“I'm not judging,” I giggle against his chest. “Just pleased all those embarrassing

high school classes about safe sex got through to you.”

“Fuck,” he laughs. “They were god awful, made worse by...”

“Mrs Sutherland,” we say at the same time, bursting into laughter at the memory of poor long-suffering Mrs Sutherland, the biology teacher who drew the short straw, nominated to teach sex-ed to the students of Cluanie District High School.

“In your year, did she always use a pointer for diagrams?” he asks. “Like she didn’t want to touch a penis with her finger, even if it was just a picture?”

“Yes,” I choke out. “And she’d write the anatomical terms in extra tiny writing like they’d be less noticeable.”

“Oh man,” he laughs. “And we were stupidly immature about it.”

“Now, class, let’s be mature about this.”

We chorus the words in perfect imitation of her. The poor woman must have said them at least ten times in every lesson.

Our laughter trickles away in tiny bubbles, until we lie in silence. I try again, this time propping myself up on one elbow to face him, the comfortable ease of shared memories between us encouraging me to be brave.

“Geordie, I need to know where you see this going. Us.” I find a snippet of courage and take one step further. “I really like you Geordie, but... ”

He presses a finger to my lips, hushing me. “And I really like you, too,” he says, as if my hesitation was simply seeking confirmation that this could be more for him, too. I take another step.

“Look, Geordie, I don’t want to pressure you, but what happened between us tonight, it can’t happen again unless there’s...”

I fumble for the words. I’m not expecting a lifetime commitment here, but I need more than the promise of a quick tumble between the sheets if we’re feeling horny. I’ve got a couple of very nice vibrators to solve that problem and Geordie’s got a pair of strong hands that I’m sure can capably relieve his needs. Neither of those options will leave us with a broken heart.

“Some feelings involved?” He says it carefully.

“I’m too old to just mess around, Geordie. I’m not looking for casual hookups.”

“You’re looking for more.” His eyes search my face, but they are unnervingly unreadable.

“Yes—well, no, I don’t think I was even looking. Moving back home, I’d kind of resigned myself to not finding someone. Just throw myself into my business for a while. Focus on making a success of at least one part of my life.” I pause; one heartbeat, two. “And then came you.”

His mouth curves in the sweetest smile, and I want to kiss it. One large arm wraps across me, pulling me down towards him. He leans forward, pressing his lips against my forehead. When he speaks, his voice is hushed.

“And you,” he breathes, the lightest brush of air whispering away my worries. We sit in stillness, taking in the magic of the moment, that this thing could really be happening. Between us. My friend’s little brother. Not so little now, with that big strong arm curling around me protectively.

He breaks the embrace, but we stay close. I lie beside him, the two of us like parallel

lines, headed in the same direction off into infinity.

“It’s the same for me,” he says. “All of it. Really, I have no idea why I came back to Cluanie. A whole lot of reasons, I suppose.”

“You didn’t enjoy your work?”

“Yeah, I did, but I was tired of the rigs. The heat. The close conditions. God, what it’s like to have your own room, space, privacy. The money was no longer enough for me.” He pauses, thoughtful. “Perhaps it was ego. Come back here and let everyone see that Geordie MacDonald, who barely scraped through school, wasn’t stupid after all.”

“I never thought you were stupid. You always seemed such a bright, lively kid.”

Oops, there it is—the word slipping out without thought, emphasising the six years between us. The age gap has evaporated in these last few days, and I’m sorry for bringing it up, but he doesn’t pick up on it.

“Thanks.” His eyes are grateful. “You weren’t there for the worst of it.” A swallow bobs past his Adam’s apple as he deliberates. “I struggled at primary school, but mostly I could bluff my way through. Memorised whole books so it looked like I could actually read them aloud. Made sure I had plenty to say in class discussions so the teachers thought I knew what I was talking about. Threw sickies whenever there was something written I wanted to avoid.”

“But your mum’s a nurse,” I scoff. “Surely she would have known?”

“I was a very good actor. And she wasn’t so hard to convince, not when she was coming off a night shift. She’d be too tired to argue. Just sigh, send me back to bed, and phone the school.” He chuckles to himself, like the naughty kid he was, a childish

pride at conning his mother. It trickles away as he goes on, the light moment gone, as a sad seriousness creeps into his expression. “But high school got tough. I couldn’t hide it so well. As the school became more concerned, Mum became more insistent I go. Dad was on her case too.” From what I saw, Geordie’s dad was always on someone’s case. “He saw school as her responsibility. All the other stuff we had to do—the piano, tennis lessons, chess coach, Rachel’s ballet and horse riding—was at Dad’s insistence, and he made damn sure we went. He’d have shipped us off to some posh school too, but Mum argued we go to school locally. Her punishment for his agreement was she always dealt with school stuff. He held her accountable.”

I know these things. Rachel’s father was—is, I doubt he’s changed—a bastard. While her ability to navigate school successfully kept her in his good graces, from everything she’s said I know, even when he was young, Geordie bore the brunt of his father’s overbearing expectations. There’s remembered pain on his face; it’s drawn, his jaw tense.

“The school tried to help. They put me in the low stream, sent me to remedial reading, but I hated it. Gave up trying. Every year it got worse. Typical story of an undiagnosed dyslexic kid,” he shrugs.

“How did you find out you’re dyslexic?”

I know a little about it. One of the Highlanders’ players a couple of years back confided in me. While it didn’t have much impact on his job as a professional sportsman, so many things I took for granted—sitting my driving test, applying for a passport, signing a sales contract for a car—all these everyday things were a huge challenge for him. This has been Geordie’s life.

“When I was in trade school. One of the tutors—her son was dyslexic—she had me pegged from the day I walked into her class. A week later, she asked me to stay behind after the class. Got me to go get an assessment, matched me up with the right

reading tutor. Saved me, really.”

“So you can read now?”

“It’s still challenging, but I manage.” He huffs out a laugh. “Hard to believe, but I even ‘read’ real books,” he says, making air quotes. “Got into it on one of the rigs. I bunked with this guy who’d sit on his bed, with a phone in his hand and headphones on, and sometimes he’d be laughing to himself. I got curious. Asked him what the hell was so funny? A movie or something? But no, he had an audiobook playing while he’d read the actual book on the phone. Fucking brilliant. So I gave it a try.”

“That’s great, Geordie. I love that for you.” My mouth tips up in a genuine smile at the thought he too has the pleasure of books available to him.

Reading has always been such an escape for me. No one in the Highlanders organisation ever suspected serious, business-like Jenna MacDonald, media manager, was reading fluffy romance novels on her phone on all those long team bus trips.

Guess I still believe in happily ever afters even though mine hasn’t come along. Or has it? I don’t want to hope for much beyond this room, but this doesn’t feel like a casual hook-up, certainly not for me, and the way he looks at me suggests Geordie’s thinking that way too .

“Anyway,” he says. “Coming back to Scotland was the best decision I’ve made in a long time.” His voice is softer, his eyes fixed on mine. The message running beneath those words is unmistakable. “Maybe it was meant to be, us back home, together, at the same time?”

In true Jenna style, I deflect; damping down the emotion threatening to swamp me.

“Not sure Dad and Rachel will be too impressed with the universe throwing us

together.”

“Well, no disrespect,” he says, “but your dad and Rachel can fuck right off. We’re not kids, Jenna. I don’t care what anyone else thinks—I want to see you, be with you, work out what this is.”

The surety of his words is inescapable. They’re the ones I want to hear, but the intensity in his eyes overwhelms me and I close mine.

“Look at me Jenna,” he says, and I comply. “I’m not putting any limitations on us, and I’m sure as hell not going to let anyone else, either.” I go to drop my chin, turning away from the weight of what he’s saying, but his hand cups my jaw with a gentle but commanding pressure. “I’m not letting you walk away from me when we leave this room. And I don’t think you want me to either.”

“No, I don’t,” I whisper.

“Then whatever this is—we don’t have to put a name on it—let’s give it a chance.” His mouth seeks mine, and I dissolve, sealing our agreement with the taste of whisky and us.

GEORDIE

Jenna's head rests in the curve of my collarbone as if someone has hand-sculpted our bodies for a perfect fit. I doze, comfortable with the gentle rise and fall of her breath on my chest as it tickles the hairs. She snuffles a little, almost a snore and it's so fucking adorable I ache with an overwhelming need for her.

Not the type of need that got us here, into her bed, allowing our mutual lust to drive our connection. There's a deep, desperate craving for her just to be with me, to want me not for the sex but for what I could be for her. It seems like she's never had a good guy in her life before. I want to be the first; and—fuck it, is it too soon to say this? The only.

I want to take care of her, ease her worries, soothe her fears. I may not be the most subtle of men, but I see there's plenty lying underneath the face this woman shows to the world. She's strong for everyone. She's always looking out for her dad—at the party last week, supporting him in facing the crowd when their grief is obviously still so damn raw; fussing around him at the lunch stop; bringing him drinks in the bar—showing she'll always step up for him. The phone calls I overheard while working in her office suggest she's totally there for her clients, too. I want her to understand I can be strength for her; be the one person who she doesn't have to worry about, but know I'm there to offer care and comfort for her. She's incredible, and she deserves that.

I let myself drown in imaginings of Jenna and me like this in the future—her tucked in safe with me and my lonely heart safe with her. Sleep grabs at me, and I let it take hold, happy for it to pull me under, knowing she will fill my dreams; and when I

wake this real-life woman who is so much more than any dream will still be here.

I'm woken abruptly, immediately bolt upright. I throw back the bedcovers. In an automatic response to years of drills, my feet hit the floor and in the pitch dark I scrabble blindly for clothes as the fire alarm's piercing scream assaults my ears. Then, as it rips away the fog of sleep, I remember where I am—and who I'm with.

I flick on a light. Jenna jolts up to sitting; hair wild, her face distorted in response to the painful wail surrounding us, the tone and volume deliberately designed to repel.

“Quick, we need to get out,” I yell.

The words are unnecessary as a mechanical voice cuts across the blare.

‘Attention hotel guests. A fire alarm has been activated. Please leave your rooms immediately and proceed to the nearest emergency exit. Do not use lifts. Do not return to your rooms to collect belongings.’

Jenna reaches for the white fluffy dressing gown lying discarded on the floor, where I unwrapped her from it. There's no time to admire her still sex-sated, drowsy face as I buckle up my jeans and pull on boots. No way am I accompanying her outside wearing only a bathrobe. It's probably going to be very obvious what's been going on between us, but no point in labouring the point by appearing wrapped only in a piece of towelling.

Tugging on my Scotland rugby jersey, I head for the door. With practised hands I sweep across the flat wood-panelled surface but feel no trace of heat. I sniff the air, but there's no tang of smoke. I edge it open to be sure, and then yank it wide, confident that whatever has triggered this rude interruption, it's not out here.

The shrieking alarm rises from uncomfortable in the room to painful as I open up to

the corridor.

“EVACUATE THE BUILDING,” the voice commands.

My hands automatically clamp over my ears, fingers pushing deep inside in a useless attempt to dampen the pain. There’s no sign of fire or even a whiff of smoke.

As I emerge from Jenna’s room, I scan left and right, but there’s no one else in sight. Our secret is safe for now. The rest of the team, and more importantly Jenna’s father, are well away from here in a completely different wing of the building. Chances are those stairs at the end of the corridor, with the giant green ‘FIRE EXIT’ sign, also lead to a different door out of the hotel. If luck is on our side, we can separate at the bottom and filter into the assembly area out front from different directions. Hopefully, none of them will work out we’ve come from the same place.

I’m just about to turn back into the room to hurry her along—my head is starting to ache from the onslaught of sound—when the door from the one other room on this floor flies open.

A guy in the remains of a suit bursts into the corridor. He stands paralysed at the sight of me. He’s lost the jacket and his vest hangs loose. A striped tie dangles around his neck, the collar undone—in fact, his shirt is half unbuttoned. The white cuffs of his shirtsleeves flap at the wrists. He’s so baby-faced he looks like he’s been playing dress-ups in his dad’s wardrobe.

One hand is clamped to an ear, and the other presses a phone to his head. He’s screaming into it, which is rather pointless given the wall of sound trapping us. There’s no way anyone could hear above that. As if realising this too, he pulls the phone away, ending the call with a frustrated stab of a finger.

Noticing he’s got company, he mouths a word at me. I knot my brows in a confused

frown. I think I know what he said, but that can't be right.

"Sorry." He bellows the word again.

My frown deepens as I stare at him, totally baffled. Why the hell is he apologising to me? Has this guy chosen to burn down the building in some fit of insanity, and now he's apologising before we're all incinerated?

"No fire," he yells across at me. I can't hear the sound, but I'm sure my lip reading is accurate as he carries on. "There's no fire. You don't have to leave. We're not."

"There's no fire?" I scream back at him.

"No," he yells. "Just this." He gives an embarrassed shake of his head towards his room, pushing the door wide open. I can see the room opposite is a mirror of Jenna's, a suite; a bridal suite.

But unlike ours, in this room there really is a bride. A dark-haired woman, her elaborate up-do coming apart, her face contorted in what could be pain, fury, or embarrassment, stands hands on hips glaring at her husband. Sheathed in white fabric, she's all gleaming curves, lit up in a blaze of candlelight .

Candles top every piece of furniture in the room. Their jaunty flames flicker off walls and ceiling, bathing the room in golden light. Small wisps of smoke spiral upwards. Petals are strewn across the carpet and the bed. There's an open bottle of champagne.

"I was trying to be romantic," he yells across at me. "But I set the fucking alarm off."

I'm impressed by his effort to set the mood for their wedding night. He did well except for the bloody candles.

Seeing the actual flames reminds me of Jenna, and how fearful she is of fire. I need to reassure her there's no danger. I'm about to turn and check she's on her way out of the room, when she arrives, colliding full force against my back. Her arms slide around my waist.

"What's up?" she yells against my ear.

"It's OK," I bellow back. "There isn't a fire." I grin down at her. "This is so fucking funny. You've got to see it."

I drag her across the corridor, positioning her in the doorway with one arm wrapped around her waist and her hand clasped in mine, knowing she'll find it hilarious. I rest my chin on her shoulder, speaking directly into the shell of her ear.

"Poor guy," I chuckle, "but you have to give him a ten for trying."

The groom has retreated. Slumped on the bed, his face flushes as he glances up at us, standing in the doorway.

The bride, tears now sliding down her cheeks, tosses us a desperate look. I feel kind of bad taking pleasure in their wedding night disaster, but I'm betting she'll forgive him soon enough. What will it take? A day, a week maybe, and they'll laugh about it for the rest of their lives .

Jenna's hand tenses under mine, her whole body stiffening. I straighten, glancing down at her face. She's staring at the bride, cheeks drained of colour, and her brown eyes wide and stormy.

Does she know this woman? Or this man? I'm not sure what the hell is happening here.

Jenna scans the woman head to toe and her face crumples. That beautiful mouth turns downward and tears sparkle in the corners of her velvet brown eyes. It's definitely the bride who has triggered this response.

The girl stares back at her, a puzzled expression creeping across her face, her dark brows furrowing. Jenna swallows hard, and in the next breath, although I can't hear the sound over the fucking alarm, I feel the vibration of a huge strangled sob ripple through her body.

She breaks free of me and rushes from the corridor, back to her room, and shuts the door with a silent slam, the sound submerged in the still insistent alarm. I abandon the unfortunate pair and follow.

Faced with the blank door, I pause, uncertain what to do. Mercifully, at that moment, the alarm cuts off. The silence is ominous.

I have a choice to make here, and neither option seems attractive. Either I take this as a sign that for some reason, despite what's happened between us tonight—or maybe because of it—Jenna doesn't want me near her, and I should head back to my room. Or, I risk tapping on the door, hoping she'll open up and let me in to face whatever lies beyond it.

One thing I know, if I go, I won't sleep, consumed with worry, while she lies up here alone and hurting. I need to get into that room.

My phone chirps to life in my back pocket, and I wrestle it free. Nathan. There are three texts, two earlier unnoticed, ignored. I was busy .

Nate: Empty bed. So you're not coming home tonight, I take it? Didn't know you'd take the warning about my snoring so seriously. Should I be hurt you don't want to share with me pretty boy?

Nate: Good on you mate. She's got it bad for you. Just don't let her father see you sneaking out of her room in the morning.

Nate: Where the fuck are you Geordie. Is Jenna with you? We're all out front.

I stab out a quick message back.

Me: All good. Yes she's with me.

That's all anyone needs to know for now. Maybe Nathan will cover for us. But on second thoughts, he's not the most imaginative bastard. Maybe I should feed him a story.

Me: We were in the back bar.

It's not a lie.

Nate: At this hour. Yeah right. And I'm the fucking Pope. Ok I'll tell Razor. Better hope he believes you mate because I sure as hell don't. You dirty dog. You fucking lucky dog.

I don't reply. At this point, I'm beyond caring about anything apart from the immediate situation. Jenna is crying in her room and I'm going back in there to find out why. As far as anyone working out that it's two a.m. and we've been together this whole time, I'll deal with the fallout in the morning. I close my eyes and reach for the handle. There's an unyielding clunk.

It seems, with the alarm switched off, the door locking mechanisms have all come back on. Fucking wonderful. With only my own key card in my back pocket, I have no way of getting into this room.

I tap on the door and wait, but there's no response. While I don't want to bully Jenna when she's obviously really upset about something, I'm going to need to be more demanding. Curling my hand into a fist, I give three sharp raps and put my mouth to the door.

"Jenna, let me in. Please."

I stand there resting my head against the door; the seconds ticking by in time to my heavy breaths, as I wonder how I've managed to fuck this all up. One moment lying wrapped around her beautiful curves dreaming of what comes next, the next out here in the corridor with all my hopes dashed.

I jerk upright at the click of the door handle. The door swings open a little, and Jenna's there, in the white dressing gown, her back to me as she walks away, heading straight for the bed.

I enter the room cautiously, pulling the door closed with a soft thud, and lean against it, unsure what to do.

Jenna's already back in bed, head covered by the sheets. Muffled sobs hiccup from the tangle of bunched up white fabric. I have absolutely no fucking idea what's brought her to this; what I did, what I didn't do.

In fact, I sense that while I may well be part of the problem here, I'm not actually the problem. Something to do with that bride has Jenna spinning out. I'm good at screwing things up, but this time it's not my screw up that has her lying there crying her heart out.

I also have no fucking idea what to do. I'm not one to make a girl cry. Me, I'm the guy who listens, checks in on how she's feeling, works to keep her happy and laughing, stops her ending up this way before it happens.

Crying women weren't part of my upbringing either. Mum is stoic. She needed to be—married to my prick of a father, although I never saw his wrath fall on her. Any time he turned even a mildly disapproving face her way, it evaporated with one of her smiles.

Rachel, his golden girl, met his moods with compliance if his demands coincided with hers, and defiance when they didn't, but even when they clashed, there were never tears. Rachel doesn't cry in front of people. It was only me he could reduce to a snivelling mess, my sister the comforter.

So, I'm ad-libbing here. The only thing I'm sure of is that standing by doing nothing makes me an asshole.

Jenna's sobbing subsides and a new sound takes its place, half wail, half moan, like an animal in distress. It cuts me like a blade, and I feel her pain in every cell of my body.

I take small quiet steps towards her, buying time, unsure of what I'm going to say. I advance like one of those negotiators stepping toward the guy standing on the ledge, knowing that one wrong move and it will all be over. But unlike the professional talkers, I'm an amateur, with no well-practised script or experience to draw on. All I've got is a heart swelling with both love and sadness for this woman, and a determination to free her from this pain.

JENNA

There's a new pain in the eerie silence, with the excruciating noise of the fire alarm gone. My feral sobs fill the room. But I can no more hold them back than I can control the impulse to curl foetal-like in the tangled mess of the bed.

With each ragged intake of breath, I can smell him—us. The pungent memory summoned by that scent only prompts deeper, agonising realisations of what I've done and how incredibly stupid I've been.

The bride next door is a reminder of all I'm not. I'm not her. I'm not someone's everything. Their one and only. The sight of her in that sleek white dress—so like mine still hanging forlornly in my wardrobe—slapped me across the face, snapping me brutally out of these last few hours, where I've pretended to be something I'm not. Something Adam left me doubting I can ever be.

His abrupt exit from my life has left me with a void inside. The cool exterior that serves me so well in my work has taken hold below the surface. It's as if the warmth of the love I felt for Adam seeped away with his leaving—although he would argue it happened earlier, providing him the reason to go.

Beyond my smiling face and the eagerness with which I've embraced Geordie tonight, there's a cool deep well, a pool where no ripple of true love stirs. Once it was there. I know I felt it for Adam. I let him plunge in and I know he found something. But it wasn't enough.

Geordie claims to have found it too. He chipped away at the ice, wrapped me in the

heat of his desire, swearing this is more than just a burst of sexual tension between two old friends we never saw coming.

But I struggle to believe him. Has he truly melted the frost around my heart, or am I simply desperate for it to be true? And in the morning I'll wake to find the same Jenna who hasn't felt anything for anyone since Adam.

As the pain intensifies, the harsh guttural sobbing morphs into a new sound. My body seeks to blur the jagged edges, reaching for what has saved me before.

When I'm running from a migraine, this keening that pours from me now in a last ditch effort to escape the all-encompassing pain will sometimes transport me to a safer place. The low wail floods every cell as I ride its wave. I soar above the river of pain. It's a meditation, holding me aloft. I swirl along the vibrating pathway of my own sad song, my voice thrumming in my brain like an extended single-syllable mantra.

This is how he finds me.

Geordie lowers himself onto the bed. Gently, carefully. He slides across to where I teeter on the edge. I've retreated as far as I can from the door and what lies beyond—the image of a happiness I'd once pictured for myself. His body brackets mine, a broad arm looped across my waist, the weight of it anchoring me. He won't let me be swept away by this aching tide of memories. Geordie has me. Here. Now.

In the safety of his protective hug, I begin to let go of the sound. It trails away, the high-pitched note dropping to a soothing hum, and finally a light hiss of breath between lips still bruised from his earlier frantic kisses.

His lips brush my hair, and I relax into the softness. My body sinks down, embracing the calm. Geordie's silence is comforting, his presence like one of those weighted

blankets, its gentle pressure conveying I'm safe with him. But I knew this. I knew this from the moment he turned to me on the patio a week ago. I've been hurt, but Geordie is not a man who would do me harm.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "There are things in my past..."

"Ssssh." He brushes a thumb across my cheek. "You don't need to explain."

"You know." My voice is dull and flat. Of course he does. I suppose Rachel told him.

Geordie knows my shame. While there's some relief in the fact he won't think me totally irrational, it would have been nice to preserve the illusion of me as a whole person, not this damaged woman with a huge gaping hole. Adam took something from me and mostly I've covered it well. Now Geordie has seen into its ugly centre, he will never see me the same way again. But then, why, if he knew all this past week, did he still pursue me?

It could be just sexual attraction—I felt the heat of his gaze on me right from the start—but surely I haven't totally imagined the other things he hints at with his eyes and his words. The tantalising allure of him possibly having feelings for me dangles in front of me. I'm desperate not to lose him this soon. Even if it's just so I can pretend this is going somewhere. That he could be something more, and that I could be something more to him than a good lay.

"Connor told me," he whispers. "I'm sorry Jenna. This guy who left you—you obviously loved him, so he must have had something going for him—but he's an idiot." His voice grows fierce. "And that he hurt you so much..." He huffs an angry breath against my ear. "I'd fucking deck him," he mutters.

It is so unexpected. Gentle laughing Geordie, who has a reputation for hauling other guys out of trouble, not creating it—a peacemaker, not a brawler—would fight for

me. I'm not normally turned on by the thought of men going all neanderthal on my behalf, but something in me wishes he and Adam might cross paths one day so he can deliver on that threat.

“Why the hell would he do that to you? I don't get it.”

“He decided I wasn't the right one for him,” I mumble from beneath the sheet. “I wasn't enough. Not loving enough, soft enough, sweet enough. And in other ways, I was too much. He saw my confidence and my success as a threat. He wanted something different. Someone different.”

“He cheated on you?” Geordie's voice rises and I can feel the tense stiffening in his body lying against the length of mine.

“He said he didn't. I believed him. I have to. If he'd been playing me for a fool, it would have been worse. But he moved on quickly. Another woman in our company. Even if they didn't get together until after our split, I think they had an eye for each other before.”

“Is that why you went to work for the Highlanders?”

“Yeah, out of one of the worst things in my life came one of the best.” I suck in a slow breath. “They've been good years, career wise. They bought me the freedom I have at the moment. To work for myself. My only regret is I didn't realise it in time to spend more time with Mum. But you can't go back.”

“No. But Jen, you've still got so much ahead of you.”

“I have.”

Perhaps saying it aloud will make it true. I untwine myself from under his arm and

roll to face him. Those grey-blue eyes study me in the gloom. Is this man what's ahead of me? He is, at least for a little while, I think. And it's nice. Him with his marshmallow centre. It's like he recognises there's softness inside me, too. For all our differences, we have a sameness. We can be friends. We are friends.

So, although not wanting to get my hopes up, or reach for more than I deserve, I make him an offer. A small safe one, so I can keep him close, but not so close it will wreck me when it ends. If this thing is just a bright burst of flame and quickly gutters out, I won't be too badly burned.

"I had fun tonight. With you. We're good together Geordie."

In the lamplight, I study his face. His eyes spark, a flare of interest, and his mouth tips up in a smile.

"I think so." One finger traces the curve of my nose, slips to my lips and trails down to rest between my breasts.

"So, why don't we do this again?"

"This?" He quirks a brow, his hand continuing its downward progress, coming to rest between my thighs.

"Meet up. Have some fun. Nothing serious. Just enjoy whatever this is. No one else needs to know. "

The playful smile slips away, and an uncomfortable silence hangs between us. A swallow travels down his throat, and he bites at his lip.

"Is that what you want? Friends who just happen to sleep together?"

“Yeah.” I shrug, trying to sound casual, like it’s no big deal. I want a lot more than that. But I’ve learned. Being greedy gets you nothing. I’m going to try for something with Geordie, even if it’s less than what my silly, hopeful little heart wants. “It’s worked for us so far.”

“And no one will know.”

There’s a tone to these words I can’t fathom. It bothers me. Reading subtext is one of my superpowers—part of why I’m good at my job. But with Geordie, at this moment I’m at a loss. Is it disappointment? Sadness? Resignation? I blunder on.

“Well, there’s Dad. You know how he feels about me and players. If the guys on the team find out, word will get back to him soon enough. And Rachel could be awkward. Might be best if we keep it quiet.”

“That’s going to be tricky in Cluanie. Unearthing everyone’s secrets is an organised sport.”

“You forget. Hiding people’s secrets is what I do for a living. When you take control of the narrative, tell the story for them, that’s all they see.”

His face has slipped behind a blank mask. I fear I’ve ruined it before we’ve even started with my calculating approach. I’ve said too much and not offered him enough. True Jenna style.

Then he smiles, although the crinkles that usually bracket his eyes are worryingly absent

“And what story are you going to tell about us? ”

“I’ll think of something.”

“What if I said I didn’t care? That I’m not worried if people know?” The earnestness written in his steady gaze tugs at my heart.

I’m flooded with a vain surge of satisfaction that he’d be comfortable with people knowing we’re together. That he’d stand up for us against the likely objectors—Dad and Rachel—makes me want to sigh out loud with gratitude. It’s always been me defending other people’s choices, and here’s a guy who’s ready to step up and defend mine.

But I push the tempting offer aside as one I can’t accept, crushing those crazy euphoric feelings back down; because when it ends, as it inevitably must—there’s no way Geordie would stay in this for more than a bit of a fling—it’s just going to hurt even more.

The fall-out—the sympathetic eyes, the consoling words, the whispering behind my back—would wreck me. I’m not prepared to live through that again. It was bad the first time in far-off London. How much worse would it be if it happened in Cluanie? Where there’s nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. No, desperate as I am for this little piece of happiness, I’d rather end it before it’s properly begun than risk that outcome.

Besides, this way, if I leave in November—much as I love my little business, I still feel the magnetic pull of the Highlanders—he won’t have to bear the gossip. There’s plenty in our town who’d love nothing better than to twist my decision to go into proof that Geordie’s nothing special. Not special enough to have kept me in Cluanie.

And then there’s Geordie’s rugby. It brings him so much joy. The way he talks about it, I know that rugby pitch is where he feels most alive, most capable, most whole. If it were to be taken away from him, over me, what would he have left?

“I’d say that I am worried. I’d rather they don’t know.” My words come out a whisper as I try to dull their impact.

He's battling with this. He closes his eyes, as if needing to protect himself against them.

"Geordie, it's better this way." I attempt a soothing tone, masking my sudden desperation for his agreement. For all my tough self-talk about doing this on my terms or not doing it all, already the thought of losing him stabs at me. I summon all of my PR wiles, talking him down from the ledge before he jumps right out of my life. "You know, just keep it casual—until we see where it goes."

It's a shitty thing to do, tossing him those last few words, a little crumb of possibility, and I swallow down the shame at my selfishness. His eyes flutter open and the glimmer of hope written there confirms I'm the worst sort of person.

"OK," he says softly, reaching a hand to smooth back my wild hair, like he's gentling a flighty horse. "Let's see where this goes."

There's a confidence in his small smile, as if he's indulging me for now while knowing he'll talk me round. I can't let him. Fun. Casual. Fleeting. And no one gets hurt.

GEORDIE

“I feel like shit.” Nathan slumps against the hotel’s front wall.

It’s also an accurate description of how he looks this morning. Even catching a bit of fresh air while I checked us out hasn’t helped his hangover. His dark hair sticks out at odd angles and he looks grimy despite spending so long in the shower I had to yell at him to check he hadn’t passed out.

“Get this into you.” I thrust the takeaway coffee at him. We’ve left it too late to grab a decent breakfast before the bus leaves.

“Thanks, mate,” he mumbles. “Don’t want to sound ungrateful, but what I could really do with is a nice big greasy fry up.”

“I’m with you on that.”

The standard antidote for a hard night would go a long way to settling the nausea in my own stomach. Mine isn’t alcohol induced. Sure, I had a few drinks yesterday, but the moment Jenna invited me into her room, I sobered up instantly. After that, well, I didn’t need booze to give me courage, or use it to blur the edges. In fact, the opposite

.

I wanted the clarity to remember every moment with Jenna just in case, come today, it might be all I had of her. She’s made it very clear that’s not the case. She sees something more beyond what happened between us, but it’s definitely not the same something I want.

That's why, although I agreed to this secret 'friends with benefits' arrangement we made in the early hours, by the light of day, it's eating at me. Especially her abrupt u-turn after the fire alarm. Before that, I'd been sure we'd found something in each other beyond just sex, something meaningful. Then all of a sudden it's back to sneaky hook-ups, and banging each other without any other expectation than a fun time in the sheets. I hate it.

I take a frustrated slug of my coffee. Returning to Cluanie was meant to be a clean break from my past. I don't want to drift forever in the aimlessness that has marked my life so far.

Eight years in a job that gave no satisfaction apart from a large bank balance. Now even that seems irrelevant. My ability to earn money proves I'm not thick like my teachers told me, but accumulating it is a hollow goal. It's a truth I didn't understand while I was off chasing contracts, always looking for the big bucks, always moving on.

Over that time, I've drifted between people too. Sure, I had friends of a sort amongst the crews on the rigs. It's a harsh life and you need to have each other's backs. Shore leave can get pretty wild, too, so it's always reassuring to know there's someone who'll pull you out of a messy situation before you end up in some South East Asian jail.

But has a single one of those so-called friends stayed in touch? Not one. Those were friendships with a lifespan limited to the job. Once I moved on, they simply became acquaintances .

So this group of friends within the rugby team, most old and a couple new like Nathan, offer something more. The small uncomfortable niggle that grew into a gut feeling, suggesting I should chuck it all in and come home for a bit, was right. There are things in Cluanie I didn't realise I'd lacked. Friends are one of them.

A girl like Jenna is another; but what I'm looking for with Jenna is something it now seems she's not prepared to give me—yet—a proper relationship. Although this arrangement she's suggested is a damn sight more than anything I've entered into previously.

My history with women consists of a stream of casual hook-ups, most the one-night stands that tend to find young men back on dry land after weeks offshore. There were the odd few where they stretched into a couple of weeks of mutually agreed no-strings-attached fun, with no expectations on either side, and no regrets afterwards.

But I'm no longer the horny kid looking for a quick tumble with a pretty girl, despite my actions last night suggesting that's exactly what I am. Jenna has asked me for a little more than that, but it's still not enough; not what I'm prepared to try and give someone for the first time in my life. It's not her fault she's unwilling to accept it yet. She will, eventually. I have to believe that.

I get it. How risky it would be for her, after what that prick of an ex did to her. So I'll play along, keep these feelings—which, to be honest, even surprise me—to myself, and play the long game.

There's no sign of her this morning. In one way, that's a good thing. I'm not sure how to play it cool with her in front of all the guys. So far, apart from Nathan, it appears no one suspects. They were all too hammered to think anything of our no-show at the fire evacuation assembly point .

But there's also insecurity nagging at me, a voice whispering the suggestion in my ear that she woke up with instant regrets and is now avoiding me.

I take a deep breath and grab my phone. It takes me three attempts to put together a text. I'm not good with the written word anyway, and this is such new territory. I eventually settle on something I hope is friendly but reassuring. I want her to be very

clear: there are zero regrets on my part.

Me: Hey there sorry I overslept. Missed having breakfast with you. Bus is leaving soon. Where are you?

Jenna: Right here

Me: Here?

Jenna: On the bus

I look up, and she's framed in a window, her mouth tipping up in a smile. It's all the answer I need to know things are OK between us. Her brown eyes sparkle with invitation, although the faint crescents of purple beneath them betray her lack of sleep. Neither of us probably got more than four hours. She tosses me a flirty wink and I'm spurred into action.

Abandoning Nathan, I knock back the last of my coffee, toss the cup in a bin, snatch up my bag and plunge up the steps of the bus. The driver, probably the only one who did have a good night's sleep, offers a way too cheerful good morning. I automatically return it without looking at him, while my eyes find Jenna—and my heart sinks as my stomach clenches in outright terror.

In the seat next to her, Coach Robbie has his nose buried in the Sunday paper. What does he know—an overprotective father sensing there's something on the radar but not sure of the shape of it? It wouldn't surprise me if he's onto us. Sharpe by name and sharp by nature.

But if he thinks something's going on, he's still hazy on the details, because otherwise, I'd be dead. Or at least kicked off the team bus and walking back to Cluanie. Razor was adamant—player plus Jenna equals off the side.

When I pause in the aisle, calculating my next move, and he ignores me in favour of his reading, I relax. Perhaps he simply wants to spend a bit of time with his daughter on the return trip.

Either way, all my hopes of basking in Jenna's company for a few precious hours are dashed by the sight of his frowning face. I take the next best seat just behind her, slouching into the gaudy plush upholstery, the pattern so bright it hurts my weary eyes. Immediately a text pings on my phone.

Jenna: If you'd got here earlier...

I fire one back at her.

Me: No one's more sorry about that than me.

There's an immediate answering chirp.

Jenna: I'm not sorry about anything I did in the last 24 hours. You?

I swallow so hard, surely she must hear it—and the exhale of relief that gushes from me. Her words make me rash. I take a chance, the first step in nudging her beyond our deal made in the darkness of the early hours.

Me: Only that I didn't find you earlier. And I don't mean just today.

I suck in another breath, holding it, my gut twisting in guarded anticipation .

As Jenna's phone chirps again, Robbie lowers the paper and fixes her with a stare. Although I can't see his raised brows, I sense them. With lowered head, I still feel his inquiring gaze swivel towards me, peering over the high seat back. I keep my eyes fixed on my phone and then breathe out silent relief as he turns back to her.

“Sorry.” She offers the apology in a smooth consoling tone, evidence of years wrangling her father. “It’s Rachel. Text-bombing both of us at the same time.”

The lie slips so easily off her tongue. But then, that’s Jenna’s job. Not actually lying, I suppose, but definitely smoke and mirrors. Right now, this statement is a lie, told on my behalf to save me from her father’s scrutiny.

I switch my phone to silent, praying Jenna has the sense to do the same. I glimpse her flying fingers and grin as the text comes in.

Jenna: Bugger. He’s got us cornered. Time for stealth mode.

Me: Already done.

The rest of the guys amble onto the bus, all looking worse for wear, after drowning the Scottish side’s loss with overconsumption of alcohol. Most commandeer entire double seats for themselves, sprawling across both spaces, eyes closed, dark glasses on.

I see Jenna tuck in her ear buds, and rest her head against the window as the bus pulls away from the hotel, rumbling along Edinburgh’s cobbled inner city streets.

Beyond the outer suburbs, we cross the Forth bridge with the navy waters of the Firth below tranquil today, and then into countryside so green it hurts my bleary eyes. I pull on my sunglasses and settle in to read the sports news online.

For almost an hour, there’s radio silence from Jenna. She’s got earbuds in, so I tuck my phone in my jacket and leave her with her music. I’m hoping she manages to shake off her father when we stop. Maybe I can catch a moment to talk to her. I’m missing her presence already, so when my phone vibrates against my chest, I’m quick to pull it out. My jubilation is short-lived. This time it is a text from my sister and

she's not happy with me. Not an uncommon situation.

Rachel: Fuck it Geordie!!!! I told you no, but you had to do it anyway.

Me: Do what?

Rachel: Hit on Jen.

How the hell does she know? Surely Jenna hasn't told her. Not after we agreed to keep this quiet. I decide to play dumb.

Me: ????

Rachel: I saw you. On telly. In the crowd. Just now watching the replay.

Me: You didn't watch the game live? Where's your patriotic spirit?

Rachel: Pierre had a company function. Had to go.

Rachel: Damn it Geordie, you can't change the subject.

She's already angry, so I poke the bear with a stick just a little more.

Me: But I just did.

Rachel: Tell me you didn't. Please. Not with Jen.

I don't answer. This is already getting messy. I don't want to lie, but I'm damned if I'm going to let my sister, or Robbie Sharpe, scare me off from the best thing that's ever happened to me. So lying might become necessary.

I bury my phone back in my pocket, ignoring the two texts that come in. I can almost feel Rachel's seething anger in the vibrations, as if it's strong enough to remotely take control of my phone, even though she's hundreds of miles away in London .

Out beyond Stirling, the bus makes a stop at a cafe. I'm desperate to get something solid in my slightly queasy stomach, but I'm even more determined to grab a few minutes with Jenna. I spot her ahead of me in line without her grumpy chaperone.

I jump the queue and sidle in behind her, trying to look inconspicuous but failing if the looks from some of my teammates are anything to go by. So much for keeping this a secret. I pray Jenna doesn't notice. It wouldn't be great for our future if she thinks I've been blabbing about her like some conquest.

Nathan's face splits in a wide grin, showing all his perfect white teeth. He angles his head towards Connor, standing behind him, who mutters something in his ear. Our captain's eyes fix on me and one side of his mouth tips up in a knowing smirk. Fuck, that's all I need. My confidence at keeping Jenna and me off Razor's radar doesn't extend to these two. I'm screwed if they don't keep their mouths shut.

First chance I get, I'm going to remind them it's not only me with something to lose by exposure. The consequences for the team would be disastrous. It may sound cocky, but they'd have a hard job replacing my talents on the field if Razor gives me the heave-ho.

"Hey, there. You OK?"

I try to keep my voice casual, although it comes out a little high-pitched and there's a nervous tremor. I'm so close I can smell a heady perfume, a tropical scent overlaid with a faint trace of spice, as I lean into her ear—her shampoo, perhaps? It's intoxicating.

“Yeah, good. A little tired. No surprises there after last night.” Her voice is low, like we’re conspiring to commit a crime. She tilts her chin downwards and a seductive smile slides across her face. “You? ”

“Yeah, same. Sleep is highly overrated, though. Better things you can do with your time.”

She giggles, and it’s so cute. This incredibly capable and normally composed, thirty-something woman reduced to a giggling girl in my presence and a knot of pleasure tightens in my chest. She might not find my next words so funny, but I need to let her know. It’s her choice how we handle it—confirm, deny or no comment—after all, she’s the PR queen.

“Hey, I think Rachel’s onto us. Did she text you?”

She turns to face me, dark brows knotted in a frown.

“No. How could she know anything? What did she say?” Her voice is low.

“Reckons she saw us on the telly. At the game. Asked if I’d hit on you. And implied she’d rip my balls off if I had. Don’t ask me what made her come to that conclusion just from a glimpse of us in the crowd.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Nothing. Yet. What do you think?”

“Yeah, perhaps that’s best. Say nothing. Wait and see if she tackles me about it.”

A grunt from behind us and Razor appears, fixing me with a glare. I study the pies in the cabinet, making a show of leaning in to investigate the little labels, humming to

myself as if the decision between the steak and ale or chicken and mushroom is the only thing on my mind, while Jenna herds her father towards the till. It will be our last words of the day. Except for a text as I'm sliding into the seat behind her, settling in for the last leg of the journey.

Jenna: God, with Dad and Rachel both suspicious, this is getting messy. What the hell were we thinking ?

Worried she's getting cold feet, the message a prelude to her shutting this thing right down, I fire one back immediately.

Me: Relax. I've got this. Remember I've always been good at flying under the radar. Talk tomorrow.

She sends back an emoji, a smiley face wearing sunglasses and I pull on mine, take my own advice, and relax back into the seat to get some much-needed shut-eye as the bus rumbles towards Cluanie.

GEORDIE

What the hell were we thinking?

As I drive the electrician's van across town, heading for the Sharpes' house, that final text repeats in my head.

Yesterday, I sat in the seat behind Jenna, visualising her typing those words, amused. In them I thought I heard her enjoying the subterfuge—playing a game—the riskiness and sneaking around, adding an edge to whatever it is we're doing here. But when my two texts last night and another this morning went unanswered, I started to imagine other meanings.

What the hell were we thinking?

Now I hear doubt, regret, rejection. Like an opportunistic tackler for the other side, these ideas come charging in, unbalancing me and threatening to topple me to the ground with a crash. If I'm going to break free of them, I need to see Jenna. Even though my stomach churns with apprehension, Mum's breakfast of porridge swirling uncomfortably beneath my ribs, it's the only solution.

The ongoing electrical checking provides the perfect excuse for me to be here each day. I'll need to tread cautiously, not wanting to scare Jenna off with over-attentiveness. After all, in her mind, this is not a relationship. Friends with benefits, on her terms alone, and no more. Whatever it is, I'm not prepared to have it end before we've started. Before I've shown her other possibilities, if only she'd believe she deserves them.

As I turn into the driveway, I'm relieved to catch a glimpse of Coach's back. He disappears with long strides, off on his morning run. He'll be gone for a while. Being here last week, I already know his daily routine: a lap right around the edge of the town and then up to the top of Bourke's Hill and back. He's fit for an old bugger. Then he'll buy two takeaway teas from Meredith Markham's cafe, an excuse to drop into Darby and Keene, where he'll spend at least an hour chatting to Grant. With the season proper starting in two weeks' time, he'll have plenty to say.

Jenna laughs at Razor's obliviousness as he monopolises Grant's time daily. He seems to have forgotten that, unlike the admin people at the Highlanders, she and Grant aren't paid for time spent on Cluanie R.F.C. matters. Grant's role as president is an honorary position. Jenna throws in PR advice for free. But Razor taking up Grant's morning suits me well, gifting me two unsupervised hours with Jenna every day.

Is this when we're going to hook up? Stolen moments when I'm meant to be working, while her father's out of the house?

It's risky for sure, but we're too old to be banging in cars. Too old to be having sex in my bedroom with my parents downstairs. It's time to find somewhere else for me to live. I'm not needed at Mum and Dad's anymore, so no one will think anything of me moving out.

I could get my own place. There's enough money stashed in my bank account to buy a decent one with cash, but that feels one step too far for now. Yes, I'm back in Cluanie, and not unhappy about it, but inside me, there's this nagging voice telling me I'm not ready to put down roots here yet. Buying a house in the town would be a permanent commitment to this place. While coming home feels like it was the right thing to do, I'm still fighting the thought of being tied to Cluanie.

For now, I should probably move into Nathan's. He lives rent free in the house

behind the distillery. Just him and plenty of spare rooms and I think he's lonely. Whenever I've complained about living under my father's judgmental sneer, he's told me the offer of a room stands.

Nathan already knows our secret, and he's not one to blab. Out there in the country, with the property screened off from the distillery by trees, no one would see Jenna's sporty Beamer parked in the driveway. It's a sweet car, but stands out in a town full of Fords and Vauxhalls. If I got a flat in town, the gossip would explode the first time she pulled up outside. Nathan's place is a good option.

Parking beneath the imitation Greek columns of the portico, I divert my mind from these plans. No point getting too far down that track before Jenna and I have talked. I need to be sure she hasn't changed her mind outside the bubble of Edinburgh.

I head straight for the summerhouse, finding it in darkness. At first I curse under my breath, thinking the lights have gone on the blink, annoyed at the possibility I missed something in my electrical check on Thursday. But the place is empty. No Jenna. No Skylar. Not even Andy .

I whirl around at the thought of the dog, wondering if the little shit is right this moment, making a beeline for me, about to pounce on my ankles. At least I'm wearing my safety boots. Surely footwear designed to protect from electrical shock, heavy objects, and slipping and falling on your arse can thwart a nasty little Scottish terrier.

But the entire property—the summerhouse, the rippling pool, the neat gardens and the looming house—is bathed in quiet, still and empty. She's not there.

I trudge to the front door, retrieve the key from my pocket, and open up the house. I step to the keypad, ready to punch in the code, but find the alarm isn't on. Coach is sloppy. I'll need to find a tactful way to remind him about security. While this is

Cluanie and most people don't bother to lock their doors, most of them also don't live in a mansion like this. It's an obvious target for anyone hoping to score a good haul. Kyle and the two other local coppers do a good job keeping the locals on the straight and narrow, but it wouldn't surprise me if some out-of-town crims saw the Sharpe house as ripe for a burglary.

I turn the power off at the mains board in the garage and head for the kitchen. I breezed through the work in the upstairs bedrooms on Friday. Down here, as well as the kitchen, there are ten other rooms, including a fancy media room and two offices. It could take at least a couple of days to properly check out the electrical wiring in this sprawling house, even if I worked on it all day, every day. Although I'd prefer to spin it out over a longer period, hoping that both Coach and Sparky won't suspect my ulterior motive in timetabling the work that way.

Two hours later, I'm satisfied that none of the wired-in kitchen appliances are going to light up Jenna, and all the power points are safe. I stand for a moment in the entry foyer, my ears searching for any sound, but there's none. I shove away the dragging disappointment at her absence, telling myself at least it's better than if she was upstairs, ignoring me, after deciding the weekend was a huge mistake.

I send her another text, letting her know I've been in and giving an update on the work. It sounds too business-like, so I follow it up with a casual 'How's your day going?' I get no response.

On my way out I leave the alarm unset—don't want to give Robbie a heart attack when he steps into the house—lock up, and set off for my next job at MacFarlane's Distillery. Nathan's an unhappy man, the ageing equipment determined to ruin the start of his working week by breaking down again this morning. Maybe his misfortune drawing me back there is a sign I should move in. Living there, I'd be on call to baby the plant along until his boss can replace it, as well as having a safe place for Jenna and I to meet.

I glance at my phone, thinking I'll time the run out there so I can convince Jenna the drive's not too far when I get to talk to her. Staring at the screen, still blank with no response from her, I swallow down the niggling worry that it may not be 'when I get to talk to her', but 'if', because right now this conversation is all one-sided.

When I return to the Sharpe's the next day, I'm met with the same empty house. In between, I've dared two more texts to Jenna, trying to sound casual. I'm too scared to bail up Razor and ask him where she is. After all, he'd only ask why I should need to know or care. There's still no sign of Andy or Skylar. Maybe the dog ran away from her house on the weekend and they're all out hunting for him. It wouldn't surprise me. He's the definition of mayhem .

By the third morning, I've become despondent. And I shouldn't be. In what universe does a beautiful, intelligent girl like Jenna choose a regular guy like me? Of course, by the harsh light of day, the weekend is just a mistake. She's gone back to her pre-Geordie life. Jenna's off doing something important while I'm here, buried in the ordinary.

I race through my work today, now spurred on to finish up everything, so I don't risk facing Jenna and my huge error of judgement by coming back another day. Packing up my tools, I linger in the foyer one last time.

To the right, in the sunny front room, a baby grand piano gleams, its black lacquer in perfect condition as if Fiona Sharpe is going to take her seat at the instrument any moment, and coax it back to life. It's beautiful, far removed from the more modest, upright piano of the lessons in my childhood memories.

I stroll towards it, and lay a hand on the glossy surface, as if offering sympathy for the loss of the woman who loved it. The big strings in its heart lie still and silent, mourning the person who encouraged sounds from its depths. The music stand lies with empty arms pointing skyward, as if holding phantom sheets in place. I open the

lid to reveal the keys; smooth black hills and ivory valleys, starved of the touch of the woman who once made them sing.

I slide onto the piano stool, settling my hands into the familiar position. Just like at the hotel the other night, the music comes easily, the residue of years of lessons and hours of practice. It's Beethoven. The man really was a genius. His Moonlight Sonata is my mother's favourite; the one she'd beg me to play over and over, sometimes just for her, other times dragging me up in front of her friends like a performing seal, red-faced with embarrassment and clumsy under their scrutiny.

Today I play for Fiona Sharpe, a tribute to her kindness and patience with a boy who didn't want to be in her studio, but found an unexpected ease in the learning forced on him there, the music a language that made more sense to him than any other, the intricate pictures on paper painting a pattern his hands could understand.

I play for me, too, the melancholy melody well-suited to my mood. I focus on the notes, trying not to think about how stupid I was to imagine the weekend could possibly mean as much to Jenna as it did to me.

JENNA

I drift up from sleep, riding on a euphoric, pain-free cloud. I've finally won. After fighting for more than two days, now the simple act of lying here, feeling almost normal, floods me with gratitude for the drugs that eventually pushed away my migraine and the preventatives that most of the time stop them from stealing away days of my life.

I take a tentative peek from under still-drowsy lids. Sunshine leaks in around the edges of the curtains. Eyes automatically clamping shut against the brightness, I reach out with my other senses.

My breath rises and falls in a relaxed rhythm, no longer the frantic panting which, like a woman in labour, I deploy as a weapon against the stabbing pain of migraine. The air feels thinner, cleared of the heaviness that's dragged me down.

The bed is cosy, a pleasant warmth in contrast to the raging heat of yesterday. Or was it the day before? I remember Dad bringing me floppy ice packs to wrap behind my neck like a chilly scarf, his hands tender in a well-practised routine .

As I roll onto my side, there's stiffness in my joints, an after-effect of the medication that thrusts me so far under I lie deathly still, not shifting position like in regular sleep. After a couple of days, my body protests the lack of activity.

The ferocious pain in my temples is no more, and even the residual dull ache of the early hours of this morning has seeped away, leaving a gentle fog.

Through its misty tendrils, the soft sounds of the world return. When my headache was at its peak, tiny noises assaulted my ears like feedback in a speaker, amplified by the roaring of every nerve in my body. Now they offer comfort. Evidence that life goes on, waiting for me to rejoin it. Birds sing. A car slips along our quiet street.

And then there's a sound that makes me reconsider; one that suggests I haven't yet returned to reality but am still a prisoner in my drugged alternate world. Music carries up from below. A piano playing a classical melody. It's a beguiling dream beckoning me towards a place where my mother sits at her instrument and plays.

But I've spent too long in the haze of sleep these last two days and I resist the temptation, spurning the hand that offers to lead me somewhere that magic still exists. Eyes flitting open, I scan my surroundings, confirming I'm awake.

This is my room, my new bedroom, in our new house. Dad's and mine. A house my mother never lived in, never played in. A house that is ignorant of the beauty she coaxed from a piano with the precise yet delicate touch of those slender fingers.

I sit up, slide my legs onto the carpeted floor, and push myself to stand. With cautious steps, I move to the door, testing my legs' ability to hold me upright. I sway a little, but there's an overwhelming need to follow the music, as if a siren song calls me .

Beyond the door, it's like an invisible hand has turned up the volume, the melody billowing up the stairs. I inch along the hallway, steadying myself with a hand on the wall. Pausing on the landing, I take a moment to let the music wash over me.

It's Beethoven—Moonlight Sonata. Another sign I'm not in some parallel universe with Mum seated at the piano.

I know if she was to play for me one last time, this wouldn't be her choice. She always preferred Bach over all the other classical composers, especially the elegance

and intricacy of his Goldberg Variations—her favourite.

The tune falters for an instant and then resumes, tentative at first, then building in confidence. I take the stairs on wobbly legs. The music draws me forward with a desperate need to discover the source.

I pad in my bare feet across the tiled entry hall, the marble smooth and chilly. Ahead of me, sunlight streams through the windows of the room at the front of the house, the one that should have been my mother's studio, where her piano has sat untouched, surrounded by her things, a shrine. I pause in the doorway and I can forgive the person who has dared invade this sacred space, because his knowledge of her gives him the right to be there.

Geordie is unaware of my presence. Eyes closed, his fingers trace the keys, occasionally losing the flow, but always finding their way back, confidence returning to his playing as he retrieves the sombre melody. His body sways, immersed in the music, while emotion ripples across his face. Sometimes his brows dip a little in a frown of concentration as he searches for the next note, then, as he finds what he seeks in memory, his mouth curves in a satisfied smile .

The elegant classical music contrasts starkly with the man playing, dressed in an ordinary plaid work shirt, sleeves rolled up, old denim jeans, sturdy leather boots working the foot pedals.

The sunlight illuminates the gold of his hair, the shafts of light picking him out in a surreal glow like he's an angel Mum has sent down from heaven. It washes over his face, highlighting the clean-shaven skin I know to be soft and smooth, emphasising his youthfulness.

I remain silent, careful not to interrupt, allowing the music in its exquisite sadness to envelop me, a match for the tears that edge down my cheeks, warm and salty on my

lips. I don't move to swipe them away, fearful any movement will alert Geordie to my presence and bring this to an end.

But it must end. Gradually, his hands slow into the final quiet, contemplative chords, allowing them to fade away to nothing. He sits with eyes still closed, as if gently resigned to the loss of the music, instinctively knowing it would be wrong to venture beyond the composition's melancholy first movement into the lighter more playful middle section, or the rapid, turbulent finale of the third.

The emotion lingers in the air, as if both of us contemplate the greater loss of the woman who will never sit in this space, whose hands will never again caress the keys of the instrument she loved.

The moment Geordie's lids flicker open, he knows. He turns towards me with wary eyes, his face draining of colour. His hands fall to his knees as if hiding them away.

"Jenna, I'm sorry. I should have asked, but—" He bites at his lower lip, chin dipped, and I see a swallow ripple down his throat .

"No, no, it's fine." I swipe at my damp cheeks with the back of each hand. I must look a wreck, with blotchy heat still in my face, and my hair, stale with sweat, matted to my scalp.

"You don't look fine."

There's both a question and concern in his eyes. Self-conscious, I swipe back a greasy strand of hair, tucking it behind my ear. Geordie's seen me in disarray, but not by the brutal light of day. Unravelling in a sexy way, not this ugly, wrung out mess. Not with a sour-smelling body, unwashed for three days. The last time I showered was in an Edinburgh hotel room, where I reluctantly erased the scent of him from my skin.

“Migraine.”

“Since Sunday night?” He shifts on the piano stool, brows drawing downwards.

“Yes,” I confirm. “Tackled me hard this time.”

“So that’s why.” Even in my half-dazed state, I see the small exhale of relief as his frown clears. “I tried to text you. Every day.”

“Sorry, once the drugs take me under, I’m gone.” I offer a weak smile. “But I’m back now.”

His face relaxes, and he stands, moving towards me, undeterred by my dishevelled state. Part of me wants to retreat—god knows I reek, and I feel every one of my thirty-four years etched on my weary face—but I don’t, sensing he needs me to allow him in close, reassurance that my silence wasn’t a deliberate attempt to shut him out, or put distance between us after Edinburgh.

“That’s good.” He wraps soft arms around me, cradling me, as if understanding how fragile I am right now. As if he knows that having struggled upwards to surface in the real world, I could so easily slip back under. He’s holding me here, keeping my head above water with his quiet strength.

“Anything I can do?” He murmurs against my ear, a flutter of breath that sends a little tremor of warmth through my veins.

“Make me a coffee?”

“That I can do.”

He drops his hands to my arms, places a whisper of a kiss on my forehead and takes

me by the hand, leading me to the kitchen as if this is his house, not mine, and settles me on a high chair at the worktop.

“No Andy?” he asks, jamming a pod into the coffee machine, while casting a nervous glance towards the empty dog bed by the French doors, as if expecting the black demon to suddenly appear, snapping at his ankles.

“Still at Skylar’s. By the time we got home off the bus, I knew the headache was on the way. I asked her to keep him there and work from home.”

“Can’t say I’m missing him.”

It feels so right to have Geordie here, in our kitchen, but winning over Andy—and Dad—to the idea may take time.

“Me neither,” I grin. Andy’s prickly personality hasn’t exactly endeared him to me. “But don’t let him know. He might decide to add me to his hit list.”

“Does this happen often? The migraines?” His blonde brows dip in query.

“Well, no.” I try to think back. It’s been a while. “Hadn’t had a headache for six months until last weekend. After the party. And then again this Sunday evening. I’m not sure why they’ve come back now.” His mouth twists into a wry smile. “No—it wasn’t alcohol.” There’s a world of difference between a hangover and a migraine. I’ve had enough of both to know.

“It’s not that,” he says. “I hoped it wasn’t me giving you a headache.”

I can hear the doubt in his voice. Even confronted by the evidence of why I haven’t responded to his texts sitting across from him, me in all my ugly, smelly post-migraine state, he’s unsure. Either that, or gentleman that he is, he’s giving me an out,

a chance to back out of our arrangement gracefully.

There's no way in hell I want that. Having him here this morning, wrapping his tender concern around me, seeing how unfazed he is by the state I'm in, makes him even more alluring.

"The only headache you've given me, Geordie MacDonald, is how to keep seeing you without Dad finding out."

I take a swallow of coffee, savouring the delicious anticipation of the caffeine hit as it slides down my throat. I study Geordie for a moment, measuring his reaction.

There's a shy downward tilt of his chin, and his mouth curves in a smile. When he looks up at me under those pretty lashes, I read relief in his blue-grey eyes.

The ache in my head has gone, now replaced by other more pleasurable ones; a deep longing for the feeling of his long body pressed against mine, and a little tug at my heart.

"I may have a solution for that," he offers. "That's if you still..."

And there it is again. An opening for me to escape through. I'm not taking it. Instead, I place the cup down, lean forward, propping my chin on my elbows. I'm not sure if he has doubts about me or himself, too. Either way, I plan to erase them .

I know as a kid, under Geordie's sunny smile, was a little boy who struggled with lots of things others found easy, and cried in his room at nights. I know his father was hard on both children, quick to criticise and never one to hide his disappointment when they fell short of his standards, but more demanding of his son. I suspect as a man, Geordie's exterior confidence is still a thin veneer, easily broken, and I leap in to protect it.

“Nothing’s changed since Sunday, Geordie.”

My voice is husky, partly from lack of use, but also thick with a memory of heat and skin and his mouth all over me. I fix my gaze on his for a moment, and from the smoulder in his eyes, I can see he’s remembering too. My eyes drift down to the sensuous lips now tipping up in a small, knowing smile, and I’d like nothing more to lean over and kiss them. But jerking back into the reality of my unkempt state, I postpone the possibility.

“Tell me about this solution.”

GEORDIE

I barely hear the tiny chirp of a text above the rumble of men's voices and laughter bouncing off the walls of the rugby club changing room. I groan, immediately regretting my offer to be on call for a couple of hours this evening. Sparky has something at his kid's school, and while the thought of him as a parent is terrifying—one Sparky is already plenty, never mind a mini version—it's good to see him trying to do right by the wee lad.

Diving into the depths of my gear bag, I pray it's the sort of electrical emergency that can at least wait until later in the evening. Coach wouldn't be impressed at me bailing on practice, not with our first match of the season looming on Saturday, even if it's just a friendly against an Inverness club.

However, Razor would be more than pissed off if he saw the name on the text that lights up my screen.

Jenna: I'm here. Come and say hi. I'm in the stand.

I swallow hard, my stomach clenching. A sheen of sweat appears on the palm of my hand clutching the phone. I stare at it, blinking in disbelief, weighing what to do. She'll know I've read it, and now I must choose.

If I do as she asks, I risk her father's hawk-like eyes spotting me; more evidence there is something going on between us. From his strategic seating choice on the bus trip back on Sunday, he may already suspect.

The other option is hiding in here, disappointing her and souring this new but still fragile thing between us. How can I feel her eyes on me as we settle into practice knowing she asked, and I didn't go?

If I do, should it be now, before this lot ambles out the door? Less witnesses that way, but a lone man crossing the pitch to the stand will be very obvious to anyone watching—like her father. He will see exactly who that man is. It may only be seventy yards, but it's a long way on your own, exposed like a deer on a ridgeline, the perfect target for a bullet.

Perhaps I should wait, choosing the safety of the herd as cover. The guys gave me lots of stick about Jenna after I sat beside her on the bus trip, so it's not as if they'll be surprised. The winding up will start again the moment they see her anyway, so maybe I'll chance it.

I'm hoping no one is stupid enough to make a scene that will draw Coach's eye. The first ten minutes or so while we're doing warm up laps is always our last bit of downtime before he turns his full attention to us and starts bellowing. Surely, they won't sacrifice that peace just to land me in it?

"You OK, mate? You're looking a bit pale."

Nathan's concern for my welfare isn't helpful right now, but I won't brush off a friend who'd think to ask. He's excited about me taking up the offer to move into his place up at the distillery. My text to him as I left Jenna's this morning was met with an immediate, enthusiastic response.

I haven't broken the news to my parents yet, but I know Dad will be glad to be rid of me. With Mum doing well, he's already turned his attention back to me and my many failings, so it's time I got out of there.

“Yeah. Just work stuff,” I lie.

“Better not be someone from up at MacFarlane’s with bad news about that fucking plant.” Nathan’s dark brows frown down at me.

“Nah, all good. Not your lot,” I reassure. “And nothing that can’t wait.” I bury the phone in my bag.

I sit elbows on knees, hunched over, deliberating, but the decision is taken away from me. “Right lads, let’s look lively.” For a gentle bloke, Connor’s voice as captain has a surprising steely authority, and we all automatically respond.

The grass underfoot is a lush carpet, rain-fuelled and thick. While softening the ground beneath into a more forgiving surface for bodies crashing onto it in a tackle, it’ll also make it more challenging for guys like me to brace the weight of the scrum. Either way, I’m up for the physicality of it tonight. Anything to take my mind off all these thoughts and feelings that have held me in their grip since Jenna walked into the piano room this morning.

Our footsteps pound in unison, the team falling into an untidy group, their matey banter echoing across the empty pitch. I sneak a glance across to the white-painted weatherboard grandstand that has proudly stood guard over the hallowed turf of Cluanie R.F.C. for more than a hundred years.

There she is, a small bundle of red jacket and dark hair, shining like a lighthouse across the sea of club blue and white plastic seats. We make eye contact, and her mouth turns up in a smile. While Jenna’s face is still pale, even from here I can see the usual liveliness dancing in her eyes. She beckons me with a subtly raised brow and a small lift of her chin.

We round the northern goal post and head back along the other sideline towards the

stand. My breath quickens as we approach, and it's not from the exertion. I feel Nathan's knowing gaze upon me, but as we cross the halfway line, he mercifully ignores it when I slip out of the pack. I crouch down, pretending to tie a rogue lace. As the others draw away from me, I look up and, as if noticing her for the first time, stroll casually across to the stand. My face involuntarily creases into a grin despite the very real fear I'm a man about to die tonight.

"If anyone asks, you're updating me on the electrical work," she says with a sly smile. "And don't panic, Geordie." My anxiety must be obvious despite my attempts to appear calm. It's not the other guys jogging away from us I'm worried about—I'm shit scared her father will see us talking. "I've got Dad sorted."

To see that relaxed face, no longer ravaged by the aftermath of a migraine, sends a surge of tenderness inside me. This girl, she spends her life protecting others—her father, her clients, me too now—but I want to protect her, save her from bad things, including the fucking headaches like the one that stole her away from me for a whole two days. This arrangement of ours may not last. She could call time in a day, or a week—or when the November deadline lures her back to Glasgow—so I want to make the most of every day I've got.

"He's going to be late. I dropped him down at Kevin O'Keefe's garage to pick up the car." The one flashy thing that marks out Robbie Sharpe as having money, besides the ridiculous sprawling house he bought for just two people and a small dog, is his electric blue Range Rover. I've seen the glow of affection on his face as he climbs into it. He loves that damn car. "And don't expect him to be in a good mood," she says with a deep sigh. "One of the mechanics brushed the wall with it as he came back from a final test drive. It's just a graze in the paintwork, but Dad's furious. I left him nailing Kevin down about when he can drop it back for them to sort out a repair."

"Best he doesn't arrive to find me talking to you, then."

“Probably not.”

“It’s good to see you, anyway. I thought about you all day.”

“You can see a lot more of me if you want.” She tilts her head and raises one provocative curved brow, her mouth curled in a flirty smile. Her invitation is clear and my cock immediately stiffens a little in my shorts. “If you want to come over after practice, that is?”

Her voice has dropped to a breathy whisper, a sexy bedroom voice that only feeds my inappropriate hard-on. How the hell am I going to bind onto the side of a scrum with a fucking tent-pole in my pants?

“Do you think I’ve got a death wish, Jen? Even if I get past Andy, I’m not stealthy enough to make it past your father. Those high-tech hearing aids of your dad’s give him superpowers.”

The lads in the team have all learned Razor’s keen ears are quick to home in on any muttering amongst us, so we keep our mouths shut whenever he’s around. The modern technology makes it feel like he’s virtually privy to our thoughts. Fuck, if he is, I’m definitely a dead man .

Jenna laughs, low and throaty, brown eyes fixed on mine. I lose myself in them, commonsense trickling out of me by the second, overruled by a brain and a body that both want her so badly I’m already ignoring my own words of protest the moment they fall from my mouth.

“He won’t be home. He’s going to Grant’s after practice. Laura is cooking a late dinner for the pair of them. She’s been looking out for Dad while I was sick. Then they’re settling in to watch their favourite mid-week sports programme.”

“But now you’re well, won’t they be expecting...”

“I begged off. Said my stomach’s not dealing with food too well yet and I need to go to bed early. The second part isn’t a lie.” She dips her head coyly, a gesture I haven’t seen from her before. It’s sweet and hints of the soft compliant girl that lies behind the face the world sees when they look at Jenna Sharpe. “You’ve still got the key?”

The words, so simple, have a seductive edge, an invitation in them.

I nod, glad I forgot to leave the key behind when I hustled out of her place this morning, fixated on getting hold of Nathan and staking a claim on his spare bedroom.

“Well, you know how to get in and you know where to go. And what you can do with me when you get there.”

There’s no doubting the meaning behind the smokiness in her voice, and there’s that fucking look again. That blatant offer that I can have Jenna when I want and how I want.

I’ve never felt attracted to submissiveness before, but it’s an unexpected turn-on. I grew up surrounded by confident women and I’m naturally drawn to them. Maybe it soothes my insecurities when one invites me into her bed, knowing there I’ll still measure up under the scrutiny of someone capable. They’re like fire, both mesmerisingly attractive, and yet there’s the threat they’ll burn.

But this thing with Jenna, this strong-minded woman saying, “Behind that bedroom door, I’m your plaything,” has me wanting to take her up on the offer with such desperation I feel guilty at the wanting. The thrill of having so much power over her almost seems wrong; like it goes against everything I’ve been brought up to believe about respect for women.

Yet it's a power that's still hers to give and also to take away, and she knows I understand that. She offers it because she knows she can call a stop to it at any time. If she chooses to take back control, all it takes is one word, and it's hers.

"OK, see you around eight," I stutter out, excitement and fear gripping my throat so hard it strangles my speech.

"I'll be waiting," she singsongs, with a girlish giggle.

I hope like hell none of the guys approaching the twenty-two, on the opposite side of the field, catch the wink Jenna tosses at me before she turns to head for the exit from the stand. I'm watching the sway of her hips, in my mind already following them towards her bedroom, when the image of a certain black demon springs to mind.

"Hey, Jen," I hiss, wanting to yell but not daring. "What about Andy? I don't want to bleed all over your sheets."

"With Dad," she calls back. "You're safe."

That's a relief. If I die tonight, when Razor finds me in his daughter's bedroom and comes at me with a shotgun, at least my body won't be lying on the slab with ankles mauled by that vicious little bastard .

Trying to look casual, I jog the width of the field, my heart pounding in time with my feet, and merge back into the pack alongside Nathan.

"I don't know if you're brave or stupid, mate," he says with a grin.

"Both," I say, "but she's worth it."

The entire practice session, I keep my head down, work extra hard, anything to keep

Robbie Sharpe's critical eye off me. I'm sure tech-enhanced hearing isn't his only superpower. Where his daughter's concerned, I bet he's got a finely-tuned sixth sense that detects horny guys who are trying to get into her pants seconds before he obliterates them. I try to shove away the nervousness and anticipation battling each other like opposing hookers in a scrum, unsure who's going to take control of the ball.

Instead, I focus on Connor's calm instructions, Razor's barked directions, and focus on the here and now. The brutal pressure of the scrum as Nathan and I attempt to balance the weight of the pack; the shambling tumble of a maul, my brain scrambling to locate the ball under the untidy heap; the bruising tackle when one of the lads from the second division team who we're practising against nobbles me, arms wrapped around my hips, propelling me into the ground with a painful thud but not before I've flicked the ball to Brodie.

Practice goes well. Coach delivers his usual mix of threats and encouragement before Saturday's pre-season match against Ardnish R.F.C.—not a formidable opponent, but we never take a team for granted. There's energy in the room, confidence buoyed by the way our combinations are coming together, the set pieces looking steady, and the old Cluanie flair catching fire, ignited by Robbie Sharpe's belief in us .

The solid forward pack, mostly older experienced guys like Kyle and me, and Nathan too, already works in sync with our lively backs, anchored by the baby of the team, Brandon Smith at fullback. There's a sense we're going to annihilate Ardnish, and in the buzz of anticipation, no one notices my extra-quick shower.

First out to my vehicle, no one else is there to observe me leaving the grounds. I turn the van, not right towards the pub where they're all going to meet for a feed, paying lip service to Razor's booze ban even though we all know there'll be one or two pints sunk. Instead, I take the road to the left, in the direction of Jenna's place and the promise of heaven.

JENNA

A little after eight, I hear the front door open and Geordie's footsteps on the stairs. I exhale in relief. There's no time left for the ridiculous parade of questions that have marched through my brain for the past two hours. I've spent too long debating where and how he should find me. Like a teenager on a first date—not a woman who's already had sex with him two times. Or was it three? No matter, it's crazy for me to make such a big deal of this.

In the end, I'm in my bedroom, sitting on the small sofa by the window, my book in hand, dressed in a pair of shorts and a singlet top. There's a tentative knock and Geordie comes in.

His damp hair triggers a memory of him just days ago, in my hotel bathroom—rivers of water cascading over us, and me gazing up to see his head thrown back, his hair soaked, darkened wet curls framing his face, eyes clamped shut in pleasure, while I took his length in my throat. I swallow hard and drag my focus back on the present.

“Hey,” he says, his mouth tipping up in a small smile, dimples still visible beneath the scruff on his face .

He's let it get a little untidy since the weekend and thoughts of how that might feel with his head between my thighs, his mouth rough and hungry, come rushing in. He slides onto the sofa beside me, taking up the space, so there's nothing between us, his muscled body warm as he slips an arm around my bare shoulder and presses a kiss to my forehead. I close my eyes a moment, drinking in the smell of his body wash, fresh like a summer breeze off the sea.

Putting my book down, I lean back to survey his face properly, glide a hand across his cheek, and ruffle the beginnings of a beard.

“Quit shaving, huh? Trying to amp up the cowboy vibes?”

“Yeah,” he grins. “Do you like it? I’ll get rid of it if you don’t.”

“Yeah, I like it,” I say, tilting my head up to kiss him.

It suits him, makes him look older, and maybe I like that too. I’m honestly still a little awkward about the age gap. It’s stupid, I know, but thinking of Geordie as more my age, helps me push aside the not insignificant and mildly disturbing fact that he’s my friend’s younger brother. Sure, I’ve been out with a couple of younger guys before, but none where the difference in age is so clearly defined by years of memories like it is with Geordie. It’s why I deflected Rachel away from the topic of Edinburgh and her brother when she phoned this afternoon. I know I should tell her, but I’m uncertain of her reaction.

“You’re still OK with this, sweetheart?” he says, leaning in, his mouth working around my neck and along my bare shoulder, small licks, nips and kisses sending shudders through my already sensitive body.

“A-ha,” I say, lounging back against the arm of the sofa, giving him greater access as a hot tongue skims along my collarbone. Hands, and then mouth, rove across my stomach and breasts .

“Not good enough, Jenna,” he insists, his words a hot breath through the fabric of the singlet, searing my skin. “I need more than an ‘a-ha’. It’s a yes, or we’re not doing this.”

“Yes,” I squeak out as he plucks at a nipple. “Yes.”

“Then be a good girl. Lie back there for me, honey.”

I love all these little endearments, almost as if the western clothes have taken over his speech patterns too. In these intimate moments between us, Geordie might have been plucked straight out of Yellowstone, a gentleman cowboy. Or maybe not such a gentleman once the clothes come off.

One large hand is already busy undoing the zipper of my shorts, while the other flicks open the button. Within seconds, my shorts are around my ankles and my already drenched thong joins them, removed with a little more finesse than last time. He’s learning.

I’m no longer left to imagine what his beard might feel like between my legs as he sinks to his knees, and my breath hitches as his mouth settles deliciously on my centre. Between the attention of his hands and the relentless caress of his lips, Geordie sets to work with determination, within minutes taking me to the edge, then pulling me back again, until I’m begging him not to stop. Who’d have known my kind Geordie was capable of inflicting such exquisite torture?

“I’m going to come,” I gasp as I reach for it once more, and he draws away again.

“You get to come when I say you can come, pretty baby,” he says, scattering kisses along my shuddering thigh, while I lie panting in frustration. “But I’ll let you in on a secret. You only have to ask. Are you ready to ask? Something tells me you might be.”

He drops his mouth to my clit, blue eyes looking up, locked on mine as he watches me climb the heights again until I close my eyes, riding wave after wave of rippling pleasure. This time I’m ready to ask. Beg even. Anything to make him take me that bit further and plunge right off the crest.

“Oh, God, oh God, please,” I gasp, my need overwhelming every thought, as if without release I can’t even breathe...and the bastard pauses once more.

“Last time I checked, my name wasn’t God.” I feel his smile against my centre, even that minute flicker of his lips, a taunting taste of the pleasure they hold.

“Geordie, please, please, let me come,” I plead, fearful I’ll slip away from where I’ve been teetering on the edge.

He drops his head to that little swollen bud that’s pulsing, every nerve end jangling with tiny shocks like electricity, and with his soft lips sucking and licking and swirling relentlessly, Geordie takes me where I need to go.

Lying back, I try to steady my breathing. With my body still a little fragile after days of migraine, I wasn’t ready for this rush of heat and sensation. I don’t want to be done with this, but I need a moment.

“I promise I’m not finished with you yet, sweetheart,” he says, grinning down at me, “But I think that was a pretty good start?”

“The best,” I say.

Geordie stands, undoes a couple of buttons and yanks his shirt off. In the lingering daylight, it’s like I’m seeing his body for the first time. Beneath the western clothes lies a piece of classical art. He might be a sculpture in an Italian gallery, chiselled to perfection by the hand of some long dead master, muscled without bulkiness, washed in gold by the rays of sun that filter through my curtains .

His hair glows bright as he bows his head to unbuckle the heavy belt of his jeans. They crash to the floor revealing the strong muscular thighs and I shiver a little, thinking of him trapping me between them, and an excited pulse runs through me, as

he frees his large erection from the confines of his boxer briefs.

Now unclothed, Geordie returns his attention to me, carefully removing my shorts and knickers from around my feet, then kissing his way slowly up the bare skin of my legs to drape his body across mine. He deftly reaches around to unhook my bra, freeing my breasts. He worships each exposed nipple in turn, leaving me humming in pleasure. Heat pours back into my centre and my hand involuntarily edges its way between us, my fingers chasing the remembered sensation.

“Ah, ah. Not yet,” Geordie says, abruptly pulling his mouth away. “I want to be in you next time you come. Feel those strong muscles of yours around my cock.”

He stands and scoops me up. Just like on Saturday, within his arms there’s this sense of being precious, while at the same time, the ease with which he whisks me onto the bed emphasises how powerful he is, like a golden panther, and me his beautiful new plaything, totally at the mercy of his whims.

I’m perfectly happy to be that for him, following his direction as I ease a condom onto his thick length, spreading myself wide and taking him deep inside me. Soon I’m seeing stars again, as the rhythm of his body sets up exquisite friction, and this time with my name on his lips he screams his release into the overheated air. I join him with an earth-shattering second orgasm.

Afterwards, he grabs a flannel from my bathroom, cleans us both up, and slides back in under the sheet beside me. He curls his body, bracketing me protectively within his long limbs, his head nuzzling into my neck.

After the frantic pace of our coming together, we can indulge ourselves a little, take some time to just doze here together. I’ve set an alarm on my phone for nine-thirty. The sports programme finishes at ten, and Dad’s never home before ten-thirty. Grant has no difficulty twisting his arm for one more whisky, a nightcap before he leaves.

We adjust ourselves so I'm lying with my head on Geordie's chest, blissfully relaxed while we talk about our day and I love the quiet thud of his heart beneath me. There's something steadying in the rhythm.

I tell him about my efforts to get back to normal after those two lost days.

"First thing I did after you left this morning was call Skylar," I say. "She came right over and walked me through everything she's handled while I was...away." The girl is a wonder; it's as if God left her specially here for me in little old Cluanie. Maybe in his kindness, he brought Geordie back here for me too.

I deliberately leave out my conversation with Rachel—wanting to keep her separate from whatever is developing between Geordie and me, at least for now. But the omission sits like a stone in my stomach.

Geordie fills me in on his afternoon. He took care of a couple of non-urgent jobs from Sparky's list, and organised to move in with Nathan tomorrow. He's wasted no time in finding us a place we can be together without the looming possibility of my father catching us out, and there's an edge of anticipation as we discuss possible times we could meet .

I feel the energy rise in his body as he moves on to talking about rugby practice. He loves the game and being with the guys. Selfishly, I hope the joy he finds in playing for Cluanie again will keep him here till the end of the season in November, while I'm here too. Having found Geordie, I'm not ready to lose him yet.

True to our agreement, I try not to make too much of this interlude, lying here together sharing about our day like we're actually in a relationship, with our lives intertwined. That can't happen, but there's no reason I shouldn't enjoy the simple intimacy of a conversation about ordinary things.

“Smith was so damn solid under the high ball tonight,” he says. “Totally unfazed. He’s going to run rings around the Ardnish blokes on Saturday.”

“The word’s out about him. Bet they’re shaking in their boots.”

“You’re coming to the match?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I say, snuggling into his chest. “But I’ll let you into a secret—I’m not coming to see Brandon—I’ve got my eye on a certain blindside flanker.”

“Never had my own fangirl before,” he says, smiling into my hair. “Best you don’t bring one of those signboards with my name on it though. Might be a bit conspicuous, eh?”

“I’ll show how much of a fan I am after the match.” I trail my lips down the line of hairs that runs to his navel, nipping at him lightly as he folds across me, chuckling to himself.

I’m just calculating if we’ve got enough time to take this further when there’s the sound of a car in the driveway. We both jerk upright. The automatic garage door rumbles open and closes again. The car’s engine stills, and there’s a click of a door opening and a matching clunk as it closes. Familiar animated yapping echoes up from below, drowning out all other sound—Andy. And Dad.

Houston, we have a problem.

JENNA

Geordie and I lie in silence, our breathing amplified by the fear in the air. Footsteps come up the stairs—steady, deliberate—and they’re heading this way.

“Bathroom,” I hiss, pointing at my ensuite. “Get your clothes.”

I hear frantic scrabbling, the rustle of fabric, the dull thud of one cowboy boot colliding with another. My heart slams against my ribs.

Please, please let Dad not hear that. Let him not worry I’m sick again and just walk in—because if he does, one flick of the switch and he’ll find Geordie naked, the room drenched in the scent of sex. And, if Geordie makes it to the bathroom, please let him gain control of his breathing. Right now amongst the panicky gasps, I swear I can hear his heart pounding, too, but it’s probably my own.

Geordie moves with remarkable stealth for a man of his size. In the dim light, I watch him slip across the room and into the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him with a soft, controlled click, even though I bet every instinct screams at him to slam it.

A few breaths later, there’s a quiet knock.

“You OK love. ”

“Yeah Dad, I’m OK.” It takes all my mental effort to sound normal.

“Thought I’d bring Andy. To cheer you up.”

The door notches open. Shit. I snatch my dressing gown from the floor, hoping to drag it on in time to spring to the gap and meet him there. The last thing I want is my father setting foot in the room, the air itself evidence. One flick of the light switch—my hair a wreck, my bed destroyed—and he’ll know.

But, before I’ve had a chance to cover myself and make the intercept, a small black shape darts in.

“Here he is then,” Dad says, in his warm rasp. “Snuggle up with him and get some sleep, eh?”

“Will do. Thanks Dad. You too.”

“Goodnight, love.”

“Goodnight, Dad.”

The door glides shut.

I exhale relief, reaching for the lamp. Its glow reveals Andy, frozen like a statue, one questioning paw raised, head tilted in curiosity, beady eyes narrowed in suspicion. He sniffs the air, and his wiry beard bristles.

He knows.

A low, menacing growl rumbles from his throat. He turns towards the bathroom, advertising his next move. I leap from the bed, but I’m two seconds too slow. Andy launches at the bathroom door in a frenzied explosion of barking and clawing.

“Andy!” I give a frantic whisper yell. Panic claws up my spine. Surely Dad must hear this riot even without the help of his hearing aids, which he usually tucks away in their case the moment practice is over. Please let tonight not be the night he’s deviated from this small protest at their necessity.

My brain fires into action. Last time I duped Andy away from a seek and destroy mission, I used the haggis soft toy. It sits high on a dressing table, a little worse for wear, but still intact enough to serve as a suitable distraction for the little shit.

“Andy,” I call softly, snatching the toy

When I toss it at him, it bounces off his back. He whirls, a look of canine outrage on his hairy face. If he could talk, he’d be saying, “How dare you use me for target practice?” But the barking stops. He no longer slams his body against the door as if possessed by a demon. His jaws snap open in glee, and he pounces, baby shark teeth clamping down with a victorious squeak . He flops to the floor, mauling his prize with growls of satisfaction.

One problem solved. Now how to get Geordie out of the bathroom without bloodshed?

They say necessity is the mother of invention, and god knows I’ve got a desperate need here. Making cooing noises, I approach Andy warily. He’s never bitten Dad, or me, or any woman, in fact. His favourite victims are blonde-haired men, but I still don’t trust him. However, I need to be brave if my favourite blonde-haired man is going to get out of here unscathed.

Andy releases the toy for a moment, grinning up at me with pride. I snatch it away, wiggle it tantalisingly, and then launch it across the room. Understanding the game, he leaps and grabs the stuffie, worries at it with his teeth accompanied by a satisfied growl, then releases it, looking at me expectantly, stubby tail wagging. Guilt stabs at

me. I've never actually played with Andy before. Mum always did, even in her last weeks. He must miss her .

With each round of the game, I strategically move myself closer to the bathroom door, eventually arriving hard up against it.

“Geordie,” I breathe, hoping he can hear me over the slurping sounds of dog drool.

“What the fuck are we going to do?” he hisses back. There's a hysterical note in his voice.

“I want you to stand back a little.” I force myself to sound calm, like I've got this under control. “When the door opens, I'm going to toss a toy in, lure Andy in there. You get out past him and we shut the door.”

“Jen, the plan sounds good in principle, but I'm not sure...”

“It's the only plan.”

A pause. Then, “OK, let's do this.”

I swipe the toy from beneath Andy's paws while he's taking a moment to gloat. One hand poised on the door handle, I speak softly against the wood.

“Geordie. Are you ready to go?”

I hover the wee haggis toy just out of reach of Andy's delighted bouncing. Right now, I'm grateful for his terrier high prey drive. He's totally focused on the toy, not the voice of the man in the bathroom.

“As good as I'll ever be,” Geordie mutters back.

“Got all your clothes?” We’ve only got one shot at this. There won’t be a second.

“Yep,” he says.

“OK, stand back so I don’t wipe you out with the door.” I ignore the leaping dog. “On the count of three.”

I waggle the toy at Andy .

“One...two...three!”

I fling the door open, and lob the haggis toy right across the bathroom. The deft throw is as good as those of my childhood rugby playing days. It bounces and lands, a grey shadow tucked beneath the toilet.

Andy zooms past me, a black arrow in full flight. He skitters to a stop by the toilet, pounces on the haggis and turns to show off his catch, his feet pattering in a triumphant dance.

The few seconds are enough for Geordie. He comes flying out. Andy spins, eyes wide with betrayal. But the moment passes. His toy-obsessed brain takes over, and he drops to the floor, chewing at his prize with glee. The haggis toy won’t survive, but its sacrifice is in a good cause. A life for a life.

Pale-faced, Geordie balances, pulling on his jeans. I can’t help but admire his bare torso, all golden in the lamp glow. Nicely sculpted pecs invite the memory of my hands flowing over them. A decent set of abs—not washboard, but still enough to beg a girl’s lips to kiss their way down them. The delicate fuzz of curls on his chest that I’ve already love burying my nose in, inhaling his musk.

However, if I want to enjoy these delights again, it’s important we develop a second

plan—how to get him the hell out of my bedroom before Dad finds out. I regret my impatience encouraging him here tonight. By this time tomorrow, Geordie will have his own room at Nathan's place up at MacFarlane's, and we will be safe—physically, at least.

What we're not safe from is the feelings I get swirling inside of me, telling me I want more than just the touch of Geordie; more than his lips on mine; more than his fingers flickering at my clit, lighting up my body; more than the length of him inside me, the powerful thrusts igniting a fire. I'm greedy and undeserving, but I want all of him.

Crazy bastard that he is, he wants me like that too. I can see it in his eyes, as he leans in to press a kiss on my tender bruised mouth.

Well, he thinks he does, but it's early days, and like Adam before him, the more Geordie knows me, the less he'll want. He'll see that our arrangement is best for both of us. Me with no expectations and him with no commitment.

Despite my dark thoughts, I can't help but smile into the kiss as he says, "Wish me luck."

With quiet footsteps, he moves to the curtained window. Drawing back the drapes, he opens the sliding door and steps out onto the small Juliet balcony. It looks like my Romeo has an escape plan. I rise and move to stand at his shoulder.

"Are you sure?" I whisper. "It's a long way down."

"Dead easy," he replies, leaning in to press a final farewell kiss. I melt into it, savouring his lips so warm in contrast to the wisps of chill night air brushing across my cheek. At least I'll have this memory if he kills himself plummeting from my balcony.

Geordie levers himself onto the railing. He swings one leg over, then a second, before gripping the steel and twisting around to hang from the side, long arms stretched like an orangutan, legs dangling. It's effortless, his upper body strength perfect for this.

For someone with his length of leg, it's only a small drop to the ground below. He lets go and lands in a half-crouch, with a solid thud.

Grinning up at me, Geordie stands, offers a wave, and jogs off down the driveway. Thank god he had the sense to leave the van down the side road. I hope he's going to make it that far. Security lights fire into life as he passes each sensor, and I hold my breath, waiting for the front door to fling open and my father to appear. That's absolutely not the thing I want because Dad's the sort of guy who believes he could still run down and tackle an intruder.

With Geordie's rugby-honed speed and agility, I doubt Dad would catch him, but he'd get close enough to identify a certain lanky blindside flanker with a mop of golden curls and no good reason to be on our property at nine-thirty on a Wednesday night.

I brace myself. No door bursts open. No yelling. The only sound, besides the thumping of my heart, is the rhythm of cowboy boots, echoing down the driveway and fading into the dark.

GEORDIE

Anyone seeing the Bright Sparks Electrical van tearing up the road to MacFarlane's Distillery at one o'clock on a Thursday afternoon with me at the wheel might think one of two things: either, 'Geordie's back to have another shot at fixing the annoying electrical fault that Nathan's been whinging about forever'; or 'Geordie's heading home for lunch'. They'd be wrong on both counts.

For one, my superior electrician's skills have triumphed over shitty old wiring, so everything at MacFarlane's is just fine right now; and second, I already had lunch with Mum, which has been my regular weekday routine most days since I arrived home.

Some days I text her and tell her I'll pick up something from Gail's Bakery down in the main street. It's worth running the gauntlet of the town gossips who frequent the place to get your hands on Gail's food. She does a damn good Scotch pie, with just the right amount of spice in the mutton filling; and I'm still floating on the memories of yesterday's bridies, with the beef and onion succulent and the pastry perfectly light and flaky. Although nothing of Gail's could compete with the macaroni cheese Mum whipped up today, all runny sauce made with generous amounts of sharp cheddar and mopped up with chunks of bread she made herself.

I've missed Scottish food, but it wasn't the lure of a good feed that took me past home right on noon. It seemed extra important to visit Mum today. I packed my clothes last night when I made it home from Jenna's—fortunately without lead shot from her irate father peppering my arse—and moved out this morning. I needed Mum to know despite my haste to leave, I'm not abandoning her.

It became more important when I arrived to glimpse Jenna through the window, sitting in the kitchen, a full-beam smile on her face, my mum fixing an adoring look on her, the one she's always had for Jenna.

Jenna dished up plates of food while chatting away to Mum with such easy familiarity they could be mother and daughter. The pair of them ganged up on me, giving me shit about my scruffy, unshaven face. I noticed Jenna relax into Mum's goodbye hug. It made something tighten in my chest, a pang of longing for something almost within my reach, but at the same time miles away.

Jenna could fit so easily into my life. I wish I could open up and let others see what an important part of it she's become in such a short time. My mother would be excited for both of us if she knew we were something more than two people who've renewed old connections and become friends.

Today, I felt Mum's eyes on us, watching the conversation flow back and forth with a small delighted smile on her face. Whether it's savouring the pair of us being home—I'm sure we're a lively alternative to my father's dour company—or she suspects there's something unspoken stirring beneath our friendly banter, I'm not sure. If anyone would guess, it would be Mum .

The people skills that make her an incredible nurse—kindness, empathy, and an ability to read what people are feeling but not saying—are all things that make her a much-loved member of this small town. In Cluanie, people will stop you in the street and tell you how wonderful Aileen MacDonald made them feel even when trapped in a hospital bed, sick or broken. After Mum saw me and Jenna together today, I'm not so sure our secret is safe.

Anyway, the way Jenna comes blazing up the road like a bat out of hell in that damn sports car of hers, she'll draw more eyes than a parade. Soon the whole bloody town will know. Behind me, she takes the turn into the gateway with a squeal of brakes and

sits right on my tail all the way up the drive to where I park in front of the house.

She leaps out, dark hair whipped by the wind, eyes glowing. Her cheeks are flushed pink, alive with the thrill of the roof down on a beautiful day.

“Fucking hell, Jenna, the cops are going to be onto you soon if you keep driving like that. Next, they’ll be waiting for you.”

“Bet I could outrun them any day.” She laughs as if the challenge excites her.

Her recklessness matches my mood, firing my need to get her inside. I snatch at her hand and stride towards the house, towing her behind me. Her mischievous giggle at my impatience stirs my eager cock, and it thickens in my jeans.

I fumble the keys in the door. Jenna moulds her body against my back, leaning in to lick and nip at my neck. One arm wraps around my waist, her hand burrowing through a gap in my shirt. Heat blooms on my skin. We fall through the door, and she shoves it shut behind us, sliding the bolt across. One corner of her mouth tips up in a wicked grin.

We pounce on one another, with wild grabs at clothes, unbuttoning and unzipping as we stumble into the lounge. I fumble with the tiny buttons on her shirt and she elbows me aside, taking over the job herself while I toss my own on a chair.

She doesn’t trust me to break her out of her skirt either; a sheen of black leather like liquid poured across her rounded hips. She shimmies out of it, casts it aside and stands for a moment in just her underwear, as if allowing me time to appreciate my first ever sight of her unclothed in the daylight. I am a grateful man.

Sun filters through a curtain, lighting Jenna’s flawless skin, the shades of it a work of art. My eyes rove from her feet still wrapped in a pair of shiny black heels that

scream ‘Fuck me now’, to the soft golden tan of her legs, then roaming upwards to where it fades to a delicate creamy white across the curve of her stomach.

I back her up against a wall and fall upon her skin like velvet beneath my lips. I kiss my way upwards, one hand drawn to cup the weight of her breasts. My thumb brushes a pebbled nipple and my mouth instinctively seeks it out. I peel aside the lace of her bra, and, cradling her breast in my hand, I gently take the already swollen peak between my teeth. She gasps, her breathing quickening as I set to working it hard between my hungry lips.

My other hand travels down the cool line of her back, provoking a shiver and a sigh as I trace the little bumps of her spine, before clasping that perfect arse, completely exposed by the tiny thong she wears .

Not wanting to play favourites, I switch my attention to her other nipple. Her head falls to my shoulder, her body slack with pleasure. She sucks and tastes, her breath fire against my skin.

My fingers seek her clit and she moans as I set up the rhythm I already know she likes; slow, steady, circling, her hips leaning into every beat. I inhale the scent of her, warm and wet, intoxicating, and it fires my desperate need to be inside her. The painful pressure of my erection against my pants demands release. I reluctantly pull away from her, kicking off my work boots and dragging my gaping jeans down, followed by my briefs. I toss them aside.

Meanwhile, Jenna discards her shiny heels, and they skitter across the wooden floor. She waits, eyes blazing with need, yet wanting me to take charge of this final undressing, offering her body as my gift to unwrap.

With one flick of my hand, the bra falls loose, and I can’t help but take a moment to give each perfect tit an appreciative squeeze, loving the way the firm flesh overflows

my hands. I slide my hand into the lacy band of the thong, thrusting my palm hard against her. Jenna groans at the friction, then groans again as I release it and slip the wisp of fabric downwards. I fall to my knees, burying my face between her thighs, hungry for a taste of her, while she daintily raises one foot at a time, freeing herself from the thong.

She unravels under my touch, gasping, writhing. Jenna chases her pleasure like she drives that rocket ship Beamer of hers—full speed ahead, with no brakes. I back off, desperate to feel her come on my cock today. I tuck my arms under hers and lift her up. Those legs wrap around my waist, and the heat of her centre pressed against my stomach feels so fucking good I could just stand there and let this beautiful creature cling to me like a fucking baby koala. Just as damn cute, too. I lower her onto the sofa, where she lies back, breathing still heavy.

“No time to get you upstairs, sweetheart,” I say, snatching for my wallet with its replenished supply of condoms. Never thought I’d be awkwardly placing a pack on the chemist’s counter at Cluanie Pharmacy for the first time at the age of twenty-eight, but there I was on Monday blushing like a schoolboy.

“Guess we’ll have to save that new bed for tonight,” she says, propping herself up on her elbows, brown eyes smouldering. Her mouth tugs up in a wicked grin. Damn it, she even tosses me her favourite flirty wink.

“Oh, I think after this, you’ll definitely be coming back for more, sweetheart,” I say. “You are good with this?” I ask, fisting my cock, then unfurling the condom as I kneel on the sofa between her splayed legs. The dusky skin between them glistens wet, the scent of her arousal heavy in the overheated air. While another guy might see her obvious readiness as an open invitation—and I’ve learned Jenna gets off on me taking control—when it comes to consent, she’s always in control. Non-negotiable.

“Yeah, I’m good. Come here,” she says, stretching out her hand and tugging me

towards her.

When I sink my length into her, it's like coming home. She arches her back, seeking the perfect angle. I grab a cushion from behind me, shoving it roughly under her hips.

“Yes, more,” she huffs and I comply, burying myself in her, hitting the spot hard and deep. Her breath hitches with every thrust, her exhales threaded with whimpers. I roll my hips in the way I know gives her extra contact, the friction working her clit .

I'm struggling to hold back today. She feels so fucking good, her muscles clenching me so damn tight I'm glad it's not my fingers in there because I swear she'd break them. Drawing on every bit of self control, I manage to hold myself back just long enough. She tips her head back, her mouth open in a shuddering release, and feeling her come so hard around me sends me crashing over the edge.

When I come back from the bathroom, Jenna's still lying there on the sofa, a cushion under her head, eyes closed. The dappled sunlight through the gauzy curtains lights the peaks and valleys of her body.

She's so beautiful it hurts and I wish I could keep her here in this little bubble, where all her worries about what anyone else might think about the idea of us together don't exist. Where all her doubts—that she's too much of this, or not enough of that—are erased by me loving her. I don't use the word love in only the physical sense, because I think this is a woman I could love if she'd give us a chance. If she'd let me love her.

Stretched out there, totally naked and uninhibited, I long for her to have the same confidence about the Jenna inside as she does about her outer body. Then she might see how easy she is to love.

I sit on the end of the sofa, lifting her feet and propping them on one thigh. She opens her eyes with a bright smile, like she's just woken in the morning to see me for the

first time. God, what I'd give to wake up with her one morning.

She shuffles herself down the sofa, edging her feet further onto my lap. I take one between my hands, massaging it with firm strokes, and she hums in pleasure.

"Feels so good," she sighs.

"Christ, if I'd known I could get those sorts of sounds from you just by touching your feet, you could have left your clothes on. "

She snorts out a laugh. "If you think you can get away with just a foot massage, Geordie MacDonald, you are deluded."

"I can tell you now," I tease, "there's no way I'd have dragged myself away from work if I thought I'd only get to give you a foot massage."

"Yeah, like getting away from work was so hard." She mumbles in between tiny moans as I begin work on her second foot, kneading her instep with my knuckles.

She's right. Working as a contractor for Sparky isn't the most exciting job, but it fills my days and gives me flexibility. I can choose to take a few hours off to spend with her.

I'd be happy filling all of my days with Jenna, but I'm thankful she's gifted me this hour away. It's pulled her away from her own work, and I know how much that matters to her.

I ignore her squeal of protest when I tuck her feet to one side and lie down, stretching out on the sofa alongside her. She turns onto her side, facing me to make more room, and I press myself against the length of her. I graze a kiss on her warm forehead.

“This is nice,” she says, dropping her head to my shoulder, her breath coasting across my bare skin. “Having the place to ourselves. No marauding dads.”

“Or dogs.”

Bubbles of laughter burst against my neck.

“No Nathan? About to crash through the front door and see your naked arse?” she grins.

“No,” I say. “I put the chain on. Besides, over in the distillery, he will have heard that car of yours announcing your arrival. He’s not coming home early. ”

“Good,” she hums against my chest, as if she’s in no hurry to leave. She’s relaxed under my arm. “Just us.”

We lie there, moulded together, skin to skin. My fingers absently untangle the strands of her hair while hers play with my chest hairs. I don’t speak, not wanting to break the peacefulness between us.

“I really like you, Geordie MacDonald,” she breathes against me, the words warming me through.

“I really like you, too, Jenna Sharpe.”

She tips her chin upwards, her brown eyes soft and serious.

“How is it that I find a guy like you, here in Cluanie? And who’d have thought,” she muses, “that guy would be you?”

“Not me,” I say. “This is not what I expected coming home would look like. But I’m

pleased it does.”

“Me too,” she says. “No one, least of all me, would have predicted that you and I would be good together. But here we are.”

I’m pretty sure from the delicate kiss she presses on my mouth that she’s not just talking about the sex, and the small ember of hope in my chest flares for a moment. And then, just like that, with my next stupid words, I extinguish it.

“I think Mum would agree,” I say. “She couldn’t stop smiling the whole time we were there.”

It’s as if I’ve flicked a switch.

“You think she knows?” Jenna’s eyes widen in alarm. The outside world comes crashing in, popping our perfect little bubble. I was the idiot who invited it in.

“No, no,” I assure, “I’m sure she’s just pleased to have us home.”

“Sure,” she says, as if happy our secret’s safe. But when she immediately pushes up off the sofa and starts to clamber across me, eyes searching the room for her clothes, I know I’ve failed to convince her. She’s spooked.

Five minutes later, I’m standing at the window, still cursing my stupidity. The bright red car disappears around the curve of the driveway, the roar of the engine emphasising the speed of her getaway.

JENNA

“I’ve got to run.” That’s what I told him, and now I’m in my car, speeding home like the cops are on my tail. Running.

Running from something that feels too good to be true. In my weak moments, I let myself believe there is something happening between Geordie and me. Something more than sex, something bigger, deeper, scarier. And I’m running from it.

The thought of Aileen MacDonald—hopeful, ready to welcome me as more than her daughter’s friend—sent me plummeting from the high of lying in Geordie’s arms, feeling wanted for all of me, not just my body. I’m left slumped in a depressing low.

This is exactly why he and I can’t be in a relationship. When it’s just sex, no one gets hurt. If it were to become more—if I was to give in to my selfish wanting, to allow Geordie to have the thing he thinks he wants—well, when the inevitable happens, it will be like a bomb going off. It wouldn’t only obliterate everything between Geordie and me, including our friendship. The rippling wave of fallout will take others down with us. The risk is too great .

I blast down the road, heading for my office, a sanctuary where I can immerse myself in work.

I toss my handbag on the desk and sink into my chair, facing the laptop where I curate perfect lives for my clients—and for myself.

It’s here I construct the version of myself the world sees: the professional, the career

woman, my life in order, bravely throwing myself into my new business after losing Mum; but like it is for my clients, it's a facade. Behind that, I struggle to believe I'm the sort of woman a man could truly love. The last time I fell for someone—let him in, shared the parts of me I rarely show—he rejected me. Now, I'm falling for Geordie MacDonald, but I'm afraid...afraid he'll see the real me and walk away too.

I go a whole day without seeing or talking to Geordie and I hate it. He texts me all through Friday.

My first glance at my phone on the bedside table:

Geordie: Good morning beautiful

While he's on a job at the restaurant at Buchanan House:

Geordie: The smell in this kitchen is killing me. Who'd have guessed Brodie could cook so fucking well? Bringing you here for dinner sometime

Parked outside busybody Fran MacMillan's place:

Geordie: Preparing for interrogation at the hands of Mrs MacM. How fast can I wire in an oven? Wish me luck

Each time I leap at the chirp of the text. Each time my finger lingers over my phone, longing to reply. Each time I tell myself no, not wanting to fall further under the spell of Geordie. Sure, friends text each other. That's normal. But I'm having a hard time focusing on my work as it is, my mind straying to possibilities of things I can't have. Conversation with Geordie, even by text, will take us further down a path that can only lead to heartache. I need to keep this thing with him in a nice neat box, namely the four walls of his house.

Finally, at five o'clock, when another text arrives, I succumb.

Geordie: Long day. Off to the pub. Guess you've been busy. Time for a drink?

Jenna: Sure I'd love to.

I type the words, then erase them. Too keen?

I type a thumbs up emoji, and then erase that too. It feels blokey.

Jenna: Great. See you in thirty. Smiley emoji.

I stare at the single line, weighing up if I've hit it right. I can't believe a woman with my PR experience, who always knows the exact words, the perfect tone for any written communication, is struggling to compose a simple text. That's the Geordie effect, right there.

At the pub, I settle myself into the booth, opposite Geordie and alongside Connor's bulky frame. Nathan's there too, and the talk is all about the game tomorrow. Even so, I feel their eyes upon us. I can see what they see. Every time we interact. Geordie's eyes are a little brighter, his smile a little wider. When he banters with me, it's charged with something small but visible. I mirror it. Without thinking, my body and my words respond instinctively to Geordie, in a way they don't with anyone else .

When Nathan and Geordie head for the bar, Connor nails me with one of his serious looks. He's an old soul, this man. That sage-like demeanour he seems to have worn since his teens is another reason I've always seen him as just a wise friend. I suspect from his expression he's about to share a little wisdom with me now.

"So," he says, rolling the word thoughtfully on his tongue. "How's it going?" He

inclines his head towards Geordie standing at the bar.

“How’s what going?” I purse my lips and raise my brows in mock confusion, scrambling to cover my surprise. If Connor wants to interrogate me, I’m not making it easy. If he’s got a question, I’ll make him spell it out.

Undeterred, he does.

“You and Geordie. Come on Jenna, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“What?” I say, my brows. “Nah, nothing to see there, Connor. Just friends.”

“Is that right?” he says.

“It’s just good to be back amongst people I know. Especially after the last six months.”

I feel a twinge of guilt. I’m not proud of dragging up the horrendous year I’ve lived through to put him off the scent, but I’m desperate. Nathan knows. If Connor knows too, that’s two people who can talk about it. Neither of them are gossips, but it only takes a slip of the tongue when someone else is in earshot and it’ll be all over town.

“Sure,” he says, “as long as you’re OK.”

He stretches a broad arm around my shoulder, giving me a brotherly side-hug. He’s smiling down at me, which is just as well, because he doesn’t see the flash of concern—no, jealousy—that blazes across Geordie’s face. It’s there for an instant and then gone, replaced by his normal cheerful expression as he sets the drinks on the table in front us.

This isn’t good. Sure, we’ve agreed we won’t see anyone else while we’re seeing

each other. It's just common sense. It'd get awkward. So he knows I'm not going to start up something right in front of him, or even in secret. He really has no reason to be jealous of Connor hugging me. It's Connor.

But when I see Geordie's possessiveness, I'm worried—for two reasons.

First, it confirms my fear that he's making too much of this thing between us. And second, I like the way it makes my heart leap way too much.

GEORDIE

“Do you have to go?” I have to ask, even though I know the answer.

The more I have of Jenna Sharpe, the more I want. A week ago, this would have been a dream come true—her lying in my bed, her curvy body soft and warm against mine, and the air thick with the scent of us, mingled with her already familiar expensive perfume.

Nuzzling into her hair, I drink in the fragrance of spring, probably some equally expensive shampoo. I want more of it, more of her. I should be grateful for these early autumn nights, making love to Jenna in slow, languid strokes—learning her body, savouring the details of what brings her pleasure. But I want more.

I should be relieved we no longer have to tiptoe around the undetonated bomb of her father coming home early—or risk that fucking psycho dog launching a teeth-fuelled missile attack on my ankles. Or my arse. I’m sure he’s not fussy about where he maims his victims.

What eats at me is how business-like this feels—like a transaction, with secrecy as the price I pay to keep her in my life. All I’m offered is this small part of her, while if I had the chance, I’d take it all .

“Stay,” I plead gently. “Phone him and tell him you’re staying over with a friend.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a lie.”

In the dark, I wince at her words. It's not a lie. We are friends. While I've been told friendship is a sound basis for a relationship, from the moment we reconnected out on the terrace at that damn party—only two weeks ago—part of me has wanted Jenna as more than a friend. And not just the sex, although that's pretty fucking amazing.

“I can't Geordie. Not yet.”

I feel a stupid leap of hope at that one little word—yet. Her staying over in my new flat isn't off the cards—yet.

It's probably wise to take it carefully. However, I'm sure we'll be sprung, eventually.

Even my parents questioned my urgent need to move out of my childhood bedroom and in here with Nathan. Dad isn't sorry to see me gone, but Mum's plea for me to at least come over for dinner once a week tugs at my conscience. She's not yet cleared to go back to work, even with the reduced hours Dad insisted on. I'm sure running around after me and cooking dinner for more than the pair of them helped to fill her days.

But that's not the main reason for her invitation. I know, even after all this time, she holds out a tiny hope that he and I could sit at a table together and have a normal conversation. She's an optimist. It'll never happen.

I still feel the old guilt at leaving her there, inhabiting the same house as the bastard. It's misplaced, as I know she's the one person in the world who he genuinely likes, and any small dissatisfaction with her is only surface level and fleeting. Still packing up my things in the space of an hour and leaving town, even if it is only seven miles, felt like a betrayal.

Jenna's old man is bound to get suspicious if she stops coming home at night. Someone is going to see her driving this way every evening, or ducking up the road

to MacFarlane's on random afternoons. Anyone who does is guaranteed to tell tales. Cluanie, like all small towns, loves to gossip, and who's sleeping with who is a topic that always grabs their attention.

"I can wait," I lie. "If anyone can come up with a good cover story, it's you. After all, that's how you make your living, right?"

She levers herself upright, sitting with those beautiful legs arched. My eyes rove across them. The ankles that minutes ago I had resting on my shoulders while I drove into her. The shapely calf muscles, taut and toned like an athlete. The curve of her thigh. I can still feel the smooth skin under my palm.

She hesitates for a moment—just long enough for hope to flicker—before she shreds it.

"Geordie, I don't think it's a good idea. To stay over. Sure, we're sleeping together. It's fun. But waking up together..." She pauses, her face a mask, her smile not tipping up at the corners like usual. "Somehow it suggests this..." She waves a hand between us. "...is more than it is."

"And what do you think 'this' is?" I add air quotes, a stupid gesture matching my stupid question. I know the answer and I know it's only going to slam my heart like going down in one of Fraser Sinclair's bruising tackles to be dumped on unforgiving early-season ground.

"A bit of casual fun. Friends with benefits if you want to put a label on it. Isn't that what we agreed? Unless you've changed your mind? And believe me, if you have, that's fine. No damage done."

Of course I've fucking changed my mind. The damage is already done. The first time I've fallen for a woman, not only is she my sister's friend, and my coach's daughter,

she wants to keep me out in the fucking friend zone. Even if it is definitely the fucking kind.

I dip my chin in reluctant agreement, trying to keep my features neutral. I want to take Jenna by the shoulders and shake her, yell at her, make her look me in the eye and tell me that she doesn't feel it too, that there's more between us when we come together than two bodies desperate for some mutual pleasure. There are two people for whom this could be so much more—and for one, it already is.

But if I can't even get Jenna to stay the night, what chance have I got of making her stay in Cluanie? In November, she will walk away from the town—and me—heading back to her glamorous job with the Highlanders, back to the excitement of the Glasgow nightlife, back to her old friends. How can ordinary old Geordie MacDonald compete with that?

GEORDIE

I'll admit it, I've messed around a bit with drugs here and there in my younger days. What kid wouldn't, given how freely available they are in some of the places I've travelled? It's legal in others, so why not? Nothing big, just a little marijuana, and honestly, it wasn't anything to get excited about.

The buzz is nothing compared to what I feel as I jog onto the field before a match, even one like this that doesn't count for much—a pre-season friendly with the lads from Ardnish. We're playing in different competitions, so this Saturday's game is just a chance for us to try out some combinations and a few plays.

Today, however, I'm on an even bigger pre-match high, because Jenna is here.

There's a larger than expected turnout of locals—probably more to check out the new coach than the team—but it's a casual affair, people flanking the field so close they risk being taken out by a player crashing over the sidelines. Small town club rugby, grassroots rugby—heartland rugby, as old Razor calls it.

Amongst them, right on the halfway mark, Jenna stands out. It's not the bright Cluanie blue supporters jersey—she's swimming in a sea of those—but a set of gorgeous hips outlined in a figure-hugging pair of jeans, and neon pink trainers that shine like a beacon. Of course I'd find her, anyway.

Jenna has a magnetic pull that somehow always draws me in her direction. I even sense when she's about to show up, like last night at the Railway, as Nathan, Connor, and I settled in for a quiet beer after work. It's busy on Friday nights, a stream of

people in and out, so you ignore the comings and goings; but this one time when the door swung open, something made me turn to look and there she was.

It's hard to have a casual conversation with Jenna in a public place, knowing that within an hour she's going to be in my bed, but I did my best. It's easier with Nathan and Connor around. They're in on the secret, so we don't have to be as guarded with our words, but damn it, I wanted to do more than talk.

The seating arrangement pissed me off, with Jenna ending up in the booth next to Connor. At least that way, I got to look into her eyes—a conversation without words flashing between us. But I'd have loved nothing better than to pull her in alongside me, or hold her hand across the table, maybe plant a kiss on those pretty lips; find some way to let the world know she's mine. Not that she really is.

I need to remind myself of Jenna's terms: she's only mine within the confines of my bedroom, our arrangement nothing more than a series of satisfying hook-ups. We do this while it's fun, and when it's not, we stop. Much as I hated it, that's what I agreed to. In the past, I've been good at keeping to those sorts of rules; in fact, I've often laid them down myself. This time it's different .

Usually I'd be glad to see a girl collecting her things and hustling out of my room, but last night when Jenna insisted on leaving in a hurry, I wished she'd stay. For a moment there, I thought she would. Cuddled up to me, talking together, I wondered if, like me, she's wanting more from this relationship, but the next minute she's grabbing her stuff and gone.

I push aside thoughts of Jenna and return my focus to the game—well, not entirely. Her presence on the sideline makes me want to play better than ever today. Although easy-going off the field, the competitiveness that roars in my brain the moment I tie on my boots is amplified to a deafening roar, knowing her eyes are on me.

The whole team is pretty fired up. No one wants to let down the new coach or sully his reputation. We'll give it all we've got. Especially with a reporter from Tryline UK, an online rugby magazine scrutinising us. He's doing a feature on Coach's transition from a champion team of professional players to a bunch of small-town lads from a two-bit club out in the sticks. His focus is on Razor, with a keen eye on young Smith—a gem hidden out here in the rough—but there's extra pressure on all of us. Don't want the rugby world thinking Coach has backed a squad of numpties.

The rugby gods are on our side, as Connor steps up to take the toss. We win and he instantly grabs the opportunity to play into the wind first. It's blowing a hoolie, so we'll make sure we face it while we're fresh and make the tired Ardnish boys work extra hard in the second half.

In the end, it doesn't really matter. Our team is rampant over the visitors from the first whistle, running in five tries in the first half alone. We follow up with two more in the second, including one by yours truly. Seventy-five minutes in, Darby sells a nice dummy off the back of a scrum deep down in the Ardnish half, and then the ball's in my hands. As I pound down the length of the field to the encouraging screams of the local crowd, I'm sure I can hear Jenna's voice above them all.

I leap to my feet triumphantly, ball tucked under my arm, not a defender even level with me yet. I immediately look to our twenty-two, where I know she's been standing. In the moment before my teammates descend on me with whoops of congratulations, Jenna's delighted eyes and wide smile meet mine and I've never felt so proud to lay a ball over the try line.

When the final whistle blows a few minutes later, I can't take credit for the eventual win. It's a team victory, of course. Our high level of fitness left the other team gasping from the start. Although no one could ignore Brandon Smith's deadly accurate boot. His cheeky drop goal and a flamboyant try of his own showed exactly why he could turn professional tomorrow. With his dependability under the high ball

and twenty-four points on the board, he's an easy choice for man of the match.

However, we all know the real man of the match is our coach. Robbie Sharpe's clever thinking, the innovative approach to set pieces, the carefully constructed combinations of players, and strategic substitutions; all combine to make us unstoppable. All spurred on by his growling instructions—bellowed from the sideline in old-school fashion rather than through a headpiece sitting in a box like he would have done with the Highlanders.

The large zero hanging under the 'Visitors' side of the scoreboard is a sweet sight—but not as sweet as spotting Jenna in the clubrooms when I step out of the showers .

There's a smallish gathering in the bar area, pretty much all locals, as most Ardnish fans didn't make the trip for what was a low-stakes pre-season game. Like a compass finding true north, my eyes swing straight to Jenna, seated at a table with two other women, glasses of wine in front of them.

One's Lexie Morgan, in my class at school, and married to burly Troy, our loosehead prop. I don't know the other woman; she's a little younger, with immaculate makeup.

Lexie's the first to spot me, waving me over. I do a quick scan for Coach. He's in the far corner, back to me, gesturing wildly as he talks to the reporter. I've got the group as cover—safety in numbers.

Jenna's mouth curves up in the sort of smile I'd like to think is only for me. It always seems a bit brighter, her eyes a bit more sparkly when she looks at me. I know there's not another person in the world who causes me such an immediate rush of happiness when I see them. Only her, and it always triggers a sharp ache inside that if I wasn't only twenty-eight, I might think was a heart attack.

It is really. Just a different kind of heart attack; the pain is my desperate need to be with her, even if it is in a crowded bar. I'll take anything of her I can get. For now, I'll share her with others, and later perhaps she'll follow me home.

"Geordie," Lexie gushes. She hasn't changed a bit, still the same loud bubbly girl I remember, which I suppose balances out Troy, who's known to be a bit of a quiet, grumpy bastard. "We were just talking about you."

"You were?" I say, casting a suspicious eye at Jenna, who rolls her eyes and laughs, and they all look at each other like they've got some conspiracy going on .

"Yes, we need you," Lexie squawks. "For the pub quiz team. Tuesday nights at The Railway. Casey and Joey moved on down to Ballenaig for his work, so we're two down and it starts again week after next. Jenna's going to join us and we need another guy, along with all that stuff you guys know about." She giggles. "Come on Geordie, please? It'll be fun."

I smile, but inside I'm gripped by panic. Joining a pub quiz team is one of the last things in the world I'd choose to do. The only thing worse would be appearing on The Chase where you have to answer the questions on your own, and your stupidity is filmed for the world to watch on television. Even in a team, I have this fear of being the dumb one. The guy who never has a clever answer, the one who has the least to offer.

But then I latch onto what she's said. Jenna's going to be in the team, and that changes everything. I can either join the team and have her, and the rest of them, witness me making a complete arse of myself, or sit at home every Tuesday like a right mug while she's down the pub with random blokes sniffing about. What if they fill my spot with some other guy and she takes a shine to him? Especially if he's got all the answers; someone more in her league in the brains department.

Anyway, I'd be crazy to turn down time with her. Wherever Jenna goes, I go, even if it's something taking me miles out of my comfort zone—like a fucking pub quiz.

“Ah, yeah, I suppose so,” I say, trying not to let my lack of enthusiasm show. Lexie might take back the offer if she thinks I'm going to put a dampener on their ‘fun’. Although Troy's never struck me as a fun guy, so maybe I'm safe.

“Here, sit with us, and I'll tell you all about it.”

“Can I grab a drink first?” This situation calls for alcohol, whether Coach says it's allowed or not.

I return a few minutes later with a whisky—beer won't cut it—pull out a chair and slide in under the tiny bar table, my knees knocking against its chipped formica surface. They may have a flash new coach, but the Cluanie club rooms are still pretty basic.

“OK,” Lexie says, “so there are six in a team. It doesn't have to be equal numbers of guys and girls, but we've found there's a real advantage if you mix it up a bit. The guys always know the sports stuff. I'm great on TV programmes and movies. Daisy here is our music expert—although we have to remind her not every answer is a Taylor Swift song.” She elbows the other woman playfully, while Daisy puts on a displeased pout. “Oh, sorry, have you met Daisy? She's Calvin's girlfriend.”

I haven't before now, but I know young Calvin. A good lad. Plays opposite Brodie out on the right wing.

“No, I haven't. Nice try your man scored today,” I say, and a smile of pride lights up Daisy's face, the candy pink lips and perfectly arched brows making her look like a doll.

“Yeah, I’m so thrilled for him. His first year in the team, first game—”

“My ears are still ringing from all her screaming.” Lexie gives a theatrical eye roll and sends a mock scowl Daisy’s way.

Jenna’s watching the exchange with an amused smile, and I give her one of those ‘What the hell have you got me into?’ looks. She smirks back at me, not showing any inclination to rescue me from Lexie’s attention.

I get the full rundown on the quiz night: the ten rounds, the points system, and the other teams. Apparently the biggest competition comes from ‘The Irn Bru Crew’—who don’t drink any alcohol even though they spend two hours in a pub every Tuesday evening, so that might explain their advantage—and ‘Whisky Business’, a group of pissheads who somehow regularly win despite their over-indulgence in the local brew.

“And what’s our team name?” I ask, realising as I speak I’ve called it ‘our’ team, so I must be joining. God help me.

“Quizzing In The Deep.” The name means nothing to me. I look at Jenna.

“Lexie’s an Adele fan,” she says. Still means nothing to me, but I nod like it does.

“So you’re in?” Lexie asks. “Please say yes. Jenna told us how you’re so smart, you know, from living in all those different countries. Apart from Jenna, the rest of us have hardly been further than Edinburgh. But you, you’ve done it all.”

I’m hit with a quiet flush of pride, knowing Jenna’s been talking me up to them. Without realising it, she constantly feeds my ego when we’re alone together, talking to me as an equal—not her, the educated one, and me, the battler—but it’s the first time I’ve felt this new confidence in front of others. For her to suggest I’m a guy

who's got something worthwhile to offer in the knowledge stakes, even if it's just for some small-town pub quiz team, makes me feel like I deserve a place on University Challenge .

"I'm in."

"That's amazing." Lexie bounces from her chair, flinging her hands around my neck and splashing a kiss on my cheek. "Let me get us another round to celebrate." She scoops up her empty glass and reaches for Jenna's while eyeing my almost empty tumbler .

"Not for me, thanks," I say. "Better stick to just the one. Need to cut back on my drinking now the season's on us."

I glance Jenna's way, hoping she'll read the invitation in the subtle raise of my brows, as I prepare to slug down the last of my drink, bringing the glass to my lips.

"Me neither, hun," Jenna says. "I'm going to head off. I've got a client I need to do some stuff for. Best I don't keep him waiting." Then she winks at me.

She fucking winks.

I almost choke on the whisky and am rewarded with a smirk from Jenna as she rises from her chair, leaving me wiping away the last splattered drops from my mouth, although, behind the back of my hand, I'm smiling too.

JENNA

“The things I do for you.” Geordie’s chest beneath me relaxes in a sigh as he leans down to brush a kiss on the top of my head.

“You didn’t seem to be complaining a few minutes ago,” I huff against the sweat-damp curls of his hair plastered against my still overheated cheek, as my fingers lazily circle one very erect honey-coloured nipple. “The things you were doing for me seemed to have some pretty obvious benefits for you, too.” I can’t help my mouth from curving into a satisfied smile.

My thighs tingle at the thought of Geordie between them. I can still feel the sensation of his length buried inside me, his cries matching my own as we moved together in rhythm, the words ‘Yes, yes’ echoing in the air. The friction of his hips against my clit pushed me to a second, overwhelming orgasm, just moments before he collapsed against me, breathless, sweaty, and completely spent.

“Not that,” his laughter rumbles through me. “I’d never complain about our mutually beneficial workouts.” I can hear the smile in his voice, but the words erase my own .

Mutually beneficial workouts. That’s what I asked for and that’s what I get. As it becomes harder and harder to push down my feelings for Geordie, I regret this agreement to the point where it ties my stomach in knots every time I think about it. Especially since I stopped fooling myself that it’s anything more than my response to his likeability, and our compatibility between the sheets.

To begin with, I tried to justify it as simply me allowing the fact he’s my favourite

person in Cluanie—one of the few people in this town who I’m really comfortable with—to colour my feelings. That self-deception didn’t last long.

In my work I can put a PR spin on almost anything, sell half-truths or even outright lies with a confidence that has me believing them too. Unfortunately, you can’t lie to yourself. I am falling for Geordie MacDonald. Hard.

While I make a living extracting people from disasters of their own making, I’m totally clueless when it comes to finding a way out of my own. Not when I see such longing in his eyes and chide myself for being so selfish to even start this with him.

Already, we’ve both run roughshod over the rules we put in place to prevent this happening. I’ve let him fall for me too, when that’s the worst thing he could ever do. Because when you fall, there’s always got to be a landing, and when that landing is finding out who I really am, it’s going to hurt both of us.

In this Goldilocks tale, he will discover I am the girl who is both too much and not enough, and realise he needs someone who is just right. When I watch him walk away, as eventually he will, it’s going to smash my heart into a million pieces, but he won’t get away unscathed. I hate the pain it will cause him because he’s so kind and decent. Unlike Adam, Geordie understands he can hurt me, and he won’t want to, but in the end he’ll also understand that he needs to—because I’m not for him.

“Are you going to admit that was pretty good, or are you just going to pretend all those ‘Oh Gods’ were some kind of come to Jesus moment?”

“Yes,” I mumble. “I love doing this with you.”

“Good. So do I, and no, I wasn’t talking about giving you orgasms, sweetheart. I meant joining the fucking pub quiz team.”

“You didn’t have to, not for me.” I sit up, glad of the change of subject while schooling my mouth into a mock pout for his benefit. “You could have said no, although I admit Lexie did a pretty hard sell.”

“What? And let you head down to The Railway on your own every Tuesday night? Fuck off.”

“I wouldn’t have been on my own,” I fire back. “Not in a whole bar full of people.”

“And that’s exactly why I had to join the team. Too many people. Too many single male people, in fact.”

“Geordie. You don’t trust me, huh? We agreed this is exclusive, right? Or is the deal off? Did someone catch your eye? One of those pretty girls swarming the club rooms?” I tease.

This is the part of our agreement I don’t regret. If I’m screwed up now, it’s nothing compared to what I’d be if he was seeing other people. I’m only going to have Geordie for a short time, so there’s no way I want to share.

“Yes, this is exclusive, sweet,” he reassures. “It’s not you I don’t trust. It’s all those other bastards who want to hit on you. ”

“You do know someone’s going to be onto us, with you sitting there glaring at every man who comes within a foot of me like you did last night?”

The man grows teeth and claws if anyone other than Nathan approaches. Damn it, he was even a little frosty with Connor squeezed in the booth next to me, and he knows Connor could never be more than an old friend. I’ve told Geordie outright. I love the man to bits, but there’s no spark between Connor and me; never has been, never will be.

“Ten feet,” he scowls. “And even that’s too close.”

“Look, the quiz night’s going to be great. Both of us have been away a long time. It’s a good way for us to get back into the local social scene. Something other than the rugby club.”

Don’t get me wrong, I do love the club, even the smell of the carpet soaked by years of spilt beer, and the tang of liniment drifting from the locker rooms brings waves of nostalgia from my childhood, but if I’m going to survive Cluanie, there has to be more.

“At least I don’t have to sit there looking like a dick at the rugby club. I know I can hold my own on the field.”

“You’ll hold your own in the quiz team, too.”

“Yeah, right,” he says, and the gloomy look in his eyes makes something tug inside me, seeing how this beautiful, intelligent man thinks so little of himself.

I curse all those people who ever made him think he was anything less because his brain doesn’t work like theirs, or because he learns differently from other people. That includes his bastard of a father. I’m determined to prove them all wrong. This stupid pub quiz is one way I can start .

“We’ll practice,” I say. “There are question sets online. Give me your phone. I left mine in the car.”

He tosses it across and I search for a moment. Geordie grabs at some pillows, props himself up, and crosses his arms across his chest a little belligerently, a less than enthused expression on his face.

“OK, hit me with them.” He exhales a weary sigh.

“Right,” I say, having found the website for the very company The Railway uses for their quiz. These will be perfect. “Question one: What is the main ingredient in guacamole?”

He screws up his nose.

“Avocado. Disgusting. Way too green.”

“Geordie MacDonald, you’re going to get a bloody deficiency disease if you don’t start eating something besides meat and carbs.” I glare at him and he smirks back, totally unashamed of his childish stance on vegetables.

“Nothing deficient about this, is there?” He leans back and spreads his arms wide, his naked body living proof that he might be right.

“Vain bastard,” I scoff. “OK. Next. What is the national animal of Scotland?”

“For fuck’s sake, are you picking out the easy ones just for me?”

“Nope.”

“Unicorn. It’s on the Cluanie R.F.C logo for chrissakes.”

“Exactly,” I say, skipping to the next question. “Which 2014 Taylor Swift album was her first officially labelled as pop rather than country? Oops, I think that’s one for Daisy—who just so happens to be the best damn brow tech I think I’ve ever let loose on these.”

I waggle my brows at him and he laughs, and stretches forward, tracing a long finger

across them .

“Beautiful,” he says. “Like every bit of you.”

I’ve never been turned on by someone touching my brows before, but then, it doesn’t even take a touch for Geordie to light me up. When his hand softly drifts down, tracing the contours of my face I melt into it until he’s cupping my cheek. I’m already thinking we should forget the quiz and go back to practising other things. Though we hardly need to, given I’ve been in Geordie’s bedroom every day since he moved in. From his smug face, he’s reading the effects of his caress, and I pull away.

“No distracting me from quiz practice. The answer was 1989, by the way,” I say, going back to the phone. “Which is the only Northern Hemisphere team to have won the Rugby World Cup?”

“England, 2003,” he recites as if that’s the most ridiculously easy question he’s ever heard. I wouldn’t have got it even though I’ve lived and breathed bloody rugby for years. Geordie’s going to be the man for any rugby questions. “Wish I could say Scotland,” he muses. “Maybe one day—”

He jerks his head towards the window as the sound of a car climbing the long driveway drifts up from below. It’s a refined purr, not the diesel rumble of Nathan’s trusty old Land Rover. Geordie stalks over to the window, buck naked, and draws back the curtain. A slant of moonlight highlights his beautiful arse, round and muscled from all that thrusting in the scrum. Perfect for any kind of thrusting, really. It makes me want to grab hold of it and pull him onto me—and into me—again.

“Jesus,” he says. “It’s my father.”

I pull a sheet around me and move to stand, one hand on his shoulder, peering down into the parking area out front of the house. A broad silver Mercedes glides to a halt

next to my little BMW roadster, which practically glows as the security lights, triggered by the other car's arrival, bathe the area below.

The two vehicles couldn't be more different: Kenneth MacDonald's sedan, a conservative middle-aged man in a formal dinner jacket, while my expensive gift-to-self is a flamboyant redhead in a sparkly cocktail dress. I've begun to regret buying something so distinctive since I started sneaking around with Geordie. I'm sure someone in the neighbourhood will soon note my regular trips up this country road at odd hours of the day and night.

"Crap. What do we do? I can't exactly pretend I'm not here. I knew we should have done a deal with Nathan for his spot in the garage."

"What the fuck does he want?" Geordie tenses beneath my hand. "Oh, shit. I hope it isn't something wrong with Mum. Though surely he'd have phoned."

Geordie's phone never leaves his side. What I once considered a vice in myself, I've learned to accept in him. Though work claims most of his calls, I understand the deeper truth: he needs to be there for his mum, haunted by what he considers his years of neglect. How could I fault him for that?

He moves to take it from me, but stops as the thunk of the car door closing echoes from below.

"Oh, fuck. No," he says.

"Fucking hell," I chime in. There are no other words for it.

Rachel MacDonald, the unmistakable curly golden mane tumbling down her back, stands hands on hips, glaring at my car, a frown on her heart-shaped face, and muttering to herself. From what I know about my friend of nearly thirty years, I don't

need to lipread—she'll be saying "Fucking hell" too .

In our shock, Geordie and I jostle at the curtain and the movement catches her eye. The security light spotlights Rachel's upturned face, knotted brows, narrowed lips, and incredulous expression. She looks as if she's just discovered the Lord Chief Justice skinny dipping in the Thames.

Geordie lets the curtain fall as she strides towards the front steps. "I'll go," he says. "I'll deal with this."

As the hammering on the door begins, I imagine Rachel's fists, clenched tight, fingers heavy with gold jewellery rapping on the old wood, demanding entry. I slump on the bed, watching Geordie retrieve his boxer briefs from beneath it.

"No, we both lied to her. We should both be there."

It's the last thing I want to do, but I don't have a choice. I've talked to Rachel five times in the past two weeks—five chances to come clean. Even when she brought up the trip to Edinburgh and Geordie, I didn't bite. Maybe my silence threw her off the scent. But now she's here, and this is so much worse than if I'd just spat it out.

"Seriously," he says. "Leave her to me Jenna. At least give me a few minutes with her first. You jump in the shower."

Nausea rises in my throat, the sour taste of deceit. I might just throw up.

Geordie drags on a set of sweatpants. They slouch low over his hips. He doesn't bother with a shirt, which is probably unwise. Confronting Rachel with evidence of his recent undress isn't going to help matters—but we're in so much shit, it's probably not worth trying to hide it.

“I’m coming,” he yells, over the pounding on the door. Geordie’s expression isn’t fearful, more pissed off as he charges down the stairs to meet her. I’m glad one of us is feeling brave .

I slip into the tiny ensuite bathroom and turn the shower on full, hoping to drown out what’s happening below. The normally soothing staccato of hot water on my skin does nothing to damp down my worries. I rehearse opening lines for the conversation ahead, but for the first time in my life, words fail me. Ironical—I can polish anyone else’s crisis to a shine, yet fumble in the dark with my own.

GEORDIE

Rachel bangs so hard on the door, that when I rip it open she tumbles through, crashing into me.

“What the fuck, Rachel?” I glare into my sister’s eyes, for once grateful for the towering heels that make her as tall as me, letting her see exactly how pissed off I am.

“Shouldn’t that be my line?” she snaps as she brings both hands to my chest, pushes herself roughly off me, and straightens into a more dignified pose. She tosses back her hair with an angry flick of each hand. “God knows I’ve got the right to ask a few questions,” she spits. “Given you obviously didn’t take any notice of what I told you two weeks ago. What part of ‘don’t hit on my friend’ did you not get Geordie? I thought that should have been fairly easy to understand. Even for you.”

With a slip of the tongue, she tosses out the sort of casual putdown that dogged me for the first eighteen years of my life. Her words slam into me like a prop’s rogue elbow to the throat. My lungs seize, trapping the words inside. When I finally find my voice, regret is already painted on Rachel’s face, but I’m not letting her off just because she’s about to plead guilty.

I’ve always been the amiable one in the family, letting slights slide off my back, but tonight, that changes. I’m going to stand up for myself, for who I am and for what I want, and to hell with her and the rest of them.

“Well, that’s a fucking low blow, Rachel. Even for you,” I bite back.

She flinches a little, but Rachel's thick-skinned. She doesn't show when words hurt, and she never backs down. Forged in the same dysfunctional family, we chose different ways of dealing with our father: fight or flight.

I chose flight. That's why I spent most of my childhood roaming around town on a bike, and why I got myself out of Cluanie as soon as I could.

Until she was eighteen and left this place behind, too, Rachel always fought. She honed her skills against the best, arguing with our father almost daily, never letting him think he'd gotten to her—though I often heard her crying in her room through the bedroom wall. Outside of that room, Rachel never conceded victory, and the old bastard admired her for it, though he wouldn't let it show. It's why she's a kick-arse lawyer earning the big bucks in a top London firm; why she's got this amazing track record for winning cases.

She's not going to win tonight. Rachel won't wear me down with her tough talking. Who the hell does she think she is, storming in here like some damned avenging angel?

I turn my back on her in disgust and walk through to the lounge, seating myself in the enormous armchair that Nathan bought himself to sit in and watch telly. It dominates the space. If I'm going into battle with my sister, I'm grabbing the high ground.

Her heels click on the wooden floor of the hallway. Trust Rachel to be wearing flash shoes on a weekend visit with the family. She follows me into the room and perches on the tiny couch. She clasps hands dripping with too much jewellery in her lap, sitting with long legs tucked neatly to one side, like she's the fucking newly crowned Princess of Wales. I love my sister, but right now I don't like her; and right now everything about her—her clothes, her carefully made-up face, even the way her eyes suggest she's about to apologise—irritates me.

She opens her mouth to speak, and I cut her off.

“You want answers, Rachel? I’m going to give them to you.”

Her mouth closes in a tense line, red lips thin.

“OK,” she says. “Spill.”

“Jenna and I are together. It’s new, fragile, and the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But more than that—and I’m not trying to be an arrogant prick here—I think it might be the best thing that’s happened to her in a very long time.”

“Edinburgh, right?”

“Edinburgh,” I repeat.

My mouth twitches, suppressing a smile, as memories of the best fucking day of my life flood my brain. Rachel must notice, her expression softening.

“I knew it the moment she sent that photo,” she concedes. “And when the two of you were on the big screen—yeah, it could have been a couple of friends having a night out at the footy, or her having some fun for the first time since her mum died—but there was something about her smile. It was so much brighter than I’d seen in ages. Not just since her mum, but since Adam.”

“He didn’t deserve her.” Even the mention of his name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

“No, he didn’t. But why didn’t she say something to me about the two of you? I text her almost every day. I must have rung her like five times.”

“Oh, come on Rache,” I scoff. For someone so smart, my sister can be a bit thick where relationships are concerned. Growing up with our father taught her there are only two ways to communicate: say exactly what you think no matter how blunt or hurtful—Dad’s preferred style—or hold your secrets close, a survival skill we both learned.

She’s not a subtle creature, which is why she can’t see the reasons Jenna, one of her best friends, would share almost everything with her, but not this.

“Don’t be so bloody naïve. She knows you. She knew how you’d react—exactly like this.”

“I might not have,” Rachel protests. I harden my expression, calling her out on the lie. A slight flush rises on her neck, and her shoulders sag a little. “OK, yeah, I probably wouldn’t have been cheering about it,” she sighs.

Sensing I’ve made ground here, I lay my cards on the table.

“Look, I’m begging you Rachel. And believe me, after you come bursting in here like this, it’s not an easy thing to do. But I’m begging you. For her sake.”

I’ve gone from berating my sister to pleading with her, as if I’m an opposing lawyer, strategically changing tactics to encourage a sceptical jury onto my side. Her eyes soften, and I know I’m making ground here.

“Please, when Jenna comes downstairs, at least try to be a little accepting of the idea of us together.” I swallow hard and confess the thing I hardly dare admit to myself, let alone say to Jenna. “I care for her, Rache. And she cares for me, even though she’s not ready to come out and say it yet.”

I’m positive I’m not kidding myself on that one. For all Jenna’s claims this is just

sex—I bet that’s what she’ll tell Rachel—it’s never just sex when we’re together.

We talk about everything and anything, our guards down. There’s no pretending between us—except for the pretending we’re both OK with this being a casual thing. I let Jenna have all of me, and I don’t think she’s ever had that before, someone who makes themselves vulnerable to her. Behind closed doors—she still believes keeping this secret protects everyone—I know I get all of her too, because I want all of her. The quiet bits and the loud bits; the sharp edges and the softer side; the easy parts and the hard stuff; the neat and the messy. I’ll take every piece of Jenna. Not like the last guy who thought she should give him only the parts he wanted. He’s the reason we’re in this situation now.

“That screw-up she was engaged to? He damaged her—let her think it was something wrong with her, when it was only about him—and she’s scared. Scared I’ll be like him. If you tell her this is a really bad idea, that’s just going to feed her fear. She’ll start to wonder if she’s made another bad mistake, that you think I might hurt her, like he did. I promise you Rachel, I won’t. Let her have this. Let us have this. At the least give us some time to see if we’re right for each other. And then if she decides we’re not and walks away...”

I blink back the vision of Jenna saying those words, telling me it’s over.

“Well, it’ll gut me for sure, but it will be on her terms and she’ll know it wasn’t because she was anything less than the incredible woman she is. Let her work it out for herself, without your judgment. If nothing else, if this ends, she’ll at least have the confidence to go into another relationship with an expectation of respect.”

When I think of Jenna with someone else, I have this sense of a hollow space, deep inside me, opening wide, a lonely place that I’m not sure anyone else can fill. I close it down, determined to do my best to prevent that outcome.

Before Rachel can answer, footsteps sound on the stairs, and Jenna appears, dark hair in a ponytail, face still flushed from the shower. She pauses a moment as we both look towards her. There's wariness in her expression. That's not surprising, after Rachel's crazy banging on the door. Jenna will also be unsure what's passed between us while she was upstairs. I hope my words were enough to save us.

Somehow she seems to shrink a little as she waits on the landing, like she's making herself less in the face of Rachel's presence. I want to scream at her not to do that, but to face her friend like the same fearless, confident woman who wrangles stroppy journalists and social media trolls with ease.

Rachel leans into me, her gold bangles jangling against my wrist as she tugs my hand.

"OK," she hisses. "But you better not fuck this up."

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JENNA

Two identical heart-shaped faces swivel towards me. Two pairs of blue eyes meet mine—his soft greyish, hers bold like a summer sky—and I swallow down a cautious lump in my throat.

In the shower, I talked myself through all the reasons I'd kept this secret from my friend, and found every one of them lacking. So, as I would advise one of my clients caught out in a lie—or perhaps, more accurately in this case, a sin of omission—I've resolved to front foot this, use the truth as a weapon, control the narrative.

I'm sure Rachel has met this tactic in her line of work, but I'm hoping she'll be more receptive, given she loves the other people in this scenario. I can't swear I'll tell her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, though. Not with Geordie there. That would require me to admit I'm terrified because I'm pretty sure I've fallen for him, and he can't hear that. When the day comes, and he needs to end this, he'll feel even worse about walking away. I won't do that to him.

In one of my perfect little romance books, this would be the time I'd spill all, reveal I'm in love with him and he'd say he loves me too. We'd stand strong together against Rachel's criticism. She would eventually capitulate, understanding love must win on the day.

This isn't a novel, and so I walk towards him, my bare feet strangely loud in the silence between Geordie and his sister. Even more unusual is the way the atmosphere lacks the cutting tension I expected. He leans back, relaxed, and she softens too—not the formidable warrior queen I've seen her become. Once, when a guy hurled

obscurities at us in a Soho club, she turned downright terrifying. But not today. The knot in my stomach begins to ease.

“C’mere sweetheart,” Geordie says, stretching out a hand from the huge armchair we call the Captain’s Chair—Nathan’s tribute to the Star Trek reruns that flicker endlessly on his massive telly. He pulls me onto his lap, looping one arm around me and drawing my head to his bare chest with the other. I feel small and vulnerable, but safe inside the protection of his arms. His lips brush my hair.

“You OK?” he murmurs.

“Yeah, good.” I whisper against his golden skin, still warm, although the room isn’t exactly tropical.

“Then I’m going to go grab a shower. Leave you two girls to talk. OK?”

I slide off his lap, holding his hand till the last possible moment, as if it’s a lifeline. He stands and gives Rachel a quizzical look. She responds with a tilt of her head towards the stairs, as if giving him permission to go.

I fold into the warm armchair, the lingering heat a message: Geordie’s got my back on this, offering me an encouraging hug as I prepare to submit to Rachel’s cross-examination.

However, she doesn’t speak, simply looks at me with those piercing blue eyes and raises one brow in question .

I hadn’t expected it to be just Rachel and me. In a complete reversal, I’ve gone from defendant on the stand, about to face curly questions in front of the victim, to a client sequestered in a private room with my trusted lawyer, a privileged conversation. Maybe, out of Geordie’s hearing, I can tell Rachel the truth. Not only will she judge

me less harshly, it would be a relief to share the secret that's screwing up my brain with the one person who will understand how I've ended up in this place.

However, that would require me to relinquish control. If Rachel knows how I truly feel about Geordie, no matter how much she swears not to tell him before I do, it's still risky. Like the PR professional I am, I take charge from the start, deciding only to share the bits I can safely let her know.

"You've come to tell me this is all a bad idea, I suppose," I croak out, my voice tentative despite my resolve.

"No. I actually came to remind my brother to keep checking in on Mum. He may have moved out—and now I think I know why." A flicker of amusement crosses her feline stare. It's there even with those she loves—this predatory grace that makes Rachel intimidating, even to us who know her best. "But he's still the man on the spot. Mum's making noises about going back to work. We both need to discourage that for a while. And he can do that better in person than I can on the phone—if he bothers to go around there."

I leap to Geordie's defence. "That's not fair, Rache" I protest. "He calls in for lunch nearly every day. He was there when I stopped in on Thursday."

"I heard you'd been. Thanks for going to see her." The small smile that tips up the corners of her mouth is encouraging, then it falls away. She bites at her lip. "He only goes when Dad's not there, I suppose."

"Yeah. It's best that way."

"True," she sighs. "Yeah, Dad was going on about him. Using the place as a doss house when he came home. Moving out without a moment's notice. Whinging about Geordie never calling in. Still, him whinging about Geordie is nothing new." She

rolls her eyes and gives a dismissive shake of her head before returning to the elephant in the room.

“So, anyway, no, I didn’t come here expecting to find my brother and you cosied up in his bed, with the intention of talking you out of it. However, I’ll admit, when I saw your car, and the two of you in the window, I did think you’d done something...impulsive? Unwise perhaps?”

“And now?”

“I still do. But for different reasons.”

“And those are?”

“He’s smitten by you, Jenna.” I know this, but hearing it from her mouth is confronting. “And Jesus, the way you look at him, I could tell in a heartbeat, you’re gone for him too, even though he tells me you insist this is just casual.”

“It is,” I protest. “He understands I’m not ready for anything serious yet.”

“I don’t think he does,” she says, shaking her head. “And when will you be ready? If you keep this up, probably never. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think you should give it a chance, try a proper relationship again.”

“Is that fair to Geordie? Messing him around while I sort myself out. ”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing now? Just giving it another name.”

I suck in a breath. It’s harsh, but deserved. I have no answer.

“I don’t think you realise, Jenna. You’re end-game for him.”

The statement floors me, not only the magnitude of it, but the person it's coming from. Rachel is no starry-eyed romantic. For her to see this in her brother, to say this—it's massive. I'm swamped by a dizzy sensation, as if I'm falling even though I'm sitting down. Euphoria and fear wrestle in my stomach.

“He's not sure you think that way about him yet. But he believes you will. I think he's wrong.”

My breath hitches. Is this the moment where my best friend agrees with Adam: I'm not capable of caring for a man like he needs or deserves? Hard, unloving, heartless Jenna. I clutch at my chest, the air in my lungs jagged and painful.

Rachel continues, oblivious to my growing distress.

“Jenna, I think you already care for Geordie way more than you're letting on to him. Or me.” I blink at her, unsure if I've heard her correctly. “And why do you say ‘when it ends’ not ‘if it ends’? What's up Jenna? You can tell me, you know. He might be my brother, but come on, you're my sister—”

“From another mister,” I finish. As tears prickle threateningly, a tiny giggle rises in my throat. Memories flood in. We're suddenly chortling together, like the two little girls we once were. When our laughter finally trickles away, and we're left facing each other, a smile still playing around Rachel's mouth, I'm struck by a heavy wave of regret.

Chasing my career—and running away from my past—has taken me away from this woman. The one who's been there for me through so much. The student years in London, sharing dodgy flats sometimes with even dodgier flatmates. The time beyond uni when we snared dream jobs, money began to flow, and we spent hours shopping in proper shops, able to buy the nice things we'd only ever salivated over in the window displays. Living in apartments free of mould and suspect plumbing.

Winter evenings in raucous pubs; all-nighters in London clubs. We've been each other's ride-or-die forever, Rachel and me. When I fled from Adam, moving to Glasgow to join the Highlanders, I also left Rachel behind and it's another thing I hate him for.

Just like I hate him for the power he still has over me. All the self-doubt that's eating at me has its root in what Adam did. The doubt when I dare to think of Geordie as anything more than a fun distraction. The doubt that causes me to question Rachel's assertion that Geordie and I could be something more.

Strangely, I trust her instincts more than I do my own right now. So I choose honesty and start from the beginning.

Tears find me when I tell her of the bride in the hotel, with her dark hair twisted in a loose braid and soft tendrils framing her face the same way the hairdresser planned to do mine. I describe the dress, almost identical to the one Rachel helped me choose, the one I can't part with no matter how much seeing it in the wardrobe pierces my heart.

"Oh, Jen," she says. She stands, grabbing me by both hands and dragging me up into her arms. "Promise me you're going to burn that fucking dress," she insists. "And that you're going to end this stupid bloody deal with Geordie. Talk to him."

"I will. Soon. "

I'm glad I'm not looking Rachel in the eye. I've just made two promises I know I can't keep, because I'm not brave enough to do either. Yet.

JENNA

I toss and turn all night in restless sleep, replaying the scene with Rachel over and over. Her words—some kind, others harsh, but all true—echo in my head. I doze fitfully, waking often only to begin another bout of brittle introspection. Each time, I resist the urge to check the time. Knowing how slowly the hours pass will only add to my frustration.

Finally, seeing a hint of daylight sneaking beyond the edge of a curtain, I relent and grab at my phone. It's not the time—seven a.m. on Sunday—that jolts me from drowsy to fully alert. It's the six missed calls from my father. All came between eight and nine last night, when I was with Geordie—oblivious to anything beyond the intoxicating touch of his strong body and the delicious smell of his cologne—while my phone languished on the seat of my car.

In the aftermath of Rachel's unannounced visit, I'd arrived home just after midnight, tired and emotionally wrung out, and simply plugged the phone into my bedside charger before falling into bed. I curse myself for not looking at it. Even after months away from the Highlanders, checking for urgent messages remains my nightly routine before allowing myself to sleep. It's an unhealthy habit, one I swore I'd break, but last night, of all nights, wasn't the time to start.

I fling back the covers, grab my dressing gown, yank on slippers, and hurry down the hallway, taking the stairs two at a time. The familiar blare of weekend sports news drifting up from the radio in the kitchen tells me at least Dad is here, alive and well. The mingled smell of coffee and toast suggests a normal Sunday morning, despite his urgent need to call me last night.

I slide across the tiled kitchen floor, coming to a halt where he's seated on a high stool at the worktop. Dad raises his head from scrolling on the new iPad I got him last week. A small victory—he's actually using it.

"Morning, luv," he says. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, Dad, I did. You?"

"Like a baby—once I heard you come in. You were late."

His eyebrow arches, the unspoken question hanging between us. I know what he's really asking: Where were you until midnight on a Saturday in Cluanie? His implied question irritates me, even though it comes from a place of concern. At thirty-four, I shouldn't feel obliged to explain my whereabouts to my father.

"Yeah, Rachel made a flying visit home. She was in Edinburgh for work and caught the train up last night. I met her over at Geordie's."

I haven't spoken a single lie—first rule of PR: stick to the truth whenever possible.

"Ah, that's nice," he says with a smile that suggests he doesn't suspect anything untoward in my explanation.

"So what's up Dad?" I pivot away from any further questions about me. "All the calls?"

"Well, luv, we've got a bit of a situation. Think I might need your help."

"OK," I say, grabbing a mug and pushing a button on the coffee machine. The familiar hiss and gurgle is steadying. At the Highlanders, 'situation' was code for a player's mistake that needed damage control. What the hell could possibly be a

‘situation’ with an amateur small-town rugby team? I’m both concerned and intrigued. “What’s going on?”

Dad sighs. “Got a call on my way home from the club rooms to say young Brandon Smith had a bit of a fender bender. Took out half the wall of St Andrew’s kirkyard.”

“Oh my god, is he all right?” My first concern is for Skylar—she’d be devastated if anything happened to her boyfriend.

“Not a mark on him—he was in his dad’s big four-wheel-drive.”

“How did that happen? It’s right in the middle of town. How can you veer off the road and hit a wall? Surely he wasn’t drunk...”

I know the older players only pay lip service to Dad’s alcohol ban, but Brandon takes it seriously—as much from dedication to his future career as any fear of his grumpy coach.

“No, nothing like that,” Dad says. He cradles his mug between weathered hands. “He’s a good lad. Sticks to the rules. He was texting that lassie of his. I know he’s daft about her, but it was stupid. Bloody dangerous too. Took his eyes off the road and went up the kerb.”

“So you want me to go and smooth things over with Reverend Sutherland?” I offer. “I can do that.”

That shouldn’t be too difficult. We got to know Elizabeth Sutherland well in those last days before Mum passed. My mother wasn’t overly religious, but Elizabeth was more friend than pastor when Mum came home from the hospice.

“That would be a good start, but there’s a bigger problem.” Dad sighs and slides a

piece of paper across the worktop towards me. “Take a look at this.”

It’s a printout of an email—from Jimmy Calder. Seeing his name, I thump down my coffee and snatch the paper. I crossed swords with the Tryline UK reporter when I was at the Highlanders. I never liked him then. He was always too friendly, his casual smile an insincere facade. He couldn’t hide the predatory gleam in his eyes. I prefer journos who are honest in their intentions even if they’re about to write something bad. At least you know where you stand.

I like Calder even less now, as I scan the email. I lean my head in my hand, kicking myself for not insisting on being involved with his visit to Cluanie. When Dad told me about the piece, it seemed a harmless bit of colour amongst all the analysis of players and matches that dominates the online magazine. The spark in Dad’s eyes as he realised his decision to leave the professional circuit hadn’t made him invisible to the rugby world had warmed my heart. And why worry? Dad is media savvy, not easy prey for someone bent on unearthing scandal, and besides, there was no point in trying to find dirt at Cluanie R.F.C.

Or so I thought. The two questions on the paper prove me wrong:

What is your response to the suggestion there is a culture where over-consumption of alcohol is the norm in amateur rugby clubs?

What is your perception of the role of local clubs in promoting healthy lifestyles and responsible behaviour amongst the young men and women in their teams ?

“What the hell is this?” I slam the paper down, teeth clenched. I know what these questions imply.

“Our bad luck. That slimy bastard Calder happens to be staying with Helen Ross.”

“At the B&B next to the church.” Where he had a front-row seat for Brandon’s unfortunate off-field display last night.

“Perfect bloody timing.”

Shit. I’ve dealt with way worse in my time—defended Dad in his role as Highlanders’ coach, fronted up for players who’ve deliberately caused trouble—but here in my hometown it feels intensely personal.

“Don’t worry Dad,” I say, putting on my cool professional smile, even though behind it I’m fuming. To take Brandon’s unfortunate accident and twist it in a way deliberately designed to cast a slur on this small club is the sort of cheap shot I should have anticipated from Jimmy Calder. “Leave it with me.”

Dad’s heard those words many times, and he knows I’ve got this.

“Thanks, love,” he says, laying his big hand over mine. “I can always count on you when the shit hits the fan.”

Warm pride blooms in my chest. Even though I know Dad’s always appreciated me coming through for him and the players, it feels good to hear him say it again. While I love my new clients, my work is mostly proactive. I admit I’ve missed the adrenaline rush of a problem like this landing on my desk. While Jimmy Calder’s attention is unwelcome, it’s the perfect opportunity to keep my skills sharp for when I return to the Highlanders in November. So, although this wasn’t how I expected to start my Sunday, I leap into action.

Two hours later, I’m standing outside St Andrew’s kirkyard. The drone of a hymn drifts from the church, the singing rising and falling like waves on the loch shore, overlaying a low rumble of male voices outside. The men pause as Angus Cameron, the team’s hooker, calls them to attention.

“Lads, see these chalk marks I’ve made?” He holds up a rough stone with a straggling white ‘4’ on it. “That’s what you need to mind, OK?”

Angus continues to order his teammates with quiet authority, as they trundle wheelbarrows loaded with stones to stack them in neat piles according to his instructions.

“Cap!” he bawls at a stunned Connor, who pauses, stone in one hand. He’s usually in charge. Not today. Angus glares and Connor scans the lines of stones and rethinks its placement.

When I’d made the call to gather the team here, I’d thought they would simply tidy things up, not embark on a full restoration—but I hadn’t expected to have the services of a fully qualified stonemason at our disposal. Apparently, Angus’s father, a master mason, has been nagging the parish council for ages to do something about the wall before it fell down of its own accord. Now, helped along by Brandon’s unorthodox demolition method, some rugby club funds, and a volunteer workforce, they’ll have it restored for free.

I busy myself setting up the drinks station. The plastic table wobbles on the uneven grass as I arrange the water bottles. At the Co-op, Maggie donated three boxes of them, as well as gave the club a big discount on the mountain of snack foods in my shopping trolley—her contribution to this morning’s community effort.

As I’m lining the bottles up in neat rows, a flash of movement catches my eye. The bright red painted door of the once tumble-down manse, now restored into a bed-and-breakfast, swings open. A disgruntled-looking Jimmy Calder stumbles down the steps, clutching a large duffle in one hand and a laptop bag over his shoulder.

“Morning Jimmy,” I call, waving with exaggerated cheerfulness. My hastily-assembled party of lads from the rugby team, doing volunteer work for the church on

a Sunday morning, is part of the reason for his grumpy face. The other is the response to his questions, emailed to him just before I left the house. My carefully crafted PR reply had been polite but crystal clear: Nothing to see here, Jimmy. Get your sorry arse back to London. With satisfaction, I watch him climb into a grey Ford Fiesta.

A few onlookers have gathered, surveying the team with curiosity. The Sunday morning spectacle draws them as if the travelling fair has come to town. Some of the women use it as an unexpected chance to admire the eye candy on display, as the thirteen players I was able to muster at short notice, flex muscle. They're an attractive bunch in t-shirts and a mixture of work jeans and shorts, beads of sweat jewelling their faces, hair with a tousled 'just got out of bed' look, and easy smiles as they banter back and forth over the task.

One woman gives Geordie a blatant appraisal from head to toe. It's Kelly Latham who works on the checkout at the Co-op—Cluanie's command centre for gossip. She had the cheek to ask me about Geordie outright the other day. Said she'd heard he'd been working at my house. It was old news, and I brushed her off, but I suspected she knew more. Today I'm sure. She watches him with a sultry smile on her face, and I feel a surge of possessiveness. Heat rises in my face, my fingers itching to reach for him. I want to march over there, wrap myself around him and claim him as mine, but I dare not.

She locks eyes with me for a moment and heads Geordie's way. He straightens from where he's been bent over, tugging at a reluctant piece of stone, his gorgeous arse on full display. I strain my ears but don't catch her words. He replies, but there's not even a polite smile, as he turns away from her, abandoning the wheelbarrow and heads straight for the drink station—and me.

“Good turn out.” Geordie takes a deep draft from the bottle of water I hand him, then wipes one hand across his mouth. A droplet clings to his lower lip, and I force myself to look away. “Thirteen of the lads on a Sunday morning.”

It's more than I expected when I put out an SOS call for volunteers at seven-thirty a.m. Not only is there significant manpower, they all turned up with barrows and tools, including Angus with a concrete mixer. He's determined to make a good start on the restoration today.

"Yeah, I'm really grateful. You're all helping a lot of people out of a tight spot."

"What about you? Feeling OK about the tight spot my sister put us in last night?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Rachel was surprisingly calm about it all. She just wants us to be happy," I say, leaving out how she's put me on notice. For us to be happy, I need to step up. "Guess I was overthinking it."

"As you do," he chuckles. The familiar crinkles bracket his eyes. "At least that's got one problem off our backs. The other one behind you might be a little trickier." His mouth tightens. He casts a wary eye across my shoulder before taking another swig from the bottle.

"There she is," Dad says, loping towards me with Grant Darby in tow. "My little lass to the rescue again."

"Lads are doing well, Jenna." Grant runs an approving eye over the orderly workers. "Bloody good bit of team-building that. And gets young Smith off the hook. Some coaches would have benched the lad for bringing heat down on the club."

"Not this one," Dad rasps. "I can count on one hand the number of times I sat a player out for something that happened off-field."

"Well, there was Webster," Grant points out with a knowing smirk. "That made quite the stir at the time. Star player."

Dad's expression hardens slightly. His jaw tightens, the muscles working beneath his stubbled cheek. "That was different."

I feel Geordie tense beside me, his water bottle pausing halfway to his lips. It mirrors the tightening of my own body as I brace myself for what's coming.

"Different how?" Grant presses, seemingly unaware of the sudden shift in atmosphere.

Dad's eyes flick briefly toward me before returning to Grant. "Webster thought his talent gave him special privileges. Made a move on Jenna at a team dinner. Wouldn't take no for an answer."

My cheeks burn at the memory. It was my third week with the Highlanders. At the time, I didn't even know Dad had seen David Webster come up to me at the bar and slip his arm around my waist. Although young, he already wore the cockiness of his newfound fame, and it had taken me several attempts to brush him off. I only joined the dots the next day after the club CEO requested an urgent press release. My job was to manufacture a reason for Webster's one-game stand down. When I confronted my father, he admitted it without an ounce of remorse. From then on, I was always extra careful around the players, never putting myself in a position for it to happen again. There was only one other slip up. That time, Dad tried to throttle the guy, and it was his arse I had to protect.

The silence stretches between us, loaded with implication.

Seeing Grant's interest, Dad continues, his voice taking on that steel edge I know so well.

"I don't care if you're David Webster, headed for international glory or some bench-warmer who barely makes the practice squad. Nobody messes with my daughter.

That's a line I won't let anyone cross."

I dare not look at Geordie. But I can feel him—the heat of his body suddenly distant, though he hasn't moved an inch. He tosses the empty plastic bottle into the bin and heads back to work without a single backwards glance.

My chest tightens as I watch him go. There's more than my heart on the line here. Geordie's rugby, the most important thing in his life right now, could disappear in an instant if my father catches wind of our relationship. I can't bear the thought I might be the reason he loses the thing that makes him happiest.

GEORDIE

The first quiz night comes around way too quickly. I park the van in the scruffy open area behind the pub which passes for a parking lot. I really should do something about buying a car. At the moment I'm conspicuous wherever I go, the vehicle splattered with signwriting on all sides, although Sparky's happy enough with the free advertising.

I've held off getting something of my own, not because money is a problem, but with a major purchase like a car, there's this sense of permanence. These last two months I've flip-flopped between fearing and wanting to put down roots. Now the wanting seems to be winning, and it's only because of Jenna. Yeah, I think it's time to get a car.

She's here, her BMW already parked. Now that's conspicuous. A bright scarlet—San Francisco red, she says—it stands out amongst the rows of drab blues and greys. There's no way you could mistake the sound of it either, the growl that becomes a roar as she screams up the road to my house and the explosive pops and crackles when she lifts off on the final bend before my driveway. Kyle says one old lady called the cops the first week Jenna arrived in town with that car, swearing she'd heard gunshots.

I trudge towards the rear entrance of the pub, like a man walking to the stocks. I'm not sure tonight isn't going to be simply a more modern form of public humiliation. But when I think of the chance to spend another two hours with Jenna, it's a no-brainer. I'd endure worse than this for even one of her smiles.

She's done her best to make sure I'm not a total muppet, making me practice for this quiz every damn day for ten days straight. I'll be at work and hear a chirp from my phone, only to check it and find a voice message with some random question I'm expected to answer. "No Googling," she says, but I'll admit to cheating. After all, looking it up has to be better than sending back a row of '????' and have her think me completely ignorant.

A blast of heat, noise, and alcohol hits me in the face as I swing open the door. The place is packed. Obviously there's a whole lot of people who consider this fun, and I suppose it is, compared to what else is on offer in Cluanie on a Tuesday evening—absolutely nothing.

I'm peering across the bar, trying to spot my team, when a hand grabs at my arm, and I turn to see Jenna behind me, loose dark hair tumbling across her shoulders, which are bare apart from two tiny straps of fabric holding up a skimpy red top. There's a faint pink mark on her chest, just above where the top ends and her breasts begin. I smile to myself, recalling how my mouth claimed that very spot only hours ago. These afternoon meetups are the best tea breaks I've ever had in my life.

"Oh, good. You're here in time," she says. "Starts in five minutes. Still time to get a drink." There's a glass of wine in her hand .

"Thought you'd have lined up a beer for me," I tease, raising an eyebrow. "Did you think I wouldn't come?"

"No," she quickly denies, biting her lip. "OK, maybe. I know you aren't exactly keen."

"More like scared shitless." I give a choked laugh. "But you know I'd do anything for you."

Her eyes meet mine, and that grateful look ignites a searing pain deep in my chest. I'd like to say it's heartburn from scoffing two of Mum's bridies for lunch, but it's not. It rips at my heart when I see Jenna's gratitude for something she deserves as of right, a guy who'd walk through fire for her. This here tonight is my bed of flaming hot coals and I'm going to show Jenna, and keep showing her, that I'm that guy.

I'm also the guy who's heeding his sister's advice. "Be patient," Rachel whispered in my ear as she left my house ten days ago. So I am. I'm accepting Jenna on her terms until she's ready to take the next step. And she will. I watch her walk away, knowing the day is coming when everyone in this room will know she's mine.

I step up to the bar, ordering a beer from a smiling Skylar, who's been promoted from waiting tables to pulling pints and appears to be loving every minute. She's a good kid, hardworking and clever too, according to Jenna.

I angle my way through the crowd to where Jenna and the other members of 'Quizzing In The Deep' occupy a large booth. Daisy and Calvin sit on one side, Troy and Lexie on the other. I slide in next to Calvin, almost pleased I can't sit next to Jenna. I don't think I could stand two hours close to her without my hand roaming to her thigh, or wanting to press a kiss to her cheek .

Sitting opposite, our feet can discreetly bump under the table, and I have an unobstructed view of her spectacular cleavage. The tricky part will be not letting my gaze linger on her face. I can't guarantee the others won't notice the heat of wanting in our eyes or the silent conversation that flies between us whenever we're together.

However, there's no time to talk, with words or smouldering looks, as the quiz master steps up to the mic. It's too late to escape. Within minutes, I relax, relieved to find the guy in charge, who thinks he's a bit of a comedian, also reads the questions from the screen. The girls are literally fighting for the pen to record the answers. With a thankful slug of my nice cold pint of Tennent's, I wash down my fear of exposure,

realising I'm not about to be put on the spot with my disability showing for all to see.

The first few rounds pass with minimal embarrassment. There's a sports one, which me and the two other guys absolutely nail, although Jenna comes through on some obscure question about tennis that gives us a perfect score.

I feel a flush of pride when my ten years of roaming the globe pay off on a 'World Cities' round. I bet I'm the only person in the room who knows Bandar Seri Begawan is the capital of Brunei. With every answer I give, I see approval in Jenna's eyes; but it's more than that, it's belief.

She believes in me more than I believe in myself. For the first time in my life, I have this sense I could do anything; nothing is beyond my reach. Except for one thing: Jenna as I really want her, not just in my bed, but as my everything. She's fighting it, but sometimes, like tonight, I see the walls come down a little.

We banter like the other couples in our team, laugh together over little private jokes, steal bites of each other's pizzas when they come—hers a Margherita, mine a Hawaiian with pineapple criminally slathered all over it. She even comes right out and declares she likes it to everyone. How hard would it be for her to do the same about me?

When we come to the music round, I see Daisy sit a little straighter; the pen poised in her hand, ready to shine. She and Lexie do well, racing through the first nine questions, including, as expected, one about Taylor Swift. Daisy's bright smile falls as she repeats the tenth question from the screen.

"What does GBX stand for? What kind of music question is that?" She frowns, wrinkling her nose and chewing on the pen.

"George Bowie Experience," Jenna and I both say at the same time. The others look

at us blankly while we grin at each other like loons.

“If you say so,” Daisy says doubtfully, while writing it down. “Is he related to David Bowie? Some old seventies music?”

“Jesus,” I say, staring at them incredulously. “You can’t tell me you’ve never heard of George Bowie?”

“GBX Anthems?” Jenna chips in. “Radio Clyde?”

They shake their heads.

“Nah, man,” Troy says. “Never heard of him.”

“What rock have you all been living under?” Jenna says.

“Well, we can’t all be living the high life travelling the world.” Troy gives a good-natured snort. He makes no secret that he’s perfectly happy here, working at the family butchery and married to Lexie.

“God, Glasgow’s practically just down the road,” Jenna laughs.

“Been there a few times. Didn’t like it much,” Troy says, shaking his head as if he feels sorry for anyone who ever has to leave Cluanie, before rising from the table. “Right, time for another round of drinks, eh?”

As a woman comes to collect the answer sheet Lexie’s waving in the air, Jenna and I exchange amused glances, and I’m secretly pleased to find an obsession with GBX Anthems is something else only we share.

“Just going to nip to the bathroom.” Jenna gives me a knowing look and a discreet tip

of her head.

A moment after she's gone, I follow. No one seems to notice. Lexie and Daisy are already deep in an argument about whether the answer to number five really was Ariana Grande. Troy and Calvin are both in line at the bar.

I arrive in the passageway to see Jenna loitering opposite the bathrooms.

"Queue for the ladies, huh?" I say.

With a quick shake of her head, her mouth widening in a wicked grin, Jenna beckons me forward. As I approach, I realise she's leaning against a large door. I've seen it before, obviously, but never paid it any attention. It's painted the same bland cream colour as the walls, almost camouflaged.

She quickly scans the passageway, turns, wrenches the door open, and disappears inside. I follow, pulling the door behind me. The distinct smell of beer tells me exactly where we are. Inside the gloomy room, kegs are stacked neatly on one side, while on the other a network of tubing attaches to more kegs in a single row. The cool air in the beer cellar squeezed between the bar and the passageway causes goosebumps to rise on my skin.

Something else in my pants starts to rise too, as Jenna fists my shirt and pulls me in close, laying a deep, demanding kiss on my lips. I spin her around, backing her up roughly against the stone wall, my body hard with need for her.

I slide one hand under her skimpy top, gliding across bare stomach and upwards to one large breast, erect nipple straining against the flimsy web of lace that makes up what Jenna calls a bra.

She moans into my mouth as I work the peak between my thumb and forefinger,

while sliding my other hand to ruck up that tiny skirt she's wearing. It's been driving me wild every time I admire her toned legs beneath it, and the way it moulds to her shapely arse, watching the sway of her hips as she goes to the bar. The tiny triangle of fabric between her legs is soaked.

"You're all wet for me, baby?" I murmur against her mouth, plucking at the piece of string holding it up. I've learned to be more careful with Jenna's pretty underwear, but damned if I just don't want to rip it away and let my fingers plunge right in.

"Oh, yeah, so wet," she whispers through her next breath.

When my hand finds its home, two fingers inside of her, my palm setting up the rhythm she likes against her clit, she moves with it. I'm so familiar with this body. I know I can make my girl come fast, or other times take it nice and slow, whichever I choose. Given we're expected back at that quiz table in twenty minutes, now might be the time to give her what she's begging for quickly.

Jenna's breathing picks up speed in time to the friction of my hand, small whimpers springing from her as I use the other to tweak and tease first one nipple and then the next. She pants into my kisses, her tongue swirling, dancing with mine through urgent clashes of teeth and lips, warm and wet and delicious .

"Oh, God, don't stop, don't stop," she's pleading into my mouth when the door flings open, slamming into my back and pushing Jenna even harder against the stone wall.

Above the roar of chatter and loud music bursting in from the bar, there's the flick of a switch and fluorescent light floods the space. Jenna and I freeze, not that we can do much else pinned behind the door. Her breasts are crushed against my chest, with my arm crammed in between us and I swear I not only feel but hear her heart thundering as hard as my own, and I don't think it's only from the orgasm she was barely two breaths away from.

We're paralysed in place, one large solid wooden door away from discovery.

"Really?" The word comes out an exasperated sigh. "You gotta be kidding." The voice is soft, feminine and familiar: Skylar. She gives another deep, annoyed exhale. The light disappears, and the door closes again with a slam.

We almost tumble back at the release of pressure, but I brace my feet to stop us falling. I gently remove my hand from beneath Jenna's top, and the other from between her legs. She smooths down her clothing and in the dimness, as my vision returns, I attempt to tame the strands of hair sticking out in a wild halo around her face.

"You know she's going to be back? Or someone else," Jenna says.

"Yeah, they must need to change over a keg. I'm guessing someone thought she could do it. No way Skylar could wrestle one of those. Let's get the hell out of here."

I open the door and cast a look in each direction. Tonight, the gods have decided not to punish me for fucking my secret girlfriend in the pub cellar. It's bloody ridiculous really that we should have to resort to this level of sneaking around like naughty teenagers just to be sure her father doesn't catch us out. So what if the old bastard has threatened to kick players off the team for messing with Jenna? I'm prepared to test how committed he is to that viewpoint. Even if my toiling away on the pitch—scoring a decent number of points too in our first few games—isn't enough to convince him that's a stupid move, surely he can see how much happier she is lately. I'm not vain when I claim it's due to me.

I scan the passageway one last time. There's no one in sight. We step out into the light and try to stroll back into the bar casually, as if we just happened to run into each other outside the loos. One of the bar staff, Simon, a tall bloke, bustles past us, heading for the cellar door.

“How did you know it was there?” I ask, hoping she’s not going to say she’s used the cellar for the same purpose before. I hate to think of her with any other guy, especially some local who I’m guaranteed to have to face, knowing he’s once upon a time had his mouth or hands, or worse still his dick, all over what’s mine.

“I was friends with Lana MacFee, the publican’s daughter. She used to pinch Bacardi Breezers from the bar fridge and we’d drink them in there.”

That was brave of them, knowing what I’ve seen of Rory MacFee and his famous temper, fiery as his bright red hair.

“And here I thought you were a good girl, Jenna Sharpe,” I tease, as we join the queue at the bar.

“Oh, I’m a very good girl,” she says, leaning in so the words brush against my ear, the breathy hiss of her voice sending a shiver through me. “But I think you know that.”

“Guess I do,” I murmur, eyes straight ahead. If I look at Jenna this minute, I’ll want to grab her and press that pretty mouth to mine right here in the middle of the bar, and to hell with blowing our cover.

She speaks again, in such a low whisper; at first I’m not sure I even heard it. “And you owe me an orgasm.”

I feel the flush creep up my neck, her words catapulting me straight back to the heat and desire between us only minutes before. This time, I chance a look, so she can see the promise in my eyes.

“And that’s a debt I intend to pay. With interest.” It comes out almost a low growl, my throat thick with need and, damn it, an erection straining against my jeans. At

least crowded in amongst the punters waiting to be served, with all their eyes on the bar staff, no one will notice what's happening in my pants.

Jenna gives me a smug smile and steps into the gap that's opened in front of her.

“A glass of the white, please Skylar,” she says as if nothing has happened.

GEORDIE

The air in the change room crackles with anticipation. Even though Coach is subjecting us to one of his barrages, half instructions and half threats, smiles lie just beneath the surface on every face. The men around me try to look serious and attentive. But I know, like me, they all want to break into a grin, whoop, and punch the air at the thought of the match ahead of us. It's the first match of the season against our most imposing opponents in the County competition and bitter rivals: Duncraig. A home game, too. We're totally amped knowing victory can be ours. It'll be hard fought, but they're the wins we crave.

This is the day we've worked our arses off for. It's why we've subjected ourselves to six weeks of this old bastard's cutting criticism; why we pathetically did anything and everything he asked for a few words of his rare, understated praise.

It's why we've slogged for hours in Forsyth's gym, battling weights to build muscle. It's the reason we've pounded the streets of Cluanie, run untold laps of Craig Ross Park and busted our guts making the steep climb up Bourke's Hill, not just once but three or four times at full speed, so we can go the full eighty minutes and leave the field with gas still in the tank.

In a few minutes, fifteen of us will jog onto the field of Cluanie R.F.C., proudly wearing our blue and white hooped jerseys. The weight of the club's long history rests on our shoulders. At the same time, we bear the hopes of the hometown crowd who've turned out in droves to support us.

We'd be fools to think the renewed local enthusiasm lies solely with the lineup,

though I'd challenge anyone to find a more dedicated group of players in a first division team. Even the least passionate fan amongst them has to know the whispers of future glory that lie in wait for our fullback, young Smith.

He could have it all right now if he wasn't so in love with Jenna's pretty little assistant, Skylar. In all honesty, we should be telling the kid to put love aside and grab one of those pro contracts, but none of us, including Coach, has said it to him. Why look a gift horse in the mouth?

Still, at just nineteen, the offers will keep coming his way, but love, that's not something that falls in front of you every day. I can't help but think he's the smartest of the lot of us, putting what really matters ahead of rugby. Remembering it's just a game. If Skylar loves him back as much as it seems she does, she'll be there for him long after the contracts. She'll be at his side when he's no longer fast, when his body can't take the punishment, and when injuries force him to call time on the game.

Somewhere out there in the grandstand is also a woman who, like Skylar, has anchored me to a place I never expected to stay, never imagined might become home again. Jenna's out there waiting for us—and especially me—to take the field. Less than a month, and the thrill of immersing myself in one of the few things I'm really good at, is second to the knowledge that at the end of the eighty minutes, I'll get to see her, even if we have to act like we're just friends under the scrutiny of the world.

In here, even through the thick concrete block walls of the change room, we can hear the buzz of the crowd. When I poked my head out earlier, thirty minutes before the game, the grandstand was already packed. People were streaming into the open terraces surrounding the field, but it's not us they've come to see, rather what someone has made of us.

Robbie Sharpe is the reason they've turned out in numbers. Everyone is curious what a professional rugby coach can do with a bunch of local lads. We won't let him down.

We'll show them that, despite the club's poor form for the last seven years, Cluanie is back and a force to be reckoned with. Every man in the team has his eyes on the prize, the County Cup fixed in our sights, and we're going to do this for Coach and for us.

Right this moment, me and the rest of the forward pack are relaxing. Having hammered the forwards with his final advice, Coach's attention is no longer upon us. Now he lends his glare to reinforce the messages his assistant and backs coach, Stephen Foster, is delivering in his quiet, efficient style. They're chalk and cheese these two men, but somehow they fit together, and the team is shaping up well under their direction.

My mind strays back to Jenna. I swear I can still smell her on my skin, the lingering fragrance a good-luck charm for the game. She's out there in the stand, waiting, watching for me. It's exhilarating to think that in the crowd, I've got one person who's not only there for the team as a unit, but for me .

I've never had that. As a kid and into my teens, I walked myself to practices; same on game days. I think I can count on one hand how many times my parents came to watch me play. Mum often slept through Saturdays. She always preferred night shifts, and with her generous nature, regularly volunteered for the hard to fill Friday night ones, allowing the younger nurses a chance to party with their friends.

As for my father, his absence expressed his quiet disdain for my choice of sport. Dad considers rugby a game for the lower classes, thuggish and untidy. He might have settled for me playing football, the beautiful game being more to his taste. I probably would have done OK at it—field sports play to my strengths—but he'd never understand my attraction to contact sports, the raw physicality of it occupying every part of my brain and body. It's the one place where I feel like all the parts of me combine in harmony, without the jarring edges of some lack in my makeup spoiling it.

Except now there's another place—when I'm with Jenna. I can imagine her like I saw her when I poked my head out the door, sandwiched between Grant and Laura Darby, in her club hoodie of bright blue, and a stripy scarf. Blue's not her colour, she says, except on game day, but as far as I'm concerned, every colour is Jenna's colour.

Or none. An image invades my mind; her lying fully naked in my bed, stretching her shapely golden limbs in satisfaction, her smile smug in the aftermath of our lovemaking, her dark eyes suggesting that she's still aroused, and ready for more.

A sharp elbow from the right stabs at my ribs.

“Oi mate, listen up.” Fraser tips his chin towards where Coach has taken the floor again .

His dark eyes scan the room, meeting each of ours briefly with that penetrating look that suggests he knows what you're thinking. It's unnerving at best and fucking frightening when you're the guy who's been thinking filthy thoughts about his daughter in his presence.

I swallow, hard, nervousness tightening in my throat, pregame tension, mixed with fear that my little hookups with Jenna will get back to him. I shove that away, because, if he knew, I wouldn't be standing here with the team ready to take the field, but permanently benched. Robbie Sharpe likes to win, but I suspect he'd risk tossing the game in a heartbeat if he decided to fulfil his threats where Jenna's concerned.

Coach clears his throat, pausing a moment to check he has every man's attention before he begins.

“Lads, it's been a long time since I stood in this room sending a Cluanie team onto the field against a truly formidable foe. It means a lot to me that the club would trust me with their reputation.” A smile splits his leathery features.

I hear a snort from Brodie, who's standing at my shoulder, a few chuckles, and I can't help but crack a grin, too. We all know Cluanie's reputation has suffered these past few years, for many reasons.

There's a lack of young talent since, like me, many leave town as soon as they can get out of high school and few return. Brandon Smith is an oddity; a teenager with a freakish ability on the field and a reason to stay. Usually, those who are left are solid enough players, but nothing special; not special enough to win the County Cup.

Coach has also had a bit of a windfall with several older players like me, all of us with a bit of flare, who've gone against the tide of men leaving town. He's filled five positions with those of us who've unexpectedly arrived back in Cluanie between the end of last season and the beginning of this one.

Who'd have predicted that Kyle Stewart would trade his government close protection job for being a small town copper? Or that Brodie would find a place to wield his legendary culinary skills within striking distance of his old home town?

What a windfall, when Fraser, who's spent most of his working life as a sound tech with a London film company, should be headhunted by the growing film studio that sprung up in some old warehouses on the edge of Duncraig a couple of years ago. It's the big bucks on offer that has lured Fraser back this way, not the chance to play in his old position of inside centre, but he's loving every minute.

Coach got lucky when Nathan arrived on his doorstep, too. Raised in a rugby mad nation, Wilder is a talented flanker, who thrives on the challenge of emulating his hero and the man whose number he wears on his back, the All Black great, Richie McCaw.

Right now, however, we're totally focused on the great man standing before us, one who has put his faith in us, while whipping our arses into shape. I've never felt as

prepared as I do today.

“Because,” Razor drawls. “This right here—clubs like ours, teams like this, men like you—are the heart of rugby. Not the flashy players with their big contracts and big egos. This right here is the rugby heartland, and I’m just as proud to send you onto the field today as any team I’ve coached.”

I swear Coach’s eyes are a little misty, and I’m not the only one who’s noticed .

“Next, he’ll probably tell us he loves us,” Nathan hisses in my ear.

“Nah, he’ll save that for when we win.” The words slide out a whisper from the side of my mouth. Like a schoolboy, I don’t want to get caught talking when I should be listening.

I’m right. Coach doesn’t tell us he loves us, any trace of emotion evaporating as he barks his final instruction.

“So you’d better not let me down. Get your arses out the door and don’t fuck up.”

I’m determined not to, not with Robbie Sharpe’s eyes on me. Not for my most important match in front of my hometown crowd in ten years. Not when Jenna is sitting in the stand watching me.

I jog along the corridor that passes for a tunnel, surrounded by the clatter of sprigs in an untidy rhythm, as anticipation, nervousness, and absolute fucking joy combine in a whirling mass inside my stomach and spill over to fill my chest.

JENNA

I ride the supercharged air in the grandstand like a wave, the anticipation of the match carrying me along with it. A few hundred Cluanie spectators surround me. I'm one small droplet in a sea of bright blue jerseys, with hats pulled low, striped scarves wound tight against the chill breeze the Duncraig opposition has brought with them from their Highland town.

"Pitch is looking grand. Malcolm Lewis got that lick o' paint on the front of the clubrooms, too. The place is looking proper tidy." Grant Darby wears a satisfied smile as he surveys the grounds below us.

Seated between him and Laura, we have seats of honour befitting the club president, his wife, and the coach's daughter—right on the halfway line. We're safe in a block of hometown fans, but pockets of Duncraig green show a strong turnout of supporters for the visiting team. It's will be a hard-fought contest today, but I know our guys are ready.

A myriad of scents float on the wind: Grant's spicy aftershave, Laura's floral perfume, the greasiness of fried food from the caravan at the rear of the stand, the tang of grass as match officials pace the sidelines, the ever-present whiff of smoke from a fire. Someone's at home by their hearth in Cluanie, but it seems most of the town is here, ready to watch the local lads, our rugby team, a source of fierce pride for this community.

The murmur of the crowd rises, like a buzz of angry bees, as they catch a glimpse of blue and white. There's movement in the building opposite. The first of our team

emerges from the small hallway that passes for a players' shute, and beneath my feet the floor of the stand vibrates, the deafening thump of stamping feet. Mine instinctively join in the rhythm, drumming a welcome.

A river of enthusiastic applause flows across the grounds, punctuated by shouts of encouragement for our lads. Chanting voices echo back from spectators clustered on the embankments at the goal ends of the field.

"Let's go, Cluanie."

"Come on lads, let's sock it to 'em."

Someone waves a warning for the Duncraig team, a banner with 'BEWARE brANDON'S BOOT' hand painted across it. Two teenagers hold aloft another: 'GO HARD CLUANIE HEARTLAND LADS'. I want to race down and grab it off them to take home as a trophy. Dad will be chuffed to see his 'heartland' label catching on with the locals.

At last Geordie emerges, Nathan on his heels, and Connor bringing up the rear, the captain herding his charges to ensure they're all where they should be.

My eyes track Geordie as he strolls onto the pitch, hair neat, jersey pristine, a glow of pure joy on his face. There's an intimacy here in these small grounds, the players so close you can read every expression, their excitement and anticipation written large for all to see. My heart clenches as he swings his head my way, and I lock eyes with him. He smiles up at the full grandstand, but I know it's a smile only for me.

I reluctantly left Geordie's early last night so he could be well rested for today. It's getting harder and harder to drag myself away from his bed, my protests about Dad finding out sounding more feeble to my ears. Geordie is wearing me down with assurances that he's not afraid of my father. He says he'll deal with the fallout,

whatever that may be. But my father's not one to make idle threats, and he's still adamant that I'm off-limits to players, so him uncovering the truth can't possibly end well for Geordie.

As I watch him jog onto the field below, flanked by the men who are brothers to him, his face already shining with the pure joy this game brings, I have a fierce need to protect him from losing this however I can. Even if it means denying what I most want. Even if the secrecy of our relationship frustrates him.

"The lads are looking fit as fiddles. Your Dad's done a braw job with them." Grant surveys the men ambling across the field with a critical eye.

They fall into a loose formation, their blue and white hooped jerseys bold against the brilliant green of carefully tended grass. Connor releases the ball tucked under his arm and tosses it to Brandon, who flicks it off to Calvin. The ball continues its progress around the team, snapping back and forth between players in precise passes.

On the other half of the pitch, the Duncraig team mirrors them, confidently flipping a ball around, while ignoring their Cluanie opposition. The message is clear: we're not threatened by you .

Our boys are a burly lot, but a couple of their blokes are man-shaped mountains. I offer a prayer that Geordie's speed will keep him out of their clutches. Bruises from last week's match still bloom mauve and yellow across the gold of his stomach and ribs. No doubt tonight there'll be more, but hopefully no broken bones. Geordie would be gutted to have his season cut short by injury.

"No doubt the blue and white will be taking home the win today," Laura says, a proud smile on her face as her eldest son, Todd finds his mother in the crowd. The scrum half is a cocky wee rooster of a lad, known for his scrappy attitude. He waves up at Laura with a confident grin before strutting back to join the warm-up.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I retrieve it, glancing at the screen with a frown. The last thing I need is a client with an urgent problem. This game is the only important thing on my calendar today and I don't want to miss it. But the name on the screen is not a client—it's my boss. Well, former boss, I suppose, though even now I don't dare to ignore a call from Kieran MacGregor, CEO of the Highlanders.

"Kieran, hi." I clasp my phone tight to my ear to drown out the sound of the crowd.

"Where the hell are you? Lots of background noise."

"I'm at a match. Five minutes from kick-off."

"Surprised to hear so much noise from a local crowd. And for a small town team."

I stiffen at the faint derisory note in his voice. Pride and defensiveness surge in me. These lads may be small town, but the guys shambling across the field below me are as dedicated as they come, as hungry to win as the flashy players in the pro teams. Maybe more so when you're not playing for the money, but with your heart.

"Big turn out," I say. "The whole town's here. That's how we do things up north."

Kieran has lived all his life in Glasgow, so even the clubs he played for in his youth had a city veneer. He needs to come up here if he really wants to understand rugby.

"Well, I need to see if I can tempt you away from the bright lights of Cluanie. Listen, Jenna, the place has gone to hell while you're away."

As the referee strides onto the field, his jersey a gaudy slash of pink, the crowd's mutterings become a clatter drowning out Kieran's next words.

"What's that?" I raise my voice.

“I said we need you back. Not in November. Now. What do you say? I’ll even add in a little bonus as a sweetener. Few thousand pounds. A bit of cash to spend on some shopping, maybe? I know you won’t have been doing too much of that up there.”

I bite my tongue, holding back a sharp retort. Shopping? That’s what he thinks I’d spend a bonus on? Not the mortgage on my apartment, or upgrading my car, or even just saving it because that’s what sensible people do with money. Certainly not investing it back into my new business, which has already attracted more clients in six months than I’d dared hope. Typical of a man like Kieran to assume a woman’s first thought would be clothes and shoes.

And that little dig about ‘up there’—the subtle contempt in his voice when he talks about Cluanie, as if civilisation ends at Glasgow’s city limits. As if I’ve been stranded in some cultural wasteland, desperate for retail therapy .

I feel the comfortable press of Grant and Laura flanking me. I soak up the comforting blanket of the hometown crowd wrapped around me.

Below me, Skylar and her friend jump up and down, enthusiastically waving the “brANDON BOOTS IT BEST” sign she made in our office yesterday afternoon.

My gaze sweeps across the field and there’s Geordie, his smile wide as he and Nathan jog forward to the halfway line where the two teams gather for the toss. As if he feels my gaze, he turns towards me, lifts his chin, and then—giving me a taste of my own medicine—shoots a mischievous wink. Something warm and certain settles in my chest. In that moment, my heart knows its decision.

Connor and the Duncraig captain step forward to meet the referee and the coin spins off his thumb, glittering in the sunlight, the future of the match perhaps hanging in those few seconds of flight. At the same time, I give Kieran the answer that determines my future, too.

The home crowd roars in approval as Cluanie wins the toss, and Connor elects to play into the brisk breeze in the first half, a tactical choice to face the challenge head-on while legs are fresh.

“I didn’t hear that,” Kieran yells down the line. “Say again.”

“I said I’m not coming back, Kieran.” I bellow back at him. “Not now. And not in November. You’ll have my resignation letter on your desk on Monday.”

My pulse quickens, not with doubt, but surety. I’m backing myself here, giving my fledgling business the space and attention it needs to fly. And I’m backing Geordie and me too. Our relationship is still new, still secret—fragile even—but I want to give it a chance to be so much more.

Who would have thought Rachel’s pesky little brother would transform into the man running confidently across that field? Having found him again here in Cluanie after all these years, I’m not about to walk away before we’ve properly begun. I watch him take his place behind the kicker, shoulders squared, focused, and ready, oblivious to my decision that will change everything for us both.

GEORDIE

The ground rushes up to meet me as my knee slams into the turf. My determined grip on his legs fells the Duncraig man like an unruly tree across the sideline, the ball in his hands spilling loose. I topple after him, jerking my head away from his flailing boot, only to faceplant in the mud. Musty earth fills my nostrils, and I taste the grit in my mouth. Ploughed by thirty pairs of rugby boots for nearly eighty minutes, the field's looking worse for wear and so are we.

Evenly matched, the two sides have battled, seesawing between attack and defence. We've run in our share of points. Brandon Smith's in top form, converting Brodie's first half try, nailing three penalty goals, and adding a flashy drop goal. But sitting on seventeen points is not enough, with Duncraig matching our converted try, and their solid kicker landing five out of five penalties.

I rise to my feet, yank out my fluoro-orange mouthguard, and take the water bottle thrust at me by the youngest Darby boy on the sideline. I swish the lukewarm liquid around my mouth, spitting out Cluanie dirt .

As I face the crowd, my smile could be for any of those faces looking at me with approval after my solid tackle prevented Duncraig capitalising on a cheeky intercept of a loose ball; but it's only for one person.

I find her instantly. Jenna.

It's been hard to keep my mind on the game. No matter whether I've been right here in sight of her at the halfway mark, or scrambling to my feet defending down on the

try line, I've felt her eyes on me. Like a compass needle, unable to do anything but face true north, every time I look into the crowd my gaze turns to her. In a sea of Cluanie blue, she's the lighthouse guiding me home.

She's grinning, eyes locked on mine, giving me a thumbs-up. Heat surges through me, stronger than the fire in my legs.

"Nice hit," she calls, cupping her hands around her mouth.

I flash her a grin, shoving my mouthguard back in. Focus, Geordie. Two minutes left, and we're hanging by a thread.

The referee's whistle cuts through the noise, dragging me back into the moment.

He's ruled a forward pass against Duncraig.

Jogging back into position, I shake out the stiffness in my legs as we form up for the scrum. We prepare to link our tired bodies together, all of us in the forward pack summoning strength from the knowledge that what we do from this set piece is likely to determine the outcome of the game. Tension ripples off the men alongside me as the referee begins the calls.

"Crouch."

My overworked thigh muscles ache as I squat, pressing my shoulder against the prop's hip, muscles coiled. I reflexively shift my weight onto the balls of my feet, my spine tensing in anticipation .

"Bind."

Shirts stretch tight, bodies shifting in micro-adjustments as we lock in. The tension

vibrates through my spine.

“Set.”

Impact. The packs collide. Eight men surge as one, legs driving against churned-up earth. The scrum twists, lurches. Mud, sweat, torn grass—I barely notice. All that matters is holding our ground, keeping our shape, waiting for the ball to emerge. My body vibrates as both packs push for dominance, every muscle burning, but I maintain my position, standing strong, refusing to submit.

Then it’s out.

Darby scoops it up, firing a pass to Connor. Duncraig’s flanker charges, but Connor reads him perfectly, feinting a kick before offloading to Fraser. Fraser flicks it back to Brodie, who’s already sprinting into space.

I break.

The moment Brodie chips the ball over their heads, I’m accelerating. Their fullback hesitates, caught between options. Too late. The ball bounces, upright and perfect.

I gather at full tilt, dive.

The roar of the crowd explodes around me as I slam the ball down. Five points. All from a set-piece we’ve drilled a hundred times in training. And a tied score right on full time.

I scramble to my feet, ball tucked possessively under one arm, a grin of satisfaction splitting my face. Immediately I’m mobbed by our players, who leap upon me with howls of delight, cuffing my head, and slapping at my back.

Time's up on the board, but we've got the conversion to come. Brandon jogs up from fullback, scooping up the ball and striding up to the neon yellow tee, ready to nail the final points and give us the win. There's no shame in a draw, but we're hungry to cement a victory over our traditional rivals.

While we wait for Brandon to set up, I let my gaze wander back to the stand. There's been a silent conversation between Jenna and me the whole eighty minutes, one I hope has gone unnoticed. Right now, while hundreds of eyes are preoccupied with the kicker, I dare another direct look, needing to see her approval more than that of all the other faces fixed on the field.

Her smile is broad, and her eyes meet mine. She joins in the chorus of encouragement. While the words are for Brandon, the look is for me.

It's not an easy goal. I touched the ball down wide, less than five yards from the sideline. Brandon's got his work cut out for him, but this is where the hours he's spent down here practising, lobbing kick after kick from every angle, will pay off. Placing the ball precisely, he pauses a moment, hands still connected with it as if he's having a secret chat, explaining what he requires.

We've watched this routine dozens of times. All kickers have their ritual, a series of motions to get them in the zone, necessary for success.

He takes three careful steps—I swear if I pulled out a tape, they'd measure exactly the same every time—pauses, and I see his chest rise and fall in three controlled breaths.

Needing to drown out the encouraging buzz of the hometown crowd behind him, and the expected booing of the Duncraig supporters, Brandon slips into his kicker's trance. His gaze sweeps from the ball poised on the tee to the goal and back again, visualising the path between the two, his head swivelling like the gun turret on an

army tank, seeking its target.

His lips move; one word, a secret mantra, none of us can know for fear it might spoil the spell. Then his mouth curves up in the slightest of smiles. There's no doubt who he's imitating; his hero, McKenzie, the Kiwi kicker with the Scottish name. I swear Brandon's got the potential to be that famous if he decided to take one of the offers dangled in front of him; but that would mean leaving Skylar and he won't do it.

For the first time I get it; how caring for someone might bind you to a place. These last weeks it's happened to me, too. What was an impulsive decision to spend some time in Cluanie, taking stock, making a plan for where to next, has morphed into something else.

The wanderlust has stilled. The restless need to be anywhere but Cluanie—the force that once drove me away—has faded, replaced by a quiet certainty. I belong here. With these men, my friends. And with her.

She calls us friends, insists that's all we are, but I know better. There are layers beneath her relaxed exterior, hidden things she won't admit. I've been patient, careful, waiting. But every week, it gets harder. Sometimes, I want to break from this defensive line I've held for too long and charge straight through her guards like I did against the Duncraig men today—no more sidesteps, no more tactical plays—just raw momentum and determination. I want to wrap my arms around her walls and drag them down, force her to see what's been right in front of her all along. In rugby, you can't score if you never cross the line. It's time I stopped playing it safe in the backfield of her life .

As the crowd hushes in reverence for the kicker, I look towards her. Unlike every other person, Jenna's eyes are still locked on me, until the thump of Brandon's boot drags our attention away from each other and we turn to watch the ball sail through the air with absolute certainty of its destination.

The hometown crowd roars in triumph and my eyes flick back to Jenna's, drinking in her adoration for a moment, before a crush of players descends on me, in a whirl of back-slapping and rough hugs.

GEORDIE

Fresh from the best shower of my life, I step into the clubrooms and a wall of heat hits me. Beer and sweat hang thick in the air. The place is packed. Our supporters are raucous, jubilant at our hard-fought win. They shout good-naturedly across tables, against the backdrop of clinking glasses and the scrape of chairs on the old wooden floors. It all but drowns out the 80s rock music playing in the background.

Everyone's talking a bit louder, laughing a bit harder. The special buzz that only comes with a win runs like an electric current through the room. The bar is three deep. As one person peels away, pint and pie in hand, another takes their place.

I spot Grant Darby over by the trophy cabinet, as if the County Cup is already there, and he's guarding it. He's a proud president in his Cluanie blue blazer surrounded by a few of his committee and some unhappy Duncraig officials in their own colour of emerald green. His weapon of choice, Robbie Sharpe, stands at his elbow, glass of water in hand, but a satisfied glow like he's already downed a couple of whiskies .

I scan the mass of bodies, but Jenna is nowhere in sight. As Coach's daughter, she's probably buried in some group of locals receiving congratulations on his behalf. The thought of some beefy farm boy or scruffy tradesman taking the opportunity for a hug; arms that aren't mine around her, other hands on her perfect waist—fuck, maybe even chancing a sly peck on her cheek—ignites jealous anger in my veins.

I take a place at the leaner, breathing in the familiar smell of freshly-washed bodies, with a faint overlay of liniment, finding it soothing. Brodie, Nathan, and Fraser are propped against it, each with a beer already in front them.

“What’s this then?” I frown as Nathan raises his bottle of Stella and takes a long swig. “Feeling cocky after the win?”

“You didn’t hear?” he replies, thumping the bottle onto the table. “Two each, lads. But no more.” He delivers the words in perfect imitation of Coach’s rasping tone, including a passable Scottish accent, and his face contorted into the growling expression we know so well.

We all howl with laughter, like we’re once more a bunch of cheeky high school boys mocking Mr Carswell, our old maths teacher, behind his back.

“But he didn’t say two of what.” Connor shoulders his way between us, sliding a pale gold pint of Tennent’s lager in front of me, and placing two others on the leaner. “If we’re allowed a beer, might as well make it a decent one, eh? No knocking back pissy little bottles of Belgian crap.” He scowls at Nathan’s drink of choice. “We’ll never make a Scotsman out of you, till you learn how to drink, man.”

“You’re really saying that to a guy who can make a damn fine Scotch whisky?” Brodie leaps in to defend the Kiwi boy.

“Now we’re talking,” Fraser says, draining his pint glass. “If Coach didn’t specifically say we can’t.”

“No fucking whisky,” Connor warns. “Or at least save it for when we sneak over to the Railway after this.”

“Sooner the better,” Nathan suggests. “At least they have a MacFarlane’s on the shelf and I won’t have to drink this pissy Belgian crap.” He chortles, unfazed by the winding up by his teammates.

“I’ll stick to my Tennent’s, thanks.” Kyle Stewart sidles in next to Nathan. “We may

have won a game, but we've got a bloody great mountain to climb in the morning, lads."

I groan inwardly. Every muscle in my body aches. I've got too many bruises to count and a massive grass burn on my side where my jersey rode up as I dived for the try—not that I'd have chosen to do anything less but slide across that ground and press the ball over the white-painted line. The only workout I'm up for after today's pummelling is with a certain beautiful woman. Maybe tonight, given my last-minute heroics on the field, I could convince her to stay over. Even so, I'd have to haul arse out of bed early in the morning, and leave her behind, tucked up in my sheets. I can't let the guys down, but the thought of trekking up a mountain is the last thing I feel like.

"Shit," Brodie says, his mouth terse, "I'd forgotten about that. Tell me again, why the fuck we're doing it tomorrow? After a big game? Wasn't the smartest idea, was it?"

Fraser leaps in. "Because, mate, you and the rest of us all bragged about knocking off a Munro, and Cap here"—he says with a nod towards Connor, who's looking a little embarrassed—"who has been kind enough to offer to take us so we don't fall off the side of the fucking mountain, has to put his paying clients ahead of dumb bastards like you and me."

We've delayed this trip twice. Connor, a cousin to the famous 'kilted climber' himself, Callum MacFarlane, has the mountains in his blood. He mixes his work on the Murray family farm with guiding for a local tour company, taking hikers who fancy bagging a Munro to the top of mountains. None of us would deny the man income to take a group of his teammates up Beinn Greannach so we can claim we're true Scots who've bested a mountain.

"Toughen up Brodie," I snort. "Besides, it's no man left behind, right, Connor? So one way or another, we'll make sure you get back down, though I can't say I'd want

to carry you.”

“We can always stretch the pathetic bastard,” Connor says with a grin. He volunteers for the mountain rescue too, so if anyone can work out how to get an incapacitated bloke off a mountain, it’s him.

I sense Jenna’s approach before I see her, the tropical fragrance so feminine, its delicate floral note distinctive amongst the manly odours surrounding me. She slides into the gap between Nathan and me, and I don’t move to widen it, grateful for the warm press of her body close, even if it is clothed in layers I’d rather weren’t there.

“Made your dad a happy man today,” Fraser says, grinning at her. “No disrespect, but he’s not an easy man to please, so it’s extra sweet.”

She laughs. “Tell me about it. You only have him for your coach. Imagine what it’s like being his daughter.”

“Pretty tough, I’d say,” Fraser replies. “Can’t be easy keeping on his good side.”

A dirty smirk splits Kyle’s face. “Especially when he finds out you’re spending time with this one here.” He grins at me. Jenna stiffens as if she’s paralysed by an electric shock. I give Kyle a ‘what the fuck?’ glare and then turn my face to hers. It’s masked with a polite smile, as she pretends to ignore the remark and continues to focus on Fraser.

“Well, after that performance out there today, I think you’re safely in his good books,” she says a little too brightly to Fraser, who pipped Brandon for man of the match with his relentless defence.

“MacDonald here has to be, too, after that last try,” Kyle interjects, luring the focus back onto me. “Reckon he deserves to get lucky tonight, eh?” he says with a

suggestive wink at Jenna.

She brushes Kyle off like he's an annoying midgie flitting around on a summer evening, not worthy of her attention. She keeps her face focused on Fraser.

"How you kept your cool after that disallowed try, I have no idea. Up in the stands we were all ready to storm the pitch and sort out the ref ourselves."

I'm torn. Part of me wants to grab Kyle by the collar and throttle the bastard; while the sensible, rational part argues I do as Jenna is doing right now—ignore him and not give his filthy suggestions any oxygen in the hope they'll die down.

"Anyway, I think I'll go get a drink," she says, turning on that mega-watt smile, although I'm guessing, like me, she's fuming on the inside. I let her walk away. As the conversation returns to a post-mortem of the game, I slip out of the group after her.

The scrum of people gathered in the bar area works in my favour. I intercept her before she's made it to the bar, inserting myself into her path. She goes to step around me, and I block her. She changes direction with the agility of an outside centre under the pressure of a defender, but I'm faster .

She halts with a disgruntled huff, arms crossed, her chin tipping in an aggressive question.

"What?" she says, eyes flashing. She has every right to be mad, but her anger is based on an untrue assumption, and I intend to put her straight.

"I didn't tell them," I grind out. I want to add 'And so what if I did?' I'm over all this secretive shit. Yes, it's best for both of us if her father doesn't know; but the guys, for all their winding, would never dob us in, not even fucking Kyle. He might be a right

royal arsehole at times, but he's still a mate of sorts, and mates don't do that.

We no longer have to worry about Rachel. She's agreed to leave us to sort this on our own timeline. I'm sure Mum suspects and, of course, these guys in the team must see it, too.

The ugly thought that's been whispering in my ear this past week, now pushes itself forward, insistent: It's not just about her father. She's ashamed of people knowing she's with you. And with it a question: Is she ashamed of you?

Yeah, I know I'm not the greatest catch, not for a girl like her: university educated, a professional, a career woman, but she's no snob. You can take the girl out of Cluanie but you can't take Cluanie out of the girl. Like my sister, there's a lot of the down-to-earth, small town attitude still there, and so I don't think she'd be wowed by a man with slick clothes or a flashy car—but this smart and successful woman is no doubt looking for an intellectual equal. She deserves one, too. Guess she thought she'd found it in that arsehole, Adam.

I'm definitely not like him, not only in the way I cherish her, and would never hurt her; but also the man the world sees is very different. No fancy suit, no Porsche in the driveway, no framed paper proclaiming my academic success .

Surely Jenna understands a person with practical skills can still be intelligent? Her father is the perfect example. Surely she knows a man can be successful without flaunting it like a big badge for the world to see? Or maybe she doesn't.

I've proved myself no slouch—topped my trade school class. And there's no doubt in my mind I've been successful: held positions of responsibility on the rigs, trusted with expensive equipment and the lives of men in a dangerous and sometimes unpredictable environment, and damn it there's a whopping few hundred thousand pound bank balance sitting there to prove my worth in monetary terms. However,

Jenna doesn't know any of those things.

The only place she has seen me succeed is on the rugby field. Fine—I've proven I have other talents too, reading her every murmur and movement in bed. If she let me, I'd be just as successful at something more important—caring for her, loving her the way I want to.

But these are the only sides of me she knows, and I can't shake off the nagging voice. Even though hearing her confirm it would break me, I have to ask.

“Jenna, tell me, what's the big problem with the guys knowing? Are you ashamed of me? Ashamed to be seen with me?”

Her eyebrows shoot up.

“What? No!” she hisses.

Her forehead creases, the little divot that's even faintly there when she's asleep now deepening. I want to stretch out my thumb and smooth it away, but now's not the time. From the flare of fire in those brown eyes, Jenna is seriously pissed off; and this time it's with me.

“We need to talk. ”

The words a man never wants to hear from the mouth of an angry woman. They come out as a steely command, a tone I've never heard her direct at me. It's the business-like voice I've heard her use on the phone. It's the voice with which she wrangles difficult clients and pushy sports agents. Just as they don't argue back against the force of her words, neither do I.

“I think we do,” I agree. “Van's outside. Unless you're worried it's too conspicuous.

Someone might see.”

I hate myself for the sarcastic note, but her apparent indifference to Kyle’s words, like a silent protest against their truth, tears at my gut. The day was always going to come when someone would find out. For chrissakes this is Cluanie. Why couldn’t we just laugh it off, accept a bit of good-natured shit from the boys and move into a new normal?

This is not that normal. If the look on her face is anything to go by, normal might be nothing at all. Finished before we’ve barely started. The thought punches me in the chest, and reeling from the blow, I swallow and try again.

“Sorry, Jen. He got me riled, too. If you want to head out the side door past the ladies’ loos. I’ll double back through the change rooms. OK?”

With a nod, she slips away through the crowd, politely accepting a congratulatory hand on her shoulder from one supporter, offering a smile to another’s murmured words in her ear, before disappearing through the door where a hand-painted sign says ‘Lassies’. I make my way in the opposite direction.

“Not leaving already, man?” Brodie accosts me before I can escape .

“Nah, just left my phone in my locker. I’m on call tonight.” The second part of that statement is actually true.

“Fuck, really?” he scoffs. “Surely Sparky could give you the night off after the first game?”

“He’s got some dinner at his in-laws. Needs me to cover.”

“Ooh,” Brodie winces at the mention of Sparky’s mother-in-law. Nerida Hatfield,

Deputy Head at Cluanie District High, is a scary lady none of us ever want to see again. “Rather him than you or me, eh?” Brodie says, giving a tight grin as I roll my eyes in knowing agreement, before edging past him.

Usually, I’m eager to leave a place when I know Jenna’s waiting for me at the next stop, but as I head towards the car park, weariness sets in, my body aching and drained, and it’s not only from the hammering I took at the hands of the Duncraig boys this afternoon.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:13 am

JENNA

The early evening air cools my flaming cheeks but does nothing to quench the fire smouldering inside. I stride towards the white van, the gravel of the carpark crunching under each furious step of my booted feet.

The bold lettering on the side—Bright Sparks Electrical Services—makes it obvious whose van I'm heading for, but no one's around. Anyway, I'm beyond caring. Even if the whole damn crowd packed inside the clubrooms came spilling out to witness my meltdown, I wouldn't flinch. I glare at the stupid cartoon lightbulb man on the side of the van. I've a violent urge to wipe the mocking, toothy grin off his face.

This is why I shouldn't be with someone like Geordie. Adam was right—there's some deep flaw inside of me, some lack—and he saw it in time to save himself. I tried to save Geordie too, back in that hotel room. We could have left it a fun one-night-stand and gone our separate ways in the morning. But he wanted more and, selfishly, I agreed .

Now this fucked-up friends with benefits arrangement has caused the outcome I wanted to avoid. Geordie thinks I'm embarrassed by him—that I'm like his father and all the others who've shone a spotlight on the things he lacks, rather than the qualities that make him so special. I've hurt a man who doesn't deserve it, simply because I couldn't do the right thing and walk away from him before we were both in too deep.

As my hand snatches at the door handle, there's one beep, a click, and the vehicle unlocks. Determined footsteps echo behind me. I wrench the door open, clamber up into the high seat, and shut myself inside with a slam.

I suck in an enormous breath and exhale a sob. I will not cry. I will not cry. The second breath is even more of a failure. A single tear escapes. I swipe it aside with the sleeve of my jersey, as Geordie jerks open the driver's door.

The van rocks as he hefts himself up into the seat. He fumbles the keys with a clatter and then, finding the ignition, fires up the engine. He jiggles the gear lever into reverse and the vehicle shoots backwards.

“Geordie, what are you doing?” I snap, and he brakes hard.

With unnerving calm, he swivels his head toward me. “I’m not going to sit here and fight with you in the rugby club car park, Jenna.”

“Fighting? Is that what this is?” I stare him down.

The quiet anger simmering in my chest boils over. I hear the snark in my voice and hate that he’s right: I am spoiling for a fight.

“I don’t know. Are we fighting?” His tone of disinterest riles me. I see his eyes, dimmed to the same blue-grey as the cloudy evening sky above us, offering a steady challenge and I leap to meet it .

“Yes, we bloody are,” I bark. “Now drive the damn van.”

“Thought so,” he says, releasing the brake.

Until this afternoon, I had my escape route mapped: November would come, I’d leave, and distance would naturally dissolve whatever we had. Our secret would remain a pleasant memory while Geordie built his new life here with his rugby, his mates—and eventually, someone else in his bed.

But a few hours ago, in one delusional moment, I let myself imagine rewriting our story—giving us the romance-novel happily ever after. After all, that’s how it works in books, isn’t it? Girl returns to hometown. Meets the guy from her past. They fall in love. She stays.

Except in real life, someone pays a price. Geordie gets the girl but loses what he loves most: his rugby. Our epilogue becomes a life where resentment for what he sacrificed festers between us. Where he wakes up one day and realises he’s tied himself to a place and a person and I was never worth the price.

A blazing argument—that’s my way out. Clean. Final. Geordie will hurt, then heal, then forget. But something deep in my gut twists at the thought of burning this bridge, of watching everything turn to ash in the space of one brutal fight.

He manoeuvres the van between tightly clustered rows of cars, out into the dark streets, before turning into the road leading to the top of Bourke’s Hill. It winds upwards, the scraggly bushes of the lower slopes giving way to larger trees and dense undergrowth.

The path bordering it, although steep, is popular with runners looking for an alternative to the flat, boring grid of streets that crisscross Cluanie. The car park, a wide area at the top, overlooking the town, is popular for other reasons. However, it’s too early for teenagers making out in cars. Ours is the only vehicle parked up tonight.

Below us, Cluanie’s lights twinkle, casting an unexpected charm over the plain town. By day, it’s unremarkable—not the picture-postcard Scottish village of books and films—but tonight, the glow of street lamps and lit windows transform it into something almost beautiful.

Lulled by the sight, I sit for a moment, Geordie’s steady, even breathing, strangely calming in the quiet stillness. The citrus smell of soap and shampoo, overlaid with his

own familiar soothing scent, fills the van. I slowly inhale it and exhale some of my rage.

I'm not angry at Geordie. Just Kyle who can never leave well alone, and my dad with his ridiculous rules. And myself for believing I deserve someone who'll lay everything on the line for me, who'd sacrifice the thing he loves most to be with me.

"Ready?" Geordie breaks the silence, his mouth quirking up at one corner, eyebrows raised.

I snort. "For what?"

"Whatever had you ready to tear my head off back there."

"Kyle." The name falls flat between us, a weak shield.

"Kyle?" He shakes his head. "The guy's a pain in the arse. Nothing more." His eyes haven't left my face. "But he's not the one you're really looking to murder tonight, is he?"

I squirm in my seat, pinned by his gaze. The words tangle in my throat, and my sigh says everything I can't.

"You thought I'd told them," he says. Not a question. "We agreed to keep it quiet, yeah? But Nathan's the only one who knows, and Christ I didn't tell him—" He runs a hand through his hair. "Those walls aren't exactly thick." There's the hint of a smile. "Connor's known from the start. Reckons he saw something between us out on the terrace back on the night of the party. But he won't say anything. Even Kyle won't. The team's too important to him. He'll keep his big gob shut."

Geordie pins me with that stare again. I have to give him more.

“No, Kyle’s not the problem.” I stare at my hands. “He can stir all he wants. And the other guys...you’re right, they’ll figure it out, anyway.” I swallow hard. “But saying it out loud makes it real. We said casual, remember? The moment we tell people, it becomes something else. Then you’re not just...then you’re my boyfriend.”

“Are you sure I’m not?” His eyes lock with mine until something he sees there makes him turn away, his jaw tight against the darkness. “Why not call it what it is?” His voice drops. “Unless you want to sleep with someone else?”

The real question hangs between us, unspoken: Why am I so afraid of calling him mine?

“Of course I bloody don’t.” The words burst out, rough with frustration.

Geordie’s too calm, too reasonable, leaving me nowhere to run. Why can’t we drop this and go back to what we’ve been? That’s what I imagined this afternoon. Everything would stay the same except without an expiry date. But my chest tightens at the thought. Living this half-life where we’re everything behind closed doors and strangers in daylight. Where I pretend what we have isn’t burning through every wall I’ve built. It’s not what I want, and god knows it’s not what he deserves, but I don’t see another way out.

He turns back to me and waits, his eyes pinning me in place. Something wild rises in my chest, a desperate need to break this moment before it breaks me .

“You think I have time for anyone else?” My voice sharpens. “Every spare minute, I’m in your bed. With you. Fucking.” The word sours on my tongue. “There’s no one else, Geordie. I’ve kept my end of the deal.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” I hate the flatness of his reply, the disinterested shrug of his shoulders. “At least you haven’t made a fool out of me by making an arrangement

with some other guy.” The way he spits out ‘arrangement’ conveys the bitter taste it leaves in his mouth.

“Geordie, you don’t seem to understand.” I enunciate each word with exaggerated precision. “I don’t want people to think we’re... in... a... relationship.”

“Yeah, well, that would be fucking terrible, wouldn’t it?” he says. His unaccustomed sarcasm stabs at me. “For people to think you and I are anything at all. How fucking embarrassing for you.”

He turns to meet my eyes, and the raw pain in his gaze triggers a wave of shame. If anything should embarrass me, it’s the hurt I’ve inflicted. I bite back a humiliated sob. This is what I’ve done—driven a gentle, kind man to lash out like a wounded animal fighting to survive.

I stare down at the lights of Cluanie, wavering through unshed tears. Minutes ago, they sparkled with promise; now they’re tarnished by my cowardice. The truth cuts deep—I’m not ashamed for others to know about Geordie and me. I’m ashamed because I can’t face what we are myself.

Geordie’s phone lights up, the distinctive ring tone he’s set for work blaring through the emptiness between us. I hear the echo of an agitated voice as he makes calming noises.

“I’ll be right over, Heather,” he says, ending the call. “Gotta go. Work. ”

He starts the engine. We spiral down into the town, the silence a gaping space that neither of us knows how to fill. At the rugby club, he parks the van alongside my car.

“Look, I’m sorry.” He turns to face me, and I can’t believe he’s apologising. I’m the one who’s done wrong here. His eyes catch the dim light, wet with unshed tears.

“I’ve been a bastard, I know. But Jenna, this thing is eating me alive. I can’t end it—Christ, I wouldn’t survive. Everything changed that night in Edinburgh. For me, anyway.”

“Can we talk later? After?” My suggestion triggers guarded hope in his eyes, piercing straight through my defences. Since Edinburgh, my world has shifted too. This afternoon, it lurched even further on its axis. The thought of telling him I’m staying terrifies me. It will only fuel his determination for us to step out of the shadows and face the whispers and watching eyes of everyone in town—and my father. But I need to tell him.

“Not sure when I’ll finish,” he says with a frustrated sigh. “Heather Buchanan needs me up there pronto. They’re fully booked and the power’s failed in one of the cottages—right as the last guests were checking in. She’s keeping them calm with complimentary drinks, but that won’t last long.”

“Better get up there,” I say resignedly. Heather Buchanan’s boutique hotel keeps half of Cluanie employed. I can hardly begrudge her an emergency call-out. Of course he has to go.

“Tomorrow then?”

“There’s the stupid bloody hike with the guys.” He gives an irritated huff. “I’d bail on it, but Connor’s done all the planning, organising the gear. I feel—”

“Like you’d be letting him down. I get it. Tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow night.”

He leans in. There’s a tentative hesitation before he presses a single, delicate kiss to my lips. I slip out of the van. Rather than watch him disappear into the night, I close

my eyes and touch my fingers to my mouth, where the warmth of his kiss lingers like a promise.

JENNA

Watching Geordie leave, a heavy, aching loneliness settles on my chest. I'm torn between the need to be alone and a craving for company, but with the one person I want most driving away from me, my options are few.

Talk and laughter, underscored by cheesy pop music, tumble from the glowing windows, but the rugby club holds no appeal. It's almost eight, so already many will have drifted off home to families and dinner. I could do the same, but the house will be empty except for Andy. After the victory over Cluanie's old foes today, Dad and Grant will hold out for a few more hours.

Instead, I climb into my car and drive to the Railway. If I'm in luck, they'll still have the pizza oven fired up.

Skylar's working tonight. She only stayed after the game long enough to congratulate Brandon on his usual flawless performance, then raced off to start her shift at the pub. Maybe a little time swept up in the sweet, pink cloud of positivity that floats around her might help .

However, after ordering my favourite Margherita pizza and a glass of red to go with it, I fob off Skylar's offer to sit at one end of the bar and chat with her between customers. Instead, I find a dark booth near the back wall—it matches my mood.

I sip my wine, my head swirling.

When faced with other people's disasters, I'm cool and decisive. My own problems,

though, leave me reeling. These past few weeks have been like a relentless rollercoaster ride—one I can't escape. My world tilts and spins, shifting beneath me. I can't tell which way is up, my vision struggling to lock onto the horizon. I'm too paralysed by fear to call for help, and no one's going to stop the damn thing.

A thought pushes through the confusion: I should text Dad, let him know where I am. As I lean down to find my phone in my handbag, I become aware of the familiar, dull pulsing—a sinister Morse code tapping out a warning message inside my skull. In my peripheral vision, something flickers, like an F1 marshal waving a chequered flag at the finish line. I recognise the signs. Unless I take action, a migraine is coming.

Moving quickly, I dig into my handbag and find Rain's herbal headache remedy. I roll a little on each fingertip, then lean forward, head in hands, elbows on the table, massaging my temples. The combination of gentle pressure, the repetitive circling of my fingers, and the woody scent bring some relief.

A few minutes later, I hear footsteps approaching and turn, ready to thank the server for the speedy delivery of my meal. But it's not pizza—it's Kyle Stewart. Before I can protest, he drops two glasses onto the table and slides into the booth across from me.

"Glad I caught you here, Jenna," he says, his handsome face lit up with arrogant confidence. On anyone else, I'd describe his smile as sincere. With Kyle, it smacks of smugness, as if he's a cat who's cornered a mouse a second time, planning to torment it some more.

"I'm not," I snap at him. The situation with Geordie, my unbalanced state, the threat of a migraine, and now Kyle Stewart. What a fucked-up day.

"Yeah, well, I thought you'd feel that way, but that's why I came over."

“So you can make my day even worse than it’s already been with more stupid comments?”

“No, because I want to apologise for my stupid comments. And shout you a drink.”

He slides a glass towards me. Golden liquid splashes against the sides. The wood-smoke smell of whisky drifts upwards. “Jenna, how I behaved at the club—I’m not usually like that, not these days. I told you, I’ve changed. But sometimes, out with the lads, I slip back into my old bad habits. It’s fucked up, I know, but words just come out of my mouth without thinking sometimes.”

I snort derisively. Everyone’s telling me this is a new, improved version of Kyle Stewart. I’m still not seeing it. I glare at him. He’s not deterred.

“So yeah, I wanted to say I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be taking the piss about you and Geordie Mac. He’s a good guy and you’re a great girl, and any mug can see you’re good together. Except perhaps your father, and that’s probably not a bad thing, eh?”

He laughs at his own little joke.

“Kyle—” I raise a weary hand, but he ignores it and carries on.

“Jenna, I can only dream of someone looking at me the way you look at Geordie. It’s like those silly little heart-eye emojis my sister puts in her texts. And he’s sending them right back at you. Guess I’m envious. That’s why I’m giving you shit about it.” He pauses, an unexpected wistfulness in his eyes. “Because it’s something I don’t know if I’ll ever have. Not that I deserve it.” His voice trails away, low and unexpectedly sad.

Kyle’s quiet, underlying despair knocks me off balance. He doesn’t see himself as deserving of love, and yet I desperately want to tell him he’s wrong. Everyone

deserves love—even Kyle—and should expect to find it. They shouldn't abandon hope of being loved.

As I look into his hazel eyes—normally sparking with trouble but now dimmed by quiet inner sadness—I see a mirror reflecting my own crippling doubt, clear and confronting. If Kyle is wrong, I've been wrong, too. I see myself as unworthy of love, so I keep Geordie at arm's length, despite his readiness to give it to me. I refuse to allow our relationship to go where both of us want.

Part of me wants to open up to Kyle, to use my own stupidity as a lesson, to encourage him to not give up on the possibility of someone special in his future. But this is Kyle Stewart, and although I can see there are changes in him, I'm not ready to have that sort of heart-to-heart with him—not yet.

However, the sudden rush of empathy still causes me to do something impulsive, and arguably stupid.

“Have you eaten?”

His head jerks up, surprise splashed across his face. He's not the only one.

“Nah, just a bag of crisps at the club.”

“I've got a pizza coming. No way I can eat it all.”

“Is that a dinner invitation, Jenna Sharpe?” His lips curl into that easy smirk, one I now suspect is just part of the mask he wears .

“Yes, but nothing more,” I say, my guard snapping back into place.

We spend two hours eating, drinking—against my better judgment with the lurking

possibility of a migraine—and talking in a way that is scarily close to a conversation between friends.

We don't veer off into serious territory again, but by the time Rory, the publican, calls the last round just before eleven, to my surprise, I can admit to having enjoyed this couple of hours with Kyle. There's the same old Stewart charm, the quick wit, the playful banter, the confident way he carries himself as if he knows his attractiveness; but he is definitely different from the cocky teenager with a reputation for collecting girls like trophies.

There's a maturity, perhaps forged from all he's seen and done in the intervening years. Kyle doesn't go into detail about his time in the army, even less on the close protection role that won him a commendation, and I sense that's deliberate. I glimpse shadows in his eyes whenever we stray too close to the reality of his past work, before he quickly deflects to some anecdote about guys he served with pranking each other, or inside gossip about a certain MP's indiscretions that were spread all over the tabloids.

Skylar clears the table, raising a questioning brow as she picks up my empty whisky glass—I've had three. My first response is a hiccupping giggle.

"I may be a little bit drunk," I confess to her knowing smile, as I gather my things.

Standing on the steps outside, the cold air slaps my cheeks with the sobering realisation: I'm more than a little drunk. I'm too drunk to drive and have no way home .

This is Cluanie, where Danny Byrne, a mechanic from the garage who moonlights as the town's only taxi driver, clocks off at ten, and Uber is a foreign word. Our house is miles away, out on the farthest edge of town, too far to walk, and anyway, I'd probably freeze to death on the way. I fumble my keys from my bag, thinking maybe

I can sleep it off in the car for a few hours, although it's not going to be much warmer there.

Kyle's hand shoots out and grabs the keys. "Sorry, Jenna, but cop or not, you're not driving. And I've had one too many to be legal myself."

"I wasn't going to drive," I protest. "I'm going to sleep in the car."

"Don't be so fucking daft. It's freezing out tonight."

"I can't stay here." Rory locks the double doors behind us with an emphatic clunk.

"Come stay at mine." Kyle tips his head towards the old building next door to the pub, the original Cluanie police station. It now houses Rain's gift shop on the ground floor, and above it a flat, former offices once turned into accommodation for the Chief of Police. The current chief lives in a nice house over by Craig Ross Park and Kyle rents this place.

I shoot him a dubious glance.

"I swear I mean nothing dodgy by the invitation," he says, raising his hands innocently. "Just a good copper doing his job, making sure the locals get home safe. And keep to the law. Don't want to have to nick you for drink driving."

Our easy conversation of the past few hours, helped by the alcohol, has dulled my suspicious side where Kyle's concerned, and I do the sensible thing, hoping it doesn't come around and bite me on the arse. I follow him to a bright red side-door and up a set of stairs to what is a comfortable flat, homely even, not at all the bachelor pad I'd expected.

"Just got to nip back down to the yard and get Dora," he says. "Make yourself at

home.”

I sit on the couch, intrigued by the mysterious Dora. A minute later, the door swings open, and a large, gangly dog barrels through it and races towards me, planting two damp paws on my knees, and grinning up at me, all white teeth and long lolling tongue.

“Sorry, she’s a bit excitable,” he says, making no attempt to correct Dora while I fuss with her floppy ears. “Worse when I’ve been out for a while.”

“She’s beautiful. You are, aren’t you?” I coo at Dora, scrunching her soft jowly cheeks between my hands. “How long have you had her?”

“About a year. You’ve heard of Pen Farthing, yeah?”

I nod. How could anyone not have heard of the ex-Marine and his controversial evacuation of animals during the fall of Kabul?

“Seeing it on the news got me thinking. Did some reading about places that match up veterans with rescue dogs. Helps them cope with some of the shit that fills your brain when you’ve been through stuff. Thought it might help.” I don’t probe Kyle for details, but it seems he’s got some memories he’d rather forget. “So I went to the SSPCA and came home with Dora.” Hearing her name, the dog races to him and springs into his arms, where he catches her effortlessly, holding her in his arms like a huge baby, waving long legs in the air. “Like to think we each saved the other, eh? Didn’t we, girl?” The dog licks at his face and he laughs, before lowering her to the floor. He walks towards the hallway, the dog dancing at his heels. “Let’s show Jenna to her room, shall we?”

I wake at daylight, disoriented by the distant bubble and hiss of a coffee machine, and the rhythmic snoring coming from a large body next to me. A sliver of light peeks

around floral curtains, highlighting unfamiliar sage green walls and a simple white pendant light above my head. A head which is surprisingly clear given how I ignored last night's threat of migraine, consuming not only red wine, but way too much whisky with Kyle.

It's definitely weird waking up in his house. Hell, I never thought I'd give the man the time of day, let alone choose to spend a night under his roof. Old me would never have trusted old Kyle to stay in his own room.

This Kyle is, as others tell me, a changed person. Dora obviously thinks so, and dogs are surprisingly accurate judges of character. I mean Andy bit him, but Andy has bitten lots of people, even Geordie, so his reads on people can't be trusted.

I pull on my jeans and jersey, trying not to disturb a sleeping Dora, but as I'm lacing my trainers, she bounces to life and waits by the door, tail thumping. She follows me to the kitchen where Kyle is at the worktop, pouring coffee into a flask.

"Want one?" he says. "Help yourself. Breakfast too, if you want. Eggs in the fridge, cereal in the cupboard. But you'll have to make your own. Connor and the lads will be here in five. Stay as long as you like. Just pull the door behind you when you go—it'll lock itself—and put Dora out in the yard."

I'm tempted by the inviting scent of fresh coffee, but leaving now might allow me to slip back inside my house unnoticed before Dad wakes up.

"Thanks, but I'll head off when you do."

"That's about now," he says, tucking the flask into a pocket of the large hiking pack leaning against the wall. "Just got to shove my boots on."

"How about I put Dora away for you?"

Armed with Kyle's instructions for feeding his dog, I set off downstairs, calling her after me. She doesn't look unhappy at being sent to canine jail, bounding through the high gate and immediately beginning an investigative mission around her grassy walled space, which is littered with dog toys. Dora doesn't even seem concerned when I lock her in, more intent on inhaling the scoops of kibble I placed in her dish.

I meet Kyle on the front steps, just as a long van pulls into the kerb in front of us. Connor, in the driver's seat, smiles and tips a hand in greeting.

"Good timing," Kyle says, taking the steps two at a time. "Wish us luck climbing the fucking mountain." He tosses me a grin over his shoulder, then joins Connor, who's now standing at the back of the van, the hatch open, ready for Kyle to sling the pack inside.

This is not good timing. I'm paralysed, a statue on the steps, knowing exactly how this looks. Geordie's in the passenger's seat and his eyes bore into mine, filled with bleak devastation. I want to go to him, explain this isn't what it looks like, but there's no time.

Connor dives back behind the wheel. The gaping side door swallows Kyle before sliding shut. With a roar of the engine, the van speeds off, leaving me standing there, stunned by the cruel irony—just as I've finally found the courage to free Geordie and me from this endless holding pattern, one stupid decision may have cost me our relationship.

GEORDIE

Two hours trapped in a van, then four hours trudging on foot, glaring at the back of a man I truly hate. It's only the presence of five other decent men in our hiking party that keeps me from grabbing Kyle Stewart by the throat and throttling him. Or simply giving him a shove as we edge along the narrow trail, skirting high bluffs and sheer drop-offs on our way to Beinn Greannach's summit.

Now we're there, the bad news is I get to spend the night with the fucking piece of scum too. Connor, as an experienced mountaineer, checked off every last detail of this trip, including the forecast, but no amount of preparation is enough to guarantee Scotland won't throw some unexpected weather in your path, just to make it interesting.

That's why Connor made the call to camp here tonight. We'll descend at dawn, after the unseasonal blizzard passes, when we can safely pick our way back to civilization. We all joke about having a legit reason to skive off work on Monday, everyone in good spirits despite the weather—except for me. The last thing I want is to spend any longer than necessary in bloody Stewart's company .

Connor's yelled instructions carry over the rising wind, which already stings our faces with needles of snow. Our three tents, anchored against the storm, stand as bright beacons of refuge in a world of grey stone and wind-whipped tussock.

Connor assigns us to tents through lip-read shouts and wild gestures, factoring in each man's size for the best fit. The sleet hammers my face like steel shot, but I linger, feet leaden, as I process his arrangement. Tonight, I'm sealed in with Brandon and Kyle

fucking Stewart. Maybe once Brandon drifts off, I'll press my jacket over that smug face and smother him. Connor, blind to the hatred crackling between us, has sentenced me to what promises to be the longest night of my life.

The vision of Jenna standing on Kyle's front steps this morning, still in yesterday's clothes—the evidence of her overnight stay written in her untamed hair—haunts me. Nothing happened between them. It couldn't have. She's made no secret of despising him. Christ, only last night I was the one defending the bastard to her. Never imagined she'd twist my words into some warped permission slip, getting pally enough to spend the night at his place. My jaw locks, teeth grinding until they ache.

Pain knots through me like barbed wire as I picture her standing there, casual as morning coffee, making a fool of me in front of my mates. Whatever her reason for sleeping at Kyle's, she had to know what it screamed to the world. Might as well have walked straight from his bed, the way she stood on those steps—shameless, unconcerned about appearances, or the whispers that she and Kyle are more than friends which are no doubt already echoing around Cluanie. While I'm the one she keeps hidden, her dirty secret stashed in the shadows .

I still blame Kyle. The underhand bastard must have loved it—convincing her to stay, then parading her on his doorstep for maximum exposure. Everyone watching. A calculated show.

The hours drag by over hands of cards. I find myself grimly grateful for Kyle's army habit of carrying a deck. Even wedged as far from him as possible in our seven-foot prison, he dominates the space, his laughter with Brandon bouncing off the walls while I maintain a sullen indifference to his attempts to draw me into the conversation. Brandon senses the tension, but I force normal conversation with the kid. Not his fault Connor threw him into a war zone.

We break for meals—emergency rations that taste like cardboard and necessity.

Water does nothing to ease the sandpaper in my throat.

When exhaustion sets in, we agree it's time to pack in the card game. I retreat to my sleeping bag along the left wall. Kyle wisely takes the right. Brandon between us is an unwitting human shield, preventing murder in the night.

Though we lie shoulder to shoulder, the darkness isolates me in my own lonely space. The weather's relentless howl wraps around my thoughts like white noise. I force my body to still for the sake of Brandon alongside, but inside my brain is a riot. Outside, the wind hammers at the mountainside, but our little tent, tucked into an outcrop, shields us from the worst of the blast. I wish I had a similar shelter from the storm pummelling my heart.

Kyle pissed me off, but rational me knows he's not the source of the problem between Jenna and me, only a symptom.

That first night in Edinburgh, I knew. Knew my life wouldn't be complete without Jenna in it. Desperate to have anything of her I could, no matter how small or superficial or infrequent, I grabbed the scraps she offered.

From the beginning, we've both let our fears and insecurities win. Jenna holds me at arm's length, scarred by her ex, keeping me in a place where I can't hurt her like he did. But I can wait. I'll show up every day until she sees I'm nothing like the bastard who left her. I'm anchored here in Cluanie, ready to prove she's not just everything I've wanted—she's more than I dared dream possible.

For me, years of not feeling good enough, and my failure to meet others' expectations, have ground down my self-esteem until it's a fragile shell, easily damaged. I let the opinions of people who don't matter get to me.

My father's words, so often hurled at me like stones: "You need to toughen up,

Geordie.” Never thought I’d find wisdom there. But now, with Jenna, I do need that grit. Nothing in my life has ever mattered more than making this real with her, and that means finding my backbone. What others have to say about us isn’t my business, or my problem.

Physical weariness finally claims the win over my churning thoughts. I drift for an hour, maybe two, until movement in the dark pulls me back. The wind no longer screams at the mountain. It’s dropped to energetic bickering and through it comes the rustle of a sleeping bag as Brandon shuffles himself towards the tent’s entrance. I push myself up, catching his outline, a deeper shadow against the nylon walls.

“Sorry, mate.” I hear the rasp of him zipping a jacket. “Gotta take a piss.”

“No worries,” I say. “Take the headlamp, eh? It’s black as the devil’s ball sack out there. ”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. I’m pretty good in the dark. Back soon.”

Brandon unzips the door, fastens it again, pausing in the porch to pull on boots before the weather swallows the sound of his footsteps.

“How long were you planning to ignore me, MacDonald?” Kyle’s voice in the darkness startles me. He waits and when I ignore his question, chuckles in response to my silence. “Look, mate, you and I both know Jenna’s never going to let me into her pants. And I might have a reputation as a horny bastard, but I’ve never once tried it on with someone else’s girl.”

“Do you think everyone who saw her standing on your doorstep this morning knows that? Given your reputation?”

He huffs out a laugh. “Everyone? No bastard’s out of bed at seven on a Sunday

morning in Cluanie. Even if they were, so what if someone saw her? Does it really matter what they think? The only thing that matters here is what you think.”

“The guys all had plenty to say about it.”

Half an hour into our drive, they finally turned their attention from winding me up to giving Nathan a hard time. It would have gone on longer if they hadn’t pounced on him after he asked Connor if he’d packed bear repellent, triggering unbelieving laughter and merciless taunting that hounded our poor naïve Kiwi boy the rest of the way to the mountain.

“Yeah, well, that’s a good sign, you see,” Kyle says. “If there was any truth in it, they wouldn’t have said a thing. You know we only take the piss when we’re sure it’s not going to blow up in our faces. Believe me, if they thought Jenna had done anything more than sleep in my spare room, there would have been silence like the grave in that van. ”

I grunt noncommittally. I know Kyle’s right—there’s an unspoken code around taking the mick—but damned if I’ll admit it to him. Still, my resentment and anger begin to filter away. He may be a dick at times, but he’s talking common sense on this one.

“What I’d really like to know is how you’re managing to dodge that savage little bastard?” he says.

“Razor?” I can’t help a laugh. “Better not let him hear you call him that.”

“Nah, that fucking dog of his,” he says. “I’ve still got the bloody scar from the bastard’s teeth.”

“Just call me the dog whisperer.”

“I think that’s your missus, actually. Dora wouldn’t leave her side from the moment she set eyes on her. Only one under my roof who slept with Jenna last night—the bloody dog. The little traitor.”

We fall back into silence, but now, instead of an invisible barrier stopping me from grabbing Kyle—and risking a charge of assaulting a police officer (does that even count when he’s off duty?)—the quiet feels more like the old ease between mates, where conversation isn’t necessary.

Tension ebbs away, my racing brain finally slowing. For the first time in hours, a blanket of relaxation settles over me. Even my aching body niggles at me less—the bruises and scrapes, the battle scars from yesterday’s game, the tightness in my calves from today’s steep climb, all subdued as I doze a little.

I’m nearly asleep when the rumble of Kyle’s voice tugs me back.

“The lad’s been gone a while. Think I better go check on him?”

I’m jolted wide awake. How long since Brandon left? Is it two minutes or ten? Way too long for a guy taking a quick slash. I feel a rush of guilt; I’ve been so deep in my own world I didn’t notice.

“Shit.” This has a bad feeling about it. “Yeah, I’ll come with you,” I say, as Kyle taps his phone and weak torchlight bounces off the tent roof.

I unroll my jacket, which I’ve been using as a pillow, and heave it on. I grapple in the pocket, finding a beanie and gloves. My headlamp is in the other and I yank it on over my hat. Kyle shuffles forward, unzips the door, and we sit side by side in the opening to the porch, pulling on boots in grim silence.

“Stick together, yeah?” he says, as we emerge from the tent to stand facing out into

the blackness, remnants of sleety rain cutting across the twin circles of light from our headlamps. “Jenna will fucking kill me if I don’t bring you home in one piece.”

JENNA

I wake on Monday morning to sunlight sliding around the edge of my curtains. My still-sensitive eyes clamp shut. I probe my body with tentative mental prods. The migraine no longer crushes my temples in its vice-like grip, although one hip aches and my neck creaks as I roll onto my side. I swallow the sour tasting residue of the nausea, also now gone. At least I didn't spend all night barfing in the loo, like I have before.

I silently thank the pharmaceutical gods for their gifts to us mere mortals and lever myself upright. My surroundings sharpen—sweat-soaked sheets, a packet of meds sprawled open, its contents spilling across the bedside table, Andy snoring on my pillow. A wave of gratitude crashes over me. I almost feel normal.

Normal until my brain jolts into action, dragging me back to yesterday morning, replaying the awful moment in sharp detail, and the miserable hours afterwards, Sunday ticking by in unbearable slowness

All day I agonised over my last sight of Geordie in the van, his eyes conveying messages of hurt, disappointment and bewilderment in one heartrending look.

When I managed to recharge my phone enough to text him, the messages sat there, not even the word 'Delivered' offering some consolation. I wrote it off as lack of cell phone coverage, but the tightness in my throat, like a sob threatening to escape, remained with me all day, while I listlessly tried to pass the hours.

Picking up my latest book, watching the anticipated next episode of a television

series, even heading over to my office to deal with a few emails from clients; all filled the time, but none occupied my brain enough to divert it from endless reruns of those few crucial seconds, and my devastating blunder at not going straight to him. I could have yelled at Connor to stop, raced to the van, begged Geordie for a minute alone, damn it even chased after them waving my arms and screaming like a mad woman; but I didn't.

The migraine that had murmured subtle threats in the pub on Saturday night crept closer throughout Sunday. It circled all day, a predator biding its time, waiting to pounce. It stayed watchful as I made futile attempts to ward it off—my herbal oil, some ibuprofen, the preventative tablets that have saved me in the past—while the creature lurked in the shadows, patient, knowing its moment would come.

Then, last night, when Dad took Grant Darby's call, it tensed, muscles coiling, sensing weakness. As my worry swelled, it readied itself, knowing the kill was imminent.

Grant passed on the news: the weather had turned bad and seven Cluanie guys, all from my father's team, were overnighing on the summit of Beinn Greannach. Crazy thoughts flooded in, and strongest amongst them the sickening realisation that if something happened to Geordie on that mountain, I might never have the chance to tell him he means everything to me, that I'm done hiding it, and I want the entire world to know.

Within five minutes of the call, I found myself drowning in a whirlpool of visual disturbances and slashes of pain. After ten minutes, sensing opportunity in my weakness, the creature pounced, embedding teeth and claws, showing no mercy. The dull pulsing became vicious hammering, and I gladly sent myself into oblivion with the maximum dose of my meds.

Now, I dither on the edge of my bed. Part of me wants to face the new day, reading

the sunny morning as a hopeful sign. Another part wants to pop another pill, dive back under the covers and slip into that dark, calm, chemical-controlled space where nothing can hurt me, and I can't hurt anyone else.

On the pillow next to me, Andy leaps to attention, tilting his head from side to side, listening. Footsteps on the stairs, a gentle tap, and my father's voice follows.

"Can I come in, luv?"

Andy launches himself toward the door. When Dad ignores the dog's joyful bounces and small yaps of greeting, I know there's something wrong.

He lowers himself cautiously onto the bed. His face is haggard. There's a weariness in his normally erect posture, with shoulders slumped, and a resigned expression in his eyes, the sort I've seen when he's had to tell a player he's no longer wanted, or replace one of the coaching staff.

He may be loud and cranky on the sidelines with his coach's hat on, but Dad's always had this calmness when things really turn to shit. Maybe I've inherited it from him, an essential quality in my PR work. Seeing it now, I'm sure something bad has happened.

Dread settles on my shoulders, heavy as a collapsed scrum. I can't regain my footing, dragged down by the weight of those around me.

"There's been an accident," he begins. I close my eyes, not wanting to face the reality of what is coming next. Bile rises in my throat, thick and bitter, as I brace myself with arms rigid at my sides, one hand twisting the bed cover into a knot.

"It's Brandon Smith."

It's not Geordie. I sag in relief.

"I'm afraid the lad's gone. Took a fall over a bluff in the middle of the night. Mountain Rescue's up there now, bringing him down."

Guilt swoops in. How could I be so selfish, thinking only of my happiness while Skylar's world falls apart?

I turn to my father, a plea in my eyes, still desperate for more news of Geordie, but even now, I'm too afraid to ask him outright.

"And the others?"

"Poor bastards, they'll be in shock for sure. Connor Murray's leading them back down. All able to walk out, they say. Except for your laddie, young MacDonald."

My laddie. My beautiful golden boy. I hang my head, tears burning tracks down my cheeks.

"It's OK, luv." He puts an arm around me. It's solid and dependable, just as it's always been. "He's going to be OK." Relief gushes out of me. "I know you're soft on the lad. I'm not daft. Hard to miss the way he follows you around like a lost puppy. And you think I'd assume you're just popping up to MacFarlane's for a whisky, belting up the road like your tail's on fire. I wasn't born yesterday. You know fine there are no secrets in Cluanie. "

"But I thought you'd..." I choke out.

"Aye lass, I know. I've been a grumpy old bastard, trying to warn the lad off ye. But I can see he's determined to be with ye. And I'm not so blind I canna see how happy you've been since he's been hanging around. I'd nae deny you that. Not after..."

He doesn't finish—he doesn't need to. Not after Adam. Not after Mum.

I lean into his chest, sobbing against the scratchy wool of his Aran jumper. I cry for Brandon and Skylar. For Geordie. And, selfishly, for myself too—this mess I've made of something that could have been really good. Might still, if I can salvage it after yesterday's disaster.

Dad smooths my hair, murmuring soothing reassurances against the top of my head. I'm still his little girl, seeking comfort in the person who's always understood me best.

“He's a good lad, young Geordie. And it's naught to worry about. They're stretchering him out. Suspected broken ankle. Him and Stewart were out looking for Brandon. Near went over the edge himself, by all accounts, but Stewart's quick thinking saved him.”

That's Geordie—always putting others ahead of himself. A man prepared to take a risk for someone else. When all of this is over, will he still be prepared to take a risk on me?

GEORDIE

Around six in the evening, it's as though someone turns down the volume in the hospital ward. I catch a glimpse of two nurses at their station, their murmured conversation and muted laughter drifting my way. A care assistant clears away the beige plastic plate, the remains of my equally beige dinner, and, with a kind smile, places a dark milky cup of tea in front of me. The squeaky-wheeled trolley fades into nothing as they disappear down the long corridor.

The three other guys in my room are thankfully all occupied. I couldn't bear having some chatty type as a neighbour. I'm not in the mood for conversation.

The man opposite dozes, drugged up on something. I wish they'd give me a few tablets to knock me out for a bit. The painkillers have kicked in, so my ankle—wrapped in a bandage—only gives me the odd twinge, but they haven't even touched the pain in my chest. The guilt and the grief twist together in a brutal knot of regrets.

Connor tried to tell us, with firm but gentle insistence, that Kyle and I shouldn't blame ourselves. Brandon made his choice when he refused the light we offered. We acted as quickly as we could. By clambering down the icy rock face, we risked our own lives to try and save him—even though it was already too late. I nodded and accepted his words, but I saw the bleakness in his eyes. He blames himself.

I caught the local news on the telly, and the critics have already had too much to say about Connor's role as leader of our hiking party. It's unfair. He did nothing wrong. His planning kept us safe through Sunday night's storm on that mountain and he got

the rest of us safely off it this morning, too. We're all damaged, but none of it is Connor's fault.

I've seen death before. My American mate, Charlie and I, came across an overturned car on a dusty back road on the way to his parents' place. Two teenagers, thrown from the vehicle; dead on impact. It was confronting, but it was different. Two strangers, not someone I knew; not a person I'd talked to and laughed with over a shared a beer; not someone I'd bonded with in that unique way teammates do.

I don't know if I'll ever completely move on from Brandon's death. For now, it's raw, the grief gushing like blood from a fresh wound, as if I've taken a stray boot to the forehead.

Jenna's been through it these past six months, and Coach, too. Fiona Sharpe is dead, yet every day, they get up, and show up, doing what needs to be done, putting on that brave game face, even though, lying in bed alone, like I am right now, it must hurt when they think of her.

The man on my left is watching a replay of Saturday's match between the Highlanders and Leicester Tigers. There was a rumour it was a Tigers' contract Brandon turned down. Everyone thought he was mad for not going after it the moment he could, but I'm glad he didn't. What he and Skylar had was worth more than the money and glory he'd have raked in by going pro.

Poor bloody Skylar. She loved that lad. She's a tough kid, but no eighteen-year-old could come through a loss like this unscathed. All their plans for the future—gone.

I reach for my phone. It took them all afternoon to find an iPhone charger in the ward. One finally arrived with my dinner. Now the screen's woken up, I immediately tap through to my messages.

There's only one. From Jenna, sent at 9:15 yesterday morning, right after I switched my phone to silent and swore I wouldn't look at it for the rest of the day.

I stab at it, guilt flooding me. I cut off any chance for her to explain, simply assumed the worst. Ridiculous as those assumptions were, now that I've had time to reflect, it's clear: Jenna was never going to hook up with Kyle Stewart—and every guy in the van knew it, too.

The one thing no one could have predicted was Kyle being the one to jolt me into seeing sense about my relationship troubles. Kyle, who's infamous for never having had a relationship that lasted beyond a quick, casual hook-up. Not that different from me, if I'm being honest—before I found Jenna.

I'm desperate to read Jenna's text, even though I know it's just going to fuel the ache of regret that settled in while I lay there, subjected to doctors and nurses fussing over my ankle.

Jenna: Geordie, I hope we still get to have that talk tonight. Especially after what you saw this morning. Yes, I slept at Kyle's, but you know me well enough to know I didn't sleep with him. Just a bed for the night after one too many at the pub. I'm sorry the guys saw, and I'm even more sorry you had to see me there without an explanation. But some things can't wait till tonight. Geordie, I've been an idiot. You and I are good together. We both know it, and other people see it too. I'm tired of hiding what we have. I'm tired of letting fear win. I don't care who knows or what they think. Please, let's take a chance on this. If you still want to.

I toss the phone on the bedside cabinet, frustrated that I can't talk to Jenna face-to-face right now. This is not a conversation for text or even a phone call.

Mum and Dad are coming up to drive me home when I'm discharged in the morning, and then what?

I can't go back to my upstairs room at Nathan's, not on bloody crutches, and damned if I want to be at my parents' even if there's a perfectly good downstairs bedroom. How the hell I'll see Jenna, with no one else around, like we need, I have no idea.

I flop back against the pillows and the movement jostles my ankle in its heavy bandage, causing a jolt of pain. It settles back to a throb. Now, reminded of my injury, it seems sharper and harder to ignore. Thank god the nurses are due with my next round of meds any minute.

When I catch a movement by the door, I turn hopeful eyes towards the flash of blue, thinking relief is at hand. However, it's not a nurse's uniform, but the distinctive blue of a Cluanie R.F.C. hoodie.

JENNA

“This is it.” Dad peers into the first room near the nurse’s station in Ward 3. “I can see him just over there.”

In a room to our right, Geordie lies propped up on a pillow mountain, his sweat-dampened curls a lank, unruly mess against the stark white linen. His face is pale, a grey sheen dulling the usual golden glow of his skin. With eyes firmly closed, and the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, he could be sleeping, except for the way he winces at the clatter of a passing trolley. His mouth remains fixed in a tight grimace.

Pain. Not my fault this time.

My first impulse is to go to him, but my feet don’t move, pinned in place as doubt comes flooding in. Will he want to see me? Has he even seen my text? Or will the sight of me only trigger memories of the hurt my poor judgment caused him?

It was barely a day ago, but the world has shifted in that time. Yesterday I was certain, rehearsing what I would say, planning to once again wind my fingers in his hair, press my mouth to his, a promise of our future sealed with a kiss. I no longer know what I’m supposed to do. As I stand debating whether we should have even come here, a pleasant voice sounds behind us.

“Can I help you?”

I turn to see a nurse in a cornflower blue uniform. Her brows raise in a question. Something in her eyes sparks panic, gripping my chest as my heart pounds. What if

she's about to forbid me from seeing Geordie, even though he's just right there? It could be family visitors only. I'm not that. What am I to Geordie? Maybe nothing at all—because that's all I've let myself be.

I can tell Dad senses my agitation when he speaks.

“Yes, you can certainly help—Allie,” he says, glancing at her name tag. “Robbie Sharpe.”

He extends a hand. The nurse takes it with an amused smirk, and I see the flicker of recognition in her eyes. Dad may have left the Highlanders, but it will be a long time before the fans forget him, if ever.

“We've come to see Geordie MacDonald,” Dad continues, his eyes crinkling in that disarming expression I've seen him use to charm his way out of many a tight situation. “The lad in there.” He tilts his chin towards where Geordie lies, ripples of discomfort now travelling his face.

“Of course,” she nods, and a relieved exhale spills from me. “I'll just let you know, though, visiting hours end at seven. So you've got, let's see.” The nurse glances down at her fob watch. “About ten minutes.”

It's not long, but any time with Geordie is precious, given how, for a moment this morning, I thought we'd have no more time together, ever .

“Do you think we might stay on a wee smidgen longer? We've driven all the way from Cluanie,” Dad says, with a hopeful tone. “And the lassie here—this is my daughter, Jenna—well, she's his girlfriend. And after all the lad's been through...”

The only word I hear: Girlfriend. Is this what I am to Geordie? Two days ago, he'd have wanted nothing more than me to wear the label. Today, I'm ready to be that

person, but I'm no longer confident that's what he'll want.

"I'm sorry, Mr Sharpe," the nurse says, with a placating smile. I can see she's not going to budge an inch, even in the face of Dad's pleading. "But we have to be very strict with the visiting hours, I'm afraid. To be fair to all our patients."

"OK, thank you, Allie," he says, turning away from her in surrender. "Best you get in there, love." He gives me a gentle shove towards the door.

"You're not coming?"

"Naw." He shakes his head vigorously. "Only one person the lad wants to see right now, and I think he already has."

I turn to see Geordie facing our way, eyes open now. From all those times I've stared into them, him with forehead pressed to mine, I know that close up their beautiful grey-blue harbours tiny flecks of gold, like the sea when the sun peeps through on a cloudy day. When he sees me, they light up, yet they're still the eyes of a man in pain.

"Jenna."

My name on Geordie's lips cuts through the air, a signal to move as sharp as a referee's whistle. All my apprehensions evaporate and I run across the corridor, flinging myself onto the bed, curling alongside him. When his strong arms envelop me, the ugly reality of the day slips away. Crushed against his chest, the worry, and pain and heartache retreat into the shadows, leaving me with only a singular truth. I love this man. He's everything I've ever wanted; and Rachel is right. He wants me too. Or did.

"Jen."

He repeats my name, over and over, stroking my hair as I cry into the ugly green hospital gown. I soak in his familiar scent, drowning out the antiseptic tang in the air. He nuzzles his face into my neck, dotting small kisses across my skin, and I feel hot tears slipping down his cheek. I draw back, brushing a thumb over the lilac bruises under each eye. There's a gaunt desolation in his gaze.

"I couldn't save him, Jen. I tried, but I couldn't."

"Geordie, you did your best."

"No. I didn't. I should've made him take the headlamp. I was too busy talking to Kyle, you know, about what happened and...we just let him go."

His voice stutters and dies, and he collapses against me. Geordie's body shudders, wracked by huge silent sobs. I hold him, desperate to take his pain, absorb the guilt, let it flow through me, a conduit channelling it back into the past. To where time might numb the devastation he feels.

He eventually stills and unwinds himself from me. He lifts one hand, a finger tracing the contours of my face as if seeing me for the first time. The turbulence in his eyes has subsided. He stretches out his other hand, taking mine in it. The roughness of his calloused fingers, the palm swallowing mine in its warmth, a tiny pulse in his thumb, the strength in his grip, all reminders that he's here, alive. It's a lifeline, pulling us both away from that dreadful past and back into the present .

"I thought I'd lost you." My voice comes out a whisper. "And I can't. I need you, Geordie, not only within the stupid boundaries I put on us. I need you, all the time, everywhere."

He brings my hand to his lips, brushing a kiss on my knuckles, a flutter of breath across them.

“And I thought I’d lost you.” His gaze is calm and steady. “But then I realised I’ve had you all along. You just weren’t ready to tell me yet.”

“I am now,” I say, but before I can tell Geordie the hundred ways I’m going to show him that I am his, without question or doubt, we’re interrupted by a chiming noise. We both turn towards the source of the sound, a discreet speaker above the door. Nurse Allie ducks her head around the corner, a rueful smile on her face.

“Visiting time’s up, I’m afraid. Sorry, but you’ll need to come back tomorrow,” she says, looking not the least bit sorry, her voice as cheerful as if she was announcing we’ve won the meat raffle at the rugby club. Just our bad luck to have such a stickler for the rules on this shift.

“You’re coming back to Cluanie tomorrow, yeah?”

“Would have sent me home today if it was just the ankle. Not broken, by the way.” He lifts the bed covers to reveal his heavily bandaged ankle, propped up between foam wedges. “They want to monitor me overnight.”

My brows furrow in concern. “For what?”

“Banged my head on the way down. Need to rule out a concussion.” He reaches a soothing forefinger to the crease in my forehead. “It’s nothing to worry about. Honestly, Jen, I’ve had much worse at the bottom of a ruck.”

“OK.” I reluctantly accept his reassurance.

“I’m sorry,” the nurse repeats from the doorway. “But I really need to close the ward now.”

I have a fierce urge to tell her to piss off, but I don’t.

“Come here,” he says, ignoring her and pulling me into him.

“It’s going to be OK, sweetheart.”

When he presses his mouth to mine, so warm and pliable, the familiar taste of him on my lips, I want to believe him.

JENNA

I wake, wishing for a time machine. A week ago, at nine a.m., I sat in my office, Andy snoring at my feet. Dad had poked his head through the door as he headed off for his run, passing Skylar, who arrived with my morning coffee.

My throat tightens as I slump back into my pillows. Today I must see her, and for one of the few times in my life, I feel totally unprepared.

After dragging my heavy limbs from beneath the covers, I stumble through a shower. I give my hair a quick blast from the dryer, not bothering with styling. I mechanically apply makeup, covering my too damn pale face but unable to disguise the stark half-moons beneath my eyes.

In my walk-in closet, I listlessly pull at outfits hanging on the rail. What is the dress code for visiting a grieving teenager? The temptation to delay the decision and go downstairs in my dressing gown grows stronger.

My hand brushes the familiar clear dress cover and pauses. The pristine white satin wedding dress inside casts its usual warning stare. Today I meet it with a resolute glare of my own. This is not who I am anymore. I am no longer the sad, rejected bride, waiting for history to repeat, but someone making her own future.

I scoop the dress off the rail and toss it onto my bed. Then, I grab a black pants suit, a sleeveless ivory silk blouse, and slip into my favourite Ferragamo pumps, their soft leather hugging my feet. It's a work outfit because, before I visit Skylar, I have a job to do.

Downstairs, I find Dad has already left for Grant and Laura Darby's house. The rugby club is preparing to go all out to support Brandon's family, and the other guys, too. They made it off the mountain alive, but not one of them is unscathed. My heart aches for all of them, but it's Connor who is foremost in my mind today. He needs more than kind words and good wishes, which is why this afternoon I'll summon all my skills and unleash my best defensive tactics to shut down those in the media attacking his leadership of the hiking party. I'll take great pleasure in putting a halt to their callous words.

However, that's not my first job of the day. Getting rid of the last reminder of the past that's held me back is. I'm glad Dad isn't here to see it. He doesn't know about the dress. Although he'd understand—even be proud of me taking this final step in putting Adam behind me—I'd rather keep it secret. Only Rachel can ever know the power I've allowed Adam to have over me for all those years.

The bulky wedding dress crowds my car, but I make it fit, squashing it down in the storage area behind the two seats. I glance at the dashboard clock. Nine fifty. Perfect. The Hospice Charity Shop opens at ten. I hope the scheduled volunteers arrive promptly today. I want to get this over with and move on with my life .

The debacle with Geordie proves what I've been denying for six years: moving on takes more than time. Number one for now is to rid myself of this daily reminder. I may not have been enough for Adam, or too much for him, but he was only one man, and he was never the one for me. The man who I'm fairly certain is the one for me is coming home today, unless he's reconsidering decisions made in the emotionally charged aftermath of tragedy.

I park outside the charity shop, just as Fran MacMillan sets the 'Open' sign on the footpath. There goes any chance of discretion. News will spread like wildfire round Cluanie the moment I leave. I'm sure there's a specific phone tree for juicy gossip.

“Morning Jenna.” Fran’s welcoming smile carries a hint of surprise. Not unexpected, since I haven’t set foot in this shop since my teens. It’s not that I’m too posh these days. I’m just lucky enough that I’ve not had to mind the pennies when it comes to my wardrobe and don’t have the time to rummage around for hidden gems amongst the secondhand bits and bobs. Of course Fran will raise her brows at finding me banging down the door at opening time.

Then, maybe she’s surprised that anyone is in the mood for shopping after the events that rocked Cluanie yesterday. In a small town, the seven who went up the mountain aren’t just names, they were sons, friends, brothers. And for one devastated young woman, a boyfriend. I swallow down uncomfortable thoughts of my looming visit to Skylar.

“Hi Fran. I’ve got something to donate,” I call over my shoulder, leaning into the car.

The damn dress fights back as I attempt to wrestle it from behind the seat. The bitch is reluctant to release me from her grip, but I’m determined to win this time. When I finally emerge, drowning in white satin, Fran’s eyebrows climb towards her hairline.

“Oh, luv.” Recognition dawns behind her wireframe glasses. She stands in the doorway, casting me a sympathetic look. She makes no move to let me in, leaving me exposed on the street with my painful past on display for anyone to see.

“It’s a bonnie dress, right enough.” Fran reaches out a hand, lifting the hem to look at it more closely. “Worth a pretty penny, I’d say.” She casts an appraising eye over the glistening satin. “But, as much as we could use the money for the shop, this isn’t the place for it, Jenna. Folk don’t come to Cluanie to shop for wedding dresses, I’m afraid.”

“Please—“ I start to protest. I need to get rid of this thing. Now. Today. It’s not that I’ll change my mind—I just want it gone.

“I know what you could do, though,” she says thoughtfully.

Five minutes later, I’m on the familiar winding road past MacFarlane’s Distillery. Nathan’s driveway comes next, and the house where I’ve spent so much time these past weeks. Geordie may not return here after discharge, but I’m not sure he’ll retreat to his parents’ place. His mother would eagerly play nurse, but I imagine Geordie would prefer somewhere beyond his father’s venom.

Nathan’s unassuming house holds precious memories of afternoons making love in the sunlit lounge and quiet nights upstairs. I wonder if we’ll ever get them back. Leaving the hospital yesterday, I felt we’d resolved things, but in the dark of my own bed, replaying every word and every look, doubt crept back in. What if Geordie can’t forgive me for hiding him away, a guilty secret, simply because I was afraid to let my scarred heart hope and dream ?

The third driveway leads to Buchanan House, an imposing eighteenth century tower house. Its burnished gold stone walls rise four storeys against the crisp morning sky. The unruly dress stays in the car. Better to confirm this is its final destination before attempting to wrangle it in front of gawping hotel staff and guests. I take a slow, calming breath, exhaling my nervousness as I head for the entrance.

Heather Buchanan stands in reception, laughing with a couple checking out. I hover behind them, and as she notices there’s a momentary frown before her mouth flickers back into a welcoming smile. She leaves the receptionist to handle checkout, and rounds the heavy oak counter. Our last meeting—discussing party menus at Dad’s insistence—seems a lifetime ago. Before rugby season. Before Geordie. Before Brandon.

She must wonder why I’m here, after the weekend’s events, but she doesn’t ask, simply scoops me into a hug. A soothing warmth radiates from her, and against my usual instincts, I lean into her. I need a hug today, especially one of Heather’s.

“I heard,” she murmurs against my hair. She steps back, placing steadying hands on my upper arms and fixing me with sympathetic eyes. “Tell your dad if there’s anything we can do... You must all be devastated.”

“It’s hard to believe it’s real.”

What I’m going to ask of her seems wildly inappropriate right now. Perhaps I need to back off. But if anything good has come out of this weekend, it’s the realisation I need to put the past behind me. I think I love Geordie, and he might just love me too, if I let him. Ridding myself of everything that’s held me back seems crucial, the damn wedding dress a tangible symbol of letting go .

“Heather,” I say, my heart pulsing warily, “this is going to seem really odd, I know, but Fran MacMillan said you’re doing something with a wedding charity?”

Her brows fly up to her hairline. Not the question she was expecting.

“Yes,” she says. “Wedding Wishes. We’re doing our first gifted wedding for them next month. The groom hasn’t been well, cancer.”

She stops short, and I see an awkward flush of pink rise in her cheeks. Knowing how cancer came knocking on my family’s door less than a year ago, Heather’s revelation doesn’t jar against my still raw edges, but rather feels like another sign that what I’m doing is absolutely the right thing: a gift to this unknown couple’s future as well as my own.

“Does the bride have a dress?” The words tumble out. “I have one, you see. It’s beautiful. Expensive. Unworn.”

There’s a brief flash of sympathy in Heather Buchanan’s eyes, a glimmer, only for a moment, before she brushes it away, her mouth tipping up in a pleased smile as she

assures me some grateful bride will treasure my dress, whether it's this one or another.

When I climb back into the car, part of me longs to drop the top and floor it, celebrating my release from those white satin shackles. But the thought of where I'm headed sobers me. It feels wrong to indulge in such blissful freedom when someone I care about is drowning in grief.

I find Skylar, a tiny hunched figure swallowed up by a massive wicker chair on her back terrace. Her mother delivers tea, hovering protectively for a moment, until the doorbell rings and draws her away. We barely speak during my half hour there, just clutch each other's hands and cry. Once again, I find myself doubting the existence of a god. If there is one, he's a cruel bastard, snatching away the beautiful future of two young people.

When I rise to leave, Skylar clutches at my hand. Her blotchy, tear-swollen face turns upwards, a question in the red-rimmed blue eyes. As hard as it would be to stay, I will if she asks.

"Could I ask you for something?"

"Anything you need, sweetie, it's yours." I'd do anything to take her away her pain, but I can't turn back time. Still, whatever she needs, big or small, I'll do my best.

"Would you bring Andy over? I miss him," she hiccups out over a sob.

"Of course I will. He misses you too," I promise through tears, my voice shaky. There's a twinge of gratitude for the strange bond our grumpy little dog has forged with this sweet, broken young woman, and the comfort he offers.

After delivering a delighted Andy to Skylar's arms, I return home. It's just past noon.

As I point my remote at the garage door, it rises to reveal an empty space, my father's Range Rover still not there.

It's no surprise Dad's been gone all morning. There's no manual on how to deal with a tragedy like this in a small community. In my former world of professional sport, crisis management follows protocols—press releases, controlled narratives, damage control. Now, I find myself grateful that those same skills might actually matter here, where there are no PR departments or media liaisons to shield grieving families and shell-shocked teammates. My expertise feels both valuable and woefully inadequate. The playbook I've mastered doesn't account for when your hands shake because the statement you're crafting is about people you've known your whole life. Still, I'll do my best this afternoon to step up for the club and Connor .

I park in my space and head inside to grab some lunch before facing the unpleasant task. As I step into the hallway, piano notes drift towards me, and my heart leaps. I know who's here.

In the sunlit studio, Geordie sits at the piano, crutches propped against the sofa, a large duffel resting beside him. He turns his head at the click of my heels on tiles, offering me a small smile but playing on without missing a beat.

I stand behind him, hands on his shoulders, feeling their solid bulk beneath my fingers. His body moves with the ebb and the flow of the music, and I lean into the piece with him. Tears well up as the melancholy beauty of 'Unchained Melody' washes over me. This song always affects me—I've sniffled my way through Ghost dozens of times—but today I sob.

As the last gentle notes reverberate like a sweet hum through the room, he lifts his hands and swings around, stretching out his long legs. One foot in a size eleven cowboy boot, the other, heavily strapped, peek from beneath his jeans. He draws me in to stand between them and, through the haze of tears, I smile down at my beautiful

piano playing cowboy.

“It’s over Jenna.” His eyes sweep across my face. “I can’t do it anymore.”

My face crumples, while inside my heart disintegrates into a million tiny painful shards, as a rush of despair like I’ve never known before courses in my veins.

He takes my hand and I clamp my fingers around his, desperate to hold on to him. I can’t let him go—I need him like oxygen—but I don’t deserve him to stay, not after the shit I’ve put him through.

“Not the lying. Not the sneaking around,” he says. “There’s no going back.” He reaches up, tracing a thumb over my trembling lip. “I love you, Jen. All of you. The bits you show the world and the bits you don’t want anyone to see. I’ll take every one of them. Even the parts you think are hard and ugly, they’re beautiful to me, because they’re you.”

My grip tightens on his hand like a lifeline, my way back to who I used to be. I can still be that woman who faces the world with confidence, who does what needs to be done without letting it define who I really am—as a daughter, a friend, a lover. What others see doesn’t have to be all of who I am. What matters is who I am to those who know and love me.

This guy knows me.

This guy loves me.

Geordie rises to his feet a little shakily, placing one steadying hand on each of my arms, insistent fingers warming my bare skin. His eyes blaze with determination.

“We’ve got a chance to make something here, Jenna. Together. And I’m not hiding

anymore. I can take whatever shit anyone wants to throw at us. And anyone who thinks we're a bad idea? Fuck them. I know we're not. I'm ready to fight for us. What I need to know is, are you?"

He searches my gaze, and I close my eyes, uncertainty flooding through me.

"I want to be," I choke out. When it's other people, I'm fearless; but when it comes to standing up for me, something inside me shrinks. I become small, timid even.

"Come on, sweetheart, you know you are. A woman who has Wonder Woman on her wall can take on anything and anyone." He gives my hand a playful tug, and despite my tears, my lips curve upward .

"And you have one superpower she doesn't." He looks into my eyes, his soft blue gaze calm, yet intense. "You've got me loving you. For as long as you'll let me."

JENNA

“There, all done.” Skylar places the folder in the filing cabinet and turns to me with a smile. It’s not her old high-beam blast, but it is a smile, and I feel a flush of guarded relief. My gentle coaxing her back to work seems to have paid off, giving her a way to fill her days. While the life she had mapped out for herself has been irrevocably changed by Brandon’s death, she’s started to see it’s still there waiting for her. She’s doing well, only her third day back, but each day brings small victories—she talks more, moves with growing confidence, no longer the silent shadow of a girl who could barely stand unsupported at the funeral.

“Thanks, Skylar,” I say. “And you did that one all on your own.”

There it is again, a second smile, this one tinged with pride at my praise. An unexpected urge to hug her surges through me, an impulse that seems to be ambushing me more often lately, but I resist. I’m still not much of a hugger, so that would be weird. Although strangely, this past six weeks, I’ve learned to accept them with barely a flutter of my old awkwardness, my angular shoulders and elbows relaxed, welcoming even when someone closes in on my unsuspecting body .

“That’s me, then,” she says, gathering her things. “Come on, little buddy.”

Andy stands instantly, ears perked forward, ready to follow. While still snoring away most of the day in his doughnut-shaped bed under my desk, he snaps to awake the moment Skylar stirs, tracking her every movement from under his shaggy black brows. He trots after her as she heads for her mother’s car parked out front of the summerhouse, and leaps in, claiming his spot in the passenger’s seat, ready to go

home.

Andy's been Skylar's since the day I placed him in her lap on that awful morning. Strangely, I miss him a little sometimes, but he's where he should be, needs to be. It's fitting that the grieving girl and the dog who I know mourned Mum in his own way, have found comfort in each other.

I'm just closing my laptop, when an unearthly rumble, like distant thunder, rolls through the air, even though the cloud cover today is the usual grey sheet of late autumn stretching across the Cluanie sky, not the towering thunderheads preceding a storm. I stand and peer out into the gloom, my wool blazer pulled tight against the chill, and my mouth falls open.

A hulking beast of an American muscle car sits parked out front—the kind Geordie drools over in magazines scattered throughout what was once my bedroom and is now decidedly ours. Its dark charcoal finish gleams almost black in the dusk. The engine growls with a deep throaty burble before falling silent. The door swings open and Geordie climbs out. Even in the dimming light, I catch the proud smirk on his face as I appear at the door of the summerhouse. He's been gone all day and now I know why .

“What the hell is that?” I ask as he wanders towards me with his casual loping walk, long legs in jeans, cowboy boots peeking from beneath. The determined bugger has proved the doctors wrong, dedicating himself to rehab, and now there's not a hint of a limp as he strolls across the terrace.

Today was the day of the doctor's verdict. I'd expected to hear from Geordie, checking my phone repeatedly, but there hadn't been a call or text. I have to admit, I was starting to worry. It's stupid, I know, but I can't help the fear that although we're together now, the universe will take against us, snatching Geordie away from me, a punishment for squandering the time it gave us through my weeks of doubt.

He's here now, and something in the way he carries himself, shoulders back and head high, tells me it's not just this spectacular car that's put him in such a cheerful mood.

"Your carriage awaits, m'lady" he says with a little bow and a flourish of his hand, an unlikely fawning courtier in his plaid shirt. "I'm cleared, so I'm off to practice. You're coming too, right?"

"That's great," I say, the words falling far short of the kaleidoscope of emotions spinning through me. Elation tangles with relief.

Geordie would have been gutted if they'd denied him clearance to play again this season. After all those hours of physio, all that time in the gym rebuilding his ankle strength, watching from the sidelines would have crushed him. Especially with finals next weekend.

But he'll be there, taking the field on finals' day, and I'll be the loyal girlfriend cheering from the sidelines. It's strange how things change. Just months ago, the thought of everyone in town knowing we were together filled me with sickening dread. The weight of other people's expectations—including Geordie's—dragged me down like stones in my pockets. Now, instead of pressure, I feel pride.

Just the other day, standing in Gail's Bakery amid the warm smell of fresh scones, I overheard two old biddies gossiping. "She's going round with the MacDonald laddie, didn't ye know," one said, not bothering to lower her voice a single notch. They're brazen in the way they talk about you in front of you around here. An unexpected wave of happiness engulfed my heart while I tried to keep my mouth from flipping up in a smug smile. Who would have thought being the subject of Cluanie gossip would ever make me feel like that?

Watching Geordie run out onto the field against Duncraig on Saturday will be special. Finally, I can openly cheer not just for the team I love, but for this man I love.

Tonight's practice, although also special, will be hard. For the first time since the accident, all six of them who have endured so much will be together on their beloved rugby pitch, drawing strength from each other. The completeness of the team only highlights what's missing. The man in the number fifteen jersey is gone. For this season, even though they've pulled in another guy at fullback, no player will wear Brandon's number.

I turn my attention back to the car, crouched low like a big cat ready to pounce.

"That doesn't answer my question. What's with the car, Geordie?" I circle around to the front, where he stands proudly.

"It's mine," he says with a grin that makes him look like a kid who's just been handed the keys to a sweet shop. "Pretty isn't she—not as pretty as you, though."

"Flatterer. "

"Meet my new second favourite girl." He runs his hand along the bonnet with unmistakable affection.

I roll my eyes. "Your girl ?" I walk around the car, studying the aggressive lines and muscular stance. "How anyone could consider this beast to be female is beyond me."

"I've always wanted one of these. Figured after the shit year I've had, it might be time to splurge."

I study the unfamiliar badge on the front. "I'm not completely sure what I'm looking at. American, right?" He nods. He's going to look the part getting out of that in his cowboy boots.

"You'd better enlighten me," I say, preparing for the enthusiastic deluge of facts and

figures about top speeds and torque, brake-horsepower and cubic capacity to pour from his mouth. Geordie loves his cars. For a man who struggles with reading, he has his nose buried in car magazines an awful lot and he's not just looking at the pictures.

"Ford Mustang Shelby GT500."

"Expensive?"

He shrugs, scuffing one boot against the gravel.

"A little. It's not a Ferrari. Didn't want to blow my entire bank balance on a car." His eyes narrow. "But damned if I'm spending the rest of my life driving around in one of Sparky's work vans."

"It's nice," I say, running a hand over the sleek grey metallic paint. Twin stripes slash across the broad bonnet and flick right up over the top, giving it an air of barely contained speed.

"These make it go faster?" I grin at him.

"Wanna find out?" His eyes sparkle with mischief as he pulls open the passenger door .

"I can see some speeding tickets in your future," I say, but I'm already sliding into the cocoon of leather, breathing in that distinctive new car smell. The door closes with a solid thunk that speaks of American muscle. I settle deeper into the seat, preparing myself for take-off.

Geordie takes the long way, showing off the car's frightening acceleration. By the time the V8's rumble announces our arrival at the rugby grounds, I've spent most of the ride pinned to my seat. It's impossible to be subtle. Before we've even parked,

guys are spilling out of the change room, some half-dressed despite the biting cold, drawn like moths to the engine's bass notes.

Fraser Sinclair's the first to reach us, his eyes gleaming with undisguised envy as Geordie cuts the engine.

"You bloody dark horse, MacDonald. What did you do? Rob the fucking bank?" He circles the car, running his hand along the sleek bodywork. "How many horses under the bonnet?"

"760," Geordie says, climbing out, drinking in their reactions.

"Supercharged?"

Geordie pops the bonnet and Fraser leans in for a closer look at the engine. I could probably answer the question myself after hearing Geordie recite the specs for the last twenty minutes, but I let him have his moment as he nods, the biggest grin splitting his face.

"Nice." Brodie whistles low, breath visible in the cold air. "Never thought I'd see one of these beauties in Cluanie."

"Going to guzzle some gas," Connor says, crouching down to inspect the four burbling circular exhaust pipes on the rear.

"Ah well, there's always a price to pay for something good," Geordie says. "She's worth every penny." Geordie's talking about the car, but he's looking at me, his mouth tipping up in a knowing smile that makes my chest warm despite the chill.

Kyle ambles around the car, his police officer's eyes filled with admiration rather than suspicion. "I can see myself having to get out my wee book very soon." He

glances between Geordie and me, grinning. “Perhaps we should have a bet, lads. Who’s going to get the first ticket, him or her?”

“Got to catch us first, Kyle,” I say with a challenging smile, but there’s no real heat in it. My little red sports car and I have mellowed now we’re not racing up to Nathan’s every day.

I watch as the guys gather round Geordie. Their big eyes, wide mouths, the envious gazes of the younger ones, and backslaps of congratulations from his mates—it all sets my heart pounding in a wild, joyful dance. So many people around here, who think they know Geordie, are suddenly discovering they really don’t.

His father would put him down openly, even in public. People in this town thought him a bit slow, one of the kids who’d never amount to much. Which is ridiculous. You only have to listen to Geordie speak to know otherwise.

Just the words that come out of his mouth show this is an intelligent man. Like Rachel, he cultivated an extensive vocabulary at the family dinner table. Their father insisted on nightly verbal sparring and critical debate, honing skills that would serve both children well. Rachel became an exceptional lawyer, while Geordie developed a command of language that transcended his dyslexia.

Yes, while he may not enjoy reading print books—audiobooks play in his ear most days on the job—and he avoids writing when possible, preferring dictated texts and voice notes, Geordie is undeniably smart. Not only with words like me and Rachel, but in a dozen ways we’ll never be.

However, in a place like Cluanie, money talks. They only understand tangible success. Tonight Geordie’s shown the lot of them and I’m glad this over-the-top car will shut them up.

I spend much of the practice alongside Dad. He's quiet with me, thoughtful, but not in his sometimes sad way. He'll never get over Mum, and that's how it should be. Tonight there's something else simmering beneath the surface—a guarded excitement. With the final only two weeks away, and Cluanie lining up against Duncraig as predicted, how could he not be? He's moulded a skilled and disciplined team, their talent shaped by his coaching expertise, their bonds cemented by tragedy. There's no doubt in his mind he's going to add the County Cup to his list of triumphs. I have a feeling it may be his favourite victory yet.

As practice wraps up, I plant a kiss on his leathery cheek before leaving him to head to Grant and Laura's. Geordie and I have our own plans. I've made a rich meaty lasagne for dinner. That, a glass of red wine and Geordie across the table is all I need for a perfect evening.

We rumble out of the car park and through the town, passing the pub where players are rolling in from rugby practice, keen for a pint and a pizza. No doubt some of Dad's team will show up soon. He knows. He's always known, but he sees his anti-booze stance as a tactic to keep them from going too far. It would be hypocritical to deny them a beer, when he's off to the Darby's to knock back a dram with Grant—though Laura's cooking may be the real attraction .

The engine's low throaty burble echoes off the stone buildings along Cluanie's main street, all dark now except for the bright lights of the pub.

“Not going for a drink?”

“Nah,” he says. “Let's go home.”

“This isn't the way home.” I shift in my seat. Home is two miles in the opposite direction.

“Yes it is,” he says, with an enigmatic grin, his white teeth and eyes sparkling in the car’s gloomy interior.

“Oh, I get it.” I roll my eyes and sigh, feigning weary resignation. “We’re taking the long way home, so you can spend more time in this damn car.”

I don’t really mind. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Geordie this happy—like a little boy on Christmas morning when Santa’s brought him everything he asked for, practically vibrating with excitement over his new toy.

“You’ll see,” he says, the grin morphing into a mysterious smugness. I settle back into the seat, as comfortable as a warm hug and with that new leather smell. I close my eyes, letting satisfaction about where I am—and who I’m with—settle over me like a blanket.

Geordie drives slowly, the car moving effortlessly through the gear changes as we twist and turn through the streets. Soon I’m no longer sure where I am or where we’re headed, half-dozing as the sound of Stellar Riot playing low through a speaker lulls me.

The car stopping jerks me fully awake. We’re in a driveway, but we don’t seem to have travelled far enough to be home. For a moment, I’m disoriented.

We’re parked in front of my old home, the modest semi-detached where I grew up, where our family lived until a year ago. That’s when Mum went into palliative care and Dad’s response was to buy the monstrosity we live in now.

People have approached Dad about renting this house, a couple of offers to buy even. It’s not surprising. He spared no expense on it, far more than anyone would spend on a simple house in a small Scottish town. He made it as perfect as he could for Mum—the beautiful interior, the garden beds she tended with love, and the music

studio out back where her baby grand piano, Dad's ultimate indulgence, once took pride of place.

With light spilling from the downstairs windows, I almost believe I could walk inside this house now and find Dad sitting in his armchair watching sport on telly, Mum in her own chair with a romance novel—like the ones I read—in her lap. Why are the lights on? The thought hits me hard, the jolt back into reality sudden and forceful.

“Come on.” Geordie climbs out of the car, his expression unfathomable. He comes around to my side, his long fingers stretching out to clasp mine. Together, we walk up the small paved path to the familiar front door.

“Why are we here? Why didn't we go home?”

“We did,” he says. “This is home. I've been chipping away at your old man for weeks. It's yours.”

“What?” I don't get it.

“I finally convinced him to sell it to me,” he says, his voice swelling with modest pride. “But it'll be in your name. All you have to do is call in to my father's office and sign the papers.”

I turn to him, mouth gaping.

“But what about Dad? I can't leave him alone in that vast house. ”

“Jenna, he knows you aren't happy in the other house. And he is. He's even talking about getting another dog for company. He'll be fine, honestly.”

Geordie's right. Dad will be fine, and I'll see him every day. There's no room here

for my office and I love my airy summerhouse with its many light-filled windows.

“You can move in whenever you want.”

In that moment, I know without question who needs to share this house with me. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love this man. I doubted I had the capacity to feel something so deep, so overwhelming and all-consuming for another person. My love for Geordie came out of nowhere—unexpected, uninvited even—hitting me from the blindside with the force of an opportunistic tackle.

“It’s ours,” I say, leaning in to press my lips against that perfect soft mouth which instinctively responds to mine. His broad hands rise to my waist, so strong yet gentle in the way they hold me like a precious treasure. “Come and live here with me, Geordie. I love you. Home is where you are. You’re my home.”

His hands cup my face, blue eyes earnest. “And you’re mine, Jen. I could never get enough of you, but you’ll always be enough for me, I promise.”

And I believe him.

We wander through the rooms, still sweet with lemon-scented furniture polish and the scent of roses puffing from a diffuser. Dad insisted it should stay exactly as we left it, furniture and all, as if by some miracle Mum might come back to us.

Out in her studio stands her original upright piano—the one that’s felt the touch of so many Cluanie children’s hands, including the ones of the man beside me now.

Geordie takes a seat on the piano stool, and I sit alongside him. He lays his hands on the keys, and I place mine over his. Together we play the first bars of a beautiful piece of music—our life together.

If you loved this book, I'd really appreciate you leaving a rating or review on your favourite retailer, review site or social media.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:13 am

JENNA

AS I STEP OUT of my car, the first flakes fall like confetti, brushing delicate kisses on my cheeks, a featherlight touch on my hair. I yank up the hood of my puffer jacket, tuck my head down and make a beeline for the summerhouse.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:13 am

JENNA

THE PEACEFUL AFTERNOON SHATTERS when the dogs transform from floppy, dozing lumps to frenzied barking lunatics. Seeing it's Geordie at the door, they stand at attention like guards at Buckingham Palace, waiting for him to come in. Flora's little body trembles in anticipation, no doubt hoping for a chance to lick him to death. Andy, who hasn't seen him for four months, is possibly plotting his actual demise.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:13 am

JENNA

“I FEEL A RIGHT dick in this,” Nathan sighs, adjusting the pointy green hat on his dark curls.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:13 am

Jenna

A security light flicks on as we watch Skylar approach the steps to her house. They illuminate an angel in a puffer jacket, golden hair glowing beneath her shiny halo, with a small dog tucked under one arm. She waves at us and her smile, something I'd never thought to see again, is wide and relaxed. She's going to be OK.