



# THE TWELVE GAYS OF CHRISTMAS

A NOVEL BY  
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HIGHLAND FLING

BRIAN LANCASTER



CHAPTER ONE  
LAST CHRISTMAS  
22 DECEMBER

TREVOR MCTAVISH LOVED TRADITIONS.

Something he could rely upon even when everything else around him went to pot, or changed unexpectedly, or disappeared entirely from his life—which seemed to happen all too often of late.

As the unsmiling Uber driver drove in silence through the early morning streets of London, eventually turning into the long road to his friend's terrace house, he pondered how these old rituals originally came into being. Not the stupid Hallmark ones invented to sell cards, but the real ones. Because every culture on Earth seemed to have them.

Take Christmas, for example. Nothing in the Bible or any other religious text he knew about pointed to Jesus being born on Christmas Day. And although he had not attended a nativity play for years, he felt certain no brightly decorated Christmas tree with flashing electric lights stood in the corner of the stable. So did somebody come up with the idea, maybe trying to cheer up the dreariness of midwinter, and then convince their village and a few others to participate? And then did more people, seeing the fun and

welcoming anything to break the endless monotony of winter, join in and invite more and more along each year, until everything we know and celebrate became the norm?

No doubt about it, people need traditions. And more than anything, Trevor loved the one he and Cheryl had created for themselves and their gay friends.

Six in the morning on that optimistic, pre-dawn Friday in December, Trevor hopped out of the car and collected his luggage from the boot before tapping a fingernail on the driver's window and wishing him a heartfelt season's greetings. Without even looking around, the driver pulled away.

Undeterred, Trevor struggled with his wheelee luggage up the unevenly tiled garden path and prodded the front doorbell. Bing-bongs chimed somewhere in the interior, and eventually Cheryl Madison's mother opened the door in her furry-hooded olive Parker and mismatching navy Wellington boots. At odds with the ensemble, her pink floral cotton nightie peeked out from beneath the jacket, and almost made Trevor giggle.

Almost. Until he saw the expression on her face.

After a quick glance at the staircase behind her, Mrs M nodded sharply towards her Volvo out front before handing him a small but deceptively heavy cardboard box. Hauling another from the floor, she strode past him, and he trailed after her, his luggage clunking arrhythmically on the broken pavement. Only as she unlocked the hatchback and placed her carton inside did she reveal the predicament.

"Jenna's not coming. She broke up with Cheryl last night. Jenna says she met someone at their Christmas office party on Tuesday. Supposedly."

The way she articulated that final word said everything. Trevor dropped to sitting on the tailgate—causing the car to bounce gently—and placed his container next to hers. She

stared down at him, arms folded, appearing to wait for his response. Instinctively, he mirrored her body language and sighed deeply. Never could he imagine walking away from anybody unless they had done something utterly unforgivable. He understood only too well the devastating effects of that kind of experience. Right before their Christmas trip, as well. Jenna had always possessed a selfish streak, something she used to manipulate Cheryl—everyone but Cheryl knew that—but he had never thought she would stoop so low.

“How’s Cheryl managing?”

Mrs M plonked herself down beside him.

“You’ll see in a minute. Putting on a brave face. I tried to sound surprised when she told me, but something’s not been right for months. The important thing, Trevor, is that Jenna’s pulled out. Which means we’re one more down.”

“Double shit,” he said, staring down at the road between his legs.

So much for the Twelve Gays of Christmas.

They had started the club five years ago. Cheryl, his best friend since high school, could take the lion’s share of the credit for the idea and, more importantly, for its successful implementation. Sick of hearing in January how many of their gay friends had spent the holiday season alone or with a family who merely tolerated them or made them feel uncomfortable, they created their own seasonal ritual.

Traditionally—or in the years since the pilgrimage had become a tradition—six couples shared the cost of renting a country cottage in rural Britain. Seven or eight days spent enjoying Christmas their own way, with their own people, in the countryside. Far from the maddening relatives. At first, nobody knew whether bringing together gay couples who were essentially only occasional friends would work. That first time, the gathering in the six-

bedroom farmhouse in Kingsbridge, Devon, turned out to be nothing short of a miracle. Everyone mucked in, laughed, partied, gelled so easily, and raved about the break well into the New Year. So good was the experience that the next event had already been booked by February. The same thing happened for the next three years, with the elite group growing closer.

Until this year—the fifth—when grim providence stuck his ugly snout in. Mrs M's seventy-two-year-old Scottish girlfriend, Monica, the only other person allowed in the kitchen at Christmas and the life and soul of the party, succumbed unexpectedly to a fatal heart attack in early January.

Next up, at the beginning of February, they all received a cryptic email from Johnny and Frank. Both sick of their jobs, they decided to take a two-year hiatus from the rat race, handed in their respective notices, rented out their home, and were now on a technology-free tour of the world, their last postcard sent from somewhere in the Middle East.

Trevor had been gutted. Johnny and Frank provided the mortar holding all the bricks in place. Irish Johnny had a way of getting on with everyone, including Karl and Jenna, who could both be prickly. Cockney Frank was somebody nobody ever messed with, but was the fiercest friend you could wish for. Mrs M and Monica loved him to bits. Trevor could listen to him talk about his antics for hours and never get bored.

By the month's end, due to one life crisis or another with four other friends, they were down from twelve to five.

And then—insult of insults—in March, Trevor's husband of two years, Karl, not only announced his newly discovered heterosexuality, or bisexuality, or sexual fluidity, but that he had fallen in love with a woman. Yes, six years

together, and his spouse realised he had been batting for a different team.

Which made eight no-shows. Initially, they considered cancelling the event. Without consulting any of them, Cheryl's girlfriend, Jenna, filled one space with a new girl from work, twenty-year-old Jessica. She, in turn, decided that inviting a colleague, Anthony, would be perfectly acceptable.

Gen Z, huh?

Next, after a doorstep altercation with Karl about which paintings, pillows, bedspreads, and cutlery he was entitled to take in the divorce settlement, Trevor succumbed to the unthinkable. For their Christmas excursion, Karl saw no reason why he should be ostracised, why he could not be invited with his new partner. Maybe because of dwindling numbers or more likely a temporary lapse in sanity, Trevor capitulated.

Cheryl refused to speak to him for three weeks after his confession.

So as the year progressed, what used to be the epitome of a cosy, warm, and cuddly Frank Capra movie morphed into the script for an awkward, dysfunctional cast of characters befitting a Woody Allen feature.

"The question remains," said Mrs M. He couldn't recall the number of times she had asked Trevor to call her Brenda, but he just couldn't. "Is it too late to cancel?"

Trevor huffed out a steamy breath and searched for inspiration among the loaded boxes. Truth be told, he had been looking forward to their private tradition all year, but this wasn't only about him.

"Technically, it isn't. We won't get a refund, so we'll lose the full amount, deposit and all. I'll also need to ring around and make everyone aware pretty swiftly before people set



off tomorrow. And I'll try, but I'm not sure I can contact the owner. Apparently, she has her own family gathering abroad."

Two nights ago, he had received an email from Mrs Mortimer-King telling him that she would not be in the country to meet them, but would arrange for someone to hand the keys over and settle them in. Even though he'd never met her, he liked dealing with her, enjoyed her clear instructions and efficiency combined with her friendly communications.

"When I spoke to Cheryl this morning," said Mrs M, "she said she still wants to go. Doesn't want to spend Christmas at home sitting around moping."

"Understandable. How about you?"

Another smile and a wistful glance to the heavens.

"No matter where I am, I'm going to miss having Mon by my side. She always made this time of the year special. So might as well be busy in Scotland, rather than quiet here with too much time on my hands. At least I'll have Cheryl to help me in the kitchen. How about Karl?"

"Karl? What about him? He's going to be there."

"My point exactly. How do you feel about that?"

"It's fine. I'll deal."

Total nonsense, of course. Privately, Trevor prayed his ex-husband would do the decent thing and not show up, or perhaps the new significant other would be better at talking him down from the ledge of his principles. Most of all, he dreaded the idea of seeing Karl fawning over a new partner. Over the years he had slowly grown to love the man, had planned a long life with him, albeit in his own head. Karl suppressed his emotions well and was never afraid to put on a front and fight for what he believed was right. Trevor had never been a fighter. He felt emotionally volatile during

their doorstep argument. After Karl got everything he came for, he promptly turned on his heel and headed back to the comfort of his newfound relationship. That evening, Trevor curled up on his side of their double bed, feeling so painfully alone and pathetic. He had lain awake, wondering why Karl had never fought for him the same way when they were together.

“In different ways, we’ve both lost someone this year, Trevor. But you know we’ll be there for you, Cheryl and I, don’t you?” said Mrs M, as though hearing his thoughts.

“And I really appreciate that, Mrs M. But if they do show up, promise me you won’t let these few days turn into us-and-them. You know what Karl’s like when he gets militant.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” She pushed a lock of grey hair from her face before turning to him. “He’s still going to the SLAGO meetings. Turned up at the Christmas fundraiser.”

Karl had said nothing, but Trevor was unsurprised. His ex might have woken up one day and realised he wasn’t exclusively gay, but he still loved a cause to side with, a fight to champion. Hence his unfailing loyalty to the Surrey and London Association of Gay Organisations. After the break-up, Cheryl mused, somewhat unkindly, whether he woke up one day and decided to call himself queer because he needed to wear the label like a badge of honour, to be part of something subversive and radical, become a member of the Great LGBT Cause Club. But for Trevor, their relationship had been sexual even if Karl shunned affection outside the bedroom. Some things Trevor accepted because they meant having someone to care for, to share a life with, to love. And more than anything, after everything that transpired, Trevor still respected Karl as a person.

But he had never, for one microsecond, believed

honourable Karl would cheat on him. Cheating was not in his DNA. But of course, women were never on Trevor's radar.

"Lots of bisexuals and straight people go to those meetings," he offered. He didn't want an argument about Karl. "Helping young gay kids who are chucked out on the streets by their families, with nowhere to go. Karl's still supporting a worthy cause."

Mrs M didn't appear to want to listen. In some ways, she was a lot like her late partner.

"Lesbians that cross over to the hetero side are labelled 'hasbians'. What do you call men who denounce their homo fabulousness?"

"He says he's bisexual, so I don't think he's entirely forfeited that title."

"Mon would have called him a fucking wee Judas."

Trevor let out an exasperated breath. Had she been alive, Monica would have probably gone round to see Karl and given him a piece of her mind, and would at the very least have withdrawn his invitation.

"Look, I appreciate the support, Mrs M, but if we're going to do this, let's keep our thoughts to ourselves and try to slog through the week with the minimum of casualties."

After a quick glance, she tilted her head back and laughed at the roof of her car.

"Wow, you're really selling this holiday, aren't you? But I'm deadly serious, Trevor. If you want to back out now, we're with you all the way."

He stared into the distance and thought about something Cheryl once said to him. Quoting the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief, she believed Trevor should be going through the anger stage by now, showing more signs of betrayal or threats of revenge. But that would never

have been his style. And heaven knew, others very loudly made their own thoughts and feelings about Karl known. But Trevor wasn't built that way. Yes, of course, he wallowed in self-pity at first, but he had also had nine months to use up those emotions and now felt wrung out, empty, resigned to live out the rest of his life as a bachelor gay. And a few days away from the smoke could be just what the psychiatrist ordered.

"Stuff it, no. Let's do it. If not for us, for Monica. She loved this time of year, and we're gathering in the land of her birth. But between us, I think this might be the last one."

"Oh, baby," she said, putting her arm around his shoulders and hugging him tightly. "You have such a good heart. I promise never to mention this again for the duration of the holiday, but Karl was neither right nor good enough for you."

"You're obliged to say that. It's written into the mother charter under the 'Cheryl's best friend' subsection. So how many are we now?"

"You, me, and Cheryl."

"Three."

"Karl and his new—is she his girlfriend?"

"Partner, I think."

"What's her name?"

"No idea. But that makes us five."

"Jessica and Anthony. From Jenna's office. Jenna texted Cheryl their mobile phone details before she dipped out."

"Choice. Seven then. Are they a couple?"

"Not according to Jenna."

"How are they travelling there?"

"Train. I think."

"Are they even gay?"

“Don’t think so.”

“Geez Louise,” Trevor said, shaking his head. “This keeps getting better and better. Seven of us in a seven-bedroom converted lakeside lodge—sorry, lochside lodge—that can sleep up to eighteen. Marvellous. Mind you, the kitchen looks amazing. Did Cheryl show you the photos? Modernised, but they’ve still kept the vintage charm, especially with that huge Aga cooker.”

“Never trust photographs. Remember the Lake District? ‘All mod cons’, my arse, just because they provided a toaster and a heated towel rack. And I’ve tried cooking on an Aga before, and recall what a temperamental pain in the backside they can be.”

“You’ll manage, Mrs M. You always do. And I suppose you packed enough food to feed the whole village?”

“You might thank me if we’re snowed in.”

“Fat chance of that.”

At that moment, larger-than-life Cheryl appeared at the gate holding three mugs of something hot and steaming. Decked out in her faux-Versace beige-and-burgundy silk dressing gown and pink slippers, with a mimed roar, she issued a steamy yawn into the morning.

“Trevor Oswald McTavish,” came her familiar voice. She was the only person he would allow to use his full name. Usually, she called him Mac, because nobody—*nobody*—ever referred to him as Trev. Not if they wanted him to respond. Considering everything that had gone down over the past twenty-four hours, she did not look in too bad a mood. “Thought I heard your lovely tones. Well, don’t sit there like lemons. One of you open this thing for poor, lonesome old me. My hands are full.”

“Someone’s cheered up. Must be hearing your voice, Trevor,” whispered her mother, echoing Trevor’s thoughts.

Standing up from the tailgate, she went over and unlatched the access. "I thought you were showering. We need to be on the road soon, beat the traffic."

"No rush. Checked Google Maps and listened to the latest traffic report," said Cheryl, handing Trevor a mug. "Looks as though most people stayed home. So we may as well do the M25, M40, and then hit the M6. If we leave by nine, with an hour's stop for lunch, we'll reach the lodge between eight and nine this evening."

"Perfect. Time for a quick bite before bedtime. Then a whole day of exploring and prepping before the others arrive."

Cheryl, who seemed far too perky considering everything, piped in with, "So what's gonna be the Christmas theme this time, Martha Stewart?"

Each year, Trevor had been tasked with decorating the venue in readiness for the rest of the troupe's arrival. If Cheryl's mum excelled in the kitchen, his forte was in decorating spaces. On the first trip, he created a freedom rainbow theme, conceptually tricky at first but accomplished without making the place seem like a set from *My Little Pony*. In previous years, other people pushed their choices: Santa scarlet, *Frozen*'s pure white, and last year, blue for Johnny and Frank, after their favourite Christmas song, *Blue Christmas*. This season Trevor had consulted nobody. But he always remembered Monica's reaction whenever he unveiled one of his creations, a simple "Nice one, Mac, but what's wrong with normal decorations?" So this year, he had decided to go with a traditional theme, fresh and natural, using whatever he could find in the grounds. Hopefully branches of fir, evergreens, and pine cones that he could fix together and finish off with the red or tartan ribbon, something he was bringing from home. No

gaudy colours, no artificial paints or glitter, just natural earth colours and raw materials.

"Trade secret. But let's say it's going to be my choice for a change."

"Whatever you do," said Mrs M, ready to head back inside, "I'm sure it will be lovely."

"Not sure anyone will care," Trevor muttered, mainly to himself, as she shuffled off, a move clearly meant to leave space for Cheryl and him to talk in private. As soon as she had disappeared inside, Cheryl moved to take her mother's place beside him. They sat there for a few moments, each sipping their drinks before either of them broke the silence. That honour he gave to Cheryl.

"Mum and I talked already. I'm driving the first leg until Birmingham," she said, the ordinary topic surprising him. "Mum's insisting on doing her bit, but her eyesight's getting worse. So I suggested she take the second leg for a couple of hours until mid-afternoon when the light starts to fade. After that, you can take over."

"Fine by me."

"Told her you're the only one who knows the Scottish back roads."

"I've been there once. When I was twelve."

"She doesn't need to know that. And anyway, we have satnav."

They sat in comfortable silence again until he peered at her.

"You want to tell me what happened?" he asked. Few who knew Cheryl got to see the morning version: pale and make-up free and, quite honestly, looking like she needed a blood transfusion. She held her mug before her in both hands but refused to look at him as she took a big sigh and replied.

“Didn’t want to bother you. You had your own shit to deal with. Truth is, Mac, we’ve been drifting apart for months. Seems everyone saw it but me. That old bastard, hindsight. I wanted us to marry, she didn’t see the point. I wanted to move in together, she preferred her own space. Can’t tell you how many times she moaned about her dislike of kids, as though letting me know not to ask. All the signs were there. Only I was deaf, dumb, and blind.”

“Yeah, well, love can do that. Maybe it was for the best.”

“I’m not really sure it was love. More like comfortable familiarity. But we all need to grow and move on at some point. Do you ever miss Karl?”

Trevor stared at his feet. *Every day*, he almost replied, but decided not to, given the situation. For five of their six years together, they lived under the same rented roof, shared the same bed, watched the same television shows, cooked and cared for each other. In sickness and in health. Outside of their home, each had their own set of friends—and the two camps rarely socialised together. He and Karl only ever showed up as a couple when it suited the occasion, such as family gatherings or meetings with their support group friends. When Karl dumped him, he holed himself up, and the flat became like a tomb: cold, haunted, and unloved. Apart from visits to Cheryl’s place, he hadn’t felt strong enough to venture out much since the divorce. In fact, once only did he venture out on his own, to attend a gay celebrity client’s birthday party, during which the celebrity’s partner proposed. How much had that stung?

“Sometimes. But I’m comfortable with my own company now. At least you didn’t get married and have to go through the bullshit of divorce.”

“True enough.”

“All those years the gay community spent chasing after



equality and gay marriage. And once we got it, we totally forgot that marriage comes with an evil twin lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce at any moment. That once you get the main prize, waiting in the wings like a nasty, spiteful predator, hungry to get its teeth into anything you have, is divorce."

"Heavens. Has it been that bad?"

"You think you know somebody until you're threatening each other's lives over placemats decorated with the heads of Lenin, Mao, and Che Guevara, or novelty penis bottle openers. Although, to be honest, I think a lot of that didn't come from Karl."

"What's her name, by the way?"

Trevor chuckled. Her mother had asked the same thing.

"No idea. We'll find out tomorrow evening. Unless the pair of them come to their senses and don't show."

Cheryl stared at her mug and gently shook her head.

"Is this going to be a disaster, Mac?"

"Only if we let it. We may not have the usual fun crowd, but your mum's still cooking her amazing food, there will be lots of rooms, and we'll be in walking country. So if anyone starts to get on your nerves, you can always shout, and we'll go for a long walk in the glen. Or a hike to a pub. Or a swim in the loch."

"I am so not packing my swimwear," she said, horrified.

"Wimp," he said, nudging her shoulder.

"Bloody right. But I'll happily cheer you on as you cut a hole in the ice and dive in," she replied with a smile, retaliating in kind. "God, you know, maybe we should just get married."

"Love you as I do, Cheryl, we would only ruin a perfect friendship. We'd end up killing one another over which TV programmes to watch, toilet etiquette, duvet hogging—any

number of things. Besides, I am neither falling in love nor getting married ever again. And you can quote me on that.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I will.”

“Now, let’s move it. We’ve got a long road ahead of us. But just so you know, I’m not booking anything next year. Takes too much effort. This is going to be the last one.”

“Huh? Last what?”

“Last Christmas.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2000 MILES

22 DECEMBER

FIVE HUNDRED MILES and three pit stops later, as they left the A82 to circumvent Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, and hit the small B-road heading for Loch Arkaig, winter's night had comfortably settled in. Fortunately, rain-clouds had cleared along the route, and the otherwise rain-washed lanes glistened with a silvery mix of ice, headlights, and moonlight.

After handing over the driving to Trevor, Cheryl's mum took the back seat and promptly fell asleep, leaving Cheryl to navigate. Trevor loved driving, but even more so when he had to be focused and the pure act drove everything else from his mind—especially the thought of encountering Karl again. When he finally turned the Volvo onto a small gravel track—at almost precisely eight-thirty—and bumped towards the silhouetted structure of Stratham Lodge, Cheryl was the first to spot the other car parked on the far side.

“Must be the owner's contact. Right on time.”

“Let me sort the keys out,” said Trevor as he parked on the other side of the front door and switched off the engine.

“It’s freezing out. Stay here in the warmth with your mum. Once I’ve got the door unlocked, I’ll come and fetch you.”

“Go on then. I need to check my phone for messages now we’ve stopped moving.”

When he pushed open the door, chill air invaded quickly, so despite stiffened joints, he scuttled out and slammed the door behind him. Across the parking area, the other car’s door opened and the silhouette of a man unfolded from the driver’s side.

“Trevor, my man. How’s it hanging?” came a very familiar Irish voice as another figure emerged from the passenger side.

“Johnny? Johnny Reilly?” Either because of the chill air or the sudden surge of emotion, Trevor’s eyes began to tear up. “We didn’t think you were coming. Aren’t you and Frank supposed to be on a beach in Iran or Afghanistan, or somewhere like that?”

“See, Frank, you dickwad,” said Johnny, leaning down to address his companion, who remained in the car. “I told you the card you sent from Istanbul never arrived. Bet it’s still behind the friggin’ hotel reception. We never said we weren’t coming, Trevor. Truth is, we wouldn’t have missed this for the world. *Umph*. What’s that for?”

While he had been talking, Trevor had strode over and pulled him off-balance into a fierce hug. Finally, something good had come out of their potential catastrophe. He held tight and pushed his face into Johnny’s collar.

“Can’t tell you how good it is to see you guys.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, sounds like someone’s got a story to tell.” After being released from Trevor’s grasp, Johnny chuckled and handed over a set of keys. “There you go. The young fellow-me-lad from the big house dropped the keys off with us. Left a few minutes ago. We were going

to see if we could light a fire, but apparently the place is centrally heated, and it's on a timer, so already switched on. He said you'd be along at any minute, so we waited."

While Johnny used his phone torch to shine light on the lock, Trevor tested each of the keys in an attempt to open the front door. Behind them, the East London voice of Frank sounded.

"So the hotel travel geezer in Turkey managed to get us a standby from Dalaman direct to Edinburgh. Mate, we've just flown two thousand bloody miles to get here, 'cause Christmas wouldn't be the same without a dose of Mrs M's nosh. When was the last time we saw you? February, wasn't it? Much happened since then?"

Trevor turned and offered Johnny a world-weary look, probably wasted in the virtual darkness.

"You have no idea," he replied. "But let's all get unpacked first. Go in and switch the lights on while I fetch Mrs M and Cheryl."

When he opened the car door wide and broke the news to Cheryl, her reaction was much the same as his. Her squeals of joy woke Mrs M, and once they had brought her quickly up to speed, they grabbed their luggage and headed for the lodge.

The front door opened into the left side of the kitchen, into a small anteroom where hooks for coats and racks for shoes sat empty. Only as Mrs M opened the next door were they met with pleasant warmth and evidence that the central heating had indeed been activated. For some reason, neither Johnny nor Frank had switched on any lights. Cheryl found the light switch first, but when she flicked it, nothing happened.

"What the hell?"

"Not working," came Frank's voice as a flickering phone

light announced his arrival. "Me and Johnny have been looking for the fuse box, but this place is a maze. Do you have the number of the owner? I'll have another look around, but all they need to do is tell us where the box is."

Trevor dug out his own phone and noticed two things. Not only was the battery almost out, but the device barely had a signal. Without another word, he strolled back out into the cold night, where, lo and behold, the reception appeared strong and stable. Eventually, he found an email from the owner with the telephone number, but each time he dialled, the call went to voicemail.

"Nobody's home," he called to the darkness inside the house.

"Looks like there's no electricity. Except for the fridge, which is a little baffling," said Cheryl. "Maybe it's on a different circuit. I just tried to plug in the kettle for a cup of tea, but no luck. The heating must be gas-fired, thank goodness. How about the Aga cooker, Mum? How long does it take to get the thing started?"

"Apart from not knowing whether this one is gas or oil-fired, my experience is they take hours to get to a reasonable heat. I'll tackle the monster first thing in the morning, once there's more light."

"So, what—no tea?" whined Cheryl.

Despite Trevor's and Johnny's groans—Frank was still lost in the lodge somewhere—Mrs M started laughing.

"Honestly, you kids. Just as well I was a girl scout in my youth. Along with food supplies I brought a big box of candles—large red ones for the Christmas table, but I think our need is greater right now—and my old Calor Gas micro stove is still in the car from a camping trip. Find a saucepan and fill it with water, Cheryl. Trevor, look around for mugs

and a teapot. Johnny, find out where the plates and cutlery are. I'll go and get the cooker."

Mrs M set about making tea while the rest of them went off with their phone lights to claim their bedrooms. Trevor picked the one nearest the kitchen, much smaller than the rest but with a comfortable double bed. When he returned, the candlelit dining table had been dotted with mugs of tea. While everyone wandered back in dribs and drabs, Mrs M used the small double stove and a large frying pan to knock up a very palatable meal of eggs, bacon, sausages, and mushrooms—more of a breakfast, really, but none of them cared, the smell of food stoking their hunger. At the end of the meal, they all leaned back, sated, while Trevor led the compliments to an amused Mrs M on her quick thinking.

"Good you two are here, actually," said Mrs M, nodding at Frank and Johnny. "Cheryl will need a hand getting some last-minute fresh local produce in town. She might also fancy a look-see and maybe some lunch. No offense, but I don't want any of you in my way while I'm trying to find my way around the kitchen. And if you do find a pub, you know my daughter. So one of you will need to drive. Consider yourself volunteered."

"She means you," said Frank, nudging Johnny.

"She means all of us," said Cheryl. "Except Trevor. To give him time and space to do his decorating thing."

"Exactly," said Mrs M, clearing plates away. "And I want to hear what adventures you two reprobates have been having since you disappeared off the map."

"In which case, let's have some after-dinner Turkish delights—and not the sugary, squidgy, sweet version."

While Frank mesmerised them with some of their world adventures, Johnny reached into his holdall and produced a couple of bottles of red wine and a selection of

cheeses that he had been saving for Christmas Day. Impressing them all, while unwrapping the cheeses, he recited each in turn—Kaşar, Tulum, Kelle, Dil, Örgü, Van Otlı, and Kuymak—until Frank told them the Turkish shopkeeper had written the names on the paper wrappers. While everyone else groaned, Trevor couldn't help but smile. This was the very reason he enjoyed the company of friends. Would everything turn to dust tomorrow evening?

"Why didn't Karl and Jenna come down with you?" Frank asked while topping up Frank's glass of Merlot. "Is Karl working?"

"Jenna and I split up," said Cheryl. Typical of her to come clean while Trevor sat there like a coward, unsure what to tell them about him and Karl. "She's not coming."

"Oh feck. So sorry, Cher."

"Let me guess. Jenna met someone else, didn't she?" said Frank. He and Jenna had tolerated each other for the sake of keeping the peace, but even a fool could see they couldn't stand each other.

When Cheryl nodded, he muttered something under his breath that nobody could hear.

"Karl's coming tomorrow," said Trevor, ignoring Cheryl's glare. Johnny and Frank knew nothing about what had happened earlier in the year, and he didn't want to spoil the upbeat mood. At least, that's what he told himself.

"Come on, Trevor. You're going to have to tell them," said Cheryl from across the table. "May as well get it out the way now."

"Tell us what?" said Frank.

They were an unlikely couple, Frank and Johnny.

Frank, with his spiked black hair, permanently creased forehead, and quick, dark eyes, originally came from a very rough neighbourhood in East London. With three older



brothers, he got picked on relentlessly. When Johnny met him, he had been sleeping rough, having been literally kicked out by his dad for coming out about his sexuality, and then kicked a lot more until two ribs were broken. Frank rarely talked about those dark days, only about this ginger Irish knob—Johnny—who volunteered as a counsellor at Gay Shelter and had offered to take him in temporarily and care for him until he got himself back on his feet. Turns out Frank had an innate knack for electrical work and, after fixing Johnny's small flat and then breezing through a couple of examinations, got himself a comfortably paid job as a sparky with a building company. By then, Johnny, three years his senior, had fallen for him so hard that rather than letting him leave, he begged him to stay.

"Come on, buddy boy," said Johnny. "Spill the beans. What's Karl Marx been up to this time? Not been in the slammer, has he? Arrested for throwing his soiled Calvins at Jeremy Corbyn."

"No, of course not. He's just, he's—"

"Decided to switch sides," finished Mrs M, loudly, turning around from the sink. "Decided he's bisexual. And he's now got a girlfriend in tow."

"He's what?" asked Johnny, aghast, his thick red eyebrows scrunched together. "Are you fecking pulling me weasel?"

"No, Johnny, he left me."

A silence fell across the table. Frank, who had been quiet all this time, was the first to speak.

"Yours was the first gay wedding either of us ever attended. So the little pheasant plucker was stringing you along. Next time I see him, I'm going to break both his freakin' legs. After I've given him a piece of my mind. See if I don't, the traitorous little—"

“No, Frank,” Trevor interrupted, a hand covering his eyes. “Please. I beg you. He really is going to be here tomorrow. With the girlfriend. And I don’t want any trouble.”

Once again, an uncomfortable silence descended on the table. Trevor noticed Johnny—despite his anger—stifle a yawn and felt the same creeping tiredness. Time for bed soon.

“I thought the whole point of this traditional getaway thingummy was that it was exclusively for us fabulous people?” said Johnny.

“Things change.”

“You can bleeding well say that again. Oh well,” said Frank, getting up from the table and placing a hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “If there’s one thing us gays love, it’s a bit of drama.”

After nodding and taking one of the candles, Johnny called back from the corridor, his voice carrying clearly.

“Reckon it might have been safer if we’d stayed in Baghdad.”

CHAPTER THREE  
DECK THE HALL  
23 DECEMBER

AT TEN O'CLOCK the next morning, Cheryl, Frank, and Johnny drove off to Fort William in Mrs M's Volvo to stock up on last-minute supplies, forage for local treats, and stop for lunch. Even though his pride took a beating, Johnny eventually dragged Frank away from trying to find the damned fuse box, which must have been artfully hidden with all of the lodge's renovations. Part of not inviting Trevor and Mrs M was because they wanted to give them space: him to decorate the lodge, and Mrs M to find her way around the kitchen and begin preparations for dinner before the others arrived later in the afternoon.

Within the hour, Trevor had already managed to string up the garlands and tartan ribbons that he had spent hours assembling back home. Wonderful smells of pastry and cinnamon and other potent spices began to fill the lodge. When he eventually entered the kitchen, Mrs M was cooking up a storm. In between checking the Aga and furiously mixing ingredients, she helped him with the minimal kitchen decorations, which left him to put the finishing touches to the main living space.

Not an easy task, as it turned out. At the far end of the lodge stood the building's *pièce de résistance*. A magnificent semi-circular communal area overlooked the loch, providing stunning panoramic views, with a huge, modern faux-log fire—gas powered—in the centre of the room, encased in a circle of brick and covered by a huge steel flue, making the whole ensemble almost ceremonial in design. A semi-circle of comfy settees in beige cotton surrounded the fireplace. Where floor-to-ceiling windows ended each side of the vista, dark oak bookcases and a long bar of mahogany had been built into the walls. All the wood used in the living area had been carefully chosen to enhance the natural light filtering into the room.

Even as he had first entered the room that morning with Cheryl by his side, bleary-eyed and still in their pyjamas, and they both took a huge intake of breath at the sheer magnificence of the space, he already knew how he would turn this haven into a traditional Christmas setting. But in order to do so, he needed supplies from nature. They had also been promised a Christmas tree by the owner, but at the moment, the room stood bare. Nevertheless, by eleven o'clock, with his wellies tugged on and plastic garden sacks in hand, he set out to scavenge the grounds around the lodge.

After the overnight frost had burned off, the cloudless morning began to bathe the ground in steamy warmth. By the time Trevor had climbed the small path to higher ground, partly to forage for holly, evergreens, and fir branches, and partly to get a decent view of the lodge, he had to remove his coat and wore only a woollen jumper. From there, he sat back for a moment to take in the stunning view.

Whoever had planned the renovation of the lodge had

attempted to keep the essence of the original building, to merge old with new. Maybe that had been a condition of the planning permission, or maybe the building was listed. Whether purposely or by coincidence, the building had been reformed into the shape of a Celtic cross. At the newly built end facing the lake, the architect had created the circular communal living area on the ground level with the huge glass windows. Three bedrooms jutting out on the floor above each had balconies overlooking the scenery. Despite attempts to blend stonework, the rest of the building—mainly comprising bedrooms and bathrooms—was clearly the traditional design, restored and updated but essentially the same structure as the original building, culminating in the long kitchen. All angst about the holiday fell away, and he started to treasure being in this little corner of heaven.

On his stroll back to the lodge down another lane, he noticed a cluster of wild purple thistles over a wire fence. Although his theme was Christmas scarlet and green, the Scottish national flower would definitely have a place in their temporary home.

Leaning over the fence, he realised he wouldn't be able to reach the plants, so carefully pushed his arm through the barbed wire and stretched forward with a gloved hand. Just as he'd grasped the prickly stems, his foot slipped on the slope of an unseen ditch, the arm of his woollen jumper snagging on the wire, and he fell up to his groin in bog water. With one arm caught and the other clutching uselessly at bog-side flora, he eventually stopped panicking and took a few steady breaths.

And that's when Trevor saw him.

In the distance, a black-capped man on a black horse—gloriously shirtless—hailed a small cart carrying a

Christmas tree. For some reason, the sight struck him as vaguely funny, but as the man got closer, Trevor's breath caught at his stunning good looks, at his smooth masculinity. Broad-shouldered and upright in the saddle, he wore his hair short beneath the cap, college boy style. But even from a distance, Trevor could make out the thick thighs in jodhpurs and the carved lines of his hairless chest and flat stomach. Woken from his fixation, he realised he needed to get the man's attention, but he appeared to have already seen him, even though he made no move to hurry. When he approached, Trevor could have sworn the man had an amused and frankly rather handsome smile on his face.

"You enjoying yourself there?" he asked, his voice a nice baritone with a hint of a Scots accent.

"Not particularly. Having a bit of trouble, actually."

Next to Trevor now, he pulled the horse to a stop.

"Aye. You surely are."

"Any chance of a hand?"

"Give me a minute."

Effortlessly, he dismounted the saddle in one lithe movement and landed lightly on the ground. After watching him a moment, Trevor managed to unpick the sleeve of his jumper, and when he turned, the man was towering over him.

"If you could just help me to—" he began, but before he could finish, the man had reached down, placed a hand under each of his armpits, and hauled him effortlessly out of the ditch. When Trevor finally regained his composure, red-faced and dripping puddles onto the path, he could barely find the courage to look the handsome man in the eyes.

"I'm Rudy Mortimer. Son of the owner. How d'you do?" he said, holding out a hand.

"And I'm ruddy mortified," replied Trevor, shaking the

hand. "Although the name's McTavish. Trevor McTavish. I'm the one renting the place."

Even though the young man didn't laugh, he looked away to smile into the sky. He had a good profile: formal, solid, and defined, probably down to good breeding. When his gaze returned, he took in Trevor's soiled clothes. However, manners seemed to deter him from commenting.

"That's a good Scottish clan name you have there. Do your folk hail from up this way?"

Even though the pronunciation of only a few words hinted at his roots—most came out in perfect Queen's English—sometimes the structure of his sentences betrayed him.

"You know, I'm not really sure where they come from. Apart from Balham in South London. Maybe my father's parents came from Scotland. They died before I was born."

"Ah, well. Welcome to Arkaig, Trevor McTavish."

"Thank you. So as you seem to be heading to the lodge, perhaps you can show me where the fuse box is so that I can switch on the electricity. Going to need a shower when we get back. And I see you've brought the Christmas tree. Everyone else is arriving later this afternoon, so it'll give me time to decorate the place."

"My apologies for that," he said, his features momentarily losing their poise. "That's entirely my fault. I sorted out the heating, and should have switched on the power. How did you manage last night?"

"Candles and a camp stove. My friend's mother, Mrs Madison, is very resourceful."

A moment of puzzlement crossed the man's face before that amazing albeit suppressed smile appeared again.

"Well, I'll need to apologise to her too. Can I ask, what

were you doing hanging over the wire fence? Trying to get yourself snagged?"

"Uh, no. Apart from being rather impulsive, I was attempting to pick a bunch of heather and thistle. Wanted some to help decorate the main living area."

"Whatever for? There's a whole field of yon prickly weed around the back of the lodge. Come, I'll show you."

After stopping himself from staring at the tight backside remounting the horse, Trevor strolled alongside, chatting companionably. He learned that Rudy was the youngest son of the owners—Mr and Mrs Mortimer-King—and that they had gone to look after his mother's older sister in Vancouver over the Christmas season, but would be back for New Year's Eve. Hogmanay, he called it. Rudy's horse was called Duke and lived in the stables up at the old house—wherever that may be; when he said the words he pointed a thumb back the way he had come without turning. Rudy was fending for himself over the holiday season. Trevor filled him in on their little group, about the regular get-together, omitting the fact that what they had in common was that the lot of them batted for the other team. Fair enough, really, because for the first time this year, not all of them did.

Instead of leading him to the front of the lodge where the loch sat, Rudy steered the horse to the other side and, just as he had claimed, a field opened before them. After a brief chuckle, Trevor stepped in and used the scissors he had brought with him to collect some of the healthier specimens, placing them into his bag. Without a word, Rudy moved off, heading towards the back of the lodge. Once Trevor had finished, he hurried to catch up, finding Rudy now wearing a white polo shirt and tying up the horse in the car park. Mrs M stood at the door, watching suspiciously



while Rudy unloaded the tree. As Trevor reached her, he stopped to watch too.

"You need a hand, Rudy?" Trevor called out.

"No, I'm good."

"You most certainly are. Good enough to eat," muttered Trevor, as Mrs M snorted and bumped her shoulder against his. They watched Rudy's able body unload the Christmas tree and drag the medium-sized evergreen towards the front door.

"Are you Mrs Madison?" asked Rudy, nodding as he approached.

"I am," said Mrs M guardedly, folding her arms, her body stiffening.

"I'm Rudy Mortimer, the owner's son," he said, removing his cap and holding out a hand. "And I need to sincerely apologise to you. I should have switched on the power last night, and because of my mistake, I put you out. So if there's anything I can do, please let me know."

She studied him for a moment and then looked to Trevor for reassurance.

"Is he for real?"

"What Mrs M means," said Trevor, grabbing Rudy's arm and leading him into the house, "is that we don't usually get such well-mannered people around us. Thank you for bringing the tree."

Over the next thirty minutes, Rudy showed Trevor and Mrs M the layout of the house, pointing out little features of the lodge that they could easily have overlooked during their stay: the light for the bar counter, the switch to illuminate the outside porch, how to light up the central fireplace, where the remote controls were located for the television sets in each of the rooms. He also offered to stick around to put up the tree and help Trevor with the decorations, the

least he could do, he said, for forgetting to switch on the power the night before.

When Trevor showed him which room he had taken, next to the kitchen—still unsure why he had done that—Rudy immediately voiced his approval. Apparently, this had been his room whenever he stayed. And when he led the way, Trevor found out why. Either side of the bed, floor-to-ceiling wood panels covered the walls. The owners had placed a small bedside cabinet and a lamp on the right side, but nothing on the left side, near the tiny window. Rudy strode around and stopped at the wall.

“Unless by accident, this you would never have found,” he said, before placing a hand on the panel and pushing. Softly and soundlessly the wall moved inwards—a secret door—although the inside of the room stood in darkness. Reaching a hand inside, he pulled on a chain and bright light flicked on. Turning to Trevor, he beamed and said, “Come take a look.”

Inside, a modern bathroom had been fitted: tub, shower cubicle, sink, and toilet. Rudy stepped over and turned the sink’s hot tap. Even though they had only just switched on the lodge’s electric immersion heaters, within seconds steam rose from the sink.

“Best of all, the old lodge used to be heated by the fire in the kitchen—pipes still run at the back and through the Aga—so if you ever have a problem with the boiler, or if you have no electricity, this room will still get hot water. You may think you got a bum deal on the oldest bedroom in the house, but I guarantee, you’ll not get cold, because the pipes run beneath the floor.”

While Rudy had been talking, he had slapped a hand on Trevor’s back, making him jump at the intimacy. When he left the warm hand there, Trevor turned to grin conspira-

torially at him. Eventually, though, Rudy let go, and the absence of warmth felt astonishing.

“Just as well. I need to get out of these wet things and take a quick shower.”

“You need a hand?”

This time Trevor’s smart mouth got the better of him. “Might not be so quick if we’re showering together.”

“I meant with the shower controls,” said Rudy, his composure faltering, his smile draining away. Trevor instantly felt ashamed. Not for the first time in his life, he had totally misjudged the situation. And now he had embarrassed Rudy.

“Anyway, I’ll fix the tree in the main room,” said Rudy, backing out of the bathroom. “But I’ll hang around once you’ve showered. Give you a hand with the decorations. As I promised.”

After showering and changing in record time, and putting his wet clothes into the washing machine in the utility room, Trevor joined Rudy back in the main room. In his favour, Rudy didn’t seem as tense as he ought to have been. Over the next ninety minutes, rewarded by a mug of tea and mince pies from Mrs M, they set about putting up the decorations. Even though their conversation had stopped, they worked seamlessly together. Most of the time, Trevor directed Rudy, sending him up a ladder and telling him where to pin different things. Not once did Rudy appear to realise when Trevor ogled him perched on the top of a ladder, or when his muscular arms hauled boxes out of the way. Both of them were so caught up in the work that neither realised how much they had accomplished. Not until they heard Mrs M’s gasp from the edge of the living room. When Trevor turned, she had placed a hand over her mouth and her eyes had welled up.

“What’s wrong, Mrs M?”

“Beautiful,” she said through her fingers. “If only Mon were here. Come over and take a look. The both of you.”

Once they had both moved to stand next to her, Rudy drew in a sharp breath before placing a hand on Trevor’s shoulder again. Trevor said nothing, tried to dismiss the gesture as nothing but a friendly affectation. Even though the hand felt really nice there. To distract himself, he cast his critical eye around the room.

Not bad, really. Tartan bows of scarlet and green, or mauve and green, those they had fixed at regular intervals to garlands of fir, provided the main theme above the windows and around the circular fireplace. Bunches of purple thistle or sprigs of holly and mistletoe, arranged with simple gold ribbons, added another focal point. To one side of the window, the Christmas tree continued the simple theme but with the added bonus of white lights that twinkled and faded softly in and out. Rudy had accomplished that really well, Trevor noted. If anything, the overall effect came across as naturalistic and rustic, exactly what Trevor had envisaged, totally fitting the lodge and the location. Not only that, but he knew the moment Cheryl returned and saw the decorations, her entire repertoire of over five hundred Christmas carols and songs would begin to issue through her Bluetooth speaker.

“Pure dead brilliant, Trev. You’ve a rare talent for this,” said Rudy, and for the first time in his life, Trevor actually warmed to the forbidden nickname. Perhaps because on Rudy’s tongue the word sounded palatable, sexy, almost. Heavens, thought Trevor, what with that and the warm hand on his shoulder, he was done for.

“Yes, well,” he replied, in an effort to keep his voice steady. “Remember you did your bit, too.”

"No, I just did what you told me," Rudy said, before absently checking his wristwatch. "Oh, will you look at the time. I should be going. Mother's going to call around four."

"Come on then," replied Trevor. "We'll see you out."

On the way to the door, Rudy commented on the delicious smells coming from the kitchen, and Mrs M, a sucker for compliments, asked him to wait while she brought some freshly baked cakes to take home for his tea. This time Trevor stood in the doorway, watching as Rudy readied to get back on Duke.

"So, Trev. What is it you want for Christmas?"

*Still my beating heart*, thought Trevor, *and stay my errant tongue*. He knew Rudy was teasing him, but he didn't mind. Trevor almost asked him if he might have a gay twin brother hidden away that he could borrow for Christmas.

"Peace and goodwill to all men. And women. More to the point," said Trevor, "what plans do you have for Christmas? Is someone cooking for you up at the big house?"

"No," said Rudy, and something fleeting passed across his gaze. Just at that moment, Mrs M appeared with a large brown paper bag. "It'll just be me. Family are not big on Christmas. As I said earlier, we tend to save our celebrations for New Year's Eve."

While Trevor's mind wrestled for some way to respond, Mrs M beat him to the punch line. After handing him the bag, she said, "Well, you're not staying on your own. You'll come and join us for Christmas lunch, even if I have to squeeze into my wellies and drag you here myself."

"Seriously, Rudy. If you think I'm good at decorating, you should taste Mrs M's cooking."

As he bounced into his saddle, an incredible smile lit up Rudy's face again.

"That's very kind of you. Let me think about it."

Anyway, I'd best be going. Let you get ready for your guests. Thanks, Trev. I really enjoyed helping. And thanks for the cakes, Mrs M. See you soon, eh?"

"I hope so," said Trevor, lost in his smile again, and almost convinced Rudy had winked. "I really do hope so."

CHAPTER FOUR  
MARY'S BOY CHILD  
23 DECEMBER

JUST BEFORE SIX o'clock that evening the show began.

Soon after Cheryl and Trevor finished setting the kitchen table while enjoying a glass of sparkling wine and savouring the odours of Mrs M's cooking—roast lamb and roast potatoes; the Yorkshire puddings and selection of vegetables would be cooked last—they heard the crackle of tyres on gravel and the first car engine being killed in the parking bay outside the kitchen window.

When Cheryl and the boys had first arrived back from Fort William, laden with extra goodies, Mrs M and Trevor had listened for a good hour in the kitchen about what they'd been up to. Frank and Johnny had bought extra Christmas pressies, cases of beer, wine, and spirits, and had also contributed generously and completely unnecessarily to the fresh food shopping, and while the boys had gotten a little drunk over lunch in a local pub, Cheryl had reluctantly remained sober, being the designated driver, but planned to make up for lost time that evening. Only as they finished talking and laughing, and as the sun began to sink, did Trevor

lead them all into the living room and show them the illuminated decorations. As expected, Cheryl gasped, and hugged the breath out of Trevor before shooting straight to her room and hooking up the music. With darkness descending, stars sparkling off the dark surface of the loch, lights twinkling on the tree, and The King's Singers filling the air, their holiday lodge finally felt like the perfect Christmas setting.

Then at around five-thirty, after the boys had gone off for some private time, Trevor knew Cheryl could sense his growing anxiousness about Karl showing up with his new partner. So when the doorbell sounded, he felt his face drain of blood. Now helping Mrs M chop vegetables at the kitchen table, Cheryl must have sensed his reaction, because she leapt up.

"I'll go."

Even with Mrs M's soft jazz radio station playing, he could hear the exchange of voices at the door. One male, the other female. But the male voice did not belong to Karl. Cheryl appeared first, trailing two young people, and treated Trevor and Mrs M to a melodramatic roll of her eyes.

"Mum. Trevor. These are Jenna's co-workers. Jessica and Anthony."

Trevor jumped up then and greeted the pair. Of the two, Jessica seemed more forthcoming and friendly, while Anthony stood back in her shadow. They made an unlikely couple—if they were actually a couple. Even in heels, she barely reached five foot, but had a nice figure and seemed to laugh easily. Perhaps nerves played a part. Towering behind her, the borderline-obese ginger-haired boy stood taller than Trevor's five-eleven, probably touching six-two. He wore thick-framed spectacles, the old-fashioned type, and every



few seconds, he screwed up his nose and pushed them back up the bridge.

“Welcome to Christmas at Stratham Lodge,” said Trevor, shaking Jessica’s hand. Behind her, the boy craned over her shoulder.

“Food smells amazing. Am I sharing with you?” he asked Trevor.

“No, there’s plenty of space,” said Cheryl. She had reseated herself at the table, having done her bit. “We all have our own rooms. I’ve put Jessica on the top floor, up the central staircase to the right, and you’re on the ground floor, directly below.”

“Wow, cool. So what’s the Wi-Fi password?”

Of all the questions he could have asked, that one caught Trevor unawares. He’d been unable to get a satellite signal in the house, but hadn’t remembered to ask Rudy if the place had a router. He stared over at Cheryl for help, but she shrugged and shook her head.

“Uh,” said Trevor, passing on the shrug, “I’m not sure they have Wi-Fi.”

“What?” said Anthony, horrified, as though Trevor had just told him they had no food or bathrooms.

“Yes, we do,” said Mrs M, coming to the rescue, a small piece of paper in her hand. “Rudy left it with me. The network is Stratham5G, and he wrote the password up on the kitchen blackboard. It’s all gobbledegook. Just a series of number and letters.”

Rudy hadn’t said anything to him, but there, as Mrs M had said, in a neat script were chalked the words *WIFI Password (case sensitive): B1gluvG@ynoH8.*

Included also was his WhatsApp handle—RudyKing—and mobile number in case of emergencies. When Trevor

turned back to Anthony, the young guy visibly deflated with relief.

“Does that mean we’re not going to see you for the rest of the holiday, except at mealtimes?” asked Jessica, glaring up at him, her hands on her hips.

Even though she was probably half joking, Trevor understood what she meant. He did seem the kind who would hole himself up in his room like some of his friends’ younger siblings. No doubt he, too, had some sword-wielding, fantasy role-playing heroes he needed to keep in touch with to ensure the survival of the human race.

“What? No!” Anthony said, taken aback. “I have a marketing proposal to get out by Wednesday. And I need to get into the system at work for research materials.”

“Honestly, he works all the time,” Jessica said with a huff. “While his boss swans away on holiday to Tenerife. Do you think she’s working? Yuh, I don’t think so.”

*Okay, thought Trevor, so I really need to reel in the stereotyping critic in my head.*

“Who’s his boss?” he asked, in all innocence.

“Head of Marketing. Jenna Wilkinson.”

“Jenna’s in Tenerife?” asked Cheryl, plucking the glass away from her mouth, the look in her eyes nothing short of molten. Trevor had been on the receiving end of that look once or twice. Light dynamite stick and stand well back.

“Jess,” hissed Anthony to the back of her head. “You weren’t supposed to say anything.”

“Oops,” said Jess, a hand held over her mouth, although Trevor was sure he could make out a smile behind the fingers. “Sorry, my bad. Totally forgot you two used to be an item. Think it was a last-minute thing, if that helps.”

“They were ‘an item’ until two days ago,” added Mrs M.

“Yuh, as I say. Sorry for that.”

“Think I’d better show you to your rooms,” said Trevor, as much to defuse the tension as to give Mrs M and Cheryl some time to vent. As distractions went, this one felt good. Trevor learned that Anthony, “call me Tone”—no, he didn’t think he could—liked football and reality television shows. Anthony asked if he could call him Trev—no, he could not, but Trevor conceded by offering the nickname Mac instead. Anthony laughed and said he would have called him Big Mac, except that Trevor was shorter.

Trevor didn’t laugh.

As he approached the kitchen from the hallway after getting Jess and Anthony settled, he spied Johnny and Frank standing together, arms folded, glaring at the front entrance, as though a wild animal had happened across the threshold. Cheryl and Mrs M were nowhere to be seen. Only as he entered did he spot the cause of the men’s hostility.

Karl.

Even through the permanent seriousness etched on his face, he looked good, if a little strained and tired. When he turned and saw Trevor, his features softened slightly. His shaggy black hair and dark eyes had always managed to captivate Trevor, even when he and Karl disagreed with each other, which had happened more often than not towards the end. Toggled out in his old tan leather bomber jacket and denims, with his short, solid frame, Karl had cultured a casual look befitting a GQ model. Not that anyone could ever tell him something so decadent.

“Everyone, this is Rosemary,” said Karl, stepping to one side. Trevor could tell by the way his ex-husband’s eyes flitted from one face to another that he was wary, but in true Karl style, he also stuck out his chin in defiance. “She prefers to be called plain Mary.”

The moment the small, unsmiling woman called Plain Mary stepped forward, Trevor could tell she was anything but plain, and either morbidly obese or heavily pregnant. From her thin face and the way she pushed a hand into her lower back, he decided to run with the latter. And then a hundred and one thoughts hit him. Why hadn't Karl said anything? Had he planned this or had it been an accident? Had they been sleeping together while he and Karl had still been married? Why the hell had he brought her all the way to Scotland in such a condition? But then her strident schoolmarm voice brought him out of his delirium.

"Which of you is Trevor?" she asked, looking from Frank to Johnny and then to Trevor.

"I—I am," he said, stepping forward, as though he had just been summoned by the officer in charge of the firing squad. With distaste, she looked him up and down like a sergeant major inspecting one of her troops—and disapproving on every level.

"First of all, thank you for arranging everything. I know these things don't happen all by themselves," she said, and appeared genuine. Okay, he thought, so maybe not a bad start, even though her words seemed to come out contrived. "Secondly, I hope you haven't assigned rooms yet, because I'll need my own private bathroom. Not that any of you would understand, but in my condition, there is no way I can share with others. And when you heat the place, make sure the temperature is comfortable, no more than twenty-five degrees. Pregnancy sends my body temperature soaring, especially at night. Obviously, I'll regulate our bedroom myself, but in the communal areas, I'd appreciate your cooperation. Thirdly, do any of you smoke?"

Nobody answered. Everyone stood in stunned silence. Until Johnny piped up, "Cigarettes?"

"Yes, of course. What else? Oh, cigars, you mean. Do you smoke either?"

"No."

"Does anyone?"

As one, Trevor, Johnny, and Frank obediently shook their heads. Trevor felt sure pot-smoking Johnny had not been referring to cigars.

"Good, because I refuse to share a living space with baby-killers. Fourth, from a food perspective, I am a strict vegetarian, so have brought my own provisions with us, which I trust none of you will touch. You'll need to assign me a shelf in the refrigerator. At meal times, please wash and move your contaminated pots, pans, and chopping boards out of the way, so that I can prepare my own meals. My husband tells me you are all animal-flesh eaters, and whether I approve or not, that is your choice, but I would appreciate your cooperation in this matter."

"Husband?" whispered Cheryl to the back of Trevor's head. She must have returned while everyone was distracted by Mary's monologue. "Did you know?"

Trevor shook his head gently, and Cheryl hissed out a sigh behind him. Simultaneously, Mary was surveying all the faces in the room to see if her words had provoked any reaction, and only then did Trevor realise Mrs M was missing. Surely she would have something to say about Bloody Mary's demands?

"Finally," continued Mary, turning back to Trevor, "I know this...situation might be a little awkward for you, for us both, but we're just going to have to deal with it. For my part, this is my one last chance of a break from routine before our baby boy comes. And I would really like to make the most of it. So let's clear the air right from the start."

"It's okay, there's really nothing—"

"Karl is with *me* now. And as you can see, we are about to bring another life into the world. So I would appreciate you not judging nor arguing with him over—"

"Okay, that's enough," said Johnny, jumping into the fray and not even attempting to mask his contempt. "Karl, are you sure you and Rosemary's Baby here wouldn't be more comfortable in a hotel? We drove past a nice one on the outskirts of Edinburgh."

"Johnny, Edinburgh's four hours' drive...*Oh*," said Frank, catching on.

"See?" said Mary, rounding on Karl, with an exaggerated sob. "*See?* I told you we shouldn't have come. Told you we'd not be welcome."

"If we'd had the chance, any one of us could have told you that," said Johnny. "If only your lying sack of shit of a—husband, is it now?—communicated instead of keeping dirty little secrets from his friends."

When Trevor looked over, he noticed his ex-husband's anguished gaze searching the kitchen flagstones for something. Maybe he was deciding this was not such a good idea, whether to turn and flee, follow Johnny's advice, but Trevor felt a sudden and overwhelming surge of pity for him. *Heavens*, he thought, *if you can't be generous of spirit at Christmas, when can you be?*

"No, Johnny," said Trevor, quietly but firmly. "I invited Karl and his—wife. Me. If you want to have a pop at someone, then have a pop at me. But while they're here, I'm going to make them as welcome as every other one of our guests. Understood?"

At that, Karl peered up, and the ghost of a grateful smile touched his lips.

"For you, Mac, happily. I'll share the place, surely I will," said Johnny, his Irish accent ramped up to the max.

“But don’t ask me to be civil. There’ll be no sympathy for the devil. Not from me.”

“So what did I miss?” came Mrs M’s cheerful voice—and then she spotted Karl. “Oh, it’s you. Just in time for dinner. Go and wash up, everyone. Dinner’s at seven. Karl, go and fetch your bags from the car while I check on the food. Then I’ll show you and your girlfriend up to the bedroom.”

“Stairs?” asked Mary.

“That’s usually how we get up to the first floor in this country,” said Mrs M, taking in Mary’s condition. “What were you expecting? A lift?”

Trevor escaped to his room before he could hear anything more. But Rudy hadn’t warned him about the paper-thin wall between his bathroom and the kitchen. After a quick, purifying shower, he stood at the mirror, brushing his teeth, listening to two female voices raised in anger.

“Stop right there,” came Mrs M’s distinct voice. “That’s just about enough from you, young missy.”

“I haven’t finished—” began Mary.

“Oh, yes, you have. Now let me lay down a few home rules. First of all, the kitchen is my domain. If you want to prepare your own food, that’s fine. But you go through me. However, I am more than capable of handling vegetarian meals, have done for years, but you work to my schedule, eat with the rest of us, or you don’t eat at all. Are we clear?”

“I don’t see why—”

“*Are we clear?*”

Even though they had probably only been together since March, Trevor could hear how Mary had already adopted Karl’s rebellious tone. But nobody—*nobody*—messed with Mrs M.

“Fine,” said Mary, the word expelled like an expletive.

“Secondly,” said Mrs M in quick-fire succession, “Cheryl and Trevor went to all the trouble of arranging this gathering, something they’ve done for the past five years, one they’ve invested time and energy planning, and something to which—”

“Look, we understand, Mrs M—” said Karl, trying to interrupt.

“—*something to which* we have all been kindly invited. So you will both show them respect like the rest of us and think yourself lucky that you’ve been included. You will not walk in here and start throwing your weight around, just because one of you is pregnant and hormonal. That was your choice, nobody else’s. I’ve been there and out the other side. My Cheryl is living proof of that. And when I was a mum-to-be, I shared one bathroom with a family of six. I know what it’s like better than anyone in this lodge. So as far as rooms, food, smoking, drinking, or anything else is concerned, you’ll keep your mouth shut and your opinions to yourself. Am I making myself clear?”

Silence. Trevor thought he heard Karl mutter something.

*“Am I making myself clear?”*

This time, Trevor would have been surprised if everyone in the lodge hadn’t heard Mrs M’s words.

“Yes,” came both Karl’s and Mary’s sulky voices.

“Good. Now let me show you to your room, so you can freshen up in time for dinner.”

As he tugged on his jeans and thin sweater, Trevor felt increasingly nauseous, wondering if the whole break had been such a good idea. He also shook away a sudden wave of sadness at the thought of Karl being henpecked for life by this woman. But then, Karl had made his bed. Surely he



must have solid feelings for her, wasn't going to ditch her at the drop of a hat when he couldn't handle the pressures of marriage or, God forbid, fatherhood? And more immediately, how were they going to get through dinner tonight without someone getting killed?

Heading to the empty kitchen, he realised he needed a stiff drink before the next round.

CHAPTER FIVE  
WINTER WONDERLAND  
24 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS EVE

THE NEXT MORNING, Trevor woke startled, in a strange bed, in a darkened bedroom, to the sound of someone opening and closing cupboards in the kitchen next door. His racing heart brought on a pounding headache from a well-deserved hangover, relieved only slightly by the crisp, chill air of the bedroom. Not as arctic as the frostiness that had hung over the dinner table the evening before, he remembered, but just as portentous.

Despite Mrs M's amazing cooking, dinner company had been, at best, punctilious. Once they had all trailed into the kitchen, each of them selecting their preferred seating around the table, sides had been drawn. Mrs M held court at the end, with Johnny and Frank next to her, across from each other. Trevor and a bleary-eyed Cheryl came next—providing a kind of no-man's-land—then Jess and Anthony, oblivious to the earlier heated words, while Karl and Mary sat at the far end.

Mrs M had begun by laying down the ground rules with military precision. Breakfast buffet and dinner she would prepare at regimented hours, and she would write up the

day's choices—both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes—on the blackboard in the kitchen. Unless otherwise instructed, at lunchtime—except, of course, for Christmas lunch—each of them would be left to their own devices. If they wanted to use any kitchen equipment, however, everything should be washed up or placed in the dishwasher, and all surfaces cleared before three in the afternoon, when Mrs M began dinner preparation. Trevor had been more amazed at how quickly Mrs M had come up with a vegetarian alternative for Mary, until she had whispered the truth.

“Already pre-prepared a batch of meat-free dishes for Jenna,” she confided as they tucked into their dinner and a surprised Mary was handed a special Brie and sun-dried tomato tart. Trevor had forgotten Cheryl's ex-partner had been a part-time vegetarian. “Pies, quiches, bean casserole. Brought them anyway, rather than waste the food. Just need heating up. But don't tell her ladyship.”

Karl and Mary had barely spoken a word that evening. Maybe, thought Trevor, they had decided to play along, because not once did Mary interrupt while Mrs M spoke. Eventually, Jess had cottoned on to the tension and distracted Mary with chit-chat about her own older sister's recent pregnancy, offering advice on water births, best-buy nappies, breast milk pumps, and post-natal depression. Trevor had tried his best not to listen in. Only then had he glanced up and caught Karl's eye, getting a warm smile from his ex that made his stomach squeeze. As soon as dessert had been completed, the four newest arrivals went off to their respective rooms, claiming travel fatigue.

Left behind, the five remaining friends finally breathed a collective sigh of relief. After helping Mrs M clear up, Frank had insisted they head for the main living room and enjoy a glass of one of the bottles of Taiwanese single malt

whisky he had been saving, while catching up on old times. Both bottles were polished off, and the rest of the night had been a blur.

Barely seven in the morning now, and instead of trying to get back to sleep, Trevor decided to get up and shower. Afterwards, before brushing his teeth, he checked his phone and huffed to find no signal once again. And then he heard a soft tapping sound. At first he wondered if the plumbing was playing up, before realising the sound was coming from his bedroom. Inside the room, he stared at the door and waited. Once again, the tapping sound came, but this time clearly from the window. When he pulled the curtain aside, he gasped to find the smiling face of Rudy. Unlatching the pane, Trevor allowed a breeze of freezing air to invade the room.

“What in God’s name are you doing here?” he asked.

“Needed to drop off a basket of goodies. From my mother. And then I was going for an early morning stroll. Wondered if you fancied joining me? Show you some of the sights around the moor.”

“Early riser, eh? Is that a habit?”

“Och, no, not really,” said Rudy, his smile slipping, which, for some reason, made Trevor’s heart pinch. “Just don’t sleep much these days.”

He might have been mistaken, but that tiny admission appeared to carry a whole depth of personal pain.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you come to the kitchen. Mrs M’s there fixing breakfast, and I know she’ll be delighted to see you. Grab a mug of tea, and pour me one—milk with one sugar—and I’ll be out in five. Deal?”

“Deal,” said Rudy, blowing into his hands. “It’s going to snow today.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

"It's not a question. I'm telling you, it's going to snow."

"When every weather person in the country says there's going to be no snow across the British Isles, Rudy Mortimer begs to differ. Is this some Scottish myth, like when the cows lie down in the field with their legs in the air, farmers know it's going to rain?"

"Lots of snow. You wait and see."

"Okay, I believe you. Now bugger off so that I can put some trousers on."

Rudy's laughter lit up the morning and was worth the freezing air in the room.

When Trevor entered the kitchen toggled out in thick woollen jumper and jeans, Rudy was sitting at the kitchen table with Mrs M, chatting happily. Rudy appeared so at home there, maybe because, as he had said on many occasions, this had actually been his home. Midway through talking to Mrs M about the basket of goodies he had left—a local brand of Dundee cake and whisky with a picture of a stately home as the main symbol—Rudy looked up and held out a mug to Trevor, before offering another of his knee-trembling smiles.

"What time will you be back?" asked Mrs M.

Trevor turned to Rudy and shrugged.

"Around nine-thirty, if that's okay, Mrs Madison," said Rudy.

"It is as long as you call me Brenda."

"Of course. But I want to show Trevor the moors before the weather turns."

"Weather turns? What do you mean?" she asked, turning to the unblemished sunshine outside the kitchen window. "It's going to be a beautiful day."

"For now," said Rudy, grinning, as though he had some secret knowledge.



SOMEWHERE IN HIS YOUTH, RUDY HAD STUMBLED UPON the perfect vantage point of the area, and Trevor felt a tinge of honour that he felt comfortable enough in his company to share the spot with him. Rudy had insisted on leading from behind on the way up from the lodge—safer that way, he said, but it was probably to let Trevor sample the climb without having a guide blocking his view. Not that Trevor would have minded having Rudy's form in his sights—he could think of a lot worse. A fallen tree provided their perfect perch on the crest of a steep hill. Beneath them, the landscape stretched out like a patchwork quilt of earthen browns and moss green. Scotland's wild flora and fauna fought for existence against a backdrop of cruel dark granite. Even without prompting, Trevor could make out the Celtic cross shape of the lodge nestling against the loch. Ben Nevis stole the view, of course, rising from the earth like a leviathan and dwarfing everything around. To the north of them, built into a hill, what looked like a small French castle or fortress painted beige stood out from smaller dwellings, humble cottages that huddled near the loch or around the small road circumnavigating the mountain.

"Is that a castle?" asked Trevor.

"No," said Rudy quietly. "That's Mortimer Hall."

"Mortimer? As in Rudy Mortimer? Are you shitting me? That's the house you live in?"

"Please don't make a fuss. It's our ancestral home."

"Ancestral home? Oh my God. Tell me the truth, Rudy. Are you royalty? Or titled, at the very least? And should we be referring to you as 'my lord' or 'your highness'? Oh no, should a commoner like me be kneeling in your presence?"

“You’re going to get thumped in my presence if you keep that up.”

Trevor instantly fell into fits of laughter, and Rudy soon followed suit.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Aye, it is that. It’s also lonely,” said Rudy, a tinge of sadness in his voice. “But at least it’s going to snow today.”

Trevor heaved out a steamy sigh and turned to study him. Quite a pleasant task, if he was going to be totally honest. With the dark red hair and brows associated with the Scottish, flawless pale skin and moss green eyes, he could have melted into the scenery.

“This again? Am I going to need to find you a local psychiatrist? What is this obsession of yours with phantom snow?”

“Just humour me, and I’ll explain how I know.”

“Go on, then,” said Trevor, folding his arms and crossing his legs at the ankles.

“Where does snow come from?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“No, come on,” he said, bumping his shoulder with Trevor’s. “Where does snow come from?”

“Uh, the North Pole.”

“You’re not a wee bairn, and this is not Nickelodeon. Think more scientific,” said Rudy, nodding exaggeratedly upwards.

“From the sky. Snow is formed from water retained in clouds that freezes into ice crystals, and then, when the particles become too heavy, they fall like rain—only slower.”

“Correct. So if you’re going to predict whether it will snow, the first thing you need to do is keep an eye on the sky.”

“Which today is cloudless, and as flawlessly blue as the Mediterranean. What’s your point?”

“The *first* thing. The second thing is to take a deep lungful of air in through your nose and hold for a few seconds. Then, when you slowly release, try to taste and smell it. That’s a bit more difficult for you, because you need to be able to tell the difference. I’ve lived here all my life, so I know the change. But when snow’s coming, the air smells and tastes different.”

Trevor did as asked, and he did notice an almost metallic taste to the air. Not that he was going to tell Rudy and let him off the hook so lightly.

“Next?” asked Trevor, causing Rudy to chuckle.

“Next, you need to listen,” said Rudy. Trevor did as asked but could hear nothing.

“What am I listening for?”

“Just listen. What can you hear?”

Once again, Trevor strained to hear something, anything. All he could make out was the gentle rush of wind and the distant sound of a car engine navigating one of the small lanes around the loch.

“Honestly, I can’t hear anything.”

“Exactly! Even in winter the birds would be chirping on a morning like this. So why aren’t they?”

“No idea. Gone for breakfast?”

Trevor’s stomach rumbled in sympathy.

“Nope, look up there. Hiding in the juniper tree,” said Rudy, pointing to a branch in a nearby tree. At first Trevor could make out nothing, but then he noticed a row of birds—unsure exactly what type—bunched together. “They huddle when snow’s coming. I’ve seen the same behaviour many times before. And the last thing is that if you’d stepped out of the lodge last night and looked at the sky—



instead of getting bladdered on shite foreign whisky—you would have seen a halo around the moon. Sure sign of snow on the horizon.”

“How did you know we had whisky last night?”

“I can smell it on you. That hike up the hill must have opened your pores.”

“Wonderful. So I smell like a distillery?”

“You smell good, actually.”

Trevor had no smartass comeback for that comment, but rather felt a trace of pleasure that went straight to his groin at the thought of Rudy noticing how he smelled. He tore his gaze back to the stately house.

“So you’ve lived here all your life?”

“Not really. Just spent time during school and university holidays. Moved back almost six months ago to the day. Spent the past seven years living and working in York. Studying and then managing a sports centre.”

“What happened?”

“Long story. I decided to come back home because—” Trevor could sense Rudy looking sidelong at him. Was he making up his mind whether to let on the real reason? “Because of a bad break-up.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Actually, I don’t think you do. But that’s my problem. Let’s just say we were together for six years—I’m twenty-nine now—and in all that time we never moved forward. I wanted to, but things were difficult, the timing and the situation were never right. It didn’t help that Debbie spent a lot of time working or travelling and I found myself alone too much. Even when we were together, we were never a proper couple, due to one thing or another. And after a while I realised that not only was I making all the compromises, but I felt as though I was slowly being suffocated. So

I decided to cut and run, come back home, much to the consternation of my father. But now I'm helping him manage our portfolio of holiday properties, which is not particularly taxing but which nicely supplements our other family business—"

"The whisky distillery?"

"Ah. Did you know all along?"

"Only just figured it out a moment ago. I recognised the picture of your home on the label of the bottle and cake you brought. Very generous of you, by the way."

"I should have dropped it off to you all the day you arrived," said Rudy. "If she asks, don't tell my mother I messed up the electricity and the welcome gift. What do you do for work, Trev? Sorry, I didn't ask earlier."

"That's okay. Nothing special. I'm a freelance accountant. After I finished my exams—which took forever—I worked for a big firm for a couple of years—hated every moment. They tend to own your lives—well, the one I worked for did. More by luck than anything, my uncle working in the London restaurant trade put me in touch with a few owners who needed bookkeeping and accounting services. That was around five years ago. I've now got around thirty clients on my books, on and off, based in Central London, and although sometimes I'm completely swamped and rushed off my feet—end of tax year, naturally—at other times my time is my own. So I love my job, earn an above-average wage, and I'm also lucky enough to have absolutely great clients, who I think of more as friends."

"Friends as clients. Sound great. Talking of which, how are your friends settling in?"

Maybe because of the wonderful morning he was having, Rudy's opening up, or maybe because of the whisky

amnesia from the night before, Trevor had completely forgotten about the dysfunctional group back at the lodge.

"Come to dinner tonight," he blurted, barely resisting the temptation to go down on his knees. "I beg you, Rudy. I'll do anything you want, just...please."

"Whoa there, pal," said Rudy, chuckling. The steadying arm he placed around Trevor's shoulders almost undid him. "What the hell happened?"

Trevor knew he was jabbering, but once emotions began to tumble out mixed with words, he couldn't stop them.

"Tension. Tantrums. Fights. Drama. Where to begin? Your basic soap opera nightmare. Not to mention my ex turning up with his new wife. If only you'd left me to drown in that ditch yesterday. But at least with you there at dinner tonight, people are more likely to be on better behaviour. Maybe even be civil to each other."

"Trev, slow down, will you?" said Rudy, smiling at him. After a moment, though, the smile faded and he pulled his arm away. "Wait. What was that about your ex-wife showing up?"

"Husband," said Trevor, before catching himself and eyeing Rudy warily. "Oh, to hell with it. I'm not going to lie to you. It's my ex-husband. Who's now straight. And remarried. To a woman this time. Who's six months pregnant. And if you hadn't already worked it out through all that verbal garbage, I'm gay. But clearly not very good at it. I'm sorry."

Rudy tilted his head back and laughed into the day. Trevor chuckled along, and took Rudy's reaction to mean he didn't have a problem with him.

"And you think I'm the crazy one, because I believe it's going to snow?"

"Seriously, Rudy. I know it's an imposition, but if you

could join us, you'd be doing me a huge favour. Plus the fact you'll get to sample Mrs M's amazing cooking. She's a virtuoso in the kitchen, and because it's Christmas Eve, she'll be doing her traditional beef Wellington.

"So, what?" said Rudy, folding his arms and frowning. "Just like that, at the drop of a hat, you want me to cancel my own carefully planned dinner arrangements? To keep you and your group of misfits from killing each other?"

"Oh," said Trevor, truly mortified. "Sorry. When you put it like that, I see what you mean. I assumed you were alone in the house tonight. Don't worry. Forget I said anything."

"No, hang on. You were seriously expecting me to leave my delicious can of tuna and packet of bread unopened, just so that I can be your dinner date?"

Once again, Rudy's wonderful laughter sounded in the crisp morning air.

"Bastard," said Trevor, putting his head into his hands.

And once again, Rudy thrust his arm across Trevor's shoulders, hugging their sides together and warming Trevor to the core. Never had he ever felt this connected to someone in such a short space of time, certainly not in all the years he had been together with Karl.

"Trev, my friend, it would be an honour. Of course I'll come. Now get me up to speed with the details of this band of miscreants you want me to meet—or kill—or both."

## CHAPTER SIX

### IMAGINE

24 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS EVE

BEFORE HEADING THEIR SEPARATE WAYS, they'd agreed that Rudy would come along at six for pre-dinner drinks. Rudy left Trevor at the top of the hill, threading his way down towards the house. Trevor watched him go for a while, enjoying the easy grace of the man as he picked his way through the wild but familiar flora. Once he was out of sight, Trevor turned and headed off to the lodge.

All the way back, grinning to himself, he kept replaying their conversation. The dose of highland air had all but cleared away any traces of a hangover. Moreover, he really connected with this guy, found him to be easy company and certainly easy on the eye. Imagine having a boyfriend like Rudy, imagine holding hands with him and watching everyone turn to stare in envy. So what if he was straight with an ex-girlfriend? A man can have his fantasy. And at no point did he seem to have a problem with Trevor being gay. In fact, they had gotten along so well that Rudy had even opened up to him. And having magnanimous Rudy Mortimer there for Christmas Eve dinner was nothing short

of a masterstroke, giving his warring friends something else to focus on.

Yes, a definite win-win all round.

As he entered the house just after nine-thirty, the kitchen smelled of breakfast but seemed far too quiet, with only the sound of Christmas music playing softly from Mrs M's radio. On the blackboard propped up at the far end of the kitchen counter, she had chalked up the day's fare:

*Breakfast: Full English or Mushroom Omelette*  
*Dinner: Beef Wellington or Vegetarian Moussaka*

Trevor smiled at the sight.

All alone, sitting and nursing a mug, he found Cheryl at the huge table. On seeing him enter, she peered up and managed a smile. Once again, she had decided not to bother with make-up, and although the absence made her appear more vulnerable, he had begun to enjoy seeing the real Cheryl.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Frank and Johnny are nursing hangovers. Frank fetched coffee for them both, but said they're going to skip breakfast and have a lie-in. Karl came down saying Mary wanted breakfast brought to their room. Can you believe it? Mum told him to tell her where to go, that she didn't do room service. I swear she's going to kill that woman before the week's up. Anyway, after having a bite himself, Karl took a tray up to her. He asked where you were, by the way. Oh, and Jessica and Anthony have come and gone. He went to finish some work and I think she's showering right now."

"Your mum?"

"Getting changed. She put a plate of food aside for you and your new friend. Being kept warm in the Aga."

"This holiday is really messed up, isn't it?"

"I've had more fun at funerals."

"At least there's still you and me? Like old times," said Trevor, heading for the oven. There inside, piled high, he found a huge plate of scrambled eggs, fried bacon, sausages, tomatoes, and grilled mushrooms. "Heck, I can't eat all that."

"Don't look at me, I'm stuffed. Take what you want and leave the rest in the oven. The boys might be hungry later. I was about to go and shower."

"Oh, okay," said Trevor, coming to the table and trying to mask his disappointment.

"But now you're here, I'm going to stay and keep my bestie company."

"Cool," said Trevor, smiling and taking a seat across her. "Thanks."

"And grill him about what he's been doing with lover boy all morning."

Trevor poured himself a mug of coffee and smiled at the table. When he offered to top up her mug, she placed a hand over the top and tilted her head to one side.

"Nothing to tell. I joined him for an early morning stroll. He wanted to show me the lay of the land, help me get my bearings while we're here."

"I'll bet he did," said Cheryl, and he knew her well enough to decipher the tone.

"He's a nice guy, Cheryl, but I should be so lucky. Have you seen how good-looking he is, and how he's built? Besides, he's straight, with an ex-girlfriend tucked away somewhere back in York."

"So? Convert him. If anyone deserves to drag one over from the other side, it's you. Mum really likes him."

"Unfortunately, the real world doesn't work like that,"

he said, spearing a sausage with unnecessary vehemence. "Did you manage to hear from Jenna?"

"Shit. I can't believe it," she said, swinging her gaze away. "Do I have 'loser' written on my forehead? Don't answer that. I gave her an early Christmas present this year. Cash, she asked for, rather than a present, to pay off credit card debts. Five hundred pounds, to be precise. Paid in November."

"How can she have debts? She's got that high-paying job."

"And spends every penny she earns. Trust me, Mac, we've had that argument so many times. She never saves a penny."

"So, she didn't pay off her debts?"

"Oh, yes, she did," said Cheryl, the annoyance plain on her face. "And then promptly booked a holiday to Tenerife with the new girlfriend. I tried to contact her last night, but each time the call went to voicemail. Then I got a text this morning, saying she'd booked the holiday last minute. A lie, of course. I collared Anthony this morning and he ended up confessing that she'd been bragging about flying to the sun since early December. Looking forward to getting a tan over Christmas. Clearly had no intention of coming to Scotland with me."

*Good riddance*, thought Trevor, but he kept the small voice to himself. Even though he would never let on to Cheryl, he agreed with Frank where Jenna was concerned. People like her needed partners like Cheryl to keep them in check, to be the parent or guardian to their child in the relationship. If Jenna fell, Cheryl would always be there to pick her up. If anything ever happened to Jenna—God forbid—Cheryl would be there to help. But if anything happened to Cheryl, would Jenna be there for her? Trevor found the



notion hard to imagine. How long would it be before Jenna had racked up all those debts again and came crawling back? And how long before Cheryl took her? At least Karl had always paid his way in their marriage, had always been on the level with him. Small concessions, maybe, but something to be thankful for.

"What are you thinking?" she asked. They knew each other far too well.

"You don't want to know."

"You think I'm an idiot."

"No, I don't," he said, putting his fork down and pushing the empty plate away. "You're caring and thoughtful, Cheryl, and that's a good thing. But some people out there are natural parasites and take advantage. What I was thinking is that it's probably time we both moved on."

"Amen to that. Let's have a drink on it tonight, and seal the deal."

"After last night, I might be on sparkling water tonight."

"On Christmas Eve?" she said, taking his plate and going to the sink. "Over my dead body. I've brought that bottle of special reserve Paulliac I won in the office party raffle. The one you said you'd love to try. It'll go wonderfully with beef, you said. You are so not going on the wagon tonight."

"Fine. I invited Rudy, too. Hope that's okay?"

"It is, by me. I'd normally tell you to clear it with Mum first, but I don't think that'll be necessary, do you?"

"Clear what with me?" came Mrs M's voice as she bounced into the kitchen.

"Is it okay if I invite Rudy to dinner tonight?"

"You know my answer already. That boy is welcome here anytime, day or night. Nice to have somebody with lovely manners around the place."

While Mrs M busied herself at the sink, Cheryl smiled sweetly at Trevor, her “I told you so” smile.

“Hope you’re not alluding to us,” said Trevor.

“You know exactly who I mean.”

“In which case I’ll text Rudy and let him know,” said Trevor, digging out his phone and then huffing when he saw no signal—again. “He still says it’s going to snow, Mrs M.”

“Rubbish. Look at the weather. Not a cloud in sight.”

“That’s exactly what I told him. But he said all the signs are there.”

“See? Maybe he is as cute as a cupcake,” said Cheryl, still smiling, “but he’s also two sandwiches short of a picnic.”

They all laughed together, and Trevor marvelled at how nice the sound felt.

“Come on, let’s enjoy the day,” said Mrs M. “If Mon had been here, we’d have been on some crazy quest by now, a treasure hunt or sailing boats on the lake. I’ve already recruited Jessica and Anthony. But the door to Frank and Johnny’s bedroom is nailed shut, and her ladyship has a headache. So go and scrub up, Cheryl, while Trevor helps me put plates and cups into the dishwasher. Then we’re going to explore.”



AFTER A LONG WALK AND A LIGHT LUNCH, TREVOR, Cheryl, and Mrs M decided to try out the loungers along the porch outside the main living space. Despite frail sunlight, the cloudless sky provided a beautiful panorama that reflected off the surface of the still loch, but the chill air soon had them all complaining. Eventually, Cheryl—who felt the cold most of all of them—went inside to have an

afternoon snooze, while Mrs M decided to begin her preparations for dinner.

Sitting alone, Trevor fired off a text message to Rudy then spotted a lone bird, white-breasted with beautifully patterned brown-and-white wings, almost chequered—an osprey, maybe; he had read in the lodge's blurb that they inhabited the area—swoop down gracefully and skim the surface of the loch. Rising in a perfect arc, the bird came to rest on the branch of a tree, to resume its silent vigilance. Alone, and fending for itself—no other birds to snuggle up to. Trevor felt a moment of profound sadness.

"Trevor," came a voice behind him.

Until his dying day, he would recognise that voice anywhere.

"Hi, Karl," he said without turning, still taken by what he had seen. After a few moments without getting a response, he craned around to see his guarded ex standing there, hands thrust deep into his baggy jeans. "Everything okay? I heard Mary's not feeling too well."

"Morning sickness. Well, any-time-of-the-day sickness, in her case. Burning essential oils helps. And foot rubs. She's sleeping right now. Gets tired very easily."

"Must be tough," said Trevor, stopping himself from adding "on you", not really feeling the sympathy right then.

"She's a fighter. Thirty weeks along," said Karl brightly, not picking up on Trevor's lacklustre response. "Seven and a half months. In her third trimester. Going to be an early March baby, by all accounts. Pisces. Same as you."

Karl stood there looking goofy while Trevor remained blank-faced, quickly working back the dates and then hating himself for doing so. Even though the divorce hadn't come through until July, they'd already been well and truly separated by the time the baby was conceived.

“Since when did you give a fuck about horoscopes?”

Karl shrugged, and at least had the decency to appear embarrassed. In actual fact, he looked as though he wanted to vomit.

“Mary likes them,” he whispered.

“So,” said Trevor after a pause, taking a mental step down and offering an olive branch. “Thought of any names yet? For the boy?”

Karl managed to produce a smile at that, and visibly relaxed. Permission to approach the enemy, sir.

“She thought we were going to have a girl. Was going to call her Sugar Ann. But now it’s a boy, we’re not too sure.”

“Sugar Ray Robinson was a guy. You could still— Hang on. Sugar Ann? Didn’t she take your family name, Spice?”

“She did. I know. Sugar Ann Spice. Can you imagine the stick she’d have gotten at school?”

“Seriously, Karl. You need to pick a good name, especially if it’s a boy. You don’t want the poor sod to end up having the kind of shit childhood I had to suffer through.”

“If my son turned out anything like you, I’d be proud.”

“But not out.”

A cheap shot. He hated himself when he stooped so low.

“Okay. I deserved that. I know everyone hates me at the moment—” Karl began.

“Not everyone—”

“And I understand why. But let me just say this. I never meant to hurt you, never meant to hurt anyone. But I needed to be honest, that’s all. Not just with myself, but with you, too. And no matter what you think of me, I do love Mary.”

“Lucky Mary. Does she know that’s a first for you?”

That was a little low too, and Trevor fell silent. Karl also quietened.

"I loved you too, Trevor. I still do, if the truth be told. Just not in the way you would like me to. Even though...we did have our moments."

Trevor knew Karl had shown him the sentiment to lighten the tension between them, and perhaps he should just have let the comment go.

"Did we?" he said instead. "I don't remember. Maybe you should have woken me up, so I could have enjoyed them too."

Aaaand, time to bite his tongue. *But if there is a goddess of love*, thought Trevor, *then she must be looking down on this little scene and laughing her tits off*. How many wives had heard the same argument from husbands who finally decided to come out of the closet, to join the life they were always meant to lead? Oh, the delicious irony of a gay man gone straight.

"God, you really hate me, don't you?"

Trevor sighed a steamy breath into the air. Out across the loch, the sole osprey had decided to try his luck again. Still no bite. Join the club, mate.

"No, I don't. Truth is I envy you. At least you can now hold hands, kiss, and cuddle in public without anyone giving a damn. People will even smile and coo at what a beautiful couple you make, especially when you're behind a pushchair. My kind still doesn't qualify for that privilege, no matter how progressive you believe society has become. Because no matter how many steps forward you think the world is taking, there is always some asshole politician in power somewhere, citing Christian or family values, who wants to nail us all back in the closet."

"You know I'll always fight against that kind of discrimi-

nation, don't you? No matter what you think of me, you must believe that."

"Of course I do," said Trevor, and he did.

Into the afternoon peace, a plaintive female voice sounded. Weak and pleading, it came from the bedroom above the balcony and carried Karl's name. Mary. Immediately Karl sprang to life, excusing himself.

Left alone, Trevor wondered if he'd ever had the same effect on him.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
LET IT SNOW  
24 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS EVE

ONCE KARL HAD LEFT, Trevor began to feel a hollow chill inside and out—not a good combination. Across the loch, his osprey friend appeared to have given up the ghost and gone back to his lonely nest. On top of everything, Trevor couldn't help thinking about the look on Karl's face when he talked about Mary. Something magical had happened between them. Why couldn't he have that, have someone look like that when they talked about him? Karl never had. And he had half a mind that Karl didn't even realise he was so besotted when he spoke about Mary. To distract himself, he decided to take an afternoon nap, but tossed and turned for only fifteen minutes before being woken by the ping of a text message.

**Unknown:** *Hi Trev, it's Rudy. I'll drop by a bit earlier if that's okay. So we can have some time together before everyone else arrives.*

Trevor read the message three times, a sudden warmth filling his chest. *Some time together.* What did that mean, exactly? Had Rudy missed him? Or was that code for something else? Would Rudy rather it were just the two of

them together tonight? What if Trevor were to push things later?

And then, like an ice-cold shower, reality hit hard and he groaned aloud, pulling a pillow into his face. Without thinking things through, he had developed a crush on Rudy. In the short space of time they'd spent together, Rudy had become a friend, yes, but a straight one—nothing more. Those three words, *spending time together*, meant nothing. Typical of Trevor, he had taken the first sign of friendship as a sign of mutual attraction, and if he didn't get himself reeled in, he would spend the evening staring doe-eyed at a man who clearly only desired the company of strangers. Tonight, Trevor would need to tone things down and distance himself, allow Rudy to chat to others, not selfishly and, quite frankly, immaturely claim him as his own property—*my* friend, not *yours*—which was exactly the notion that had begun to form in his fragile heart. Unfortunately, he had never been very good at putting on an act. And whenever he tried, he usually ended up over-exaggerating the opposite: being cold instead of detached, rude instead of impersonal.

Worst of all, he thought with a sinking heart, within the space of ten minutes the one thing he'd been looking forward to all day, he'd now begun to dread.

To try and distract himself, he decided to take a hot shower, but as he stood under the water, staring up at the shower head, thoughts of a gorgeous, muscular horseman kept riding into his mind. Instead of fighting the vision, he gave in and allowed his over-used right hand to bring about much needed relief, hoping the expurgation might clear his mind of further unsavoury thoughts.

No such luck.

After the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist and



hands gripping either side of the wash basin, he stared at himself, wondering whether he needed to shave—an event that happened every fortnight. Once he had finished the ritual, he heard the approach of a car. At the sound, his heart did a little tap dance, until he stared hard into the mirror, told himself to get a grip and get dressed.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled open the front door to the handsomely grinning Rudy, standing on the doorstep with carrier bags of unknown goodies. Despite the unflattering blue Barbour, which had clearly seen better days, the tight denim jeans and body-hugging turtleneck sweater of grey wool that he wore accentuated his muscular form. Trevor tore his gaze away, but then had to look instead into those fathomless green eyes. Swallowing hard, he hoped the warmth in his neck didn't show.

"Hey there, mate," said Trevor, upbeat, fixing a smile in place. *Mate?* Had he become Australian over the past few hours of turmoil? Fortunately, Rudy didn't seem to notice.

"Hi, Trev," he said. "Something smells nice. I'd give you a hug but my hands are full. You okay? You've got a wee bit of colour in your cheeks."

Trevor continued to smile, even though little Trevor inside his head had just curled into a ball and rolled away into a corner.

"Do I? Just had a shower," he said, recovering. "Probably a bit too hot. And stayed under a bit too long. Hence the colour—you know? Come on in. Let me get you something to drink."

Over a bottle of beer each, they sat at the kitchen table while Rudy told a nodding and smiling Trevor about his day. Back home, he explained, their old housekeeper, Millie, and her husband, Tam, had kept everything ticking over. His mother and father had called to tell him they'd booked

their flights and would be back the day before New Year's Eve. In turn, Trevor managed to get Rudy quickly up to speed with titbits about all their guests, to which Rudy listened carefully without a single comment. Rudy wanted to know why all the blinds in the kitchen were drawn, and Trevor explained that Mrs M liked the comfort of having the place feel confined, and also didn't think much of the view over the rear car park. When she returned before anyone else, mainly to check on dinner, Trevor finally managed to breathe normally. Her spirits lifted the moment she spotted Rudy seated across the table from Trevor.

"Oh, Rudy," she said, going over and giving him a hug from behind. "It's an honour to have you at our table. You are always welcome here, dear. Always."

"Get you a drink, Mrs M?" asked Trevor, wanting something to do.

"Let me just get the Greek pie into the wall oven first. Away from the main event for the meat-lovers."

"What kind of pie is it, Brenda?" asked Rudy.

"Humble pie, if her royal ladyship asks. Vegetarian moussaka, to you and me."

"Sounds like tonight's going to be a heap of fun," said Rudy, and for the first time that evening Trevor laughed.

"What's going to be fun?" came a male voice from behind. "And who the hell are you?"

Karl strolled in and stopped at the head of the table, staring suspiciously at Rudy.

"This is Rudy," said Trevor. "Son of the owner."

"And Trevor's dinner date tonight," said Mrs M, still at the wall oven, her back to them all.

When Rudy exchanged a glance with Trevor across the table, Trevor's face finally reached boiling point. He managed a plastic smile and a nervous, barely noticeable

shake of the head. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Karl go over to the tall fridge, clang open the door, and stare at the collection of bottles of soft drinks, beers, and wines inside.

"Is he now," he said, as though to the contents inside. "Funny, nobody said anything about another guest for dinner."

"That's because it's nobody's business but mine," said Mrs M, slamming the oven door shut before addressing Rudy. "That's Karl, by the way, dear. He used to be married to Trevor. But apparently Trevor wasn't good enough for him."

"Mrs M, *please*," said Trevor, and then hiked in a breath when Rudy stood abruptly and went over to Karl. Even Karl appeared slightly taken aback by the imposing figure that loomed over him.

"Really nice to meet you, Karl," said Rudy, holding out a hand with his usual impeccable manners. "I didn't want to gatecrash, but Trev insisted. Hope I won't be in the way tonight, but I promise to do my share of kitchen duties. And I've brought presents for everyone, my way of saying thank you for letting me join you."

After shaking and releasing Rudy's hand, Karl stood dumbstruck for a moment, before actually smiling and responding.

"He lets you get away with calling him Trev, does he? That's a first."

"You don't like being called Trev?" asked Rudy quizzically, turning to Trevor. "Why didn't you say?"

"Most of the time, I don't like people calling me Trev, that's true. But with your accent it doesn't sound so...so...so *bloody Essex*."

Everyone burst into laughter, and even though Trevor

had been deadly serious, he joined in with them. Just then, Jessica, Anthony, Frank, and Johnny arrived together, attracted by the sounds of merriment.

“Something else you should know about Trevor. He’s a solid-gold snob,” said Karl, above the laughter. Karl had often called him out with the label in public, and Trevor simply ignored the slight. Today, however, he noticed Rudy had stopped laughing and was now staring at Karl. Fortunately nobody else had seen, and when they all sat back at the table, Karl had clearly warmed to Rudy, because he took the seat next to him. Not for long though, because Rudy got up and went to introduce himself to the newly arrived guests.

At least with more of them in the kitchen—safety in numbers—Trevor felt able to step away and help Mrs M with the preparations. Only as he turned to survey the gathering did he notice how they’d all taken the same seats as the night before, but this time with Rudy at the other end of the dinner table from Mrs M’s place, chatting to Karl and Mary. While everyone helped themselves to drinks from the large fridge, Rudy engaged those gathered in conversation—with even a pale-looking Mary joining the fray—and Trevor went about setting the table around them, keeping an ever watchful eye on everyone. Jessica appeared to be instantly taken with Rudy—well, who wouldn’t?—and flirted shamelessly. Trevor did his best to act indifferent. But every now and then, Rudy sent Trevor a private smile which he tried hard to ignore. Before long, chatter around the table had reached a comfortable level, unlike the dine-in-silence experience of the night before.

“Are you okay, dear?” asked Mrs M, having put the meat onto a chopping board to rest and now checking on a pot of vegetables. “You’re looking a bit distracted.”

“Fine,” lied Trevor.

“He’s lovely,” she said, lifting the steaming pot off the heat and taking the contents to the sink. “And he clearly likes you.”

“Yeah,” said Trevor, helping her strain the contents with a colander. “If only ‘like’ did it for me.”

“Oh,” she said, her voice softening. “Oh, I see. Have you spoken to him?”

“Enough to know he’s straight.”

“He said that?”

“Not in so many words, but he alluded to an ex-girlfriend back in York.”

“And having another friend is not enough for you?”

“It’s going to have to be.”

Mrs M had outdone herself with the food once again. Trevor—not the best at cooking—had tried making beef Wellington a couple of times but had always ended up with tough, overcooked meat and burnt puff pastry. Mrs M’s meat had roasted to medium and still maintained a healthy colour and texture. Having finished taking all the dishes to the table, Trevor took his place next to a happy Cheryl.

“Did you help cook the food too, Trevor?” asked Anthony in all innocence, tucking into his dinner.

“Are you kidding?” said Cheryl, setting Johnny laughing across from her. All his friends knew about his ineptitude in the kitchen. “The extent of Trevor’s culinary skills is beans on toast. Isn’t that right, Trevor?”

“Trevor’s the only person I know who could burn a Caesar salad,” added Frank.

“Come on, lads,” said Karl. “That’s a bit unfair. He’s pretty adept at microwaving spaghetti hoops. If we ask him nicely, he might even agree to making us supper tonight. What do you think of him now, Rudy?”

“What do I think?” said Rudy, and then took a deep breath before putting his fork down. In the silence that followed, Trevor willed the floor to open up and swallow him. “Clearly, I don’t know him as well as you all. But I think you’re missing what’s important. Without Trevor, none of this would have happened. My mother kept me updated, so I know the young man she referred to is Trev, someone who painstakingly organised this whole holiday, sorted out the deposit and the one final payment, arranged rooms and keys. And it takes a lot to impress my mother, let me tell you. But not only that, without anyone asking and, more importantly, without even a word of acknowledgement or gratitude except from Mrs M and Cheryl, he set about turning that living area into something wonderful, both festive and special for all of you—”

“You did that?” asked Jessica, her eyes wide. “I thought the owners had put up those decorations. They’re absolutely beautiful. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Maybe because he’s selfless. Doesn’t do things for recognition and praise. Maybe Trev’s the kind of person who just gets on with it, to make other people’s lives easier, brighter, and just that little bit more bearable. What do I think? I think you’re all damn lucky to have him as a friend.”

A rebuked silence descended on those assembled. Left breathless, Trevor felt the need to defend his friends.

“They were only pulling my leg, Rudy. But I really appreciate the affirmation—”

“Rudy’s absolutely right,” said Mrs M, standing. “And I propose a toast to Trevor, without whom none of this would have happened. To Trevor.”

“To Trevor,” they all said in unison, grinning down the table at him. Even Mary had a small glass of wine raised in

salute. Trevor, never one for public displays of affection, thanked everyone, before nodding to Rudy and making brief, teary eye contact.

“Before you get stuck in to Brenda’s wonderful meal, and just so that you don’t think I’m a complete arse for that last comment, I’ve brought you all a small token of thanks from my family, as a way of saying Merry Christmas. I know you have your traditions about opening gifts on Christmas morning, but I’m sure you’ll forgive this small break with convention. These aren’t even wrapped but are largely from the family business.”

And to the delight of everyone, Rudy started to hand out presents from the bags he had brought: a large snow globe each for Cheryl and Jessica, a miniature bottle of Mortimer twenty-year-old single malt whisky each for Johnny, Frank, and Anthony, a full-length apron with a Mortimer Distillery slogan for Mrs M, and thick hoodies with the same for Trevor and Mary.

Cheryl had already removed her snow globe from the box and now shook the scene to life, holding the ornament out for everyone to see.

“Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow,” she sang.

“So that’s what you meant by ‘it’s going to snow today’. You brought the bloody snow with you,” said Frank to Rudy. Clearly Rudy had mentioned his theory to more than a few of them.

“And for Karl,” said Rudy, laughing along, “Trev mentioned you’re a rugby fan. And back in York, I knew someone who plays for the Bulls. So I’ve got you their annual calendar signed by the team, if you—”

“You what?” said Mary. “No, no, no. I’m the Bulls fan, not Karl. He can have this hoodie. I’m the one who goes to all their home games and most of their away matches—”

“Wait,” said Frank from the other end of the table. “You’re a Bulls supporter? No way!”

“For the past ten years,” said Mary proudly, before patting her stomach. “And if it wasn’t for this, I’d have been to every game this season.”

“Favourite player?” said Frank, shouting a challenge down the table.

“In the present squad? Has to be either Todd Mercer, Francois Debois, or Damian Ingram.”

“I meant from a ‘performance this season’ perspective. Not from the ‘hottest player’ viewpoint.”

“They’re both.”

“Jessica. Swap seats, please. *Now*. I need to educate Mary.”

And just like that, the whole seating arrangement changed and, in the true spirit of Christmas, foes became allies. Mrs M finished the table off by handing everyone their plates of meat, while setting a dish of moussaka in front of an intermittently beaming and happily arguing Mary.

Midway through the meal, amid the quiet buzz of chatter around the table, Trevor, who had quietly enjoyed his food, excused himself to get another bottle of white wine from the fridge. After taking the time to select a nice screw-top Chablis, he thumped the door closed to find Rudy standing there, a look of concern on his face.

“Did I do something wrong?” asked Rudy.

“What?” said Trevor, flinching. “No, of course not.”

“Because you could have asked me not to come if you don’t want me here.”

Trevor’s expression of shock was deep and genuine.

“Of course I want you here,” he said, before nodding back at the table. “Are you kidding? Look what you’ve done.



Nobody talked last night. Tonight they're all getting along. And that's thanks to you."

"Then why are you so unhappy? You can't even look at me."

"I'm not unhappy, Rudy. Honestly. Quite the opposite, actually. It's just..." said Trevor, deflating. "Okay, look. I'm giving you space to get to know everyone, and also making sure my smart-mouth comments don't scare you away, like I almost did in the bathroom about the shower. I like you a lot, Rudy. And I mean, *a lot*. What I'm trying to say, in my not so subtle way, is that if you hadn't already guessed, Jessica's not the only person in the room who has developed a little crush on you."

In the short silence that followed, a crestfallen Trevor felt the other man staring hard at him. Eventually, unable to bear the gaze any longer, he looked up to a gently smiling Rudy.

"I'm sorry, Rudy. Okay?"

"You're a silly arse. And there's nothing to be sorry about," he said, snatching the bottle from Trevor. "Here, give me that. Before everyone dies of thirst."

Once the meal had ended, they passed used dinner plates to the end of the table, and Rudy excused himself to use the restroom, but not before he caught Trevor's eye, smiled, and winked at him. Once again, Trevor's heart fluttered, but this time, he made sure to return a quick smile before watching Rudy go. In the absence, he sipped his wine and listened to conversations around the table. A few minutes later, Rudy's voice whispered in his ear.

"I need you. Can you come with me a moment?"

Trevor turned, concern on his face.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. I just—need you for a second."

Trevor got up and followed Rudy through to the living room. The first thing he noticed was that the main lights had been switched off, although the log fire gave off plenty of warm light. Just for a second, he stopped in the doorway, realising how nice it felt to walk into this wonderful festive and homey space, and barely heard Rudy call his name from the front windows. Soft strains of Nat King Cole's velvety voice singing *The Christmas Song* issued from Cheryl's speaker. When Trevor got there, Rudy's playful grin had his pulse racing all over again. Maybe he ought to warn his new friend again about the effect he was having, so that he might tone down the furtive glances and warm smiles—and ultimately the mixed signals he was sending. But something twinkled in his eyes right now, as though he had a secret he desperately needed to share with his new best friend.

"Come here," said Rudy, pulling Trevor to him and—with what had quickly become his trademark gesture—putting his left arm across Trevor's shoulders. "Look outside."

When Trevor turned, he could not help the gasp that escaped him. Without thinking, he snaked his right arm around Rudy's waist as his mind grasped at what it was seeing.

Snow.

Everywhere.

Drifts and swirls and fields of powdery flakes. Brilliant white, pure and fluffy. Falling in slow motion, settling on everything, onto the hard, icy ground. Masking everything in its purity. Just as Rudy had predicted.

"Now tell me I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy. You were right all along. It's beautiful," Trevor said to the view. "You're amazing, Rudy."

Next to him, Rudy's body stiffened slightly, and his arm tightened around Trevor's neck. Before Trevor realised what was happening, his body was being turned around. With an effort of will, he tore his gaze away from the scene, just as Rudy brought their mouths together. Trevor barely had time to catch his breath as the kiss turned from soft lips touching to an open-mouthed inferno. And then, almost as though a switch had been activated, Rudy's body came to life, hungry for Trevor, pulling their torsos together. Engrossed in the kiss, Trevor's mind raced to catch up, to acknowledge Rudy's hard arousal pressing into him. When questions nagged him about Rudy's sexuality, he batted them away, not wanting to spoil the moment. Only when Rudy's hand smoothed down Trevor's back, venturing beneath the material of his jeans to cup one of his cheeks, did Trevor finally come up for air with a gulp.

"You okay?" asked Rudy.

"Seriously? Are you really asking me that? I am being seduced by the hottest man in Scotland, against a backdrop that most photographers would kill to capture, and you're asking me if I'm okay? Rudy, this is fast becoming the best Christmas ever."

Rudy had started chuckling even before Trevor had finished. Soft chortles rose and fell against Trevor's chest until Trevor stilled them with another molten kiss.

"Should we let the others know?" whispered Rudy, tickling Trevor's ear with his breath. "About the snow, I mean."

"In a minute. Let me just enjoy this moment a little longer," said Trevor, tightening his arms around Rudy and pulling him closer. "They come so rarely in a lifetime."

CHAPTER EIGHT  
DEAR SANTA (BRING ME A  
MAN THIS CHRISTMAS)  
24 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS EVE

ON THEIR RETURN to the happily buzzing dinner table, Trevor insisted that Rudy be the one to let everyone know what was happening with the weather. After all, he argued, Rudy was the one people had ridiculed, including himself, so he should have the honour of saying “Told you so.” Just before they entered the kitchen, Rudy let go of Trevor’s hand and moved to his place at the head of the table.

At first, Trevor grieved the sudden loss of contact, before a wave of uncertainty hit—but then Rudy smiled and winked at him. While Rudy announced the news and everyone rushed up to open the blinds—or in the case of Jessica, Anthony, Frank, and Johnny, shouted with joy and headed out of the door to throw the first snowballs—Trevor’s mind went into Spanish Inquisition mode. Although Rudy followed the others outside, he didn’t seem to mind when Trevor chose to stay behind. And then the questions flowed. What had the kiss meant and what prompted it? Surely not just because of falling snow? And more importantly, was this a one-off—a mercy kiss—or were

there going to be more? Rudy had admitted to having had a girlfriend in his past, so maybe this was a bi-curious act to test his gay waters? But then again, there was nothing hesitant in the kiss, quite the opposite. Rudy had rocked Trevor's world.

"You okay, Mac?" asked Cheryl, nudging his shoulder.

Trevor flinched at the contact.

"Whoa," she said, leaning back. "What's gotten into you? Have you gone into self-analysis mode?"

Cheryl knew about Trevor's incessant self-talk only too well.

"Rudy kissed me," he hissed, so that the others couldn't hear.

"Lucky you," said Cheryl, waggling her eyebrows and not getting the fact that he had been freaked by the encounter. "Told you he liked you."

"You're missing the point. He's not gay. What should I do?"

"Do you like him?"

"*What? Of course* I like him. He's my fantasy book hero come to life."

"Then if he likes you, I don't see the problem."

"We had a moment, that's all. I'm not throwing myself at him now, and making a fool of us both. What if he's disgusted?"

"What if he isn't?"

"Cheryl, you of all people know how much I've humiliated myself in this world. I'm not about to add another notch to that particular belt."

Later on, everyone drifted back into the house. Rudy kept everyone entertained, the man of the hour, and Trevor barely got to speak to him, even though he did keep an eye

on events. A couple of times he noticed a slightly drunk and smiling Jessica leaning against Rudy, but later she seemed to be pouring her affections over Anthony.

Over time, excited conversations mellowed, and those few still wanting to party on made their way to the living area to watch the animated winter scenery by the warmth of the fire. For the rest of the night, Rudy seemed to enjoy keeping Frank, Johnny, Mary, and Karl entertained—and Trevor could hardly take exception to that. Cheryl sat with him out of loyalty and solidarity, but when she yawned for the fourth time, he sent her to bed. He had been in two minds whether to do the same, but he needed to talk to Rudy once he was alone, needed to know where he stood or, at the very least, clear the air. All night, he worried about what to say, whether he should go to Rudy or whether to let Rudy come to him. Eventually, just after midnight, with a backdrop of flurried snow, Trevor and Rudy ended up as the last remaining, sat either end of the settee. They had not spoken all evening.

“How did you get here tonight?” asked Trevor, throwing out an olive branch, before taking a nervous swig of beer.

“In the Rover.”

“Do you think you should drive back tonight, Rudy? You’ve had a bit to drink.”

Trevor had been serious, but turned to see Rudy grinning into the fire.

“What I mean is,” said Trevor, tripping over himself in his haste, “the roads will be treacherous in the dark. I’d never forgive myself if—”

“You may be right. I can always sleep here on the sofa.”

“Oh,” said Trevor, and quickly turned away. “Okay. Or you could sleep in your old room, if you want?”

"With you?" said Rudy quickly.

"If—if you want."

"Of *course* I want."

Trevor breathed out a huge sigh of relief and smiled into the fire.

"With me, then," he said, and turned to witness Rudy's smile become a full-blown grin. And then, of course, his smart mouth kicked in before he could stop it. "But with you in bed next to me, I'm not sure how much sleeping there'll be."

And just like that, Rudy's smile drained away, replaced by a look of pure, wanton need. He stood abruptly, went to Trevor, and took the bottle from him, holding his free hand out. And this time, all the way to the bedroom, he never once let go.

But as soon as they reached the icy room, the atmosphere became less certain. Both stood fully clothed either side of the bed, Rudy appearing as nervous as Trevor. Both had taken turns to use the bathroom, and now the time had come for them to get into bed.

"Funny. The room's cold, but the carpet's warm," said Trevor, scraping around for things to say.

"Underfloor heating," said Rudy, nodding nervously. "I told you. The water pipes run under the floor. Keeps the room warmer than most as long as the fire's burning or cooker's running."

Trevor began to remove his sweater, but then stopped.

"Are you okay that side of the bed? I mean, which side do you prefer?"

"I'm good. This is the side I'd normally sleep on."

"Fine, then."

"Or is this the side you prefer?"

"This side's fine for me."

Once again, they both stood there, staring at the duvet cover.

"We don't need to do anything, if you'd rather not," said Trevor.

"You don't want to?"

"Well, no," said Trevor, but then corrected himself. "Of course I want to. I'm in the same bedroom as Rudy Mortimer, for heaven's sake. But I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. And I get the impression you're a bit uncomfortable right now."

"It's not that," Rudy began. "It's just—I haven't had sex for a while."

"How long's a while?"

"Around six months."

"Well, I haven't had sex since January," said Trevor, grinning. "So I beat you on that score."

"But when you did, what did you prefer?" asked Rudy. Once again he appeared unsure.

"Under the bedcovers is a good start. Especially when it's this bloody cold."

"No, but sex-wise. In bed."

"With Karl, you mean? He always insisted on being in the driving seat, if you know what I mean? Wouldn't let me anywhere near his trunk."

"And how did you feel about that?"

"Fine. In fact, I preferred things that way," said Trevor, before looking nervously at Rudy. "Unless you—you know, prefer to be the passive—"

"No!" said Rudy urgently, and then softened. "I mean, no, I'm very happy to be the active one. It's my preference, if you really want to know."



“So. Are we really going to do this?” asked Trevor.

“God, I bloody well hope so. Just looking at you, even with your clothes on, and I’m in danger of blowing my load. Do you have any—you know, thingies?”

Trevor stared confused for a moment, until he realised what Rudy was alluding to. Condoms. And lubricant, probably.

“Box of twenty. Unopened. They come with me everywhere. And leave unopened. In the drawer your side of the bed. Although you might want to check the expiry date. And you’d better toss me the lube, so’s I can get myself ready.”

“That’s my job. Shall we get naked, then?”

Trevor wasn’t quite sure what Rudy meant about the lube. In the past he had always prepared himself for Karl. But he decided to let Rudy take control.

“Fine. Quickly then. Ready, steady...go!”

Like a couple of school kids getting changed at break-neck speed for their swimming lesson in a cold changing room, they both shucked off their clothes and dove under the chill covers. As soon as they began to warm up, Rudy reached out and stroked Trevor’s chin with his thumb and forefinger.

“Can I kiss you again?”

“Please.”

Unlike the previous kiss, this one felt more tentative, more about asking for permission. Trevor opened up then, pulling Rudy’s muscular form over to him and deepening the embrace. And just like that, all of Trevor’s doubts and insecurities melted away. Rudy’s beer-flavoured tongue wrestled with Trevor’s, as hands smoothed over each other’s goose-bumped flesh, their erections duelling beneath the covers. When Rudy disappeared under the sheets, Trevor

wondered what was happening, until he yelped with surprise at the warmth of Rudy taking his shaft deep into his moist mouth. In all of their six years together, never once had Karl given Trevor a blow job.

Best *fucking* Christmas ever.

But Rudy had not even started. After bringing Trevor close to orgasm—he seemed to know instinctively when to stop—his mouth began to work its way down, across his balls, sucking on one and then the other. Trevor barely managed to breathe until...

“Fu—uuuck,” cried Trevor, his eyes opening wide, his hands reaching for Rudy’s head, as Rudy’s talented tongue ventured into his crack and started loosening him up, probing in and out, sucking and lapping hungrily around his hole. Once again, he brought Trevor close to orgasm, but, *once again*, stopped just before that happened. Trevor’s heart hammered in the few seconds of respite, before he felt cool gel being massaged into him, one finger exploring and caressing. Before long one finger became two, and Trevor started to meet the thrusts into him, until Rudy hit a particular spot.

“Fuck!” cried Trevor. “What did you just do?”

Beneath the sheets, without stopping, Rudy rumbled with laughter.

“Karl has a lot to answer for. Say hello to your prostate,” came his humoured voice. And this time, Rudy’s mouth swallowed Trevor’s shaft all the way down, while at the same time his two fingers smoothed confidently over the newly discovered sweet spot. Trevor didn’t stand a chance, his body on erotic autopilot. Arching his back and pushing onto the fingers, he had the most Earth-shattering orgasm of his existence, shooting wave after wave of cum into Rudy’s throat while his spent body shook and spasmed in ecstasy.

When Rudy surfaced, Trevor could barely speak, could only lie there feeling as though his body had just been filleted. Only after a deep, salty kiss did his conscious mind come back into focus. Rudy hadn't finished yet, and right now he was rolling a condom onto himself. Eager to reciprocate, Trevor began to roll onto his stomach, but Rudy stopped him with one hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing, Trev?"

"You don't want me on all fours?"

"God, no," said Rudy, horrified. "What kind of a monster was your ex? I want to be able to see your face, to kiss you, and lick you, and suck you, and watch you."

"Oh," said Trevor, embarrassed, quickly flipping onto his back. "Okay."

Once he was arranged comfortably in place, Rudy's face appeared over Trevor's, and when Rudy nipped at the side of Trevor's neck, he almost missed the gentle prod of his cock nudging his entrance. Rudy lifted Trevor's knees into the air with practised ease and then pushed slowly inside. Relaxed from his orgasm, Trevor still had to adjust to Rudy's size, but he had resolved to reward him for his toe-curling early Christmas present. When Rudy paused for breath with his whole length inside, Trevor pulled his head down for a deep kiss, to let him know he trusted him no matter what. So began the slow push and pull, the rocking back and forth, bedspring squeaks gathering speed like the Flying Scotsman leaving its highland station. But once again, Rudy surprised him, slowing occasionally, swapping long, slow strokes for shorter ones and then ramming hard and fast. Without his even realising, Trevor's arousal had been stoked back to life, and as Rudy began the erratic race for home, he grabbed Trevor's shaft and brought them both to a heart-stopping, blinding climax. Exhausted, Rudy fell

on top of Trevor, who marvelled at the weight, the pounding heart, and the smell of this new friend, who had finally brought his body to life.

*If this is what great sex is like, he thought, then let every day be Christmas Day.*

CHAPTER NINE  
WHITE CHRISTMAS  
25 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS MORNING

TREVOR WOKE the next morning toasty warm, Rudy's body wrapped around him. Excited voices sounded from somewhere outside the room. Others had already awoken and there were distant barks of consternation and squeals of laughter: Jessica's and Anthony's voices. Were they opening their presents without everyone? Cardinal sin. Surely Mrs M would never allow that to happen. Not that Trevor really cared. He had the best present of all lying right beside him, an arm draped over his chest. And then, as he listened carefully, his senses coming to life, he realised the voices weren't coming from the kitchen, but from outside the back of the lodge.

Trying not to wake Rudy, Trevor stretched out an arm for his phone and checked the time. Even that small action brought a tinge of pleasurable soreness from last night's exertions. Eight-ten already. After their third amazing love-making session, Trevor had finally begged for sleep. Next to him, Rudy stirred and turned onto his back, his messy, sleep-tussled hair nothing short of loveable and endearing.

"What time is it?" he said to the ceiling.

“Just after eight.”

“What time did we sleep?”

“You eventually deigned to let us sleep at around two.”

Rudy laughed quietly, before rolling on top of Trevor and kissing him. Trevor really liked playful Rudy. Actually, Trevor really liked Rudy. No adjective required.

“Do you mean I managed six hours of uninterrupted sleep? Unheard of. I have this odd but unshakeable feeling that you’re good for me, Mr McTavish. How are you feeling?”

“A bit sore.”

“Bad sore?”

“Good sore.”

“Any regrets?” he said, looking into Trevor’s eyes.

“Nuh-uh. But I *am* waiting for you to say those two magic words.”

Rudy looked quizzically into Trevor’s eyes, before a mischievous smile transformed his face.

“Cup of tea?”

“That’s three.”

“Any chance of a blow job?”

Trevor rolled his eyes. “That’s five. Or is it six? And the answer is, yes, of course. Although we’ll have to be quiet. If I can hear them shouting outside, I’m sure they can hear us in here, too. But those aren’t the words I’m thinking of. These two words go together and you only get to say them once—”

“Merry Christmas!” said Rudy, pinning both of Trevor’s arms to the mattress and kissing him. “Merry Christmas, Trev.”

“Merry Christmas, Rudy. Or Merry White Christmas, to be precise. And because you guessed correctly, you get to receive your first present of the day,” said Trevor, using his thighs to roll Rudy onto his back before heading south.

Rudy gasped and then quietened in anticipation. All the way down Rudy's body, Trevor planted gentle nips and kisses, stopping to circle his tongue around each of Rudy's nipples, to follow his rippled stomach, and then the money trail down towards his groin. Stopping before the thick bush of hair and the beautiful thick cock already straining at the leash, Trevor kissed both of Rudy's thighs and felt him shudder. Even though he had never once been sucked off by his ex-husband, he had perfected the technique on Karl. Without hesitation, he breathed hot breath along the length of the shaft, causing Rudy to groan, before drawing his tongue slowly from base to tip a few tantalising times. Once he heard Rudy's breathing quicken, he drew his mouth away until he heard his soft, frustrated groan. On that signal, he took him down to the root, opening his jaw to accommodate the full length, and felt the bed shudder with Rudy's pleasure. Slow and long suction followed short and fast, eventually one hand brought into the equation to pull on Rudy's shaft, the other to work his own, until he felt the tell-tale vibration in Rudy. Wobbled thrusts of the hips were followed by the stiffening of his body, until Trevor's mouth filled with Rudy's salty cum, just as his own orgasm hit. Trevor took all of him, every drop, and only when Rudy stopped shaking did he remove his mouth with a plop.

When he finally joined him, Rudy's expression was a picture of wonderment, which had Trevor grinning with pleasure.

"Where the fuck did you learn to do that?"

"Would you believe Boy Scouts?"

"Seriously?"

"No," said Trevor, chuckling. "I had Karl to perfect my technique on. One thing in his favour was that he never refused a blow job."

“Like the one you just gave me? Who in their right mind would?”

And then Rudy surprised Trevor again by squeezing his forearm around the back of his neck, pulling his head onto Rudy’s shoulder. The gesture felt so simple and yet, at the same time, so intimate. Rather than dwell on the lost time he’d spent without simple affection, he decided to savour the moment.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” he asked.

“Uh-oh,” rumbled Rudy’s voice by his ear. “This sounds ominous.”

“Not really,” said Trevor. “It’s just something you said. Yesterday. Wow, can you believe I’ve only known you two days and here we are, snuggling like an old married couple?”

“I liked you from the moment I saw you. Waist-deep in bog water. And then, as soon as I lifted you out, your eyes had me snared.”

“Really? You like my eyes?” said Trevor, genuinely surprised.

“Blue-grey? Trev, I could gaze into them all day.”

“So you fell for my eyes?”

“To begin with. And then, when you made that quip about showering together, I was this close—”

“Noooo! I thought I’d disgusted you. When you backed out of the bedroom, I was crushed.”

Rudy chortled then, and turned his face away for a moment.

“You definitely didn’t disgust me. When you took your shower, I came back to the bedroom. You’d left the bathroom door open. You probably don’t know this—how could you—but the mirror on the bedroom wall reflects the image from the mirror in the bathroom. And if you stand in a



certain part of the room, you can see the reflection of whoever is in the shower. Pervy, or what? I stood there for a full five minutes watching you soaping up and washing, and I popped the biggest hard-on ever.”

“In which case, you definitely should have joined me. I thought you’d gone to the kitchen.”

“I had. But I came back. And later, when I was helping with the decorations, I couldn’t help noticing your amazing arse going up and down that ladder. Was one of the reasons I got you to go for a hike yesterday morning. So I could ogle your magnificent bum.”

By now, Trevor was laughing uncontrollably.

“Wait. You insisted on me going up first because you said it was safer.”

“I lied,” said Rudy, kissing Trevor on the side of his head. “I can be very single-minded and resourceful when I want something.”

When Rudy went to do the same thing again, Trevor turned and met his kiss, which turned into a lingering one, until Trevor gasped and pushed away.

“Hang on a minute,” he said. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Rudy, rubbing his nose into the side of Trevor’s neck.

“You sidetracked me.”

“I’m good at that—”

“No, I remember,” said Trevor. “You mentioned you had an ex-girlfriend back in York.”

“A what?” said Rudy, his chest rising and falling with laughter.

“No, seriously,” said Trevor, even though Rudy was chuckling at the ceiling. “I’m pretty good with this kind of

stuff. You said you had an ex-girlfriend called Deb or Debbie back in York.”

And then, suddenly, Rudy quietened and became serious.

“Oh. You heard that?”

“Yup.”

Somewhat sheepishly, Rudy rolled onto his side and checked Trevor’s expression.

“So you’re bi?” asked Trevor.

“Not even close. If you cut my leg off it would say ‘gay’ all the way through. That’s one of the reasons I left the roost early and moved down to England.”

“Parents didn’t approve?”

“I didn’t give them a chance either way. Went to study at York Uni. Guess I was too scared to tell them.”

“Do they know now?”

“They do, and the funny thing is, they’re fine.”

“So who’s this Deb?”

“Debbie. Oh God,” said Rudy, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands. “I suppose you of all people deserve to know. Debbie is code for my ex-boyfriend, a man buried so deep in the closet you could call him a Narnian. Who, whenever he referred to me in company—even when I was in the room—used feminine pronouns—she, her, hers. And do you want to know the most fucked-up thing in all of this?”

“Go on?”

“I let him. I played along. But I could never do the same when I talked about him. It would have felt like lying.”

“So what happened?”

“Trev,” said Rudy, expelling the name through a huge sigh, “do we have to spoil the moment? Just know that it’s been over for six months.”

Trevor thought about Rudy's words for a few moments, knew he needed to say something even though Rudy had given him only the basics.

"I'm so sorry, Rudy."

Rudy appeared genuinely surprised.

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because someone as amazing as you should never have to hide or settle."

"Fuck, Trev," cried Rudy, rolling onto his back, his hands covering his face.

"What?" said Trevor, trying to pull Rudy's hands away. "I'm sorry. What did I say? Tell me."

"Most people would call me all kinds of an idiot. That I got whatever fucked-up relationship I was prepared to put up with. But not you. Where were you six years ago when I needed you?"

Trevor didn't answer that. Six years ago, he had met Karl. Six years ago, he was about to embark on his own doomed relationship.

"You know, I have this theory," said Rudy. "A friend from college has a sister who went into acting. They called her a 'triple threat', because she could act, dance, and sing—all really well. I think for a good relationship to work, it also needs to include at least three elements. Sexual chemistry is important, but then so is having personalities that gel. And if both parties are looking for more than something casual—mutual commitment and patience to work on building something more. As long as that's what each person wants. Find someone who matches those qualities and you're onto a winner."

"Is that what you're looking for?"

"You know, I think I am now. I'm sick of feeling adrift."

And my superficial days of casual encounters are well and truly over.”

“And how am I doing so far, Mr Mortimer?” asked Trevor.

Rudy smiled, and rolled back on top of Trevor. “So you’re in the game?”

“Why not? Sounds like a good one.”

“In which case, you, Mr McTavish,” said Rudy, his face hovering over Trevor’s, “are a serious threat. Not sure if I know you well enough to call you a triple one yet. But I’d like to. And something I do know is that Karl’s an asshole.”

“Karl’s straight. Or bi.”

Rudy rolled off and heaved a huge sigh.

“You see, I don’t get that. How someone could be in a relationship with another man, day in and day out, sharing the same bed and having sex—”

“Not the best sex, as you could probably tell from my reaction last night. But then, I was a later bloomer and he was my first crush.”

“Don’t even get me started on how wrong that is. He clearly didn’t know what he had. Plus, he must have got a hard-on at the thought of sex with you.”

“Some men are fickle that way. Could just as easily get a hard-on fantasising about a piece of fruit. Or livestock.”

Rudy laughed into the morning air, until Trevor stopped him with another kiss.

“Come on,” said Trevor. “We need to get up and shower. It’s Christmas morning. Look, Rudy—and I’m serious here—what do you want to tell my friends? About us? If you want, I’m happy to pretend you just crashed in here last night because you couldn’t get home. That’s not strictly a lie. If you’d rather people didn’t know that we slept together—”

“Trev. Do you really think I’m going to be able to keep my hands off you today? I really like what we did last night and hoped we might find time to do some more today. In short, I really like you, Trev, and I am sick of hiding how I feel. After your holiday, you’ll all be heading back to England, so let’s be together for Christmas and New Year, at least. Are you okay with that?”

Trevor hadn’t even considered that, the cold, finite dread of a deadline on their time together. At some point, he would need to deal with it.

“Does it mean I can kiss you under the mistletoe?” he asked to keep things light.

“As long as it’s on the lips,” said Rudy, playing along and, this time, causing Trevor to burst into laughter, quickly staunching by Rudy’s kiss. “Come on, let’s conserve water and shower together.”

Twenty fun-filled minutes later, they stood either side of the bed getting dressed.

“You can’t wear the same shirt, Rudy. That’s like doing the walk of shame. Oh, I have the perfect idea. I know you’re a few inches taller than me and broader around the chest, but try these for size.”

Trevor reached into his case and hurled across a plain tee-shirt and thick knitted jumper. Intrigued, Rudy opened the jumper and instantly started laughing.

“Och, Trev, are you kidding me? You really want me to wear this?”

“And I’ll wear this one.”

One side of the bed, Trevor held up a black jumper with the cheerful, red-cheeked face of Santa Claus on the front, while on the other, Rudy’s was dark green with the knitted and toothy, smiling face of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

“Monica used to knit me one every Christmas as a present. I’ve got three, but the one of a Christmas pudding shrank in the wash.”

“And you’re worried about me doing the walk of shame? If we’re both wearing your clothes, your friends will know for sure we’ve slept together.”

“So let them,” said Trevor, shrugging before pulling on his sweater. “I’m not ashamed. Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Trevor, smiling. “Come on, let’s get some breakfast. I’m starved.”

As luck would have it—or not—everyone else had already awoken and was either chatting or tucking into a light breakfast of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon on toast, or crumpets and jam in Mary’s case. Conversations quietened around the table as Rudy and Trevor entered and took their seats—next to each other this time.

“What are you two wearing?” said Jessica, oblivious to the obvious and giggling into her coffee cup. Both hers and Anthony’s cheeks were bright red, and he guessed they had enjoyed playing in the snow that morning. “I love them.”

At first Cheryl and Mrs M said nothing, but after a brief exchange of glances, both of the ladies grinned mischievously at Trevor. Cheryl got up and brought two champagne glasses of orange juice to them—at least, he assumed they contained juice—and nudged Trevor while placing one glass beside him. If others around the table suspected anything, they said nothing, either not noticing or deciding to be polite. That is, until Irish Johnny piped up loudly.

“Mary and Joseph! Are you two shagging? Did he stay the night in your room, Mac?”

"Yes," said Trevor, aiming for brevity. "Rudy stayed the night. In my room. With me."

Even though he had decided to leave out the part about shagging, he noticed Karl frowning at them—as though he had any right to a say in the matter.

"Good on you, mate," said Frank, beaming.

"Rudy," called Cheryl, slowly and meaningfully, from the end of the table. Trevor felt the blood drain from his face. He knew that tone only too well. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Cheryl," said Rudy, matching her tone. "You can ask me anything you want. However, I reserve the right not to answer."

"It's just, in the brochure, I saw this lovely table setting by the lakeside—"

"Lochside."

Beside Rudy, Trevor let out a breath of relief.

"Sorry, *lochside* windows, but I notice the table has been removed. I thought it might be nice to have Christmas lunch overlooking the loch."

"Ah," said Rudy. "So I owe you all an apology for forgetting to switch on the power when you arrived, but I've kept the table as a surprise for today. At the request of one of your guests."

Trevor peered to the end of the table, where Mrs M sat grinning.

"You knew, Mrs M?" asked Trevor.

"Of course she knew," said Cheryl, rolling her eyes. "They're as thick as thieves, those two. I knew something was up."

"So can I ask you all to top up your glasses and come and join Mrs M and me by the windows and Christmas tree on the raised floor section of the living room."

While everyone filtered out, excited and intrigued, Trevor grabbed Rudy's elbow.

"You planned this?" he asked.

"Not me. Mrs M asked me not to say anything to anyone, including you. The day I came and showed you where the fuse box and all of the switches were. She wanted to leave this as a surprise for everyone. In a moment, you'll see why."

Rudy had arranged everyone by the Christmas tree, with its glowing white lights and piles of brightly wrapped presents beneath. This time, however, wooden slats blocked the view outside. Once the crowd stood in place, Rudy instructed them to remain still while he walked to the other end of the raised floor.

"Why are the blinds still drawn?" asked Jessica.

"We're going to open them up once lunch is served," said Mrs M.

"So," said Rudy, "as nature laid on a unique white Christmas for you all—my family can't take credit for that—Brenda thought it would only be right to have lunch with a view of the winter landscape."

"Before you ask, I am *not* carrying that bloody kitchen table in here," said Johnny.

"You won't need to," said Rudy.

Holding a remote control in his hand, he aimed the device at the ground and pressed a button.

"Hey presto!"

At first, nothing happened, and the crowd giggled. But then a mechanical buzzing kicked in, a vibration coming from beneath the smooth floorboards. Suddenly, to everyone's gasped surprise, a portion of the pine flooring began to move, a long oblong section rising slowly almost to waist height. Within minutes, a huge banqueting table clunked



into place, its dining chairs stored artfully in the space beneath the tabletop.

"Wow," said Cheryl, mesmerised. "That's really cool. I wish I could get one like that for my tiny flat."

"You can," said Johnny. "Place called Ikea."

"Shut up, Jon," said Frank, laughing along with everyone else.

"The catch is that you're all going to be tasked with getting the table ready for Christmas lunch. But before you do anything, it'll need to be cleaned and polished thoroughly—"

"So clean you could eat off the floor," said Frank, causing everyone to laugh again.

"Glad you think it's funny, Frank," said Mrs M, "because you and Johnny will be doing the cleaning."

"I bet it'll look amazing when it's laid, Mrs M," said Mary, in all innocence.

"Like Trevor, you mean?" said Johnny, who was on a roll.

Even Trevor laughed at that, although his cheeks burned a deep shade of Christmas red.

"And while you're all busy in here, Cheryl and I will prepare lunch in the kitchen, without any disturbance. Lunch will be served at one. If you need drinks beforehand, use the bar in here. Cheryl and I stocked the fridge this morning. Now let me read out the rota."

Everyone turned their attention to Mrs M.

"So while everyone else clears out of the way, Johnny and Frank will vacuum the floor beneath the table, as well as cleaning and polishing the table and chairs. Once they've finished, Anthony and Jessica can lay the Christmas table cloth, and place table decorations, candles, and Christmas crackers from the big cardboard box behind

the bar. While they're doing that, Karl and Mary will collect everything they need—place settings, cutlery, and wine glasses—from the kitchen and lay the table. They'll also choose the music for us all to listen to through lunch. Sorry, Cheryl, but we need someone else's choice today. Rudy and Trevor will be the only ones allowed in the kitchen with Cheryl and me, because they'll be on vegetable-peeling duties: King Edwards, parsnips, sweet potatoes, Brussels sprouts, carrots, and fresh peas. Any questions?"

Nobody spoke for a few moments, and Mrs M clearly took that as a sign of consent.

"In which case, Merry Christmas, everybody," she called, lifting her glass into the air, followed by a round of the same echoed by all those gathered.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Now can we *please* open our presents?" moaned Johnny.

"Honestly," said Frank affectionately, putting his arm around Johnny. "You'd think I live with a child."

In the true tradition of Secret Santa, each guest had been given the name of another guest two months before, and a budget had been set on what they could spend. Presents often ended up being funny and more thoughtful than if there had been no limit. Mrs M always brought spares—thankfully, this year—in case anyone forgot or if there happened to be unexpected guests. In a slight break from tradition and to make up for their surprise arrival, Frank and Johnny gave each of them a present from their travels. Trevor's Secret Santa gift was a cookbook for one. He didn't even need to look up to rumble the person who had chosen it, because he knew Cheryl's humour too well. Frank and Johnny had bought him a clay-modelled three-

dimensional fridge magnet of Petra in Jordan, one to add to his collection.

When everyone finally headed off to start on their various chores, the only person Trevor heard pass comment was Mary, grouching to Karl that they'd been given the most arduous task and that she would not be lifting plates or anything heavy in her condition, so would choose the music while he did the rest.

Trevor could only guess at what Karl's life would be like once the baby was born.

CHAPTER TEN  
BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE  
25 DECEMBER – CHRISTMAS DAY

BY THE TIME all the chores had been completed, the hour was nudging one. Trevor had been cocooned in the kitchen with Rudy, his hands aching from peeling root vegetables. When Frank came to fetch them all to inspect the table, Trevor felt a ripple of excitement.

Inside the living area, lit simply by tree lights and candles, the Christmas table took his breath away. Keeping the blinds closed had been masterful, even if it hadn't been intentional, because the decoration did not have to compete with the landscape outside. Someone—Jessica, he guessed—had continued Trevor's theme of nature, but with the addition of gold and scarlet baubles set in clutches of wild green fir and arranged around blood red candles, glossy green and mauve Christmas crackers, shiny stainless steel cutlery, and sparkling crystal glasses. They had even managed to add a garland of matching tartan around the rim of the tablecloth.

While he stood there mesmerised, Rudy handed him a glass of champagne, and then used his phone to take a selfie of them both.

"Best Christmas ever," he murmured into Trevor's ear.

Just having Rudy's body heat near sent shivered vibrations through Trevor's body.

"I meant it, Rudy," said Trevor, turning to gaze into his eyes. "This whole trip was set to become a train wreck. And then you showed up."

"When I said best Christmas ever, I was speaking for myself. And besides, I can't take credit for all of this," said Rudy, nodding at the table before clinking Trevor's glass with his own. After a brief, lingering stare, he leant in and kissed Trevor full on the lips.

"Oh my *God*," came a female voice. "*He's gay now?*"

Trevor felt Rudy's lips morph into a smile against his own. Moments later, he pulled away and turned to the voice. Mary. But Trevor beat him to the punchline.

"Of course I'm gay," said Trevor, grinning widely. "Even your husband knows that."

And just like that, everyone—except Mary—burst into laughter.

"Is it your mission in life to make every straight man gay," asked Mary, ignoring everyone, her words purposely caustic.

Trevor's face reddened, his anger spiking, until he felt a warm hand on his shoulder.

"He didn't turn me gay," said Rudy. "I came this way. And I plan to stay this way. But if you're referring to Trev making me happy, then I can't think of a better mission in life. Now, shall we not all help Brenda bring the food to the table and have a civilised and, more importantly, fun lunch?"

"Well said, Rudy," shouted Anthony, much to everyone's surprise. Standing in front of him, Jessica pulled his head down and kissed him. *Aha*, thought Trevor, *so our relationship isn't the only holiday romance.*

As soon as the last of them had arranged their dishes along the table—Rudy last in, holding a large platter with the huge roast turkey surrounded by golden roasted potatoes and balls of chestnut stuffing—bringing the arrangement to another level, photos were snapped until Mrs M joined them from the kitchen. In the past, Monica had always kicked off Christmas lunch with a short speech, but Mary had already been helped to her place at the table by Karl, her back to the window, complaining about aching feet. Hardly anyone noticed Rudy walk up to Mrs M and hand her a small remote control, instructing her to press a particular button.

One by one, from left to right, the shutters on the windows began to slide open, revealing the outside world. Everyone standing gasped in unison. Snow fell unending across the sweeping winter wonderland, while bleached light flooded the room. Only Mary struggled to turn and see what everyone had witnessed, difficult from her seat with her bump getting in the way. Eventually she pushed back her chair, stood awkwardly, and joined the rest of them.

“Come on, everyone,” instructed Mrs M before long. “Let’s eat before everything gets cold.”

Turkey-carving duties performed, vegetables passed around the table, Christmas crackers pulled, and generous glasses of wine poured, everyone got into the Christmas spirit, eating, chatting excitedly, and laughing merrily. For Mary, Mrs M had excelled with a leek, mushroom, and goat’s cheese roulade of filo pastry, and even Mary herself praised the creation. By the time dessert came out—a home-made, bowling ball-sized Christmas pudding with a sprig of holly on top and a huge bowl of sherry trifle—most of those gathered could barely eat another morsel.

Place settings had made sure that Trevor sat opposite

Rudy, and every now and again they caught each other's eyes and smiled. Despite having friends around the table who Trevor had known most of his life, for some reason, Rudy felt the most familiar. At one point, as Trevor took a sip of wine while listening to Anthony enthuse about his new role in the marketing department, he felt a socked foot beneath the table rub against the shin of his jeans before making its way up between his thighs. Spluttering his drink, he explained to a curious Anthony about his mild case of hiccups. Across the table, Rudy chuckled into his napkin, until Trevor reached down and squeezed hard on Rudy's big toe, making his new friend yelp and yank his foot away. When, this time, Anthony looked puzzled across the table at him, he said one word.

"Cramp."

After dessert came a selection of cheeses and biscuits, courtesy of Johnny and Frank's Turkish adventure, followed by freshly brewed coffee, courtesy of Colombia. Mellowed by food and alcohol, everyone relaxed in their seats, enjoying Mary's musical collection, which mainly consisted of modern pop songs. Maybe Frank noticed a nodding head or two, because he decided to wake everyone up.

"Truth or Dare!" he called. "Come on, it's a Christmas tradition."

"Actually, it really is," said Jessica, surprising everyone around the table. "Did you know Truth or Dare has been played for centuries? My grandfather said the game dates back to the seventeen hundreds. Used to be called Questions and Commands, and was played at Yuletide. But basically the rules remain the same."

"Sorry, there is absolutely *no way* I'm playing," said Mary, her arms folded.

"Oh, come on, Mare," said Frank, grinning wickedly at

her—as her new best friend, he was the only one who got to call her by that rather fitting equine nickname. “You can start by challenging me. I’m happy to go first.”

And just like that, Mary caved in. Even Karl seemed surprised. As usual—not that the new crowd would have known—Frank went straight for a dare and ended up in his Calvin Klein underwear outside in the snow, beyond the living room windows, doing a very passable Gangnam Style dance, while snowflakes fell around him and everyone in the room laughed uncontrollably. Later on, Trevor went with truth when confronted by Frank, and was asked about Rudy, to which he answered truthfully; Anthony was dared to eat the remains of the trifle, which he did effortlessly, and Jessica was asked the truth about her virginity, to which she replied honestly that she had been saving herself until the right man came along.

Eventually, Jessica’s turn came around.

“Mrs Madison,” she called, surprising everyone. “Truth or dare?”

“Am I playing?” asked Mrs M, brought from her daydream. Normally, she would be out of the proceedings in the kitchen, but this year she had been enjoying the company with everyone so much, she had decided to stay and remain invisible. Understandable, under the circumstances, considering those around her were twenty years younger or more.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to play, Mum,” said Cheryl, patting her mother’s hand.

“Come on, Mrs M,” said Frank, slurring a little. “You remember Monica’s rules. No observers. If you’re watching, you’re playing.”

“Frank,” warned Cheryl.



"It's fine, Cheryl," said Mrs M. "Come on then, Jessica. I'll take truth."

"Okay," said Jessica, thinking long and hard. "What happened to Cheryl's dad, Mr Madison?"

Trevor froze. And he felt sure he wasn't the only one in the room. None of their gay friends would have asked the question, because they knew the answer. Although he wanted to intervene and roadblock the question, he had no idea what to say. Fortunately, Mrs M seemed unfazed.

"Actually," said Frank, not too drunk to be remorseful, "I don't think that's appropriate—"

"No, it's fine, Frank," replied Mrs M matter-of-factly. "Truth is, there never was a Mr Madison, Jessica. Not in the picture, anyway. Cheryl was conceived out of wedlock."

"Oh," said Jessica, the reply carrying multiple insinuations. "I see."

"Well, no. I don't think you do," said Mrs M, trying to close the conversation down. "But that's fine."

"And besides," intervened Johnny, speaking directly to Jessica, "Mrs M answered the question. The rest isn't anyone's business."

Trevor wanted to go up and hug him. But now Mary decided to join the interrogation.

"No, hang on, Mrs Madison. We're intrigued. Tell us what—"

"Mary," said Trevor, before glaring over at a stunned Karl. "Why don't you stop this?"

"It's okay, Trevor," said Mrs M gently, wiping her hands on her napkin before giving Mary her full attention. "We're all friends here, at least I hope so. I was thirty—a little older than Cheryl is now—and working as a nurse at a local psychiatric hospital. It was the Christmas party, of all things, and I'd had far too much to drink. And

let's just say that Cheryl is a child conceived of non-consensual sex, and leave it at that. So, to answer your question, Mary. No, there is no Mr Madison. However, the true love of my life and Cheryl's other parent, Monica, who stood by me through the various stages of grief, the pregnancy, and then motherhood, died in January of this year. Is there anything else you need to know, dear?"

Everyone around the table looked embarrassed, some mortified, even. In fact, Mary, whose face had drained of colour, shoved away from the table and came over to Mrs M.

"Trevor, do you mind swapping seats?" she asked.

"Look, I don't think—" began Trevor.

"No, it's okay, Trevor," said Mrs M, rising from her seat. "Let Mary and me have a private word in the kitchen."

By the time they returned to the table half an hour later, Mary and Mrs M appeared to have found their peace. Trevor had heard nothing of the conversation—nobody had—but he'd witnessed Mary giving Mrs M a heartfelt hug and returning teary-eyed to her seat. Christmastime could be such a mystery. Karl waited there for her, holding her cardigan, concern etched on his face.

After that, nobody really felt like any more games.

Later in the afternoon, once everything had been cleared and their Christmas table had once again become the floor, everyone except Trevor and Rudy retired to their respective bedroom to relax or sleep off the big lunch. Trevor joined Rudy at the large windows as light began to drain from the sky, watching shimmer after shimmer of heavily falling snow.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Not if it keeps up like this," said Rudy, and Trevor

noticed the concern in his voice. "Might look lovely now, Trev, but being snowbound in the highlands is no joke."

"You don't need to worry. Mrs M packed enough food to last until spring. And I'll happily keep you warm at night," said Trevor, putting his arm around Rudy's waist, hugging him into himself and making the taller man smile.

"Thanks, Trev. I just don't want anything to spoil this break for you," said Rudy, nuzzling his neck. "What was that about Brenda tonight, by the way? I didn't understand what was going on."

"Oh heck, Rudy," said Trevor, heaving out a sigh. "Our usual group knows the story. Mrs M took a group of orderlies back to her place from the Christmas party, to carry on the celebrations. She used to be pretty wild in her youth. But she passed out, and when she woke up in the morning to an empty room, she knew she'd been violated by one of the men. At the time, she felt so ashamed, she kept it to herself."

"Bastard. And that's how Cheryl was conceived?"

"Twins, actually. But her brother, Connor, a beautiful but poorly child from birth, didn't survive the year."

"God, Trevor. Poor Brenda."

"That's why she rarely drinks. Everyone told her to abort them both. Except for Monica, who told her to do what she felt was right and not listen to others. Terrible ordeal at the time, she often says, but then that's how she ended up with Cheryl and Monica in her life."

"Thanks for telling me."

Once again, Rudy pulled his head around and kissed him, a more lingering kiss this time,

"Don't know about you, Mr Mortimer, but I think we should grab forty winks in the bedroom before the evening

celebrations—” said Trevor, before something in the sky caught his eye. “What was that?”

Rudy followed his gaze out of the window.

“What was what?”

“I thought I saw the shadow of a large bird in the sky.”

“In this weather? Very doubtful—”

“There!” said Trevor, pointing. “No, not a bird, an airplane.”

They watched in stunned silence as a light airplane—a seaplane—circled overhead through the snow, before landing smoothly on the surface of the loch.

“Shit. In all my years coming back here, I’ve only witnessed that happen twice, and both times have been because of a medical emergency.”

As they watched, the plane began to rotate ninety degrees and inch towards the mooring pier that belonged to Mortimer House.

“It’s heading to our home,” said Rudy, the concern plain in his voice. “Why hasn’t anyone called? Oh, God, what if it’s my parents? Or if something’s happened to Millie or Tam? They’re both in their late sixties. I’d better head back. If it’s my folks, I should really be there when they arrive.”

An odd realisation came over Trevor then—that he had no idea about Rudy’s true life. Everything between them had happened too quickly.

“You want me to drive you?” he asked, turning and sharing the concern.

“No,” said Rudy quickly, but then turned and smiled before leaning in and kissing him. “Although I do appreciate the offer. But you should stay with your friends. Let me sort this out. It might be nothing.”

“Is your car going to be okay?”

“My car is going to be just fine,” said Rudy, raising an

eyebrow. "I have snow chains on the tyres. Remember who predicted the snow, Trev?"

"Fair comment. Are you sure you don't want me to come?"

"No need, honestly. I'll call you once I've found out what's happening. And hopefully be back well before bedtime."

Finally, Trevor broke into a smile.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### WINTERSONG

25 DECEMBER - CHRISTMAS EVENING

AFTER WAVING Rudy off at the front door, Trevor went to his room and tried to nap. But the bed simply felt too big for one. And time on his own only made him stew about cold realities and how tenuous everything stood between them. Trevor would be heading back to his tiny two-bedroom house in Kent in a week, to his uneventful job as a freelance accountant. Rudy would remain here. After which, was he ever likely to hear from him again? Probably not, even though the mere thought hurt his chest and made his stomach curdle. In all of his twenty-eight years, he'd never had such an instant and intense connection with somebody, had never known someone whose magnetic presence in a room set off currents beneath his skin and cast everybody else in shadow. And in the bedroom? Indescribable.

But the simple, unromantic truth was they had different lives, different jobs, and lived at different ends of the British Isles. After tossing and turning for half an hour, and on hearing soft music from the kitchen, he decided to get up and seek out the company of whoever he found there.

Mrs M stood frozen at the kitchen sink, staring out of the window, the tap running. He stopped and observed her for a moment, then felt a wave of concern when she didn't move. Soundlessly, he went to stand some way off to her left and then noticed a tear on her cheek.

"Mrs M?" he said softly.

She came to life with a start, then seemed almost embarrassed to have been caught, until she realised Trevor stood there. Looking away from him, she turned the tap off before smearing the palm of one hand across her cheek, then down her apron.

"Are you okay, Mrs M? Is this about what you told Mary today?"

She shook her head, chuckled, and then let out a deep sigh, before turning to him.

"No, Trevor. Nothing like that. Don't mind me, silly old woman. Just having a moment. There I was, all alone a few minutes ago, washing cups and glasses, when Sarah McLachlan's beautiful voice came on the radio, singing a sad song about loss called *Wintersong*. Never heard it before, and I don't usually listen to the words of songs these days. Most of the time they're either vulgar or they make no sense. But hers hit me so hard. Could have been singing about Mon and me, especially something about lying awake at night or in the morning and trying to remember how her body felt lying beside me. I do that a lot, you know? Wake up and think she's still there. But when I reach out, she's not. Gets me every time. Incredible, isn't it, how a song can sum up what we're feeling in so few words?"

"Oh, Mrs M," said Trevor, going over and pulling her around. "Give me a hug. I know you miss her. Believe me, we all do. But she was your Mon, first and foremost."

"She loved you to bits," she said into his shoulder. "I hope you know that."

Selfless to a fault, Mrs M cared for everyone around her. In turn, Monica had been the one to care for her.

"You've done a wonderful job this year. Do you need a hand cutting up bread or meats or things for Christmas supper?"

Traditionally, they had no sit-down dinner on Christmas night because everyone was usually still overloaded from lunch, but Mrs M would provide salad, French bread, filled vol-au-vents, plates of cold food including left-over turkey, cold-cut meats, cheeses, heated quiches and flans, and pickles. And despite everyone's protests about having eaten too much, most of the food usually disappeared.

"No need, Trevor. You've helped enough already," she said. "Anyway, Cheryl will be here in a moment. And Mary's also offered to come and help."

"Well, look at you two," said Trevor, smiling incredulously. "New best friends?"

"Let's not go that far," said Mrs M, clucking her tongue. "Why don't you go and have a shower, and then come back, sit at the table, and enjoy the show."

Trevor laughed. That was more like Mrs M.

"Talking of new best friends, where's Rudy?"

Trevor's smile slipped.

"He had to go back to his house. Some people have arrived."

"Is that his brother and the wife?"

"I don't know. Why? Did he say something to you?"

"He told me his brother and sister-in-law usually arrive early to help him with the arrangements for their New Year's party."



Trevor looked away and huffed out a sigh. Why hadn't Rudy told him that?

"He probably forgot to say anything because you two have had better things to do," said Mrs M with a smirk, once again reading his mind. "You really like him, don't you?"

Trevor nodded sadly.

"And he really likes you."

"I don't know anything about him, Mrs M."

"That's the point, love. The fun is in getting to know them."

"But we all head back to England next week."

"Then make the most of your time together, because that's how you'll know whether there's a reason to keep in touch, or want for more. Trust an old woman when it comes to matters of the heart—"

"You're not old."

"But let me tell you this. I haven't seen you looking this happy in a long time. So go with your heart and tell that little man in your head to keep his mouth shut."

Trevor laughed. He had only ever told Cheryl about his critical little head voice.

"Okay, I'm going to shower," he said, heading to his room.

"Oh, and Trevor?"

He spun around in the doorway.

"Yes, Mrs M?"

"I wouldn't be offended if you started calling me Brenda," she said, smiling and causing Trevor to laugh again.

"No can do. You'll always be Mrs M to me."

Served at eight in the evening, Christmas cold supper was its usual success. After snoozing or relaxing, everyone had worked up a brand-new appetite. Mrs M, Cheryl, and Mary moved around each other to serve the fare together

with mugs of steaming tea as everyone tucked in. Mary had even put together a couple of hot vegetarian pasta dishes, which were an instant hit.

When the fourth person asked Trevor where Rudy had gone, and for the fourth time he had explained, he checked his phone. As usual, he had no signal, so he headed out into what could now officially be called a snow blizzard to check again. One step across the doorstep, the security light came on and he scanned the display of his phone. No calls, no messages.

He thought for a moment about calling Rudy, but decided to let him deal with whatever had happened even though he longed to help out. Instead he fired off a short message.

**Trevor:** *Hope everything's okay. In case you're not back in time for supper, there are cold cuts in the fridge that you're welcome to. Miss you.*

On a second glance, he removed the last two words, even though he meant them. Standing there in the raw chilliness, he shivered. Wrapping his arms around himself, he stared up into the night sky and did something completely out of character.

He asked for help.

"Monica? Tell me what to do?" he whispered, as flake after flake of snow landed on his face. "Because I really like him, and I don't know what to do."

He listened to the wind, but no words came back.

CHAPTER TWELVE  
FAIRYTALE OF NEW YORK  
26 DECEMBER – BOXING DAY

RUDY DIDN'T RETURN that night.

Trevor woke alone, the way he had every night since Karl had left—every night but one. But today felt wrong. He thought back to Mrs M's words from the night before, about mourning the warmth of someone's body lying beside her, and wallowed in the dream of actually having Rudy permanently in his bed. Bleary with sleep, having stayed awake until after one, listening for any sound, for footsteps at his door, he had overslept. Now he rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. What happened last night? Why had Rudy not returned when he promised he would? Or not somehow got a message to him? Maybe they'd had a legitimate medical emergency, which was why Rudy couldn't return his text. Or maybe Rudy had cooled off, realised their time together would soon come to an end, and, rather than prolong the ordeal, decided to cut and run.

In tracksuit and dressing gown, Trevor dragged himself into the kitchen, where there appeared to be a drama unfolding. Frank, Johnny, and Anthony stood huddled together. Mary and Mrs M beavered away at the kitchen

counter, either oblivious or, more likely, ignoring the situation.

"You're finally up, Mac," said Anthony, looking up from the pack. "We can't get out of here."

"What do you mean?"

"The front and back doors must be blocked with snow."

"Okay," said Trevor, shrugging. "Then we'll need to dig the snow out."

"How?" said Frank. "The shovels are outside and *we can't get out.*"

"Oh, for goodness' sake," said Trevor. "There must be other ways to get outside. Talk about a bunch of drama queens."

Without another word, he turned and headed back to his bedroom. He pulled open the short curtains to his window to inspect the scene. Even though snow had stopped falling and the sun shone, overnight drifts had almost reached the windowsill. Almost. He pulled on the handle to the lead-framed panes and, despite letting a smattering of powdery snow fall onto the bedroom floor, managed to open the window. After throwing on a thick coat and boots and squeezing into warm gloves, he dragged a small chair beneath the window, clambered outside, and ended up waist-deep in snow.

Rudy had shown him the small lean-to container at the back of the house where they stored tools and gardening equipment, as well as shovels and salt grit in case of this very occurrence. He just hoped the structure had not been submerged in snow, which would be an inconvenience but not a showstopper. On his slow progress there—his side of the lodge had seen the worst of the blizzard and moving was slow, one deep footfall after another—he noted that hard graft would be needed at some point to clear the cars of

snow. However, as luck would have it, not only had the other side of the building been protected from the worst of the drift, but the cabinet had already been cleared of snow and tools had been removed. And then he heard the sound of someone digging.

On reaching the front door of the lodge, he found Karl already there, bent double and shovelling out snow. Trevor laughed out loud, which instantly drew his ex-husband's attention.

"How on Earth did you get out here?" asked Trevor. "You didn't clamber through a window too?"

"Walked through the sliding porch door at the front. Overheard the boys fretting and thought I'd sort the problem out. Can't have Mary feeling trapped in the lodge. And if I'd been unable to get the porch door open, I've have dropped from the balcony of our bedroom. Lots of soft snow to land in. Good to have you here now, though, Mac. Another pair of hands never hurts."

Working alongside Karl felt familiar and awkward at the same time. Together they had decorated rooms in their old apartment, had laid a carpet in one of the bedrooms, so working back-to-back was nothing new.

But still.

"You like him, don't you?" said Karl out of the blue, pausing for a second to wipe his brow and puff out a steamy breath. "The Scotsman? I notice the way you look at him."

"I *am* allowed to look at other people now."

"I know, I know," he said, holding a palm up in defence. "I wasn't accusing you or anything. Believe it or not, I'm really pleased to see you looking happy."

"You are?"

"Of course I am," Karl said, leaning on his shovel and gently shaking his head. "Well, okay, at first I felt a little

pissed off and weirded out. Jealous, I suppose. Not sure I ever made you feel that way. Until Mary pointed out how I was being a hypocrite. As you can tell, she tends to say exactly what she means. And she asked me why I can't just let go and be happy for you. So that's what I'm doing."

*Because we all need to grow up and move on at some point.* Cheryl's words came back to him then, and felt so true.

"Hope this doesn't sound shallow, Karl," began Trevor as they both continued to dig, "because I mean this as a compliment. One thing I admired about being with you was that I could always rely on you for practical things. Mary's going to need that once the baby's born."

Next to him, Karl stopped digging.

"I'm terrified, Trevor. What the hell do I know about bringing up a child?"

"What does anyone? Talk to some people who already have. Mrs M, Mary's mum and dad. How about your brother and his wife? They've got two kids now."

"Three."

"Three!" said Trevor. "When did that happen? Are they going for a football team?"

Karl chuckled and then picked up his shovel again.

"We did a weekend with them and their newborn. And, of course, you know me—I did a heap of research with pamphlets and self-help books. The literature I could handle. Even the pre-natal clinics with Mary and other mums-to-be were bearable. The practical experience scared me half to death. Seems to me that all babies do is eat, sleep, scream, and then shit on you."

"I hear that continues on into early adulthood. Metaphorically, for the last thing, rather than literally."

Once again, hearing Karl laugh lightened Trevor's mood.

"Don't forget I'm at the end of a phone if you need to vent, or talk—or whatever," said Trevor. "Not sure I'll be ready to babysit until he's at least on solids, using a proper toilet unaided, and talking politics."

"Uncle Trevor," said Karl, testing the words. "Yeah, I like that. You know, after chatting around the table, when she got the Bulls calendar, Mary was dead set on calling him Damian—you know, after Damian Ingram. But after Frank's comment about *Rosemary's Baby* she changed her mind."

"Just as well. And don't even think about calling him Trevor. Clever Trevor, when I got something wrong, Whatever Trevor when I tried to make a suggestion, or as the girls in high school used to called me, Never Trevor. Girls can be so cruel."

"Point taken. But I'd be honoured to have you babysit, whenever you're ready. Come on, let's get this finished."

Unblocking the pathway to the door proved a lot harder than expected, and half an hour later, they had both built up quite a sweat from the exertion. Just as Trevor scooped the last chunks away from the doorstep, his phone pinged in his pocket. While Karl stepped in front and took a couple of attempts to haul the door open, Trevor checked his phone.

**Rudy:** *Sorry. We're on our way over. I'll explain then.*

"Rudy's on his way over with his brother," Trevor said as he followed Karl into the kitchen. "Or his parents. Not sure which."

"Good," said Mrs M, looking up from the kitchen counter. "In which case, we may as well have an early lunch, as everyone seems to be up now. Rudy and his folks can join us, if they wish. Mary put together a spectacular

curry sauce this morning, so apart from the leftovers and salad in the fridge, we're having turkey curry, aubergine masala, and aloo gobi, with pilau rice, bubble and squeak, and chunks of French bread. Hope you're all hungry. Frank and Johnny can set the table. Anthony and Jessica, put the kettle on and make pots of tea. Trevor and Karl are excused because they've been doing manual labour. Actually, Trevor, can you go and check on Cheryl?"

Trevor found Cheryl in her bedroom, sitting cross-legged on the single bed by the window, hugging a pillow. When he looked closer, he noticed her staring down at her phone.

"Everything okay?" he asked, waiting for her to acknowledge him before coming any further into the room.

"Message from Jenna," she said simply, peering up.

"What's she done now?"

"She's miserable. Texted to say she's made a terrible mistake. Ever since they arrived, she's had nonstop disagreements with the new friend's family, especially the mother, who, apparently, hates her. Now the new friend's not talking to her. They've all driven to the beach today, and left her alone in the villa. Didn't even ask if she wanted to tag along. On Boxing Day. All she wants to do is get on a plane and come home. Says it's the worst Christmas ever."

"Uh-huh," said Trevor, coming over and perching on the side of the bed. "And how do *you* feel about that?"

"Oh God, Mac," she sighed. "I don't know what to think. I know I should be mad at her, should be feeling vindicated that she got what she deserved, but the truth is I miss her. Does that make me an idiot?"

"Of course not. They say that Christmas is a time for forgiveness. Have you said anything to Mrs M?"

"Not yet. And I know what she'll say. That I'd be a fool



to take her back. I bet you're thinking the same thing right now."

"Not really. Everyone makes mistakes. Hell, I'm the pin-up boy for that old adage. And maybe Jenna's learned her lesson. But I do think you'd be a fool to take her back without at least laying down some ground rules."

"What do you mean?"

"That she understands there are two of you in the relationship, and she needs to respect what *you* want out of being together. If that means living together, then so be it. Oh, and remind her that she only gets to dump on you once. If there's a next time, then the door is shut, locked, and bolted for good."

"Should I be writing this down?" asked Cheryl, a glimmer of a smile finally lifting her lips.

"We've always looked out for each other, Cheryl. That's something you *can* rely on," said Trevor, just as Frank poked his head around the door.

"Sorry, Mac. Mrs M told me to come and fetch you. Rudy just pulled up in a bloody great Range Rover."

As soon as Rudy entered the kitchen and spied Trevor, his face lit up with a smile, his eyes softened, and he mouthed the word *sorry*.

Behind him, two figures came in wearing winter coats, clearly too young to be his parents. His brother and sister-in-law, perhaps. Even though small in stature, the woman's comportment and appearance spoke of unchallenging competence. A tightly bound ponytail of blond hair and natural equine beauty—not a trace of make-up—could have made her appear austere, but her expression held humour and composure. When the man behind her stepped into the room, Mary dropped the handful of cutlery she had been holding with a loud clatter. Instantly recognisable, even for

Trevor, who was by no means a rugby fan, Damian Ingram smiled broadly at the group, his familiar Northern accent catching everyone's attention.

"Something smells friggin' amazing in here."

Just hearing the familiar voice had everyone laughing. Ingram, with his mop of unruly brown hair, had that killer combination of incredible looks and muscular physique, as well as being a star on the field and a celebrity off. Lucrative modelling contracts for a famous national underwear chain and men's cologne brand kept his face on the pages of lifestyle magazines and posters nationwide. Not to mention being the primary reason for the phenomenal sales of the Bulls' semi-naked team calendar. Women and gay men—and, no doubt, a few straight ones—dreamed of getting into his designer underpants.

Rudy clearly noticed the kitchen's collective fascination and hurried to explain.

"Damian and Helen are here for my parents' Hogmanay gathering. Some roads have been closed off, hence the rather dramatic seaplane entrance. We're putting them up at the house with other guests who manage to get through. Unfortunately, something's gone wrong with the house boiler—"

"Place is like a bloody morgue. Froze my ass off last night," added Ingram.

"—but the Fort William repair man's been called and he's coming tomorrow, if he can get through. So for tonight I'm going to put them up in one of the small two-bedroom cottages we have down by the loch—"

"Why can't they stay here, Rudy?" asked Frank, the diehard Bulls fan.

"I didn't think that would be right. I mean, first of all, you don't really have room—"

“Of course we do,” said Mary, star-struck, a hand resting on her bump. “We can all shuffle around a bit. Cheryl can bunk in with her mum. Jessica seems to be spending all her time in Anthony’s room anyway. And, more importantly, as you can probably tell, the lodge’s heating and boilers are working perfectly.”

“Fine by me,” said Jessica, unable to take her eyes off Damian.

Trevor watched Cheryl and her mum share a look before nodding. However, Rudy seemed to be more concerned about Trevor’s reaction, his gaze and shrug seeking an answer. Maybe because Trevor had made all the arrangements and rented the lodge for their group’s private holiday. Typical Rudy—he would be more concerned about lumbering them with his parents’ guests than the fact they’d be entertaining a celebrity.

“At the very least,” said Mrs M, also sensing Rudy’s hesitation, “your guests should stay for lunch while you have a think about it.”

As expected, lunch turned out to be a huge success with the group and their celebrity guests. Also as anticipated, Mary and Frank monopolised the conversation—interrogation, more like—firing question after question at Damian. They learned that he’d cancelled a dream Christmas holiday at the Grand Hotel in New York with an unnamed celebrity’s family because Rudy had asked one of the Bulls team to attend the Mortimer family gathering—and Francois “Frankie” Debois had pulled out at the last minute; that he and Helen were old high school buddies, and because he had finally got his pilot’s licence, could co-pilot the plane; that he knew Rudy from when he ran the gym in York and, through a teammate, Rudy had been offered a special Bulls team membership; that he was not, in fact, dating the

famous supermodel he had recently been photographed with at a charity event. All in all, he took the fandom in his stride and had everyone laughing by the end of the meal.

“Look, if you’re all really sure,” said Damian, after a whispered conference with Helen, “we would love to stay here and keep you company.”

“Awesome,” said Frank, clapping his hands together with delight, followed by murmurs of approval from the rest of those gathered.

“Come on,” said Jessica to Helen, happily escorting her from the room. “I’ll show you to your bedroom. Got amazing views. Good job I made the bed this morning.”

“Like she even slept in it,” muttered Frank after she was out of earshot, glaring at a blushing Anthony.

“Can I have a private chat with you?” whispered Rudy to Trevor. Throughout the meal, he had sat next to him, laughing along to Damian’s stories and light-hearted banter, even though he had probably heard them before. Trevor cringed inside at hearing Rudy’s polite, formal tone. “In your room, please?”

The minute they reached the room, Trevor stood there and stared at the floor, felt sure the hammer was about to fall.

“Trev, look at me.”

Eventually Trevor managed to make eye contact, to find a gently smiling Rudy. Taking a step forward, Rudy pulled Trevor into his arms and hugged him tight.

“I’m truly sorry about last night, sorry about all of this mess,” he whispered into Trevor’s ear.

“Are you okay, Rudy? You seem...I don’t know—rattled? Did something happen?”

“No. Well, yes. Och, I’m just being selfish. I wasn’t expecting anyone to get here until later in the week, thought

we'd have more time together. Each year my folks invite celebrities to our annual Hogmanay celebrations. Mother's a bit of a collector like that, happy to show off people they've met during the year. Been trying to get some of the A-list royals, but as everyone knows they spend New Year in Sandringham. Damian's not supposed to be here until the thirtieth. Helen's his date to the party—even though they're not actually a couple—so because of the weather he got her to fly them here a few days earlier than expected. At least they actually arrived. So I had to play host last night, which was when the heating packed up. But I wanted to come back. Please believe me."

"I missed you."

"I missed you too. I'm so sorry."

"You're forgiven."

"Am I?" said Rudy, loosening his hug and facing Trevor. "So can I stay tonight? I brought a bag, if that's okay? Was going to show them to the cottage and then come back to you."

"Of course you can stay," said Trevor, relieved, pecking Rudy on his smiling lips. "Go and fetch your bag, and I'll see what the others are up to."

As though Ben Nevis had been lifted off his shoulders, Trevor trailed behind Rudy into the kitchen, where Mrs M sat alone, reading a magazine.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"The woman's taking a hot shower, poor thing. And Frank's showing the man to Cheryl's room, while she packs her things. The rest of them are in the lounge. I know he's a famous person, Rudy, but I hope he's not expecting star treatment—room service and all that."

"Of course not, Mrs Madison. If you like, I'll call our Millie and get her to fetch some food from the house."

"No, dear," said Mrs M. "I don't mind feeding them both—there's plenty of food to go round—but I'm not making any beds or doing laundry and ironing, no matter how important he is."

"That's not going to be an issue, Mrs Madison," said Rudy, laughing. "So, Trev, is it okay if I go and fetch my bag, take it to your bedroom?"

"Are you staying too?" asked Mrs M.

Rudy appeared a little hesitant then.

"If it's not too much bother."

"Bother? Are you serious? One night you're not here, and I've never seen this one look so miserable. But you're both on vegetable-peeling duty again."

Both Rudy and Trevor laughed.

"Anything you say, Mrs M," said Trevor.

While Rudy went to the car to fetch his bag, Trevor propped his shoulder in the doorway to the living area, smiled and watched on as his friends gathered around the open fire, where Johnny had them all laughing about a comment Helen had made.

"Seriously, though, can you believe it? It would be like me calling Johnny Doris!"

"Hah! You see?" said Mary smugly. "This is why I'm a better fan than you. If you really knew the Bulls as well as you say you do, you'd know his middle names are Edouard Bruno. So his initials are D-E-B-I. Damian Edouard Bruno Ingram. *That's* why she called him Debbie."

Despite the heat from the fire, a sudden coldness swept through Trevor.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN  
STAY ANOTHER DAY  
26 DECEMBER – BOXING DAY EVENING

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON, true to her word, Mrs M set Rudy and Trevor the task of peeling vegetables for their twelve guests. Twelve, Trevor mused. Finally they had reached their traditional optimum number with this far from traditional bunch of people. Mrs M—usually flitting around the kitchen behind them—had been called to their shared bedroom by Cheryl for a private chat. A few minutes before, he had found out why when Cheryl came up and whispered in his ear.

“Thanks for the chat earlier. And you’re absolutely right. Everybody deserves a second chance. And if you really want someone in your life, you should fight to keep them. Jenna and I are meeting up when we get home. I’m going to have a word with Mum right now.”

Unfortunately, her words twisted in his gut when he thought of Damian and Rudy together. Now he and Rudy sat alone at the kitchen table, working quietly on the chores they’d been set.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Rudy asked, for a second time.

"I'm fine," said Trevor, continuing to concentrate on his task, letting peel fall into a pile on the table and then dropping bald potatoes into a saucepanful of cold water. Seconds later, he flinched when Rudy placed a warm hand on his thigh.

"Okay, Trev. You need to tell me—"

"Your lordship," came a deep voice from across the room. Ingram stood there in tracksuit bottoms and white tee, his impressive pectorals and biceps on full display. Trevor could see the annoyance in his face—even the slight flinch—as he took in the hand Rudy had placed on his thigh, something that Rudy made no effort to conceal.

"Yes, Damian," said Rudy calmly.

"I need your help. The shower in the room isn't working."

"Really? It was working fine this morning for Cheryl."

"Well, it's not working now. Can you give me a hand, please? You're supposed to be the maintenance boy around here, aren't you?"

Trevor frowned at the tone. But Rudy simply stood, removing his hand from Trevor's leg in the process. The coldness in its wake felt like an amputation. When Rudy left with Ingram, Trevor put down the half-peeled potato he had been holding and let out a sigh.

Damian Ingram and Rudy? But then he thought back to his conversations with Rudy, about how his ex hadn't wanted commitment, how they never went out together in public, and how he had insisted on being the active one in the relationship, forcing Rudy to adopt the passive role against his natural preference. And, most importantly, Rudy said they had not been in contact for the past six months. So why in heaven's name had he come to Scotland? Surely not really at the request of Rudy's folks. Had he come to get



Rudy back? And if so, what hope in hell did Trevor have against that bronzed demigod?

Taking a deep breath, Trevor put his peeler down and stood. On autopilot, he went out into the hall and stood by the open door to Cheryl's former bedroom.

"—not showering with you. I'm busy in the kitchen."

"What about a blow job then. My balls are ready to burst."

"Damian! I'm warning you."

"Okay, but there's two beds in here," came Ingram's voice. "So it won't seem off if you spend the night—"

"I'm sleeping with Trevor tonight."

"Sleeping or *sleeping*?"

"None of your business."

Silence fell, during which Trevor felt sure he could hear Ingram's pants of breath.

"You're an ungrateful little bitch, aren't you? I wasted money on two business-class tickets and a five-star hotel for Christmas in New York—why couldn't you at least have had the decency to honour that arrangement?"

"York didn't work for us, so how the hell could you think New York would? Besides, we're over, Damian, and have been for more than half the year. And I like Trevor. I really like him."

"That little runt? He's not a patch on me."

"Exactly. He's sincere and honest. And happy to kiss me in front of people."

Ingram sorted loudly.

"Not that old chestnut again? Can he give you what I gave you?"

"He gives me respect. That's worth more than anything you ever gave me. Now go and take your damned shower while I—"

Trevor heard a soft scuffle of feet.

"Get off—Get *off* me," came Rudy's muffled cry.

"Rudy," called Trevor loudly, before knocking on the door. "Rudy, are you okay?"

Rudy staggered into the doorway looking flushed and rattled. Without stopping, he stepped into the hallway and slammed the door closed behind him.

"Is this going to be awkward?" asked Trevor softly, turning to Rudy as they stopped before the kitchen entranceway.

"Is what going to be awkward?"

"The fact that Damian Ingram's your ex-boyfriend? He's the person you referred to as Debbie, isn't he?"

"Shit," said Rudy, pushing the palms of his hands into his eyes. After expelling a deep sigh, he turned to look at Trevor, his seriousness plain. "I'm sorry. I should have said something earlier."

"You were dating the Bulls' star international player and supermodel? How the hell am I supposed to compete with that?"

"You're not. You don't need to. And what me and him had was a far cry from dating, Trevor. He used to treat me like dirt, knock me around and force himself on me. Still thinks he can, if you heard any of that back there."

Rudy stood there looking pale and sick with worry, and Trevor's heart tugged at the sight.

"If you want me to leave—" said Rudy.

"You're not going anywhere," said Trevor adamantly, grabbing Rudy's hand and moving forward again. "First of all you have no heating back at the house. And secondly, you're not leaving me to peel the rest of the vegetables all by myself—"

Frank and Johnny stood in the kitchen, mouths gaping open.

"Ingram's gay?" asked Frank, his eyes like golf balls.

"Oops," said Trevor, a hand covering his mouth. "You heard that?"

"You can't breathe a word," said Rudy, fear in his eyes. "He's not out, and it would wreck his career if anyone found out."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Not that anyone would believe us. And we're not in the habit of outing people. But did I hear that right? Did he really beat you around?" said Johnny, his eyes narrowing. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Rudy, are you fecking serious?"

"Yes," said Trevor. "You heard that right."

"Was a long time ago," said Rudy. "Look, he'll be gone in a day or two. Back to the house. And you'll never lay eyes on him again. Well, not in person."

"Rudy's right," said Frank, uncharacteristically calm, eyeing Rudy in a measured way that Trevor could not interpret. "None of our business."

Out of the two, Trevor had often seen Frank lose his cool over closet cases. Perhaps he had made an exception for one of his rugby heroes, or maybe he had learned to manage his temper while travelling the world.

"But we're all here for you, Rudy," said Trevor, putting an arm around his shoulders, mimicking Rudy's own gesture. "Whatever you need."

"In which case, let's all just be friendly and welcoming at dinner. Act as though you know nothing. They'll stay another day, and then I'll drive them back to the house. Can you please do that for me?"

"Friendly and welcoming?" said Frank, holding his

palms out to either side in a gesture of peace. “Rudy, they’re my middle names.”

After the heavy meals of the past few days, Mrs M had prepared a simple seafood pie and steamed vegetables for dinner that evening. When Helen admitted to being a vegetarian, Mary insisted they sit together and share her butternut squash and spinach filo pie. Unlike the night before, wine and beers made another appearance—perhaps in honour of their celebrity guests—and everyone loosened up considerably. Tonight, Frank beat everyone to the spare seat next to Damian and enthusiastically engaged him in conversation. Perfect, actually, because between him and Mary, they knew pretty much everything there was to know about the Bulls’ current season.

Next to him, after a few furtive glances at the beginning of the meal, Rudy began to relax, no longer worried about Ingram’s attention. Frank completely captivated the man. But, all the while, Trevor kept an ear in on their conversation, even when Rudy placed his warm hand in Trevor’s and squeezed.

At one point, at Frank’s request, Johnny went to their bedroom to get the hoodie Rudy had given Frank, because he wanted Damian to sign the front in felt pen. At Mary’s bidding, he also brought back her Bulls team calendar.

“Are you as good as this in the flesh?” asked Frank, opening to the semi-naked photograph of Ingram. Most others around the table held their own conversations, but Trevor was keeping an eye on them and noticed Frank clearly flirting. He cringed on hearing the bawdy remark, but the man in question grinned broadly, appearing to enjoy the attention.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” murmured Ingram.

"Definitely," said Frank, the mischievous smile fixed in place. "So what do you think of the lodge?"

"Nice, very cosy. I'm downstairs—no view, but at least it's warm," said Ingram, looking around. "Felt a bit lost in that big old ruin. Bloody draughty, too."

"We got great views here, too. Our balcony overlooks the whole of the loch. Stunning."

"Sounds great."

"You want to come and have a look?"

"Uh, I'm not sure—"

"Johnny, is it okay if I show Damian the view from our balcony?"

"Of course it is. Knock yourselves out."

Up to this point, Johnny had said nothing, nor did he appear to be concerned, chatting amiably with Mrs M and Cheryl. Every now and then, he checked his phone beneath the table, something Anthony had been doing for practically the whole meal, probably playing a game. Indeed, before long, as Frank and Damian left, Johnny turned his whole attention to Helen, who had been sitting enjoying a glass of sparkling wine and savouring the company.

"So, Helen," he said. "How long have you been flying?"

"Ten years," she said, straightening up at the question. "I got my commercial pilot's licence just over two years ago, but I'm still mainly flying light aircraft in this neck of the woods. That baby out there is an amphibious Cessna Caravan 208B. Has retractable landing gear for land or water landings. Flew her out of Glasgow with Daim, but she's normally stationed at Loch Lomond."

"How many passengers can she carry?" asked Karl.

"She's fitted to carry six, four passengers and two crew. But others are configured to carry up to nine."

“Do you fly for a living, then?” asked Anthony, finally putting his phone away.

“Heavens, no,” she said, grimacing. “I’m a physiotherapist by trade. On the Bulls’ payroll, thank you very much. Think if I flew for money, I wouldn’t enjoy it so much. And at the moment, I absolutely adore flying in my spare time. I’ve flown light aircraft all over the world—Bermuda, Ottawa, Florida, Sydney, and, my most favourite of all, Kenya. Flying at low altitude over the national parks and seeing the wildlife below. Amazing.”

“Forgive me a moment, folks,” said Johnny, standing up from the table. “I’d better go and rescue Damian. Otherwise Frank’s likely to bore the poor bastard to death.”

“If it’s okay with everyone, I need to turn in. I’m feeling a little out of sorts,” said Mary, who did indeed appear a little pale.

“You want me to come with you?” said Karl, about to rise.

“No, I’m fine,” said Mary, unusually cooperative. “I’ll only fall asleep. You may as well stay and enjoy the company.”

Almost as soon as Mary had left, Jessica continued the questioning.

“What’s the biggest plane you’ve ever flown?” she asked, more than a little star-struck.

“Co-piloted. That would be the ATR 72-210. Around seventeen passengers.”

“Scariest moment in the cockpit?” asked Karl.

“Hot coffee spill,” said Helen, causing everyone to laugh.

When Helen started talking at length about some of the “incidents” she had been involved in, everyone became so mesmerised they barely noticed the three men return.

Johnny and Frank seemed fine, and only Damian appeared a little flushed. For a fleeting moment, Trevor wondered what had happened, but then, after a few moments, they all started laughing along to Helen's aeronautical tales.

Later, when Mrs M herded everyone into the living area so she could clear the table, attention turned to Damian. Enthusing about his antics on and off the field, he relaxed into his usual entertaining self. Rudy took the opportunity to pull Trevor away, to help Mrs M with the last of the dishes, before leading him to the bedroom.

"Are you tired?" Trevor asked.

"Not in the slightest."

"But don't you want to say goodnight to everyone?"

"Nuh-uh," said Rudy. "Let them chat together. I've heard everything Damian's got to say a hundred times. And I want you all to myself. I've already missed one night—I'm not wasting any more time."

"Just as well I'm not tired either."

"One thing, though," said Rudy.

"Yes?"

"Lock the door."

"Why? You don't think he'd try and come in here?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I just know I'll feel safer if we're locked in here together. Tonight, I want to get in bed with you and wake up next to you. Totally undisturbed."

"Me too."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### SANTA BABY

27 DECEMBER

A SOFT CLUNK woke Trevor just after midnight.

At first he dismissed the noise as simple imagination, or maybe snow falling from the roof, but then the same sound came again—from inside the room. Next to him, Rudy lay fast asleep, breathing evenly, a possessive arm draped across Trevor's waist. Without waking him, Trevor raised his head from the pillow and, using the soft glow of his phone display, illuminated the door. Very slowly, the handle moved downwards and then back to its resting position. After that, soft footfalls moved away.

Someone at the door. Not difficult to guess who.

Trevor fell back into the pillow, awake now, and thought back to the previous evening. No matter how famous, rich, and charismatic the man was, he didn't give two hoots about Ingram, because Rudy had chosen him. And yes, they had only spent two nights together, but already Rudy's body felt wonderfully familiar. Trevor had never met anyone so considerate and selfless in bed. Not only had Rudy remembered all the things that turned Trevor on the first time, but he had tested out new ways to



give his body pleasures he could never have imagined. Last night they'd fucked long and slow, Rudy kissing and licking and nibbling, eventually sending them both over the edge by pulling Trevor's right foot from his shoulder and sucking on the toes. For someone so polite and formal by day, nothing in the bedroom appeared to be off limits. After the second round, what was supposed to be a pre-slumber spooning session with Rudy's warm body aligned along Trevor's spine, both soon became aroused. Trevor put it down to making up for lost time. Gently fucking him from behind, every now and again Rudy pulled Trevor's head around for a deep kiss, occasionally licking and nipping at his nipples. Even as spent as he was, Trevor's body came alive again and hit boiling point as Rudy thundered his own orgasm into him. After that, even though exhausted, neither could sleep for a while.

"Trev, can I ask you a huge favour?"

"Anything."

"Really?"

"Anything, Rudy. You've made this Christmas for me."

"Well, back at the house, with Millie's help, her husband, Tam, usually puts up our traditional decorations for the Hogmanay ball. They're fine, you know, pretty tired now—the decorations, not Tam and Millie—because we've used them for the past fifteen years. To be honest, they could do with a wee bit of freshening up, and I wondered—"

"Of course I'll come and help. Can I add some new ones? I've got a ton left over that I didn't use. So long as I can watch your gorgeous bum going up and down the ladder."

Rudy hummed with humour and rubbed his nose into the back of Trevor's neck.

"The other thing—and I need to get your opinion on

this—is that I told my mother about you all, and she wants to invite everyone to the ball. It’s just...it tends to be a tad formal, and I wasn’t sure if everyone would be up for that.”

“If you’re there, of course I’ll come. And I think the best thing is to ask at breakfast tomorrow. Get their opinion. But I’m guessing that if Ingram’s going to be there, Frank and Mary will surely be there, which means Johnny and Karl will be in too.”

“Hmm.” Rudy sounded doubtful.

“What?”

“To be honest, I hope Damian doesn’t stay. Hope he takes the hint and flies back to England. Even though my mother will be disappointed.”

“Even if he does stay, we can manage him, Rudy. If they’re going back to the house tomorrow, will you need to go and stay with them?”

“Not necessarily. Millie can feed them. And my brother and his wife are supposed to arrive tomorrow. Mother and Father the day afterwards. As long as they can get through.”

“Let’s sleep on it. And if the weather’s good tomorrow, let’s go for one of your early morning hikes before anyone wakes. Deal?”

“Trev, it would be my honour.”

Minutes later, they had both fallen into a deep sleep.

Trevor sighed into the night now, as Rudy stirred next to him and murmured something inaudible. When Trevor leaned in close and asked him what he’d said, Rudy simply giggled in his sleep and pulled Trevor closer. Unable to resist, Trevor breathed out a sigh and snuggled in close, and within moments, sleep had taken him.

How much later he had no idea, but he woke with a gasp and a jolt to someone hammering a fist loudly and repeatedly on their bedroom door.

“What the f—”

Rudy took a little longer to wake, but quickly jumped out of bed.

“Who the hell is it?” shouted Trevor.

“Trevor. Rudy,” came Karl’s muffled but terrified voice. “It’s Mary. I think she’s having the baby. Can you open the door?”

“Shit, shit, shit,” said Trevor, trying to hop into his jeans and falling back onto the bed. Rudy, already dressed, got to the door first, and unlocked it and hauled it open. Without stopping to talk to Karl, Rudy pushed past and headed straight for the kitchen. Karl watched him go part puzzled, part panicked.

“It’s too early,” said Karl, his attention swinging back to Trevor. “She’s not due until March.”

“We need Mrs M,” said Trevor, doing up the top button of his jeans. “She was a nurse. If anyone’s going to know what to do, it’s her.”

But they didn’t need to wake her. They met Mrs M and a bleary-eyed Cheryl in the hallway as they were hurrying towards the stairs.

“Look, just so you know, I’ve had no specific training in midwifery, Karl,” said Mrs M without stopping. “But I have had some experience dealing with childbirth—not just my own—during my days as a nurse. I’ll do whatever I can. How far along is she?”

“Thirty weeks,” murmured Karl. Trevor had never seen him look so pale and scared. Until a blood-curdling cry of pain issued from the bedroom and Trevor thought Karl might faint.

Mrs M breathed out a sigh.

“Ten weeks early? Then we really need to get her to a hospital with good maternity facilities. Let me check on her

first of all, but if she really is about to give birth to a preterm, then both she and the baby will need specialist help.”

“Where is the nearest hospital?” asked Cheryl as they approached the room.

“I think it’s in Fort William. But Rudy will know,” said Trevor. “Did you see where he went?”

“He flew past me like a bat out of hell, heading towards the kitchen,” said Mrs M, opening the door.

Without hesitation, she hurried over to Mary’s side.

“Listen,” she said, turning to Trevor and Karl. “There’s not much you two can do right now. And we’re going to need a little privacy. So maybe Cheryl can stay and help while you go and make everyone some tea.”

Trevor thought Karl would object, but he nodded mechanically and quickly backed out of the room. After a quick shrug to Cheryl, Trevor followed suit.

“Well. That’s told us,” said Trevor, heading back down the stairs. “Are you okay?”

“No idea.”

“I think maybe you need something stronger than tea.”

“No,” said Karl. “Need to keep a clear head. Tea’s good, though. I’ll make it. I need something to—”

“What the feck is going on?” came Johnny’s voice, the man appearing out of nowhere, taking them both by surprise. “All this crashing around, and people screaming. S’like being back home in Dublin with me feekin’ family.”

“Mary’s gone into labour,” said Trevor. “At least, we think so. Mrs M’s with her right now.”

“Jesus, Mary. Has anyone summoned a priest?”

“Not funny right now, Johnno,” said Trevor, noticing Karl wince and turn away, even though Trevor couldn’t resist a small smirk to himself.

As they approached the kitchen door, Rudy came marching out.

"Where's Brenda?"

"With Mary," said Karl.

"Okay, good. So I've made a couple of calls. Doris Brennan in the village used to be our local midwife. Said she'll be here in around five minutes' time. She's retired now but helped deliver me and my brother. I also called the hospital in Fort William, in case we need an ambulance, but they said the roads in and out of Arkaig are still blocked. Nothing's getting through."

"Cheryl's mum says that if the baby's premature," said Karl, "they'll need a hospital that has the right facilities."

"Like the specialist maternity hospital in Glasgow?" said Rudy, nodding to Karl. "My mother's on the board there. I could make a call?"

"What's the point? If the roads are blocked, we can't drive her there anyway," said Karl, looking desolate.

"No, maybe we can't drive," said Rudy, looking to Trevor, his eyes lighting up. "But we can fly. Karl, can you go and wake Helen?"

At five-fifteen that morning, the usually quiet lodge became a hive of activity. Doris Brennan, a little woman with a heavy accent, arrived with her large medical bag and had a short but largely unintelligible exchange of words with Rudy, before marching straight past the men up to the bedroom. Karl came back with Helen, apparently having given her an update along the way, just as Trevor poured tea for everyone. Finally, Jessica, Anthony, and Ingram—all woken by Mary's cries and other sounds of activity—sat at the kitchen table with Johnny and Frank, mugs of tea in front of them, all looking so washed out and weary, an onlooker might think they had just given birth themselves.

Trevor didn't miss Ingram occasionally glancing at Rudy, but right at that moment, he didn't give a damn. More important things were happening. Almost an hour later, Cheryl came to the kitchen to provide an update. Between the two of them, Mrs M and Doris had managed to calm Mary and make her more comfortable. Even though at first her contractions had not been regular, they had increased slightly, and Doris had agreed it would be safer for all concerned if Mary went to the hospital.

"We told her your plan. Mary wants Mum to go with her and Karl. Doris has asked to come too, to support Mum. She's such a love. I think Mum's really grateful to have her there. Even though we can barely understand a word she's saying."

"It's all arranged, Karl," said Rudy, coming in from outside. When he reached the table, Trevor handed him a hot mug of tea to warm his hands on. "There'll be an ambulance waiting at the seaplane jetty in Glasgow to whisk you and Mary to the maternity hospital. Can you ask Brenda to start to get Mary ready, and I'll bring the Rover round to the side of the lodge. I can get you pretty close to where the plane's moored. What do you need to do, Helen?"

"Just warm up the engines. Should take about fifteen to twenty minutes. Then we can be off. I estimate around forty minutes' flight time. How many am I taking?"

"Karl and Mary," said Cheryl. "Mum and Doris, if you can fit them both."

"I'll stay," said Damian.

Trevor's heart sank at that remark, and if he'd really got to know Rudy as well as he thought he had, his friend's face showed the same dismay.

"No, you won't, Damian," said Helen adamantly. "I need a co-pilot. You'll be flying next to me, in case anything

happens. That's one of the conditions of me bringing you here. So that's a full load of six. Rudy, can you drop us down there now and then come pick up the rest?"

"Good idea," said Rudy, fishing in his pocket for his car keys. "Maybe I should go warm up the engine while you pack."

"Cheryl," said Trevor, "can you take Karl and Jess with you to get Mary's bags packed and help her down when she's ready? Tell your mum not to worry about her own things. If she's not back here before New Year, we can bring them back in the Volvo."

With a quick nod, Cheryl, now accompanied by Karl and Jessica, headed back to the bedroom.

"Don't worry, Trev. I'll make sure Brenda gets back," said Rudy, patting a hand on Trevor's shoulder.

"Let's pack our bags, Damian," said Helen, turning at the kitchen door. "I'll see you back here in five."

"Rudy," said Ingram, standing. "A word outside?"

Trevor stood then, took his place next to Rudy.

"Anything you have to say to Rudy, you can say to me."

"It's okay, Trev," said Rudy, smiling gently, before kissing him on the cheek. "I appreciate the gesture, but I've got this."

Rudy followed Ingram outside into the small antechamber, and, once they had gone, Trevor moved to the doorway to listen. Even though they spoke in hushed tones, he could make out every word they were saying.

"We're not finished, you and me," said Ingram. "I didn't fly all this way just to have you snub me. We've still got things to discuss."

"I've nothing to discuss with you, Damian."

"Yeah, we'll see."

Eventually Trevor came back to the table. Only three

others remained. Anthony had his head resting in his folded arms, his eyes closed. Frank and Johnny sat opposite each other, each with their hands around a mug of tea.

"I want to punch him," muttered Trevor, dragging out a chair noisily and sitting opposite Frank. Frank turned to him and smiled.

"Hoi! That's the Bulls' star player you're talking about there," he said.

"I don't care who he is."

"Don't know what people see in the prick. Body off *Baywatch*, face off *Crimewatch*, if you ask me," said Johnny, pulling a face.

"Do you want to show Mac, or shall I?" asked Frank with a knowing grin.

"Show me what?" asked Trevor.

"Not yet," said Johnny cryptically. "Wait until the bastard's airborne. But if it'll stop you being all antsy, Mac, just know that your Mr Fancy Pants back there will not be bothering you or your man ever again. Not if the shitehawk knows what's good for him. Nobody—and I mean *nobody*—fecks with our friends. End of story."

"Oh my God," said Trevor, his jaw falling open. "What have you done?"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
WHEN A CHILD IS BORN  
27 DECEMBER

ONCE A PALE and tired Mary had been carried ceremoniously by Karl through the assembly in the kitchen out to the waiting car and installed in the back seat, Mrs M came back in to say hurried goodbyes to everyone. Rudy also came in, mainly to give Trevor a hug and tell him he'd be straight back. Once the car had pulled away, the remaining guests headed to the living room windows, waiting to watch the plane take off across the loch.

"And then there were six," murmured Frank to the darkness.

A couple of people chuckled.

"Seven when Rudy gets back," said Trevor. "What time is it?"

"Just after seven-thirty," said Cheryl.

"Is she okay to fly?" asked Jessica as they stood there listening to the distant thrum of the plane engines warming up.

"Bit late to be asking that now," said Frank.

"Mum spoke to the doctor in Glasgow, who said it's fine," said Cheryl. "On commercial jets, pregnant women

can usually fly up to around thirty-two to thirty-six weeks into pregnancy, as long as they're in good health. But this is a light plane, which flies at much lower altitudes. I just hope there's not too much turbulence, for Mary's sake. Helen says she'll be fine. It's a short enough hop."

"So now that we've lost the evil twins, our celebrity, and, most importantly, our master chef, what are we going to do for food? Me and Johnny live off take-out. Don't suppose they have pizza delivery around here?"

"Fat chance," said Johnny.

"Mac and I can do breakfast. As long as you don't want anything fancy. And Mum said there are still cold cuts in the fridge, if we're okay with that. She'll be back as soon as she can. Problem is, Mum kept the Aga going and I haven't got a clue how it works."

"Rudy will sort that out," said Trevor.

"Ant," said Jessica, nudging Anthony. "Tell them."

"Tell us what?" said Johnny.

"Go on," said Jessica, urging Anthony to speak, and when he wouldn't, she filled in. "Anthony trained as a chef. Before he got into marketing. Didn't like the hours being stuck in the kitchen. But he can cook brilliantly. Tell them, Ant?"

"I'd be happy to cook for you. I never said anything because Mrs M's food is so good. Simple and delicious. And, to be honest, sometimes it's nice not to have to cook. But yes, I love being in the kitchen, and if you want, me and Jessica will take over food duties. Bit easier now that we don't have to worry about putting vegetarian meals on the table. Once we've seen the plane off—kind of looking forward to seeing that—we'll get started on breakfast."

"Anthony," said Frank, "you have just become my new

best friend. If it weren't for the fact that Jessica would punch me in the face, I'd give you a kiss right now."

"I'll pass, thanks," said Anthony, just as they heard engines revving from the loch.

Everyone fell silent then, watching the silhouette created by the plane's lights against the dark surface of the loch. Over the edge of the mountain, like an augury of hope, a faint glow heralded the dawn of a new day. The engines throttling, the seaplane began to move slowly across the water, all the time gathering speed, but even then it seemed to be travelling far too slowly, until the nose lifted and the plane glided smoothly into the brightening sky. As they stood watching, the shape shrank to a speck on the horizon.

"Beautiful," came Rudy's warm voice in Trevor's ear as his body squeezed in behind him, arms wrapping around Trevor's chest. Nobody had even heard him arrive. Trevor simply let out a sigh and rested his head back on Rudy's shoulder, their cheeks touching.

"You're not bad yourself," said Trevor, breathing in Rudy's scent. Around them, everyone headed back to the kitchen, leaving the two of them alone.

"And he's finally gone. Ingram. Just you and me now. But he swears he's coming back for the party. I told him not to bother, but he insisted. See what a stubborn bastard he can be?"

Trevor said nothing, remembering what Frank and Johnny had told him. What the hell had they done? Not sabotaged the plane, he hoped and prayed, and then berated himself for having such crazy thoughts.

"You okay, Trev?" whispered Rudy, kissing the side of his face. "I'm so sorry, I should have told you earlier, but I think I was in shock. Or denial. Or both. But I thought he'd be on best behaviour, what with Helen here with him. But

leopards don't change their spots, it seems. Hope you'll forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Rudy. He put you in a difficult spot. Coming here wasn't particularly dignified. To be honest, I'm glad I was here for you. Hate to think what a living hell he'd have made of your life if we hadn't all been here."

"I know. And I need—" said Rudy, then stopped and leaned back a little. "What's that smell?"

Trevor chuckled. If he wasn't mistaken, the smell of bacon or ham cooking had tickled Rudy's nose, that and something else, creamy and delicious.

"So in the few minutes you were gone, we found out that Anthony trained as a chef and is going to be cooking for us all today. If I'm not mistaken, he's knocking up some eggs benedict right now."

"And coffee. I can smell fresh coffee. Was going to suggest we go back to bed for an hour or two, but my stomach has just overruled my dick."

Back in the kitchen, Trevor had thought everyone would be sitting at the table, but Frank and Johnny stood at the cooker with Anthony, observing the master at work. Anthony was using a large pot of boiling water to poach eggs, while reaching over from time to time to either stir the hollandaise sauce, check the asparagus, or toss the mushroom and onion combination. Eventually, Jessica shooed them all away, back to the table, where she had placed doorstops of toast and a pot of freshly brewed coffee. After the seven had eaten their fill—Anthony congratulated on his cooking—and the table had been cleared, Rudy made his announcement.

"I mentioned to Trev last night that my mother has invited you all to attend our family gathering on New Year's

Eve. Mainly family and friends, with locals and guests from out of town. The only thing is that it's usually a bit formal, and I thought you might find that a bit stuffy—"

"Will there be whisky?" asked Johnny.

"Is my family not Scottish?" said Rudy. "Of course there will."

"Then count us in. We've only got clean jeans, button-down shirts, and jackets. Is that going to be dressy enough for you?"

"That's going to be fine. How about you, Anthony?"

"I came here straight from work, so I've got my suit. Need to wash and iron my shirt, and press the suit, but I'm good to go."

"God, I finally get to wear a dress," said Cheryl. "Did you bring anything, Jess?"

"I did, actually," she said. "It's a not a ball gown, exactly—more of a cocktail dress—but I'm certain it'll be fine. Are we going the whole hog, Cheryl? Make-up and all? We can help each other. I've got some fab jewellery. Or is that over the top?"

"Nowhere near the top," said Cheryl, pushing her chair back, clearly warming to the idea. "Come on, let's go and see what you've got."

"Anthony," said Jessica. "Come and show me which shirt you want washed and ironed, and I'll sort your clothes out for you. Least I can do to pay you for that amazing brekkie."

As they disappeared off, Trevor kept quiet. At some point he would need to tell Rudy that he'd not brought anything even vaguely formal—unless you could count jeans with holes in them and a Father Christmas jumper.

"Look, guys, just so you know," said Rudy, checking over Johnny's shoulder to ensure the others were out of

earshot, “Damian’s probably going to be there too. So just treat him the way you did last night. Stroke his ego, Frank. He likes that.”

“Not just his ego,” said Frank, grinning.

“He’ll not be back, Rudy,” said Johnny firmly. “Not if he knows what’s good for him.”

Rudy faltered, looked to Trevor, who simply shrugged and shook his head.

“Is it show time, J?” asked Frank.

“You know, Frank,” said Johnny, leaning back in his chair, “I think it might well be. Go get your laptop, while I explain to Rudy why that fuckwit won’t be messing with any of us ever again.”

With Frank gone, Johnny explained how, last night, he had slipped away on the premise of getting Frank’s hoodie, but mainly to set the stage—otherwise known as a nanny cam. Later, when Frank had fawned over Ingram—as rehearsed earlier that evening—offering to show him the view from their bedroom, Ingram, who they could count on to be the lecherous arsehole that he was, had finally agreed.

“But rather than explain what happened, probably easiest if we show you,” said Johnny, as Frank came back into the room with his laptop.

Trevor watched the whole thing play out, incredulous, the camera probably sitting on the windowsill, capturing everything in the room. Frank managed to manoeuvre Damian so that, after taking a cursory glance at the view, he sat on the edge of the bed facing the camera. Even though the lighting wasn’t the best, there was no mistaking Damian Ingram’s face—he even wore his field shirt with the very distinctive advertising logo—sitting asking highly inappropriate questions, such as how long had Frank and Johnny been sexually active, whether they fooled around outside of

their relationship, whether Frank enjoyed rimming. Frank remained a tease throughout, saying Johnny loved him because he gave the best head out of all the gays he'd ever known. Of course, Ingram fell for that, stood, dropped his pants, and grabbed his already stiff dick.

"Show me."

Even Trevor spluttered when he heard Frank's remark.

"Is that it? In all your underwear posters, you have the hugest of baskets. And that's all you've got? You should be arrested for false advertising."

To which Ingram literally snarled, lunged forward, and pushed Frank by the shoulders down onto his knees in front of him.

"Shut up and suck my cock, you little faggot."

And right then, a loud pounding could be heard at the bedroom door, followed by Johnny's clear voice. Ingram instantly began to hike up his pants.

"Frank? Are you boring the tits off Damian Ingram? Come on down. And stop sucking up to the poor guy."

"Barely a mouthful," muttered Frank, smirking to the camera, before going to the door.

Even though Trevor laughed along with Johnny and Frank, he noticed that Rudy had gone ghostly white.

"I placed the camera on the window ledge," said Johnny. "Beautifully captured, don't you think?"

"The video?" asked Frank, laughing. "Or Ingram?"

Johnny must have noticed Rudy's face, because he quickly explained.

"Don't worry, Rudy. This is just a little, um, insurance, if you will. Your man kindly gave Frank his personal email address—before any of this happened. So we were simply planning to fire him a warning shot, so to speak. Nothing's been sent yet, not without your consent. Here, have a read."

Johnny twisted the laptop so that he and Trevor could read. They both did so in stunned silence.

*Dearest Damian,*

*Lovely to have met you at Stratham Lodge in Scotland. And such a shame that you had to leave so soon, just as we were really getting to know you.*

*Also sorry we didn't get a chance to give you our little memento video we took of your time here, but happily it's short enough for us to attach in this email message.*

*Best wishes for the New Year,*

*Johnny and Frank*

*PPS: If you come anywhere near us, or our friends, come to that—and I include Rudy Mortimer as one of our friends now—not only will this video go viral on all the gay porn sites that Frank and I frequent (and we frequent a lot), but I will also personally send it to all of my friends who work in the media, and who are always scavenging around for any salacious titbit or six.*

*PPS: Rest assured, as an out gay man myself, I am nevertheless not in the habit of outing others, and would only do so if I thought the person dishonourable in any way. In other words, so long as you hold to your end of the bargain, this little clip will never see the light of day.*

*PPPS: Enjoy the closet.*

Before Trevor had even finished the last line, Rudy reached a hand across the keyboard and hit the enter key, sending the email. All the other men gasped in astonishment.

“Are you sure you won't regret this, Rudy?” asked Trevor.

“The only thing I'll ever regret,” said Rudy, a wicked smile lighting his face, “is not being there to see the bastard's face when he clicks on the attachment.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### SILENT NIGHT

28 DECEMBER

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Trevor woke to someone's mobile phone ringing faintly but persistently from the next room. Rudy stirred softly next to him. Trevor sat up and looked down at him, at his beautiful holiday romance, and felt a moment of deep affection. For somebody who didn't sleep well, Rudy had certainly improved. Trevor smoothed a hand into his hair, causing him to emit a low purr, before reclining back into his pillows.

Both had been exhausted from the previous day—and not from any excessive carnal activities, for a change, with only a comfortable session before both had dropped off. Their dog-tiredness had come mainly from an afternoon of manual labour in Mortimer House. Everyone else had opted to catch up on lost sleep or await news of Mary and Karl and the possibility of a new arrival.

Rudy and Trevor had decided to get busy, working with old Tam and Millie to bring down decorations from the attic, sift through and clean them, create new ones, and then spend three hours clambering up and down ladders. Trevor loved the old house, the musty smells and the sheer vastness

of the place, full of oak panelling, faded tapestries, and old portraits—so different from the modernised lodge. Fortunately, they had no boars' heads or game trophies on the walls, something at which Trevor might have baulked. But chatting to Tam—whose accent he could just about understand—he learned little snippets about the Mortimer family, old English gentry settled in Scotland in the early eighteenth century. Tam had also let slip that Rudy's father was the sixteenth Earl of Stratham. When Trevor had casually dropped this into conversation with Rudy, he had been told in no uncertain terms that if he even so much as bowed—or curtsied, come to that—to either of his parents, he would get the biggest wallop across his backside.

“Promises, promises,” a grinning Trevor had replied.

Best of all, Rudy had taken Trevor to his old bedroom on the upper floor, so that they could both clean up. Spacious and yet oddly austere, the room boasted two voluminous oak wardrobes along one wall, a free-standing mirror in between, floor-to-ceiling velvet curtains of deep scarlet outlining the French windows, and a large double bed with a thick quilted bedspread to match the curtains. Stood at one end, a person would never have associated the room with a boy's bedroom, and Rudy admitted that apart from the room getting redecorated once he'd moved out, he'd had a strict upbringing, especially where manners, tidiness, and teenage paraphernalia were concerned: no posters on the walls, clothes hung before bedtime, magazines and books tidied away on shelves or—in the case of some of his more private collections—hidden away securely under his bed.

Together they had showered, smoothing and caressing the grime from the creases of each other's bodies—initially in innocence, until before long the ritual had turned

sensual, both of them breathing hard with desire. Rudy must have known what would happen, because he'd had the foresight to lock the bathroom door. After rolling a condom and plenty of lube onto himself, he'd turned Trevor's face to the glass cubicle wall and pushed slowly inside. Holding his hands above his head, he'd begun the slow push and pull until both of them achieved a mutual rhythm. Finally, they came together in shuddering spasms, Trevor's cock spurting abstract patterns onto the glass. For a full five minutes, they clung to each other beneath the shower, letting the warm water wipe everything clean. As they'd both got dressed in the bathroom, Rudy had confided in Trevor.

"I've always held a fantasy about doing that with someone. But what we did back there was hotter than any fantasy I've ever imagined."

By seven o'clock that evening, Rudy had to physically drag Trevor away from fussing over his decorative creations and order him back to the lodge. Anthony had prepared a mouth-watering salmon en crouete with a lemon parsley sauce, polished off by a dessert of Eton mess. Dinner was a quiet affair, nobody having much to say after the craziness of the past few days, and only a few comments were passed across the kitchen table about Anthony's cooking skills. Eventually, Johnny broke the virtual silence.

"Have you heard from your mother, Cheryl?"

"Not yet. I tried calling a little earlier, but either her phone was switched off or she's forgotten to charge it again."

"So we don't know what's happening?"

"No," said Cheryl. "I talked to her at midday, and they said Mary's contractions are coming more regularly now, so looks as though the baby may be early. They think Mary might have been further along than she thought. Mum said

she's going to stay there with them until they know for sure."

"Are they considering drugs?" asked Frank.

"I think Mary wants to avoid them as much as possible," said Cheryl.

"I meant for Karl," said Frank, raising a collective chuckle around the table.

By ten o'clock that night everyone had turned in, and the lodge and its guests enjoyed a rare silent night.

That morning, by the time the phone's ringing stopped, Trevor and Rudy had already thrown on dressing gowns and shuffled out into the kitchen. Cheryl sat on a stool by the kitchen counter, talking animatedly into the phone—the call was clearly from somebody she knew. While Trevor moved across to find out what was happening, Rudy filled the electric kettle from the tap. Seeing them both, Cheryl provided a smile and a simple wave of one hand, before asking the person at the other end to hold on.

"Mum's on the line. Mary gave birth to a baby boy at four-thirty this morning. Premature and weighing in at five pounds, six ounces, so he's in an incubator for now, but all things considered, both mother and child are doing very well. Father passed out during the birth. Sorry, Mum, say that again."

As Mrs M spoke from the other end, Cheryl placed a hand across her mouth, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh, Mum. That's lovely," she said, clearly moved. Placing the phone against her shoulder, she told them, "Mary and Karl have insisted on naming him Connor. After the twin brother we lost."

Trevor reached in and gave her a warm hug. What an amazing Christmas. Behind them, Frank and Johnny had entered the kitchen.

“Connor, eh? Now there’s a good Irish name. So she’s had the little devil, has she?” asked Johnny.

“Karl texted me,” said Frank, which Trevor thought odd, and even Johnny turned to him quizzically. “They’ve even thought of middle names.”

“They have?” said Cheryl.

“Yep,” said Frank, heading over and helping Rudy with the tea. “Oliver after Cheryl’s dad, Clive after Karl’s, and Kenneth after Mary’s grandfather.”

“Why the hell would he be texting—?” began Johnny, but Anthony’s loud burst of laughter from across the room had them all turning in surprise.

“Good one,” he said to a slyly grinning Frank. “And even though Karl might have let that one slip by—probably wouldn’t have realised until the kid hit puberty—Mary would have spotted it a mile away.”

“Spotted what?” asked Trevor.

“Frank’s pulling your leg. Spell out the initials. Connor Oliver Clive Kenneth Spice? Nobody in their right mind would give their young lad the initials C-O-C-K-S.”

As the room filled with laughter, Cheryl talked to her mother, who wanted to know what all the merriment was about.

“His middle name’s Karl. Plain and simple. And Mary’s mum and dad are flying in at lunchtime. So Mum and Doris are about to make their way back by bus and should arrive at the Fort William station just after lunchtime.”

“As long as the road has been cleared, I’ll come and pick them up,” said Rudy, pouring boiling water into mugs.

“She says thanks, you’re a godsend, Rudy. Okay, Mum. Yes, I told him. See you later,” said Cheryl, rolling her eyes, before putting down the phone. “She’ll text me when they’re half an hour away from home. And Trev, she said to

put some sparkling wine in the fridge, because we'll all need to have a wee tippie tonight, to wet the baby's head. A wee tippie? My mother's now officially Scottish."

After Rudy had made a couple of calls to confirm that the roads in and out of Arkaig had been cleared and they finally received the text message from Mrs M, he asked Trevor to accompany him into Fort William. Sitting high up in the vehicle, warmth from the heater enveloping them, they listened to Rudy's choice of music. And Trevor found himself discovering a little more about his new best friend, who was, apparently, a diehard country and country rock fan, with song after song from old and modern artists: Blake Sheldon, The Allman Brothers, Sam Hunt, Dolly Parton, Garth Brooks.

"You like country?" asked Rudy.

"I'm not too familiar. Except for the classics."

"Then maybe I'm going to have to educate you. What's your favourite music?"

"Rock and pop, mainly. I was a nineties child, so I was brought up on a diet of Radiohead, Nirvana—"

"Ah, the legendary Kurt Cobain. Dark and moody—"

"Keith Urban, Sheryl Crow—"

"Now we're talking—"

"Kylie, Cher, and Mika."

"Huh? Are they like Crosby, Stills, and Nash?"

"Oh dear. Looks like this musical education thing will need to work both ways."

When Rudy laughed, Trevor took the opportunity to turn and enjoy his profile. He navigated the small lanes really well, completely in control of the car, slowing at each turn and ever mindful of his speed. In Trevor's book, Rudy would be classed as a comfortable driver, aware of his own skill and competence, completely at home behind the

wheel. Cheryl, by contrast, was a nervous driver, always tense while driving, something accentuated when anything unusual happened: a bump in the road, a sudden downpour of rain.

"Rudy. Something I've been meaning to say. I don't have anything formal to wear for your parents' party. I didn't think to bring anything. But if we could stop at a men's clothing shop while we're in town, then maybe I could—"

"You'll do no such thing. Maybe I'm a little broader than you, but you can borrow something of mine. I've got suits I've barely worn back at the house."

"As long as you're sure?" said Trevor, relieved.

"Of course I'm sure. I'll even help dress you."

Another comfortable silence fell between them as Trevor hummed along to a vaguely familiar melody while watching out of the window as the highlands floated by.

"So are you inviting any of your friends along to the ball?" he asked.

"Apart from the Bulls team, you mean?" said Rudy without humour.

"Yes, well. Maybe not them. How about other friends?"

"I'd invite them if I had any."

"Come on, Rudy," said Trevor, aghast, turning to gape at him. "You expect me to believe you never made friends while you were at university? Or working at the gym? Even an idiot can see that you're friend magnet material."

"I did have friends," he said, before looking away, his smile slipping. "But when you have to keep putting people off because your closeted other half won't be seen out with you, or won't allow you to invite friends home, then friendships become like autumn leaves in a storm, gradually dropping off and blowing away."

“Yeah, well,” said Trevor, rubbing his nose. “We’re going to need to fix that.”

After around fifty minutes, more houses began to line the road as they hit the outskirts of Fort William. Trevor received a message on his phone from Cheryl to say Mrs M and Doris had arrived early and were waiting outside a supermarket along from the bus station. As he navigated a few turns, Rudy explained that the centre of town had been pedestrianised but the bus station stood further out, near the main train station. As they rounded the corner of a street lined with single and double-decker buses and coaches, Trevor spotted the two ladies chatting happily together, a clutter of full shopping bags arranged at their feet.

All the way back to the lodge, Mrs M kept them entertained with stories about the past twenty-four hours, about how the flight had been remarkably smooth, how Mary, for all her previous complaining, had been fairly level throughout the whole ordeal, and how Karl had passed out cold when she finally began to give birth. Fortunately, Doris had been there to catch him. Otherwise he might have given himself a nasty concussion. When asked about Damian, they found out that he had been in a fairly foul mood, maybe because his holiday plans had been scuppered. Out in the waiting area, he and the woman pilot “had words”, after which they both left. Mrs M had no idea what the argument was about; neither did she care.

Neither did Trevor. Or that’s what he told himself.

He just hoped Ingram had got the message that he wasn’t invited back.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN  
DRIVING HOME FOR  
CHRISTMAS  
31 DECEMBER – NEW YEAR'S EVE

AFTER THE DRAMA and activity of the past days, a cosy lethargy descended on the lodge. Down to only eight including Rudy, the remaining guests, all firm friends now—at least, that's how Trevor viewed them—savoured the relative tranquillity of the highland countryside.

On New Year's Eve, the morning of the Mortimer Hogmanay Ball, Rudy drove Trevor, Cheryl, Frank, and Johnny over to Mortimer House with the promise of taking them horse riding around the grounds. Making up for lost holiday activities, he'd offered the same to everyone, but Mrs M, Anthony, and Jessica wanted time on their own. Trevor and Cheryl also declined horse riding—Rudy even agreed with the decision—but still came along, because Rudy wanted Trevor to give his final endorsement to the decorations by daylight and make any finishing touches before guests started arriving at around six. Cheryl insisted on helping, although in reality she simply wanted to check out the grandiose venue.

That morning, after breakfast, Mrs M surprised everyone by announcing she would be spending the day

with Doris Brennan in her small cottage, and would be accompanying her to the ball in the evening. Sitting next to her, Cheryl had merely smirked at Trevor, before getting an elbow in the ribs from her mother. Anthony and Jessica also decided to have some alone time, but not before Jessica agreed to her and Cheryl catching up later in the afternoon, to help each other glam up for the ball.

On the short car ride over, they could see how much of the surface snow had cleared, and with cloudless skies over the past few days, the threat of more snow had diminished. Rudy's mother and father had safely arrived home the day before—happily to a house with fully functioning heating. Only his brother, Ivan, and his wife had been delayed, because of a mix-up on flights and times. Even with his parents at home, Rudy had volunteered to stay at the lodge with Trevor, with the excuse that he wanted to allow Millie time to prepare the bedrooms for other guests.

As they drove down the short driveway, Tam and Millie stood at the front door to greet them. Once Rudy had parked up and Millie had explained that his parents had headed off early to the station to pick up his brother, he and Tam led the boys off towards the stables, while Millie accompanied Cheryl and Trevor into the house.

Cheryl couldn't get enough of the grand place, exploring one room after another, and especially the main hall, which had been transformed into something befitting a Jane Austen novel—if only she'd written one set in Scotland. Trevor had probably overdone the tartan theme, but Millie had advised him on the correct colours to use—scarlet and fir green—and, moreover, he felt the old decorations had taken on a new lease of life with the makeover. Certainly the two massive Christmas trees at the far end of the main hall—previously adorned with simple white

baubles and starry white lights—now positively drew a person's attention with their tartan bows of all shapes and sizes, as well as flashes of holly and purple thistle.

Beyond the main hall, Trevor noticed that the dining room was already being set up by the catering staff, three huge tables seating thirty guests each. He saw that the party planners had carried his tartan theme forward along the tables, probably at the advice of Millie. Rudy told him how his parents always employed specialist caterers to wait tables, feed everyone, and serve drinks. But *ninety* for Hogmanay dinner? Once again Trevor felt a tremor of nervousness when he thought how different his own world was from Rudy's.

"Can you believe we've only been here ten days?" said Cheryl, bringing him out of his reverie. "Feels like months. I have to be honest, Mac, after that second night here—when Mary and Karl arrived—Mum and I spoke about throwing in the towel, maybe driving home for Christmas. But I'm glad we decided to stay. Because, let me tell you, we're going to be dining out on this Christmas tale for years to come."

"Yes, well. It's not over yet. Besides, nobody will ever believe you."

The three horsemen of the apocalypse—as Johnny had labelled them—returned to the house just before midday, and Millie arranged a light lunch of sandwiches and hot tea for them all, sat around the big oak table in the large kitchen. Rudy appeared to take pride in introducing his new friends, and both Millie and Tam sat by patiently until he'd finished. Trevor could see how Millie liked Rudy, the way she smiled at his enthusiasm and the way he introduced them all. Frank and Johnny—both red-cheeked from the chill air—stole the show, talking excitedly about their riding adventure, what they'd seen and where they'd been,

Loch Arkaig clearly a far cry from their suburban haven back in London. When Cheryl offered to show the boys around the house, they jumped at the chance, leaving Rudy and Trevor together in the kitchen.

"Is yon bonny McTavish lad goin' tae the ball taneet?" Millie asked Rudy. Trevor had to listen carefully to her accent, much broader than her husband's.

"Yes, Millie. He's coming to the ball as my guest," said Rudy, before turning to Trevor. "Millie's family name is McTavish. Was, that is, until she married old Tam McDonald."

"Then he shud be wirran a Clan McTavish kelt," she said, folding her arms. "D'you no ken?"

"Aye, I suppose," said Rudy, with a smile and a shrug.

"Nae s'poose about it," said Millie, standing and grabbing Trevor by the elbow. "Come wi' me, young laddie. We'll make sure ye hae the right sett."

"What's happening, Rudy?" said Trevor in a panic as he was led away by the housekeeper to their little set of rooms behind the kitchen.

"If I'm not mistaken, I think you're about to be fitted with a Clan McTavish kilt. Still, that sorts out your wardrobe for tonight. And I have all the right accessories to go with that particular outfit."

While Millie set about measuring Trevor and then fishing out a large straw basket filled with cloth and accessories, she asked him questions. Rudy stood by to translate, leaning against the door jamb and grinning, his arms folded, watching her work. Eventually, she found what she needed—a blue-and-green-checked material—and wrapped the cloth around Trevor's waist.

"You'll need tae drop yer troosers," said Millie, to which Trevor's eyes pleaded with Rudy for help.

“Do as she says, Trevor. Don’t worry, she’s seen it all before. Looking after me and my brother.”

“Aye,” said Millie, with a wheeze of a giggle. “That I have.”

Oddly though, the more Trevor tuned in to Millie’s accent, the more he understood. She explained how the kilt normally fell to the centre of the knee, how the flat folds in the front were called aprons, while the sides and back were usually pleated. The one she had found had belonged to her late brother, who had stood a bit shorter than Trevor and was definitely broader around the waist, but using the kilt pin fastened to the front apron, the result looked—and felt—good. She explained how he would need Rudy’s thick belt to keep things in place, but both Millie and Rudy approved of the result. When she enquired why he wasn’t planning on bringing a Sassenach girlfriend or boyfriend to the ball, Trevor decided to tell her about his ex-husband, something which didn’t seem to faze her in the least.

“Aye, well,” she said, unpinning the seam and taking the cloth over to the waiting ironing board, “it’s a lang road that’s no gote a’turnin.”

Rudy nodded and hummed his approval.

“Too true, Millie. Too true.”

While Millie carefully ironed the kilt, Trevor turned to Rudy.

“Okay,” he said, looking helpless. “I’m not sure I understood a word of that. What was that about a goat attorney?”

Rudy laughed in his usual good-natured way.

“She said it’s a long road that doesn’t have a turn somewhere down the line. It’s an old Scottish saying which means be patient even when things are going badly. Most roads have a turn in them eventually.”

“Do you believe that?” asked Trevor, after thinking for a while.

As Rudy studied him seriously for a moment, a smile like the sunrise blossomed on his face.

“I do,” he said. “Aye, Trev, I think I do.”



WHEN TREVOR STOOD AND STARED AT HIMSELF IN THE long mirror in Rudy’s bedroom, he couldn’t help the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined he’d be wearing a kilt. Well, maybe to a fancy dress party, but never formally. But the combination of blue and green in the material matched the blue-green of his eyes. Not only that, but his shock of unruly black hair complemented the white shirt, black waistcoat, and matching jacket—all items borrowed from Rudy. Complete with silver buttons, the whole ensemble came across as not only respectable but pretty darned sexy, if he was going to be a little conceited. Even the long black socks, garters, patent leather shoes, and sporran hanging over his family jewels looked authentic. Yes, he definitely rocked the part of Scottish laird.

“Well, look at you,” came Rudy’s voice from across the room.

Trevor twisted around and hiked in a breath. If Trevor thought he was sexy in a kilt, Rudy owned the look. In one of patterned scarlet and moss green wool check, Rudy seemed completely at home, moving naturally across the carpet. Although the kilt covered his thick thighs, sexy, muscular knees peeked from beneath, above knee-length socks of thick oatmeal wool. Trevor felt his mouth go dry.

“You wear the style well, Trev. Always keep in mind

that when you put on a kilt, you need to wear it with pride. Own the outfit, and when people study you, they'll see a warrior or a nobleman, not a man in a skirt."

"Christ, Rudy," said Trevor as Rudy came to a stop in front of him. "Forget me. Look at you. You're giving me a hard-on."

"I am?" said Rudy, grinning. "Let me check."

And just like that, a hand reached beneath Trevor's hem and cradled his balls through his underwear. Trevor let out a soft yelp, and grabbed Rudy's arm before emitting a nervous chuckle.

"Och, not fair, Trev," said Rudy, smoothing a thumb over Trevor's semi-erection. "We agreed to go commando."

"In this draughty old place," said Trevor, pulling Rudy's hand away. "Not a chance in hell."

"What was that about a commando?" came a voice from across the room. "You're not thinking about joining the army now, are you, little brother?"

Trevor turned to see a taller carbon copy of Rudy, same college boy style haircut, same handsome grin, maybe a little leaner than Rudy. Dressed in an evening suit with a tartan cummerbund, rather than Rudy's traditional choice, he would nevertheless turn heads.

"Ivan," said Rudy, going over and giving his brother a hug. "This is my, uh, friend Trevor. I was just explaining what a true Scotsman wears beneath his kilt. He and his friends are staying at the lodge for Christmas and New Year. Mother invited them to dinner tonight."

"Did she now?" said Ivan, appearing genuinely surprised. "That's a first. You must have done something to impress her if she's invited you for dinner."

"Not sure about that," said Trevor, going over and

shaking Ivan's hand. "I think maybe she took pity on us all. Snowed in, and all that."

Ivan and Rudy shared a quick look, before turning back to Trevor and saying, in unison, "No."

"Our mother doesn't work that way," said Ivan. "There'll be an alternative reason. Anyway, brother, I've been sent here to drag you down to face the masses. You know what Mother says about family meet-and-greets."

"Okay, I'll be down in a minute," said Rudy, before placing an arm around Trevor's shoulders. "Let me have a quick word with Trev first."

Before Ivan left, he looked quizzically at Trevor, then at their kilts, and finally at their faces, before producing a knowing smile.

"Okay. So maybe I *do* know why Mother asked you."

Before Trevor had a chance to ask what Rudy's brother had meant, Rudy began talking.

"Just so you know." Rudy hooked his arms around Trevor's neck and drew him close. "Our family always stands at the living room doors and greets guests as they're seated for dinner. My mother likes to maintain certain formal rituals. We also usually sit together at one end of the table, as a family, but I've asked to be seated with you all tonight. Mother's fine with that, because Ivan's here with his wife, Beth, so they'll sit with Mother and Father. As I said, it's a formal occasion, but I promise it'll be fun."

"What do I do in the meantime?"

"Are you kidding? Go and join your friends. Have a good time. I'm always going to be coming back to you."

Comforting words. And that is exactly what Trevor did.

At six-thirty, on his way down the wide staircase that descended one side of the hall, he estimated around thirty people were standing in small clusters, with serving staff



dancing around them. Cheryl's loud laughter drew his gaze to where all of his friends stood, sipping champagne. As he reached a point halfway down the stairs, Johnny turned and spotted him, producing a wolf whistle that had the others—and a few people he didn't know—turning to observe him. Self-consciousness didn't even begin to describe the hesitation that hit him, but he decided to take Rudy's advice, hiked in a deep breath, held himself high, and descended into the fray.

"Will you look at that," said Frank, the first to comment as Trevor approached. Frank wore black jeans, a white silk shirt, and a navy corduroy jacket, and came across as more smart casual. "It's Sean bleeding Connery."

"I must say," said Jessica, wearing a pretty black spangled number, "you rock that look, Trevor. You're a true McTavish now."

"Actually," said Trevor, puffing out his chest with pride and grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, "I am reliably informed that this is the McTavish sett—the correct tartan for the McTavish clan. But can I say, you all look fabulous too. A toast to all my wonderful friends."

After half an hour had gone by, as more guests arrived and the hall filled up, dinner was announced in a spectacular way. Two men dressed in matching tartan kilts climbed to the landing on the stairs and began playing bagpipes. One of the waiters stopped and informed their group that the song was called *Flower of Scotland*, a popular tune for a not-so-popular instrument. Afterwards, and following a polite round of applause, the master of ceremonies summoned everyone in to dinner, each person announced as they entered. The same waiter as before came over to their group and asked them to hold on until everyone else had been seated, which seemed odd, but nobody appeared

to mind. Trevor looked over at Rudy's family, the father and sons dressed to match in family tartan, his mother wearing an elegant, full-length evening dress in black velvet with a matching tartan sash worn diagonally from shoulder to waist.

At last they approached, and as Trevor went to shake her hand, she produced a gentle smile before taking his elbow and drawing him away from the line.

"So you're the young man who's finally put a smile on my son's face," she said, her own smile so like her son's. When Trevor peered over her shoulder, he noticed Rudy shaking Anthony's hand but also turning to look nervously at them. "Honestly, when I saw him the other day, I barely recognised him. Since he came back last summer, he's been like a bear with a sore tooth. And Millie tells me I have you to thank for decorating the hall. While you're supposed to be on holiday enjoying yourself. Is that right?"

"Oh, no," said Trevor. "Well, yes, I did help Rudy spruce things up. But honestly, it was nothing. I really enjoyed myself."

"Well, it was certainly not nothing. I've had a stream of praise and questions from guests about our wonderful ornamenting this year, asking whether I did it myself or used a company. And if so, which one? Feel like a fraud. So when my husband does his usual Hogmanay speech—which will be traditionally long and boring—he has also been instructed by me to give you a special mention and a huge thank you."

"Really, you don't need to—" began Trevor.

"If I don't," she said, cutting him off, "my son will never talk to me again. And I've only just got him back. Now let's go eat, drink, and be merry."

The rest of the evening turned out to be equally spec-

tacular. As promised, Rudy came and sat next to Trevor, putting his hand on his bare thigh and squeezing; Trevor got his mention and a round of applause in Mr Mortimer's long but actually very entertaining speech; the food turned out to be good, if not great, according to Anthony; and everyone had too much to drink.

When they retired to the main hall and the doors to the dining room had been closed off, a quartet on a small stage provided the music. While they had been eating, a selection of buffet finger food had been laid out on long tables and an amply stocked bar had been set up in a corner. Rudy explained that more guests would arrive during the evening, having enjoyed dinner with their own families, and that his mother always over-catered.

During the evening, everyone laughed along while joining in for the Scottish country dances, where a couple of instructors demonstrated moves and called out directions to the group. Mrs M's friend Doris knew all the steps by heart, and led Mrs M around with professional ease, giving only a few whispered instructions. Rudy did his best to lead Trevor—not the easiest of tasks—but then many of the dances were quite subtle, encouraging people to circulate and end up occasionally with a new partner. But each time Rudy came face to face with Trevor again, his smile shone brightly, his eyes burning with need. Eventually Trevor stopped fretting and enjoyed the fun, knowing Rudy would always come back to him.

Eventually, unseen by others, Rudy drew Trevor away into a small dark utility room at the back of the hall. Once inside, he hurriedly locked the door. Breathless, using his own body he squeezed Trevor up against the wall, before hungrily clamping their mouths together.

“Ouch,” said Trevor through the kiss, a sharp pain his back.

“Sorry,” said Rudy, nipping Trevor’s bottom lip before pulling their mouths apart. “But I’ve been wanting to do that all evening.”

Out in the hall, the band had begun a new melody, a simple waltz.

“Something hard’s digging into my back.”

“Just your back?” said Rudy, rubbing his groin into Trevor’s before bringing both hands beneath his kilt and cupping his backside.

“Can it wait?” asked Trevor, even though his body, despite the pain, began to respond willingly. “Until we’re tucked up in bed. I’ll even wear the kilt, if you want.”

“Och, I’m sorry, Trev,” said Rudy, a warm hand retreating from his buttock, before pulling him away from the wall. “I think I’ve got you leaning into a mop handle.”

“Uh-huh. That would explain the pain,” said Trevor, chuckling and pushing his face into Rudy’s neck, his own hand slipping under the hem of Rudy’s kilt. “Best night ever, Rudy. I really like—Hey!”

“What?”

“You’re wearing underpants.”

“Of course I am. It’s too bloody cold to do otherwise. Now what was that you were about to say? Something you really like?”

“Cheater. I was going to say that I really like your family.”

“They like you, too.” Rudy reached down, took Trevor’s hand, and smoothed it over his own erection. “My mother’s a tough gig. Ask poor Beth. But she seems to have warmed to you already.”

“She’s cool. But come on, baby. We should save this for

later. Let's go join the others. It's our last night here, and we should really be with everyone else."

Rudy quietened a minute, and Trevor couldn't make out his expression in the darkness. After a moment, however, his body relaxed against Trevor's.

"Spoilsport."

Back in the main hall, only a scattering of guests remained, and Trevor wondered what had happened. Maybe an event outside, the promised bonfire and fireworks display, or more dancing. None of his friends were around, and he was about to ask a waiter where everyone was when Rudy's brother headed towards them.

"Rudy, Trevor," said Ivan, his eyes wide, not stopping on his way out the door. "Everyone's out on the front lawn. Someone's only landed a seaplane on the loch. We think it might be a special celebrity guest arriving."

Trevor watched Ivan go, frozen to the spot. He turned to the expression of an equally horrified Rudy.

"It couldn't be," said Trevor quietly. "Could it?"

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### AULD LANG SYNE

31 DECEMBER – HOGMANAY

THEIR BACKS LIT by the spotlights illuminating the house, Trevor and Rudy stood together staring out across the loch, their shadows stretching towards the water. Like an accusation, lights from the seaplane glared brightly as it made its way towards the house. Trevor reached for Rudy's cold hand and squeezed. All around them, guests gathered, immunised by alcohol to the chill air, drinking still and chatting merrily, wondering with excitement who had arrived. Trevor heard somebody in the crowd voice the words *famous rugby player*. One thing Trevor recognised immediately was the precise model of the plane and the unique number on the tail, something that sent a menacing shiver through him.

This seaplane was the same one Helen had piloted.

"Rudy," he said, turning, his heart giving a little tug to see Rudy's anxious profile and concerned eyes.

When Rudy didn't answer, he pulled at the hand he held.

"Rudy," he said, a little louder, causing him to turn his

way. "Relax. No matter what happens, we'll get through this."

"I just don't want anything to spoil tonight, Trev. That's all."

"Nothing will. I promise you."

"Why would he come back?"

"Because he's an insensitive prick, because he's a sadist, because he's an egotistical bastard who doesn't give a shit about anyone but himself. Pick any of the above."

Out on the jetty, a few people had gathered as the plane drew close. Fortunately, part of the pier's construction— inches above the surface of the loch—allowed for the aircraft to dock right alongside. Old Tam stood waiting with a rope to moor the craft. Others stood further away—including Rudy's mother and father, if Trevor wasn't mistaken—waiting to greet the new arrivals. And then he drew in a breath when he saw Frank and Johnny approach the group. Maybe there would be fireworks—before the official ones. Lamp posts along the pier illuminated the unfolding scene as the propellers slowed and stopped, as the doors opened, and as, one by one, four people clambered out. Three women and one man—a tall and solid man. Mr Mortimer immediately moved forward to shake hands with the new arrivals, before engaging the man in conversation.

"That's Helen, but it's not him," said Rudy, breathing out a steamy sigh of relief. "I can't be sure, but I think it's Francois Debois. Come on, let's go and find out—"

But before they could move, a scream of joy pierced the air behind them. Cheryl had hiked up the hem of her red dress and was sprinting in high heels, unsteadily and unceremoniously, towards the passengers on the pier. Many of those gathered around giggled at the spectacle, but something had clearly caught her attention, and Rudy and

Trevor moved to find out. When Cheryl flew past Helen and threw herself at the two other women, the penny finally dropped.

Elaine and Kim—now being hugged to death by a bouncing Cheryl.

How the hell...?

For the past four years they'd all spent Christmas and New Year with these two friends, but this year the girls had pulled out because of a new house and money issues. Wondering distantly how they came to be there, Trevor almost missed another person emerging from the plane. Only when he saw Cheryl freeze did he recognise the figure.

Jenna.

"Who are they?" asked Rudy as they strode towards the new arrivals.

Cheryl and Jenna stood facing each other, words clearly being spoken, but Trevor was too far away to hear. Suddenly, though, the two of them were in each other's arms.

"Old friends. And the girl hugging Cheryl is her ex-girl-friend, Jenna, the one I told you about. Well, from the look of things, maybe not ex anymore."

Trevor and Rudy approached the small group now consisting of Frank and Johnny—Cheryl and Jenna stood off to one side, still deep in conversation. After introductions had been made, Trevor asked the question that he guessed everyone wanted answered.

"How on Earth did you find us?"

"Johnny the fixer, of course," said Elaine, nodding towards Frank and Johnny, the co-conspirators. "Arranged everything. Kept us updated daily with emails and photos of your crazy adventures. And even though we had a nice



quiet Christmas in the countryside, things weren't the same. So when he told us Jenna had emailed him to say she'd flown back early from her holiday, and that we needed to get hold of her and get our arses up to Scotland, we did as we were told. Jenna stayed with us one night, then we all took the first train up from Exeter to Glasgow this morning. Over seven bloody hours. Then, from Glasgow station we took a taxi and met up with Helen at the airport. Somebody called Jessica had apparently arranged everything this end."

"Here she comes now," said Frank, nodding over Kim's shoulder to where a smiling Jessica and Anthony approached the group.

"Jess and I have been plotting behind your backs," said Johnny. "Thankfully she kept in touch with Helen. Otherwise these ladies would have been hitching a ride."

"We'd have got a train, actually," said Elaine. "Hell, I think we would have walked just so long as we could be here. But that flight and then landing on water was the icing on the cake, wasn't it, Kim? The whole day has been one hell of an adventure, and one we wouldn't change for the world."

"And it hasn't finished yet, by the looks of things," said Kim, staring at the floodlit building. "Does somebody actually own this castle?"

"Ah, honey," said Frank, chuckling. "Do we have a story to tell?"

"This," said Johnny, turning to take in the building, "is Mortimer House."

"And this," said Frank, putting a hand on Rudy's shoulder, "is Rudy Mortimer. Trevor's new beau."

"You own this place?" said Kim, her face aghast.

"Not quite. My father does," said Rudy, smirking. "And officially my name is Rudy Mortimer-King."

"Wait," said Elaine. "Isn't this the house from the Mortimer Whisky television commercial? The one with the 'smooth as a highland stream' tagline?"

"Smart girl," said Johnny, grinning. "I knew all those nights we dragged you down to the local pub were not just a waste of brain cells. And guess what they're serving behind the bar?"

"Hope it's going to be okay to stay with you all, Trevor," said Elaine. "I know it's only one night, but Johnny said Karl and Mara's room is now vacant."

"Mara?" said Trevor, raising an eyebrow. "Do you mean Mary?"

"Ah," said Johnny, looking sheepish. "My fault. Must have been a typo."

"Liar," said Frank, nudging Johnny. "Mara's the name of the Buddhist version of the devil. My husband can be very literary when he wants to be."

"I don't understand," said Elaine.

"Come on," said Frank, grabbing Elaine's arm. "We've got a shedload of catching up to do. And I don't know about you, but I tell a much better tale with a glass of whisky in my hand, and when I'm not freezing my arse off."

"You all go on," said Rudy, holding Trevor back. "We'll be in shortly."

Trevor knew what Rudy wanted to do—find out from Helen and Francois why they had come. And especially what had happened to Ingram. He found them chatting to Anthony and Jessica.

"I thought you'd cried off," said Rudy after shaking hands vigorously with a fresh-faced Francois. "That's what Damian told me. Said you pulled out at the last minute, so he felt obliged to come in your place."

"Pulled out? Damian told me I'd been officially unin-

vited, that he'd be coming instead. Bloody annoying, actually, because I'd cancelled a lot of other plans and it was too late in the day to put them back in place. But you know what Damian's like. Whatever he says, goes."

"Damian can be a dickhead," said Helen, folding her arms. "When we got back to Glasgow, he was all for flying back for the party, but somewhere along the journey he must have got a better offer. Flew off to New York two nights ago. I only phoned Francois on the off chance, because I was really looking forward to the ball."

"Well, I'm really grateful you both came," said Rudy, standing between Francois and Helen and taking each of them by the arm. "I'm afraid we've already had dinner, but there's still plenty of food to be had. Come inside, into the warmth, and get something to eat and drink. I think we've got a bottle of our special twenty-year-old single malt you love so much."

"Now we're talking," said Francois.

At eleven-thirty, just as the earlier excitement had finally died away, Mr Mortimer announced the start of the traditional end-of-year firework display. Outside, in the middle of the lawn, Tam lit the carefully prepared towering bonfire contained within brick housing, a knee-high fence marking out a perimeter to stop people venturing too close. Working with the entertainment specialists, Ivan and his father readied themselves to begin setting off fireworks. Lights inside the house and spotlights around the grounds were extinguished one by one, until the area lay in near-total darkness, with the only illumination coming from the brightly burning bonfire.

And then the spectacle began.

Pink, purple, red, blue, silver, and gold—whizzing, fizzling fireworks raced for the sky before exploding into

showers of glittery snowflakes reflected in the dark surface of the loch. Oohs and aahs and gasps of glee rose from the crowd. Mobile phones captured the moments, especially the second wave bursting into a kaleidoscope of colour above the house, illuminating the white walls and turrets in a panoply of hues, like something out of a highland fairytale.

As the clock neared midnight, Tam commanded everyone back into the house, where Mr Mortimer provided the countdown to the New Year. Immediately afterwards, as everyone around the room cheered, the quartet began playing *Auld Lang Syne*, many of those gathered singing along. Trevor and Rudy wished a Happy New Year to all their friends—old and new—as well as the hosts and other guests before finding each other again. Back in Rudy's arms, Trevor felt at home, far happier than he had in years.

"You know, we sing this song every New Year, but I've never really understood the words," said Trevor, resting his chin on Rudy's shoulder as they slow-danced to the quartet's haunting version of *Auld Lang Syne*.

"Penned by our very own Rabbie Burns. It's a question, Trev. Should old acquaintances be forgotten, and never brought to mind? And then he repeats it. Should old acquaintances be forgotten, as well as old times gone by? Obviously—for me, at least—the answer is no. We need to hang on to thoughts of old friends and the times we had with them. If not, what else do we have when they're not here anymore?"

Something in Rudy's words filled Trevor with sadness. Would their time together be reduced to a memory next year? Of old times gone by? He peered out across the room and saw his friends dancing slowly together. Softly, in his

ear, Rudy began to sing along to the music, with such a beautiful baritone in Scots brogue.

"For auld lang syne, my jo, for auld lang syne, we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet, for auld lang syne."

"You're killing me."

"And surely ye'll be your pint-stoup!" Rudy smiled and brought their foreheads together. "And surely I'll be mine! And we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet, for auld lang syne."

"I never knew," said Trevor, his eyes moist. "Such a beautiful song. We've sung it countless times, and I never really knew what it meant."

"So what happens now?" said Rudy, his smile slipping.

"What happens now is that you take me back to the lodge and have your wicked way with me. If you don't mind walking back."

"No, I mean, what happens to us? You all drive back to England tomorrow."

Trevor stopped dancing and faced Rudy. Lines of concern crinkled the skin between his brow, something Trevor wanted to smooth away. Instead, he took both of Rudy's hands in his own and kissed him gently.

"I'm not going to lose you, Rudy. I promise." Trevor leant forward then and kissed Rudy between the eyebrows. When he pulled back, the crease had disappeared and a small smile lit his face. "We've only just found each other. Let's agree to stay in touch at the very least. Until we can both figure things out. Is that enough for now?"

"More than enough."

Cheryl interrupted them, her arm around Jenna. Most of their other friends stood by the main entrance.

"We're going to stroll back to the lodge now. Are you two staying here tonight?"

"No, we're coming back too," said Rudy.

"Where are Frank and Johnny?" asked Trevor.

"They've already gone back with Mum," said Cheryl. "Ivan dragged out a bottle of their premium thirty-year-old single malt, and between them, let's just say that Johnny got a little over-refreshed. Mum's dropping Doris off and then driving them back. She said she'll put the kettle on for tea when we get back."

"Let's go, then."

After Trevor and Rudy said thank you and bid farewell to the family, Rudy led the way down darkened lanes back to the lodge. Soft footfalls, murmured conversations, and gentle laughter told them the others were following behind.

"So how come your name is hyphenated?" asked Trevor, their arms around each other's waists as they negotiated the lane.

"Mum's maiden name is King. Dad agreed to double-barrelling their family names when they got married, because Mum's family were all girls. So nobody to carry on the family name. But you can tell they're down-to-earth people, Trev. You should see the piece-of-shit car he drives."

"I like your parents. They're good people. And I like your brother, too. In fact, Mrs M and I invited them over for breakfast tomorrow. Your dad's staying to help Tam clear up, but Ivan and Beth, your mum, and her two sisters are coming over. They'll bring Helen and Francois. It'll be a full table tomorrow."

Just then, the moon poked out from behind a cloud and pale light flooded the lane. Only for a moment, though, before the track fell back into gloom.

"Does the darkness bother you?"

"No, not really," said Trevor, before tightening his hold around Rudy's waist. "Not with you here next to me,

anyway. What was it Helen Keller wrote? I would rather walk with a friend in the dark than alone in the light.”

“Beautiful.”

Before very long, they reached the crest of an incline in the lane and saw lights burning in the lodge below. Eager to get into the warmth of the kitchen, they all hurried the last hundred yards and entered to find Mrs M alone, pouring large mugs of tea for everyone. Even though some complained of tiredness, they remained around the table, chatting and catching up on each other’s stories. Just as Trevor had decided to drag Rudy away, they heard a clatter of feet from the hallway.

“Oh my God, you guys. You need to watch this,” said Frank, rushing into the kitchen and spinning his laptop around on the table so that everyone could see the screen. One of the nation’s main news channels had a banner—*Breaking News*—across the top of the screen, and a female newscaster talked to the camera.

“News just in on the hour. A man charged with indecent behaviour in a New York public toilet is none other than the renowned Bulls forward Damian Ingram.”

Right then, a headshot of Ingram faded into view.

“Ingram was caught during a police sweep of a New York railway station. Sources say the area is a notorious meeting point for gay men. An undercover officer went into the restroom area and witnessed Ingram publicly engaged in lewd behaviour with a younger man. The officer observed the act and then arrested both men. Ingram posted bail and was released three hours after his arrest yesterday. The Bulls’ press office has yet to release an official statement.”

“Busted!” said Frank.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### WE THREE KINGS

1 JANUARY - NEW YEAR'S DAY

FITTING SO many people around the kitchen table the next morning proved to be somewhat challenging. Rudy's mother and her sisters, together with Helen and Francois, turned up just after eight o'clock, laden with small presents for the holidaymakers. "We three Kings", Rudy's mother called the trio of sisters, even though they had all inherited slightly different surnames.

Breakfast preparations had begun an hour before—Trevor heard the sounds of natter and work through the thin walls—with Mrs M and Doris taking the lead for their final meal in the lodge.

After a night of gentle lovemaking, Rudy and Trevor had finally dropped off at around two, wrapped in each other's arms.

On hearing Rudy's mother's voice next door, they showered and dressed together, and then, as Rudy stood by solemnly watching Trevor pack his case, he barely spoke a word. Despite Trevor providing what he hoped was a reassuring hug and kiss at every opportunity, Rudy's mood failed to improve.



"At least I don't have to repack this," said Trevor, holding up the empty condom container and raising an eyebrow.

Rudy's smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

Eventually they moved out to the kitchen, where conversations around the table already buzzed with excitement. Everyone had already taken their seats, so Rudy and Trevor squeezed in at the end near Helen and Francois. Cheryl sat next to Jenna—of course—and congratulated Mrs Mortimer on the spectacular party, while Jess cornered Francois about his career. As mounds of buttered toast and pots of jam landed on the table, together with bowls of fruit, a variety of juices, yoghurts, and heaps of fried food, Trevor guessed Mrs M wanted to use up as much food as possible before the ride home. Nobody appeared to mind much, with everyone tucking into the early morning feast.

"So," said Frank, looking up from his laptop, clearly bursting to broach the subject with Francois. "How about that teammate of yours? All over the internet this morning. What New Year's resolution do you think he's chosen?"

Francois let out a heavy sigh, shook his head, and put his mug down.

"He's such an idiot. Some of us knew about his little secret. Yeah, he'd probably have gotten stick from a few of the fans, maybe even some of the players, if he'd come out. But now I doubt even the gay community would give him any slack, even if he does decide to come clean. Not after vehemently denying rumours for so long, and then being caught in a public place. I bet money those lucrative sponsorships are drying up as we speak."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer bloke," said Johnny, then winked at Rudy. "What do you think, Rudy?"

Rudy merely shrugged, staring down at his mug of tea.

Johnny threw a quizzical look at Trevor, who grimaced and shook his head. Johnny understood instinctively and didn't pursue the question.

"So, Mrs Mortimer-King," said Frank, taking up the slack. "Trevor tells us you've been abroad. Anywhere nice?"

A good tactical diversion, as things went, because Rudy's mother told them about her trip to Vancouver, where both her sisters lived with their families. They'd chosen to go to Canada mainly because they wanted to be together for the first time in five years, but also because they stood a better chance of having a white Christmas. For the first time, also, she could leave Scotland, because Rudy would be around to take care of the rentals. Ironic, as things transpired, because they could have simply stayed at home. Nevertheless, they'd enjoyed incredible food, followed by the delights of sisterly retail therapy in Vancouver during the days that followed.

As breakfast ended, unbeknown to everyone, Frank dialled up Karl, Mary, and baby Connor on the video-conferencing app on his laptop. Still in the hospital, Mary appeared tired. Karl turned the laptop camera to take in his newborn lying in a plastic-framed cot, the tiny body orange-tinged. Karl, however, could not hold back his paternal pride. Elaine, Kim, Jessica, Cheryl, and Jenna all cooed in unison—causing Frank to choke on his tea.

"He's still in the incubator for now, classed as level-one neonatal because, as you can see, he has a slight case of jaundice. Other than that, he's doing really well. We hope to have him home in a week's time. His lungs are certainly strong enough," said Karl, taking charge while a tired Mary sat close by. "Hasn't stopped complaining since he arrived."

"Must take after his mother," said Frank, out of earshot.

Karl made a few more observations about little Connor,

clearly more excited than many of those listening, before Mary interrupted him.

"Look," she said, leaning into view. "I just wanted to thank you all for being so amazing. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and if I'd realised the baby would be premature, I would never have considered us coming in the first place. But as luck would have it, I couldn't have been in more capable hands. So I'd especially like to thank Brenda and Doris for taking care of me and the baby, and Helen for flying us to Glasgow. Will we have a story for Connor when he's old enough to understand. And mostly to Rudy, who had the foresight and common sense to call Doris and the specialist maternity hospital, to figure out Helen could fly us to Glasgow when the roads were blocked, and then for arranging the ambulance at the airport."

"You did all that?" asked Mrs Mortimer, clearly impressed, once Mary and Karl had dropped the call.

"And so much more," said Trevor, turning to smile at Rudy. "He's gone out of his way to take care of everyone this holiday."

As the last order of the day, they needed to figure out how everyone would be getting home. Even though the girls wanted to fly back to Glasgow with Helen, they decided car rides would be a more sensible method of travel. Anthony had brought his car and would drive Jessica home. Jenna had already arranged to ride back with Mrs M, Cheryl, and Trevor, while Frank and Johnny agreed to drop off Elaine and Kim on their way home.

After everyone had packed their respective cars, the farewells began.

When Trevor hugged Mrs Mortimer, she whispered to him, "Come back and see us whenever you like. Rudy's been happier than I've seen him in forever."

“Not this morning.”

“Oh, Trevor, he’ll get past it, he always does. Poor boy takes things to heart, has always felt things more deeply than Ivan. Just promise you’ll keep in touch with him.”

“I have,” said Trevor. “But it doesn’t seem to be helping.”

Finally, Trevor dragged a solemn Rudy away to the front windows in the lodge.

“Remember the night you showed me the snow falling?”

Staring out to the scenery, Rudy nodded.

“And then kissed me?”

A small smile crept across his face. Trevor followed Rudy’s gaze. Out across the lock, two birds flew together—his osprey friend?—towards an overhanging tree, where they both settled.

“I want to do that with you every Christmas. Whether or not there’s snow.”

With that, he pulled Rudy around, wrapped him in his arms, and kissed him. But Rudy didn’t really return the embrace, letting Trevor hold him but not hugging him back.

“Look, I need to go, Rudy. I promise to stay in touch, okay?”

All Trevor managed to elicit was a weak smile and a nod.

Sitting in the back seat of the Volvo, his body twisted around, Trevor watched through the rear window as the car moved away from the solitary figure of Rudy in the driveway, framed by the beautiful wild scenery.

Finally, his heart couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Cheryl, stop the car!”

“Have you forgotten something?” asked Cheryl, pulling the car to a halt.

"Yes, something like that," said Trevor, opening the door before poking his head back in. "I won't be a moment."

When Trevor trotted back down the lane, Rudy's head came up, a look of quizzical surprise replacing the one of desolation. Trevor stopped in front of him and held out his hand.

"Give me your phone."

Baffled, Rudy did as asked.

Trevor peered down at the screen.

"Can you unlock it for me?"

"Why? You have my mobile number. What are you going to do?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then unlock the damned phone."

Rudy did as asked and then handed the phone back.

Trevor found what he wanted, pushed his thumb on the app, and then raised the phone to his mouth, all the while looking Rudy in the eyes.

"I love you, Rudy Mortimer. I love you more than life itself. If you're ever feeling down, listen to this and remember that I'm out there somewhere, thinking of you. And somehow, I'm going to find my way back to you. That much I promise. Because I love you, Rudy, and I've never felt this way about anyone before."

With that, Trevor thumbed off the device and hit the play button.

*"I love you, Rudy Mortimer..."*

When he held out the phone and looked up into Rudy's eyes, a tear spilled down one of his new boyfriend's cheeks. The sight undid him, and he strode forward, folding Rudy into his arms.

"Rudy, I really mean it," said Trevor, feeling the

embrace returned. "We'll figure something out. But I need you to be strong. Can you do that?"

Instead of replying, Rudy nodded his head in Trevor's shoulder.

As Trevor went to move away, Rudy pulled him firmly back.

"I love you too, Trev. And I'm sorry I've been moody this morning, but I never knew how hard the reality of not having you here would hit me. But I also promise we'll both work at being together again."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### CLOSE TO YOU

22 JANUARY

DURING THE THIRD week of January, Trevor received a text message from Rudy to say he'd be in Central London for the day—connecting from a business meeting in the south—and could they meet for a drink somewhere. Since the New Year, Rudy had been rushed off his feet, helping his father with the business while his brother and sister-in-law took a skiing holiday in Europe. Somewhat cryptically, Rudy mentioned having something he needed to say, something that needed to be said in person. Ever since Trevor's return, they had been texting and calling each other daily. Trevor warmed inside every time he saw Rudy's name pop up on his screen, the feeling intensified whenever he heard Rudy's voice. Ever hesitant, though, Trevor wondered if, given time, Rudy would eventually cool off. But every communication since New Year had been white hot.

As luck would have it, Trevor happened to be in the premises of one of his restaurant clients on Edgware Road—the restaurant closed on Sunday—doing the owner a special favour. Using his own laptop and a portable scanner, he had

been finalising the books and getting everything ready to go off to the accountant at the end of March.

Once again he read the text suggesting they meet in a wine bar not far from the restaurant. Trevor could simply hop on a bus and arrive well before two. Just after midday, and not only was his stomach churning but his heart felt just about ready to jump out of his chest.

Right on cue, the restaurant owner unlocked the front door and strolled in. Marcus Fryne and his chain of restaurants called Old Country had become a big name on the London restaurant scene, and despite his celebrity status, Marcus came across to everyone who met him as genuine and down to earth. Trevor had even brought Cheryl and Jenna to his Shepherd's Bush restaurant once, and they had been treated like royalty. Not just that, but the restaurant had recently won a Michelin star award. Marcus knew how to put together amazing dishes. He also looked after his members of staff, and Trevor, as the man's bookkeeper-stroke-accountant—albeit a consultant—was treated as such. Best of all, Marcus was gay and had recently married his partner, Tom.

"I thought you guys were supposed to be honeymooning in Cairns," said Trevor.

"Despite the wonderful weather—it's summer down under—plus the amazing seafood, wines, and excellent diving, we came back after a week. On the fourteenth," said Marcus, parking himself in the other side of the booth Trevor had commandeered. "Tom missed his girls too much. So did I, if truth be told. Ah, here's the man himself."

Marcus' husband did not have Rudy's breeding, but there was something about his natural masculine attractiveness that also turned people's heads. Toggled out on this cold January lunchtime in simple jeans and navy turtleneck



sweater beneath a long grey trench coat, he moved with such ease and confidence. And Trevor couldn't help but notice the adoring looks from Marcus, his husband, as Tom slid into the booth next to him and pecked him on the cheek. *At some point*, he thought, *I need to hear the story behind these two beautiful, well-adjusted men.*

"Still, you've got a great tan, both of you. I must look like a vampire by comparison. So, anyway, as I was telling Michelle just now, your books are updated for all four restaurants. You've had record takings this holiday season, so well done. I've made a few recommendations of where you might want to offset some of your costs against tax when the time comes, but you'll have to let your official accountants decide whether that's feasible or not. Most important thing is that your accounts are all up to date. Now it's just a case of keeping them that way until it's time to submit."

"See what I mean? He's priceless," said Marcus, turning to Tom.

"So," said Tom, drawing Trevor's attention. "One of the reasons I'm here is because—and you can always say no—I need someone to look over my accounts. Marcus has been singing your praises about how much time and money you save him. At the moment, I've got a part-time bookkeeper, but I still spend almost a fortnight each year sorting through papers and invoices, and half the time I'm sure I'm missing things."

"I didn't even know you owned a restaurant."

Marcus laughed. "He owns a building company."

"Oh," said Trevor, and then shrugged. Accounts were accounts at the end of the day, irrespective of business type.

"No problem. What accounting system do you use?"

"Book ledger, box files, and spreadsheets."

Somewhat dramatically, Marcus dropped his head into his hands. This time Trevor laughed.

"I know, Trevor," said Marcus, looking up through his fingers. "I've been trying to get him to embrace the twenty-first century, but it's been an uphill struggle."

"Is it that bad?" asked Tom.

"Not really," said Trevor. "Your husband's a bit of a drama queen."

"You think?"

All three of them laughed.

"But the truth is, he's right. There are some great web-based systems out there that can save you a lot of time and effort. Depends on your business set-up. Let's arrange for me to come and see you, check through your current system, work with you and your bookkeeper to assess where we are with your accounts right now, and then I can make a recommendation and give you a quote."

Tom seemed genuinely relieved and grateful, and sent a silent *thank you* to Marcus.

"So, come on," said Marcus, an unspoken message passing between the two men. "Who's this mystery man Michelle told me about? The one you're meeting today?"

"Oh, God, Marcus," said Trevor, raking his hands through his hair. "I am so nervous. We met at Christmas and had this intense time together. I know this sounds corny, but I just felt at home with him. I didn't have to be someone else, I could just be me. Everything felt so...so..."

"Natural?"

"Exactly. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think I get the gist," said Marcus, turning and smiling at Tom. "So you really like him?"

"Of course."

"Then I don't see the problem."

"He is so far out of my league."

"According to whom?"

"According to me! He's from Scotland, the son of the Earl of Stratham, for heaven's sake!"

Marcus turned to Tom, chuckling.

"Does he like you?" asked Tom.

"I think so. At least, that's what he told me."

"Where are you meeting him?" asked Marcus.

"In a wine bar. Off the Strand. In an hour."

"Cancel."

"What?"

"Tell him to come here instead. Not only can I feed and water you both, I can also give you my honest opinion. My gaydar relationship score out of ten."

"Marcus," said Tom, his eyebrows lowering.

"Okay," said Marcus, holding his palms in the air. "No judgements. I'll just cook. You want to impress him, don't you?"

"I guess so."

"Then bring him here. Is he allergic to any foods?"

"No. At least, not that I know of. You see, that's the problem. I barely know him."

"Trevor," said Tom, putting his arm around Marcus' shoulders and kissing his partner on the cheek. "Believe me when I say this. That's half the fun, really getting to know someone."

Mrs M had used almost the same words to him over Christmas. Maybe he had been overthinking things—maybe he should simply go with the flow.

"Right," said Marcus, pushing Tom out of the booth. "I have food to cook. And you, Trevor, have a text to send. Tom, come and help me in the kitchen."

Left alone at the table, he sent a text to Rudy and

received an instant *okay* in response. Over the next half an hour, he finished off his work on the laptop before closing up the scanner and putting paperwork into a file.

Maybe there had been a small sound, a tiny rush of wind, or maybe he had sensed someone else in the room, but Trevor looked up to find Rudy standing there, a small holdall hanging from his hand. Weather-proofed in a long overcoat of charcoal wool, smart jeans, and oatmeal crew-cut sweater, he wore a red-and-green tartan scarf loosely tied around his neck. Together with wind-rouged cheeks and slightly tussled hair, he looked adorable. Trevor stood instantly and smiled, even though a sudden burst of nervousness filled him. Rudy's grin grew wide, his eyes filled with happiness.

"You made it."

"I did. Front door was open. I've locked it behind me. Don't want any random customers walking in, do we?"

They smiled nervously at each other before Rudy's gaze dropped to the floor and the smile drained away.

"How's Cheryl?" he asked.

"Back with Jenna. After her miserable holiday, I think the experience has woken her up. They're talking about moving in together—Jenna's idea—and even getting a dog. Small steps. Rudy?"

"Yes," said Rudy, looking up hopefully.

"Any chance of a hug?"

Rudy dropped his holdall, strode forward, and took Trevor's face in his hands, kissing him firmly and passionately before resting his head on Trevor's shoulder. Standing that way for a full five minutes, arms squeezed around Trevor's torso, rocking gently back and forth, eventually Rudy let out a huge sigh.

"I can't do this anymore," he breathed in Trevor's ear.

“Yeah, I—I know.”

Trevor let out a sad sigh of his own and deflated, emptiness filling him. In his head, he had been half expecting as much, but the sudden emotional wave that filled the empty void caught him unawares. Tears brimmed over, while his body trembled uncontrollably.

“Trev? What’s the matter?” said Rudy, pulling Trevor’s miserable face into view.

“I underst—” said Trevor, all he could manage, as tears ran down his cheeks.

“No, no,” said Rudy, smiling and shaking his head, wiping away Trevor’s tears with his thumbs. “I’m such an idiot. That’s not what I meant. Look, I—I’ve just been for an interview with my old boss. That’s why I’ve been down here. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to jinx anything. But he’s opening a new mega-gym in Shipworth—”

“In Kent?” said Trevor, his eyes widening. “That’s the town next to mine.”

“Yes, but let me finish,” said Rudy, his hands draped around Trevor’s neck. “He wants me to manage the whole thing—the fit-out, the operating systems, recruitment—and then run the gym for at least a couple of years. It’s similar to what I did in York, but on a bigger scale, so it’s not going to be an issue. The only problem is, even though he’s not going to have the official opening until May, I need to get back next week to get things rolling. And at the moment, I don’t have anywhere to stay—”

“With me,” said Trevor quickly. “Stay with me.”

A huge smile of relief blossomed across Rudy’s face.

“I was hoping you might offer. They’re giving me a decent housing allowance.”

“Nuh-uh. There’s only one thing I’ll need from you. And lots of it.”

Rudy pushed his nose into the side of Trevor’s neck, his lips brushing beneath the ear.

“That’s a given. But you need to let me take care of you, too. Deal?”

“Deal. And if you want,” said Trevor, releasing Rudy, “I can come back with you and help you pack.”

Rudy tilted his head in puzzlement before looking back at his holdall.

“I’m already packed.”

“Back in Scotland. Help you pack for your new life down here.”

“But I’m flying later this afternoon.”

“Yes, I figured you were. And I’ll need to buy a ticket at the airport if we’re flying together. Or don’t you want me to come back with you?”

“Of course I do,” said Rudy, aghast now. “Mother would be over the moon to see you. But don’t you have other things to do?”

“Not really. Yes, the house will be empty, but Cheryl will go and feed the goldfish if I ask. I’ve got all my work here on the computer. And next week I don’t have to physically visit any clients, so the least I can do is come help my new partner—wow, I really like the sound of that—pack for his future life with me.”

While Trevor had been talking, a broadly grinning Rudy had been checking something on his phone.

“How about a compromise?”

“Go on.”

“If I stay one more night—at your place, perhaps—to give you time to pack and me a chance to check out my bed in my new digs—”

“Our bed.”

“Our bed. Then we can both take the six-thirty train up from Euston tomorrow.”

“What about your plane ticket?”

“Not booked yet. I was going to get a standby at the airport.”

Trevor laughed happily.

“Then it’s a deal.”

Across the restaurant, he barely heard the two men framed in the open kitchen doorway, standing shoulder to shoulder, laughing too and clapping their hands.

“Are you done yet? Can we bring the drinks and appetisers?” asked Tom.

After pleasantly surprising Trevor with a very drinkable sparkling wine produced by a vineyard in Sussex, Marcus went on to impress Rudy with a traditional Scottish soup he introduced as Cullen skink. Trevor thought the name sounded like a character from a Charles Dickens novel, but Rudy knew better, though he had only ever tasted the one made by their housekeeper, Millie. When the main course came along—Marcus serving his delicious spin on the Scottish classic haggis, neeps, and tatties—Rudy insisted Tom and Marcus join them. Trevor sat back at one point, listening to the easy conversation between the three men, with Rudy promising to bring them to Scotland one day, for Marcus to meet Millie and grill her about recipes and Tom to do some fishing in the loch. While Marcus and Tom cleared plates and prepared dessert in the kitchen, Trevor and Rudy found themselves alone again. A very happy Rudy reached across the table and grasped Trevor’s hands in his own.

“I love your friends. They’re such easy company.”

“Technically, Marcus is my client. But I know what you

mean. Isn't it great to have clients you can categorise as friends?"

"Sure is. And what I meant to say earlier—and fucked up monumentally—is that I couldn't stand this geographical distance between us. I need to be close to you. I'm not sure I really believe in fate, but somehow everything feels right when I'm with you, when we're together, Trev. And I want to see where this goes."

"So do I." A warm feeling of optimism filled Trevor, and he lifted his wine glass in the air. "Let's do this, Rudy. Together. For the sake of old times gone by."

Rudy raised his glass and clinked it with Trevor's.

"To old times gone by. And new ones to come."

>>>>>> END <<<<<<<<





## SONG LIST

Season's greetings to one and all. In case you wanted to enjoy this story over Christmas accompanied by the music, here's the chapter song list with the artists included:

1. *Last Christmas* – Wham!
2. *2000 Miles* – The Pretenders
3. *Deck The Hall* – New Philharmonic Orchestra
4. *Mary's Boy Child* – Boney M
5. *Winter Wonderland* – Tony Bennett
6. *Imagine* – John Lennon
7. *Let It Snow* – Joe Williams
8. *Dear Santa (Bring Me A Man This Christmas)* –  
The Weather Girls
9. *White Christmas* – Bing Crosby
10. *Baby, It's Cold Outside* – Chris Colfer &  
Darren Criss
11. *Wintersong* – Sarah McLachlan
12. *Fairytale of New York* – The Pogues featuring  
Kirsty MacColl
13. *Stay Another Day* – East 17

## SONG LIST

14. *Santa Baby* – Eartha Kitt
15. *When A Child Is Born* – Johnny Mathis
16. *Silent Night* – G4
17. *Driving Home For Christmas* – Chris Rea
18. *Auld Lang Syne* – Mairi Campbell
19. *We Three Kings* – This Hope
20. *Close To You* – Carpenters