



JACKIE KESWICK

a Box of
WISHES

A WORDS & WISHES STORY

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A WORDS & WISHES STORY



A Box of Wishes

JACKIE KESWICK



Break In

Ryan O'Shaughnessy, baker, barista and owner of the Top o' the Morning coffeehouse, pulled his bike to a stop in Rothcote High Street as the church clock struck five. He switched off the engine and pushed the machine through the arched gateway into the courtyard. Shop fronts and windows lay in darkness, with the Christmas tree in the centre of the square the only illumination.

Ryan parked the Kawasaki in its usual spot and fished for his keys.

He loved the dark winter mornings when hoarfrost mantled the trees, loved the strings of golden lights that draped the spreading beeches along the High Street and gave the town centre an otherworldly feel.

When he reached the back entrance of the coffeehouse, his good mood vanished.

The security light lay in shards on the doorstep, and the door hung in the frame, half-wrenched from its hinges.

Ryan itched to rush in and take out his ire on whoever had violated his space.

Caution made him hesitate.

He didn't know who had broken into his business. Or if they waited for him inside. Helmet in hand, he stood in the frigid silence and listened.

No sound.

He pushed the door wider and flipped the light switch, then took a careful step through the door.

The kitchen was undisturbed, as tidy as he'd left it the previous night. The same wasn't true for his office. A kick had splintered the wood around the door's lock and the handle was gone, torn from its fittings. Ryan braced for destruction.

He found it inside.

Overtured filing cabinets, their contents in drifts on the carpet. Every drawer on his desk wrenched open and emptied over desktop and floor. The damage was wanton and pointless because the intruders hadn't touched the watercolour painting covering his safe.

Sweat dewed on Ryan's neck. Not money. Not his recipes.

"The box! Damn it!"

He dropped his helmet and sprinted for the bar. The metal-bound wooden box with its cloverleaf-shaped padlock sat beside the cash register, undisturbed.

Ryan exhaled in a huff, relief making his knees wobble and his hands shake. He ran a coffeehouse, not a drinking den. In the four years since opening Top o' the Morning, he'd never once had trouble. Break-ins and vandalism didn't fit into his worldview.

He slid his palm over smooth wood and chilled metal, assuring himself that nothing had harmed the Box of Wishes. And before he could change his mind, he reached for his phone and called the police.



The wet rasp of a rough tongue across his nose and cheek jerked Ben awake. "Morris! Leave off." He pushed the cat's face away, grabbed the big fur ball and sat up, cradling the tabby to his chest. "Shit."

Ben had tossed and turned for half the night. The last time he'd glanced at the clock, the green numerals had read 03:47. He must have dozed off after that and snoozed right past his wake-up call.

"Without you, I'd get the sack," he told his purring companion.

Morris didn't argue. He nudged his nose under Ben's chin, urging him to do more than talk.

Ben took the hint.

He climbed out of bed, wincing as his bare feet touched the chilly wooden floor. Keith had taken half the furniture when he'd moved out, including the sheepskin rugs they'd brought back from a holiday in Yorkshire.

Ben was grateful that Morris had always been 'his' cat. The idea of coming home to an empty house at the end of each day didn't appeal to him at all. He cuddled Morris closer and buried his face in the soft fur as he made for the kitchen. "I wouldn't have let him take you. I like you too much to be without you, big boy."

Ben set the cat on his feet and opened the cupboard where he kept the cat food. "What do you fancy for breakfast this morning? Nice tuna or a bit of dead cow?"

Morris settled beside his mat. If Ben dawdled any longer, he'd stand up on his hind legs and wave a paw. Ben loved the manoeuvre, and—in need of something to cheer him—he opened the food packet, emptied the contents into Morris's bowl, and waited.

As if he knew what Ben expected, Morris rested one front paw on the cupboard door and stretched the other in a high five, mewing his request for breakfast.

"Aren't you lovely?" Ben stroked the striped head and the tiny button nose before he set the plate on the mat. "See? Nice Morris breakfast. Right on time."

His own breakfast wasn't so easy to find. His cupboards were bare. So bare, he'd gone to bed without dinner the previous night. He needed to go shopping before he headed home, or at the very least pick up a kebab or a pizza on the way.

His stomach growled in agreement. Ben ignored it. Not having a cup of tea to start the day with was worse.

Keith had never failed to wake Ben with a cup of tea. It had been one good thing—towards the end, the only good thing—about living with him. It had also kept Ben from throwing the cheating sod out long after he should have.

Ben pushed the memories away and returned to his bedroom to get ready for the day. Finding food wasn't difficult. His daily commute passed a supermarket, a petrol station, and a couple of coffee shops.

The real problem was finding a decent cup of tea.

The stuff in the station canteen was stewed-to-death undrinkable, and he hadn't yet sunk so low that he'd consider coffee an adequate substitute. He added milk to his mental shopping list, mourning the loss of milk floats and the clink of bottles in the early morning air.

Christmas was a fortnight away, and the weather matched his mood. A thin layer of frost covered his car and thick clouds hung low, muting the glow from the streetlights. The damp chill bit at his exposed skin, reminding him of his time in uniform, patrolling the streets of Manchester. Cold, damp days were the quieter times on the beat. People who had the chance to stay indoors did so.

Ben had found the same pattern when he'd moved across the country to be with Keith, and when he'd switched from uniformed officer to plain clothes detective. The workload hadn't changed—far from it—but his hours had been a little more predictable, and he had loved the work. Then Keith had left, and Ben—confidence shaken—had traded dealing with people for dealing with data. Facts had no agendas and didn't lie.

For a while after the breakup he'd become a recluse, a loner who spent his time at work dealing with facts, and his time at home cuddling with his cat. Now the lure of facts alone was waning. People and their problems drew him once more and Ben wondered what he had on his desk that might hold his interest. The monthly crime statistics... He made a face. Finding new leads in that dreary stack of misdemeanours wasn't likely. He usually had better luck picking up one of the longer-running cases for review. Fraud cases were intricate, with many strands to unravel. He was good at prising out new leads, so—

His phone rang.

“Hobart.”

“We’ve had a report of a break-in at a coffeehouse in Rothcote. Can you head over there and take point?”

Seemed they were short-staffed again. Or the patrols were all out dealing with other shouts. A hint of excitement warmed Ben’s mind. Hadn’t he just wished for something less predictable than facts? And Rothcote was on his way, even if skirting the town was faster than driving up the High Street and stopping at each of the four traffic lights.

“I can be there in a few minutes. What’s the address?”



He found Top o’ the Morning just off the High Street in a small courtyard that also housed a knitting shop, a store selling fishing rods, a hairdresser, and a furniture arcade. Festive decor brightened each shop window, and a large Christmas tree, decorated in white except for one red bauble, occupied the centre of the square.

Should he celebrate Christmas? He could buy a treat or two for Morris, wrap them, and arrange them under a tree. Or was it pathetic to—

Negative, defeatist thoughts were common after a long night spent near sleepless. Ben acknowledged them, then put them aside. He was here to work. Contemplating Christmas trees could wait.

Golden light spilled from the coffeehouse’s windows along with the enticing scent of freshly baked goods, and Ben’s stomach woke up and roared its displeasure.

Inside, the scent of warm bread twined with the aromas of sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon and made his mouth water. Almost as much as the man behind the counter.

Ben stopped in his tracks. Blinked. Had he just...?

He had.

In his defence, he'd have to be blind to ignore *this* man.

The barista wore a dark green apron over close-fitting black jeans and a long-sleeved top. He was slight, with warm brown eyes, a mobile mouth, and shoulder-length auburn hair that he'd pulled back into a tight tail. And the mirror running the length of the wall behind the bar showed him to be just as decorative from the back as he was from the front.

“Good morning, sir,” he greeted when Ben reached the bar. “How do you like your caffeine?”

“What?”

The man gestured, lips stretching into a welcoming smile. “You're up early and barely awake. How do you like your caffeine?”

“You reported a break-in,” Ben said. “I'm DS Hobart, Northamptonshire Police.”

The smile grew a little wider. “I knew you weren't one of my regulars. Thank you for coming so quickly. Now, before you ask me all your questions, can I offer you breakfast?”

Ben stared longingly at the ham and cheese croissants that must have come out of the oven not long since. His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't just skipped breakfast, but dinner, too. First things first, though. “Would you have tea?”

“Of course. Grab a seat. I'll bring it right over.”

It wasn't standard procedure for investigating burglaries, but if the owner of the coffeehouse needed to look after people to keep his composure, Ben would let him do so.

He ignored the Christmas trees dripping baubles and ribbon at each end of the long room and sat in the nook beside the unlit fireplace, imagining a roaring fire in the grate and the coffeehouse filled with an afternoon crowd, enjoying scones and jam, Danishes, and cheesecake with their tea.

It was easy to do.

Despite the stainless-steel counter and the high-tech coffee equipment behind it, the room felt warm and inviting. A

space to stop in the daily rush and relax for a while.

Ben had spent much time in coffeeshops when he'd first moved to Manchester. Sat at a small table and read, baffled the baristas with requests for speciality teas, watched the other patrons and guessed at the kinds of lives they led.

Then he'd met Keith and his coffee shop outings had stopped.

Now he lived in a house with half the furnishings missing. With marks on the walls where pictures had told stories, and bookshelves that showed bare patches. He'd done nothing to the house since Keith had left. He'd stayed away from people and buried himself in work and workouts until he even forgot to go shopping for food. His home reeked of loneliness and heartache, with Morris the only bright, welcoming spot in his life. The tabby might go out for hours at a time, but he'd never desert Ben. Morris was loyal. Faithful. The way Keith hadn't been.

"Here you are." The barista's voice pulled him from his thoughts. The soft baritone fit with the space, as much as the Christmas lights draping the walls, the trees in the corners, or the wooden tray that held a proper teapot, a cup and saucer, and two plates. A large cheese and ham croissant lay on one, a cherry and white chocolate muffin on the other.

It was what Ben would have chosen if he'd placed an order. "You watched me," he accused, cheeks burning.

"That's my job." The man slid into the seat opposite. "I'm Ryan O'Shaughnessy. I own this joint," he said, and watched while Ben poured himself a large cup of tea, added a little milk, and raised it to his nose to inhale the fragrant steam.

"You reported a break-in," Ben began when he'd soothed his empty stomach with the croissant and muffin and had coaxed a third cup of tea from the pot.

"I did." Ryan's chin rested on his folded hands. He hadn't moved while Ben enjoyed his breakfast. "I found the back door forced when I got here at five. My office looks like

a tip. And don't worry, Detective. I only peeked in from the doorway. I've not touched a thing."

"You sound calmer than most burglary victims I get to see. Could you tell whether they've taken anything?"

Ryan's eyes narrowed. "Like I said, I've not checked. Nobody touched the cash register. I'm not sure if they even came in here. All the damage is in my office. They've upended my filing cabinets and turned out all the drawers in my desk. I don't know what they were after. Not money or my recipes, I don't think."

"Why not?"

"I lock my recipe book in the safe along with the petty cash, and the safe appears undisturbed."

"Your recipe book... I take it that's valuable?"

"My most valuable asset." He waved his hand at the furniture and equipment. "All this is insured. My recipe collection? Not so easy to replace. Though..."

"Yes?"

Ryan shrugged. "It's a recipe book. It's not much use to anyone but another baker. I mean... you can't sell it or anything."

"You'd be surprised what you can sell. Do you keep cash on the premises?"

"About two hundred in petty cash. That's in the safe. Front of house... most people pay by card. I keep a little cash on hand for change. Fifty quid at most. If there's more, I bank it at night."

Ben finished his tea and closed his notebook. "May I see your office?"

"Of course." Ryan led the way into the back of the coffeehouse to a small room that looked as if a tornado had paid a visit. It wasn't an unfamiliar sight, and Ben retrieved his notebook and got to work.



Inspicions

“You reported it, right?” Cara’s voice betrayed mounting anger alongside a hefty dose of concern.

“I’ve reported it,” Ryan sighed, not sure what had possessed him to call the police. Attracting attention wasn’t always a smart move. Especially not at this time of the year, when he had the box sitting on the bar. He could have covered the repairs and nobody would have been the wiser. But no, he’d reached for his phone and called for help.

As if Fate hadn’t wanted him to stop himself.

“Ryan. Are the police taking it seriously?”

He thought of the detective who’d arrived on the heels of his call. DS Hobart was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a sweet smile and sad eyes, wrapped in an aura of despondent grey. He’d appeared so lost sitting at the table in the nook, cradling his cup of tea as if it were something rare and precious, only to change into a focussed, confident officer the moment he’d set to work.

“They sent a detective round right away. He brought in the crime scene techs. They’ve photographed and fingerprinted everything and asked me about a thousand questions.” Very few of which had had anything to do with the break-in.

“Can you still open?”

“Sure. The cafe and kitchen are fine, so it’s business as usual for today and tomorrow. After that, it might get a touch dicey.”

“What? Why?”

“They made a mess of all my paperwork. I know I have no big orders for the next two days, and the freezer is full. After that...”

“So you’ll be filing.”

“Like a clerk.”

She laughed, knowing how much Ryan hated paperwork. “I’m sorry I’m not around to help.”

“You’re no better at sorting papers than I am. Where are you, anyway?”

“At a food fair in Tokyo. I’m collecting all kinds of yummy samples for you. The sweets are amazing. We had a demo this morning, where the chef created individual treats for each of us from layers of sugar paste and fruit jelly.”

“Wagashi?” Ryan loved his sister’s enthusiasm as much as her ability to distract him when he most needed it.

“That’s it. The apple jelly was out of this world. I’m bringing samples and recipes. I’ve found a couple of cookery books for you, too.”

“You remember I don’t read Japanese, right?”

“Yes, thank you. I don’t think it matters. They’re full of graphics and diagrams. They’re the bits you want.”

“If you say so.” Ryan headed to the kitchen, phone clamped to his ear. Cara was a buyer for a chain of delicatessens, and with a restaurant, a coffee shop, and two pubs in the family, she always kept an eye out for special recipes or unusual ingredients. Ryan had learned to pay attention to her comments. It allowed him to stay ahead of the trends.

“Any new coffee flavours I should know about?”

“Nothing that really floated my boat. Spiced teas are a thing this year. And almond blossom tea.”

She yawned so heavily that Ryan heard her jaw crack. “Go to bed,” he said. “You’re clearly worn out.”

“True.” She yawned again. “And I have more of the same tomorrow. Keep in touch, will you? And stay safe.”

“Always. You know that.” He ended the call, grateful for the reprieve it had brought and not at all surprised when his mind returned to the mess in his office, the strange questions

the police had asked, and the memory of DS Hobart sitting in the nook, cradling a cup of tea.



“Ben. A moment?” Detective Inspector Tarbert’s voice stopped him before he’d made it to the end of the hallway.

“Yes, sir?”

“With me.” Tarbert tilted his head towards his office.

Ben followed his boss, settled himself into the visitors’ chair in front of the inspector’s desk, and waited.

“You were first on the scene at the break-in at the coffeehouse?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Impressions?”

He’d pondered on the drive to the station how to phrase his report. “It’s a well-kept place. Welcoming. Warm. Immaculately clean, and popular.” The police van outside hadn’t stopped people from coming in to check on Ryan. Neither had it prevented Ryan from feeding everyone who needed food, including the crime scene techs and Ben himself. “The thieves forced the back door and tossed the office, but nothing appears to be missing.”

“According to?”

“The owner, sir. He checked once the techs had finished. The safe was undisturbed, as was the cash register.”

Tarbert made a note on his tablet, brows drawn tight as if he struggled with a choice. “Have you been to this coffeehouse before?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“You don’t know the owner?”

“Never spoke to him before this morning. What’s this all about?” Ben had wondered that ever since a detective

inspector had arrived from Northampton, and he'd heard the questions the man had asked Ryan.

"It's possible that this is more than a bungled break-in." Tarbert steepled his fingers. "There are rumours that the coffeehouse is a front for a drug dealer."

Ben wanted to point out how ludicrous a suggestion that was. He swallowed the words just in time. Since when did he feel defensive about the people he interviewed? Or convinced of their innocence when he'd barely met them? "Any evidence?"

Tarbert shook his head. "Not exactly. The initial report came through Crimestoppers roughly this time last year. The specialist unit followed up, but they've not seen anything untoward. We had another tip four weeks ago. And now this break-in. Since you were first on the scene and the owner knows who you are... maybe you should monitor the place for a bit."

"Using the break-in as cover."

"Yes. Any problems with that idea?"

"None. Do you suspect the owner, or do you think someone's making use of the coffeehouse?"

"Blow me if I know," Tarbert grumbled. "Strictly off the record, I can't imagine Ryan O'Shaughnessy of all people as a drug dealer. I know his mother, did I say? Fiercest woman I've ever met. It could all be hogwash or spite, but if it's not..."

"I understand." Ben stood and tugged his jacket straight. "I'll see what I can find out."

"Good man." Tarbert turned his attention to the next item on his to-do list before Ben had even closed the door behind him.



When his ma had taught him to bake, she'd also shown him how to make use of the freezer. Ryan was grateful for the

lessons as he shoved trays of croissants and cinnamon buns into the oven. His morning hadn't been peaceful. After covering the early breakfast shift, dealing with the police and his insurers, and finding a carpenter who could fix the back door in a hurry, he'd finally escaped into the kitchen after lunch for a much-needed stint of baking. But now he worked by rote, his enjoyment overshadowed by memories of the detective who'd sat in the corner booth, huddled over his mug of tea as if nobody had offered him comfort in a long time.

Ryan had never met anyone so distracting.

From cropped dark hair to slate blue eyes, Ben Hobart was gorgeous. He'd be devastating if he smiled. But the cloud of dark grey Ryan saw around him told a different story. The detective was lonely and heartsore and needed a bit of happiness in his life.

Ryan never argued with his other sight. Helping people find their slice of contentment made him happy. It was the reason he ran a coffeehouse.

"If I wanted to spend the day with grumpy people, I'd have opened a pub," he'd told his da more than once and meant it.

There were few things that a cup of something hot beside a plate of pastries couldn't cure. And for those ailments... The need to check on the Box of Wishes flared hot in Ryan's chest and Ryan didn't question it. He left the kitchen and headed for the bar.

The box stood where he'd placed it on the day of the autumn equinox.

Fashioned from rowan heartwood, with a long, metal-bound slot in the top, it might once have lived in the entrance hall of a country hotel, collecting letters for posting. Ryan had found it one summer in a tiny antique store in Connemara. He'd pulled it from between piles of trinkets, and the sudden fierce burn—as sharp as touching a live wire—had stopped his breath and brought tears to his eyes.

His mind had screamed at him to let go, to drop the box and run.

Ryan had held on.

He'd been running already, had been trying to escape his need to help others whatever the cost to himself, even as he knew he'd fail. Clutching the box hurt, but with the pain came understanding. He knew what the box could do and why he'd been the one to find it.

When he'd opened his coffeehouse, he'd taken to displaying the box on the bar between the autumn equinox and Christmas Day, during the part of the year when people sought solace more than at any other time. And whenever he felt Fate nudge him, he reached under the counter and set a small square of coloured paper on the customer's tray between the coffee cups and the plates filled with cakes and pastries. He added a marker pen to the paper and nodded when the customers dropped the square—now neatly folded—into the box after they'd written their wish.

Most did it with a sheepish grin or a tiny, embarrassed smile. Some didn't look at him at all. And only once had a customer asked him why he felt a sudden need to write on the coloured bit of paper and put it into the box.

"Because you need help and were ready to ask for it," Ryan had answered.

The bell jangled as a customer entered, and Ryan's mood brightened when he caught sight of the newcomer's face. "Alastair!"

"Hey, kiddo. Look at you, all grown up."

"Three months, big difference." Ryan couldn't believe his eyes. "Why didn't I know you were coming? No email in the jungle?"

"Forgot. What can I say? I love my job."

Ryan waved Paula away as she came to take Alastair's order. "I'll look after this one, don't worry." Then he turned to his cousin. "I'm baking. Come back to the kitchen and talk to me."

“What? Not even a cuppa to greet me?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “We’ll have a pot of tea, Paula. The Irish.”

She regarded Alastair from narrowed eyes, but then nodded, as if satisfied he deserved the special tea.

“Through here and to the right, just as before. Grab a seat while I get the croissants out of the oven.” The timer beeped right on cue, and Ryan’s eyes met Alastair’s. They were both grinning.

Alastair reached into the inside pocket of his coat. “Catch.” A cloth bag flew across the kitchen.

Ryan caught it right before it smacked him in the face. He buried his nose in the cloth and breathed the heady aroma of roasted cocoa nibs. “That’s gorgeous. Thank you! I knew there’s a reason I like to have you around.”

“Yeah? Then try these.” Alastair pulled more cloth bags from his coat, like a conjurer planning to impress his audience.

Ryan’s grin grew as he unwrapped cinnamon quills, anise stars, cloves, and allspice berries, each more fragrant than anything his suppliers offered.

“We’ll have the new harvest in stock by the second week of January. Let me know what you need.”

“Oh, I will. And thank you.” Ryan kept sniffing, loving the treats his cousin handed out as if they were nothing when he had at least a hundred quid’s worth of spices sitting on his counter. But that was Alastair all over. His older cousin was generous to a fault, rarely lost his temper, and always had Ryan’s back.

“Can I share these with my da?” His father, chef patron of a local restaurant, appreciated fresh spices as much as Ryan did.

“No need. I have a box for him as well. And one for Cara. I didn’t realise she’d brokered a deal between her boss and mine. Ruawal is pleased as punch.”

“Do Cara’s delis sell spices?”

“They do now. She suggested bundling spices into themed dinner kits, and they’re flying off the shelves. Fine by me. Means I get to go to Indonesia in the new year for more pepper.”

“Thank you.” Ryan took the tea tray from Paula and set it on the counter running the length of the back wall. He peeked into the pot, then replaced the lid to let the tea brew a little longer.

Alastair pulled up a high stool and settled with a sigh. His aura was dim, an uncertain green mottled with a wavering grey. With the smile gone from his face, his hair a dishevelled mess, and the layer of strawberry blond scruff covering his cheeks, he appeared more than usually travel-worn and tired.

Ryan hadn’t often seen him like this. Alastair was a snazzy dresser, stylishly turned out even after a night in a drinking den, or at the end of a trip around the world. “Does Aunt Nessa know you’re home?”

Alastair’s expression darkened. “I’m sure your ma will let her know.”

“Still not talking?”

“I’ll call her the next time I want a lecture.”

Ryan didn’t comment. Alastair’s mother didn’t get on with anyone. As a boy, Ryan had spent as much time avoiding her as he’d spent luring Alastair to his own home to hang out. When she’d returned to Ireland after the divorce, Alastair had stayed with his father and cousins, and now that he travelled the world for a living, he was less inclined than ever to break his journey in Dublin.

“What would you like with your tea?” Ryan set down a tray of golden croissants that oozed chocolate. “I also have iced buns, lemon drizzle cake, and apricot Danishes.”

“You think I need fattening up?”

Ryan gave him a measured look. Down. Up. Down again. “You won’t catch a single piece of arse looking like you do right now. Sleep’s what you need. And a shower and shave. I assume you’re just off a plane?”

Alastair moved his shoulders as if he needed to work out the kinks. “You assume correctly.”

“And you still don’t sleep on flights.”

“Also true.”

“Right then.” Ryan snatched up a plate and filled it with two slices of lemon drizzle cake, an iced bun, two chocolate croissants, and an apricot Danish. “I made millionaire’s shortbread yesterday, but that won’t go with the tea. I’ll make you a bag to take home with you.”

Alastair’s smile had wilted edges. “You don’t have to stuff my face every time I walk through the door.”

“I don’t have to, no. And I promise to stop the moment you no longer need it.” He poured himself a cup of tea and reached for a slice of lemon drizzle cake.

Alastair had been part of many of Ryan’s firsts. It had been Alastair who’d stood beside him when he’d come out to his family. Alastair, who’d accompanied him to his first night out at a gay bar. Alastair, who’d been with him on his road trip across Ireland. He’d been with Ryan in Connemara when Ryan had found the Box of Wishes. And he’d turned out his own pockets to help Ryan buy the thing.

Ryan was more than happy to return the many favours, starting with looking after Alastair when he hadn’t slept for a day or more and his aura had less colour than a rainy day. “Where have you come from?”

“Singapore.”

Ryan raised a brow at the one-word answer and tried to work out what time it would be in Singapore. Late. Or very early. He poured tea and set the cup in front of Alastair. “Tell me later,” he said. “When your brain’s in the same time zone as your coat.”

Alastair picked up his cup and took a sip. The tension flowed from his shoulders as he sighed. “Don’t fuss. It’s tired I am and no mistake.”

The wavering green of Alastair's aura called him a liar.
“That's not all that ails you.”

That drew a chuckle, but no confession. “You see far too much, kiddo. But I'm not blind, either. Why's there police tape around your place?”



Questions

Across town, at his desk at the police station, Ben doodled on his blotter. He'd spent the afternoon working through updates on the drugs traffic in the area and had read everything they had on file about Ryan and the Top o' the Morning coffeehouse.

Neither set of information amounted to very much.

In the westernmost corner of the county, drugs offences made up a tiny percentage of local reported crime, and the main trafficking routes ran well east of the county boundaries. The closest Ben had come to a drugs case since he'd moved to Rothcote was by assisting the neighbouring force in an arrest.

The information about Ryan's coffeehouse was just as scanty. A Crimestoppers report, a comment made to an officer during a community outreach session, a complaint about customer parking, and the resulting follow-up reports. None of their checks had found drugs or a connection to a dealer.

"Yeah, well." Ben shut down his computer and tidied the files away. "I can't picture Ryan as a drug dealer, either. And I'm supposed to have a knack for assessing people's characters with a look or two."

A knack that failed when you met Keith and fell for the cheating sod.

"Oh, shut up!" Ben muttered, aware he'd given the negative thoughts far too much room in his head. Besides, what had happened with Keith was irrelevant. Ryan might have caught his eye, but Ben wouldn't let the attraction interfere with his job. He needed facts, and the morning spent in the coffeehouse had yielded a bunch of them.

Ryan O'Shaughnessy got a kick out of looking after people. He greeted his regulars by name, joked with customers he didn't know, and reached for their chosen pastries before they'd even placed their order. He'd refused to talk about the break-in until after he'd fed Ben a delicious breakfast. And

he'd cared for the crime scene team while they worked, supplying sandwiches and muffins alongside tea and coffee.

The coffeehouse felt more like a home than business premises. And for the first time in months, Ben had been as content with another person as he usually only was with his cat.

He'd wanted to return to Ryan's coffeehouse, he just hadn't expected to do so while working. Tarbert assigning this case to him made sense, though. Seeing Ben at odd times would neither surprise nor alarm Ryan, while it gave Ben a chance to verify the reports about Ryan handing out small packages to his customers without being obvious about it.

Ben stopped for groceries on the way to the coffeehouse, stocking up on frozen pizza, steak and ale pies, battered haddock, and chunky chips. He bought cat food and treats for Morris and even remembered to buy milk. Christmas music and gaudy decorations were everywhere he turned, and as he parked beside the Christmas tree in the courtyard, he wondered about the single red bauble in a sea of white tinsel, baubles, icicles, and stars. Its placement was neither an accident, nor was it random. Did that mean it was a signal?

It was, for now, an unanswerable question.

The coffeehouse smell drew Ben out of his car. And his day grew brighter when Ryan O'Shaughnessy looked up at the jangling of the bell over the door and smiled.



"Thank you!" Ryan whispered to nobody in particular when Ben Hobart stepped into his domain for the second time that day. He'd hoped to see the sexy cop with the sad eyes again, but he hadn't expected that Fate would be quite so prompt to grant his wish.

Ben turned to close the door, and Ryan's gaze caught on the beautiful V made by wide shoulders and narrow hips.

Before the detective had reached the bar, he'd cut a slice of banoffee pie and placed it on a plate beside a turkey and cranberry relish-stuffed panini.

“What’s your poison of choice at this time of the afternoon? Still tea? Or coffee?”

“Tea,” Ben said, an apology in his tone. “Sounds silly, perhaps, in this age of coffeehouses, but I don’t like coffee all that much. And I’m a bit of a tea nerd.”

“I’ll not argue with that.” Ryan allowed more of his Irish accent into his voice. “There’s little that a good cup of tea can’t fix. That’s what my ma says.”

“Reckon, she’s right, too.”

Ryan’s hands hesitated over the edges of the tray. Sludgy grey surrounded Ben, but Ryan felt none of the physical symptoms that would make him reach into the cubbyhole under the bar for a slip of coloured paper. No difficulty catching his breath, no burning tightness in his chest, no pain in his gut forcing him to double over. Just a sad-eyed detective in an aura of grey. “Find yourself a seat. I’ll bring your tea right over.”

“You can’t keep feeding me. You’ve already made me breakfast, and the sandwiches at lunchtime were delicious.”

Ryan shrugged. “It’s time for afternoon tea. Go find a seat.”

“Let me at least take the tray.” Ben headed towards the nook, leaving Ryan to wonder why his gift wasn’t reacting to the detective. If anyone needed help, it was this man who stood straight and proud, but whose eyes and aura told a different story. Ryan wanted to take Ben home. Feed him, look after him, and help him replenish the energy he spent each day helping others.

The urge was insane, given that he didn’t know the first thing about Ben Hobart. He couldn’t say whether the detective was kind or mean, warm-hearted or cold, whether he took pride in his work or just counted the hours.

Ben was a virtual stranger and yet... Ryan recognised a kindred spirit, and it made him reach for a tea he reserved for special occasions. One that grew in a tiny corner of Ireland. It was a gorgeous tea: pale gold, with a delicate, floral aroma that blew Ryan away every time he brewed a pot. And having seen the care Ben had taken over his tea that morning, Ryan was sure he'd enjoy this one.

"Aren't you meant to be closing at three?" Ben asked when Ryan arrived with the teapot. "The sign on the door says so."

"It does. But I'm here, so why should I deny someone a cup of something warm?"

"Fair enough." Ben poured the tea and when he inhaled the steam, his eyes popped open wide. "Wow! That's a new one." He took a tiny sip and let it linger on his tongue. "Cornwall?"

Ryan shook his head. "Ireland."

"Nice. Very nice." He spied the cup in Ryan's hand and held out the pot. "You're joining me?"

"If you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I'd imagine you have questions."

"Maybe." Ryan drank his tea while Ben inhaled the panini and enjoyed his banoffee pie. He worked in a coffeehouse all day, but as he sat opposite Ben, watched the lights twinkle on the Christmas tree, and listened to the music, it occurred to him that he rarely shared a cup or a cake with anyone. And today he'd done it twice.

"You make the best cakes."

"That's good to know."

"I'm serious."

"So am I." The bell over the door jangled and heat flared in Ryan's chest. Sudden as a match set to petrol, and about as fierce. Ryan swallowed his gasp and pushed to his feet. "Excuse me." He slid out of the booth before Ben could reply.

The elderly lady at the bar wasn't a regular. She wore a cashmere coat with the buttons done up all askew and a pricey scarf twisted into a shapeless string. Signs, if Ryan had needed them, of her distress. Despite that, she offered him a tremulous smile.

"I'm so sorry," she said, in the most refined accent he'd ever heard. "It's past your closing time, I know. But I—" She took a deep breath and stared at the box beside the cash register. "I need help."

Ryan clutched the edge of the counter as the fire in his chest grew fiercer. He considered the woman's red-rimmed eyes and shaking hands while his other sight showed him her aura, pulsing and juddering through colour after colour. Bone-deep fear, no doubt about it. He reached into the cubbyhole under the bar, and pulled out a pale lavender square of paper. "Why don't you find a seat? I'll bring you a cup of tea. And a pen."

She took the chair closest to the Box of Wishes, and reached for the pen and paper before she ever touched her tea. Ryan watched her write a few words, then fold the square and drop it into the box. Her lips moved without sound in a wish or a prayer, and Ryan added a thank-you of his own.

The woman returned to her seat and picked up her teacup. Fear still darkened her eyes, but her hands were steadier now, her breathing less hurried, and the colours around her had slowed their crazy whirl.

Ryan resisted the urge to comfort and reassure her. Once past the emergency that brought them to his coffeehouse, most of his customers returned to valuing common sense above all other considerations. The woman might feel embarrassed she'd sought his help. Or angry. He'd been faced with both and had learned to leave well enough alone. The emergency was over. Any comfort and reassurance he sought now was for himself.

A wave of lethargy followed the pain, and Ryan braced himself before his shoulders sagged so much that Ben noticed.

Ben.

The cop hadn't moved from his place in the nook, and his steady regard brought the comfort Ryan had wished for moments earlier. He settled back on the bench and picked up his teacup. "Sorry about that."

"No need to apologise. You're running a business. You look after your customers. That's how it works, isn't it?"

"Most of the time, yes." Ryan's inner sight claimed his attention. Had the grey hue surrounding Ben grown a few shades lighter, or was he imagining it? Shame he couldn't simply ask.

"Are you okay? You look a little..."

"Peak? Long day."

"I bet. But that wasn't what I was going for."

"No?"

"When I came in, you looked relaxed, pleased about something, even."

Ryan thought back to the moments before Ben had arrived. "I was. Pleased, that is. My favourite cousin turned up. That's always a good thing."

"Are you close?"

"We used to be. I don't see him all that much these days. He travels for work, is out of the country for weeks at a time. And he's a bit of a workaholic."

"That seems to run in the family." Ben's tone was dry, his eyes on the cast-iron skeleton clock over the bar.

"Sure." Ryan didn't argue. "Do you have any news about that break-in?"

"No, not yet. I stopped by to see that you had your premises secured."

"The carpenter finished half an hour ago," Ryan said. "New doors, new locks, new security light. I'm all set for the night."

"Think about installing a security camera."

“Inside or outside?”

“Both, if you’re asking me. Have one watching the back door, and one wherever you expect the most trouble inside.”

“But that’s just it. This is a coffeehouse. We don’t have trouble. People come for food, for a break, or for business meetings. They sit, drink their coffee, and talk. I’ve never even had to break up an argument. Not like one of my uncles. He runs a pub, and that’s all very different. He has cameras in the hallway outside the bathrooms.”

“Not having booze in the mix helps, I grant you. Have the camera watch your office, then. Still no idea why someone wanted to search it?”

“Beats me. I’d understand if they’d been after money. I might even understand it if they’d nicked my recipes. My sales receipts and purchase orders? That makes no sense.”

Ryan watched Ben across the teacups, not wanting to break up the comfortable accord until he realised that Ben was doing the same. “How much longer are you on shift?”

Ben checked his watch. “About done for the day. The patrols in town know to check the courtyard on their rounds, and I’ll stop by on my way to work. I know it doesn’t sound like much, but—”

“It’s a deterrent. I get it. And I’ll make sure I have a pot of tea ready for you tomorrow morning.”

A wave of red engulfed Ben Hobart’s face. And Ryan loved it.



No extra furniture had materialised while he’d been at work. The bare patches on the wall hadn’t gained fresh memories and the gaps in his rows of books still resembled missing teeth. But when Ben settled on his couch with a pizza, a pot of

tea, and Morris draped over his lap, his home felt much less lonely.

He ate his dinner with half an eye on a documentary about the Titanic, while he took stock of his day. From the phone call before he'd left for work to his afternoon in the coffeehouse, nothing had been routine.

Was this the reason he felt so different?

It couldn't be the new case. He hadn't interviewed victims or witnesses in a while, but he investigated break-ins all the time. He drank tea all the time, too, provided he didn't forget to buy milk. Neither his selection of tea nor an exciting new case had ever made the world feel that much brighter. Not even his Morris had managed that.

Ryan O'Shaughnessy, though....

The man moved like a dancer in the narrow space behind his bar, turned and shifted and leaned while he reached for mugs, plates, and teapots. He watched his customers, anticipating their orders as if it were a game he played with himself, and smiled when he found he'd guessed correctly.

Ben didn't want to think of Ryan as a drug dealer, but he couldn't ignore the reports. Not after he'd seen what the tip-off had described: Ryan reaching under the bar and handing a customer a small paper packet.

"It was a sheet of paper, not a packet. And the woman wasn't an addict," he reminded himself. Her hands had been shaking with fear not need, Ben would swear to that. She'd reached for the pen and paper with near desperation, had written a few words and had dropped the paper square into the vintage box that stood beside the cash register.

At no point had the paper been out of Ben's view. He was also sure that the lady had removed nothing from the paper, nor had she added more than ink to it. Had she been placing an order?

It hadn't felt like that at all.

"If I'd been in a church," Ben told Morris, "I wouldn't have batted an eyelash." Then he froze, surprised by his train

of thought. He wasn't a churchgoer, but the brief scene he'd witnessed in the coffeehouse had made him think of faith. "The woman was asking for help and Ryan was... a conduit. A man with a direct line to a higher power."

Morris grew restless on his lap, and Ben picked him up and cuddled him. "I know it sounds silly, big boy. I won't mention it to Tarbert just yet. Not until I know a lot more."

Knowing that he had a reason to hang out in Ryan's coffeehouse, that his boss had ordered him to get acquainted with Ryan O'Shaughnessy... that sent him to sleep with a smile on his face.



Ryan was rolling out croissant dough when his phone rang. "Answer call," he said.

"Ryan! Cara just told me you were burgled. Why didn't you call us? What did they steal? Did they take the box?"

"No, Ma. They took nothing. Not my recipes, not the change, not the box."

"Then what did they want? And why didn't you ring?"

Ryan rolled his eyes. He loved his ma, of course he did, but her intensity could be hard to take. Especially when she got an idea in her head and didn't listen to anything he said. "I've no idea what they wanted. They wrecked the back door, kicked in the door to my office, smashed the furniture, and tossed my paperwork. I'm going to have a hell of a time filing it all again."

"That is a tiny annoyance, Ryan, a trifle compared to losing the box. Maybe... Maybe you shouldn't leave it out in view."

And there they went. "Ma, we've talked about this." Ryan wanted to run his hands through his hair. He stopped himself just in time. "It's not my choice. And locking the box

away at this time of year isn't a good idea. We're all as busy as." He heard his mother's sigh as if she stood beside him. "Alastair is home," he said to distract her. "He wandered in while the carpenter was fixing the back door."

"How is he?"

"Jetlagged. Tired. A little... off." Ryan dusted flour over the dough before he flipped it, folded it into thirds, and started rolling again.

Alastair's aura had held more grey than green. He'd also evaded Ryan's questions. Gone was the cousin who shared his passions with all and sundry, and Ryan most of all. Alastair no longer raved about spices, or enthused about his travels, and the quiet contentment that had drawn Ryan into his orbit had all but disappeared.

"Maybe all the travelling is getting to him," Ryan said, not believing it.

"Maybe he needs to fall in love."

"Ma. Just because he's a bit down doesn't mean he needs to fall in love."

"No, of course not. But he's not been the same since he split up with that boy. Troy, was it?"

"That was six years ago. He was fine until... I don't know... last spring? And I'm not sure he and Troy ever broke up. They graduated and drifted apart. That happens."

"Not to someone as single-minded as our Alastair," his mother disagreed.

Ryan kept working his dough. He'd met Troy twice while Alastair had been at uni and he remembered little of the two of them together. "I don't know, Ma."

"Me neither. How about you? Have you made a wish yet?"

"No, Ma."

"Ryan..."

“Don’t, please. I’ll know when it’s time for me to make a wish.”

“I don’t like it. You hurt yourself for strangers. You should be happy, too.”

Ryan didn’t bother to correct her. She never heard him, anyway. “I am happy, Ma. You know I am.”

“No, I don’t. I know you love your coffeehouse. I know you love to help whether someone’s hungry or in pain. But you’re always alone, Ryan.”

“I spend my days surrounded by people. I couldn’t be lonely if I tried.” He thought of Ben Hobart, who’d visited the coffeehouse at various points during the day, as he’d promised. Now there was a man who was lonely and didn’t deserve it.

Ryan looked forward to Ben’s visits, to serving him tea and cakes, and to see a little of the hurt melt from his eyes. Ben’s aura was brighter than it had been the first time he’d stepped into Ryan’s coffeehouse, a gorgeous slate-blue that reminded Ryan of his favourite scarf.

“I’ll be fine, Ma,” he said. “The police are keeping an eye on the coffeehouse.”

“The police? Or one particular officer?”

“Ma!” Ryan stared at the phone. “I know you don’t have second sight. Who snitched on me?”

“It’s true?”

Ryan sighed, knowing she’d prod until he answered. “The detective who responded to my call lives in the next village. He stops by on his way to and from work.”

“And you like him?” His mother’s voice rose at the end of the sentence, though Ryan knew it wasn’t a question.

“I’ve barely met him.”

“And?”

“He’s cute. And sad.”

“Of course, he is. Did the box recognise him?”

“No. So while he looks sad, he doesn’t need my help to change that.” The words sounded clipped, almost bitter, and Ryan checked himself. “Sorry, Ma. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Don’t apologise, Ryan. Of course you meant it. And, of course, you’re right. I shouldn’t push. I just wish...”

She hung up without saying goodbye, and Ryan hoped she’d forget about it rather than call back to apologise. Apologies changed nothing. They never had.

He’d always been the one in their vast family who saw the world differently. His ability hadn’t brought him joy or earned him gratitude and it had taken him a long time to realise that most people were content with their misery. That they didn’t want his help to fix their problems.

Ryan had faced outrage, anger, and fists until he’d learned that people felt better if they fixed their problems themselves. Maybe Ben Hobart’s frequent visits, the smiles that grew more successful every time he stepped through the door, showed he was doing just that.



Offers

The aromas of coffee and vanilla drifted into the courtyard on waves of laughter and cheerful music, advertising the season of comfort and joy. Ben pushed back the hood of his coat and stepped into the scented warmth. The bell over the door announced his arrival, and Ryan's smile—luminous with delight—welcomed him. But it was the fact a bright, cheerful *'Sorry, this table is reserved'* sign had kept the space in the nook for him, when there wasn't a single free chair or barstool in the coffeehouse, that sent heat into Ben's cheeks and butterflies into his stomach.

A week after the break-in, Ryan still smiled when Ben turned up. It didn't seem to matter that he had neither suspects nor promising leads for the attack on Ryan's business. As promised, Ben stopped by the coffeehouse at least twice a day. And Ryan would sit with him for a few minutes each time, and they'd talk.

He'd learned much about the Irishman in those conversations.

He knew Ryan's parents owned a restaurant, his sister was a buyer for a chain of delicatessens, and his favourite cousin travelled the world buying spices. Ryan's uncle ran a pub, and Ryan had other cousins who owned and managed a hotel. Looking after people was a family trait, and Ben had given up arguing, or even feeling awkward, when Ryan brought him not just tea, but sandwiches, croissants, or cakes.

This afternoon, a capacity crowd filled the coffeehouse. Ben was sure that Ryan would have no time for more than a brief greeting. He was wrong. The teapot arrived, along with a grilled beef and cheese sandwich and a plate of shortbread. And Ryan joined him a short while later.

"It's as busy as I've seen it," Ben said when Ryan had taken his first sip of tea.

"Christmas party time. Love it or hate it."

“Which is it for you?”

“I like the buzz.”

Ben’s gaze homed in on the shadows under Ryan’s eyes. “How long did you work last night?”

“Honestly? No idea. I kept baking until I couldn’t tell flour from powdered sugar, and then I crashed in the break room.”

Ben frowned. He understood dedication to a job and working long hours. But this... this was... “Do you do that a lot? Work all night? Not go home?”

“Not often, no.” Ryan sagged a little. “And I didn’t mean to whine.”

“You’re not whining. I asked. So, please, tell me?” He poured more tea into Ryan’s cup and pushed it closer to his hand.

“Thank you. And before you put your worry-face on... I rarely work through the night. I’ve done it once or twice when we were catering a big wedding or charity event, but most times, a couple of hours extra will cover it.”

“Then what’s different this time?”

“My office.” Ryan knuckled his eyes and sighed. “The papers that got tossed around during the break-in? Four years’ worth of purchase orders and booking forms. I can’t work without having them in order, so...”

“You spent hours filing instead of baking.”

“I’m trying to make a dent in the mess, but I’m crap at paperwork.” He shrugged. “Never mind. It could have been worse. The girls do a fab job running the show out here, so I can work on getting things back together. But now Connie’s daughter is sick, and we have a rule about not coming to work when that happens.”

“Which is why you’re manning the bar when you should be baking.” Ben wanted to reach out and catch Ryan’s hand in his, but he couldn’t predict Ryan’s reaction to being touched in

front of customers. And by Ben, of all people. “Did you finish all your filing?”

“Don’t make me laugh. I’ve barely started. I’ll have to take a stack home tonight.” Ryan’s tone said that he didn’t relish the idea.

“Can I help?”

“What?”

“Can I help? I’m no earthly use in the kitchen unless you need the washing up doing, but I can put papers in order.”

“You’d do that? Oh man, I’d love you forever!”

The outburst was as heartfelt and genuine as the scarlet mantling Ryan’s cheeks. Ben saw no reason to retract his offer.



“You make a brilliant assistant!” Ryan stood in the doorway of his office. Ben had been working for a couple of hours, but already the place resembled an orderly workspace rather than the disaster zone it had been before. It was more than Ryan had managed in a week, even if he felt uncomfortable about putting Ben to work. “You’re so much better at this than I am.” Ryan replaced the empty teapot with the one he’d brought.

“Police. Paperwork. Comes with the territory. Also, I like things neat.” Ben sniffed. “What have you got there? That’s something different.”

“Extra strong Assam with Christmas spices.” He poured a cup of the copper-coloured brew and handed it across his messy desk. Ben Hobart loved tea, no two ways about it. He was knowledgeable about it, too, and a bit of feedback never went amiss.

“You blend this?” Ben asked after he’d taken his first sip.

“No. My sister found it. I told you she’s a buyer for a deli chain, right? Christmas-flavoured coffees are popular, so she thought I should give this a whirl. What do you think?”

“It’s... pleasant. Less ginger than my favourite chai, more cinnamon and cloves. I’d brew it longer, though. Make the tea come through more.” He flushed. “Sorry, not telling you your job or anything.”

“Don’t apologise. Customer feedback is good, and you’re more of a tea drinker than I am. I like tea, but you... I’ve watched you. Even when you’re barely awake, you take care with your tea.”

Ben took another sip, then set the cup down. “I suppose that’s true. Tea is... I can’t explain it, but it’s like a luxury and an adventure—at home.” He spun to face the stacks of papers, and as he gripped his forearms, the muscles bunched under the fine cotton of his blue shirt.

Ryan suddenly felt too warm. The fragrance of tea and spices wove through the room, a nudge towards something—what had Ben called it?—luxurious and adventurous. He moved closer and wound his arms around Ben’s middle in a loose hug. “Don’t be embarrassed,” he whispered into the side of Ben’s neck.

Ben had gone rigid at Ryan’s touch. When Ryan spoke, he jumped, startled. “Sorry,” he mumbled, neck and cheeks a sea of fiery red. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I get it.” Ryan tightened his arms, the feeling that Ben needed a hug stronger than ever, even when Ben stood unmoving. Or maybe because he did. “Why so jumpy? I promise nobody will come in. You’re safe here.”

“That’s not... I’m out, don’t worry.”

“Why then?”

“Bad breakup. I haven’t—”

“Did he cheat?”

“Yeah.” The word was a whisper. “It was my fault. Working long hours, studying for exams. And I’m so goddamn

annoying, the only way he could bear to stay with me was to find other men to screw.”

Ryan leaned his cheek against Ben’s hair, breathing in faint hints of shampoo, wood smoke, and a touch of something sweet he had no name for. “I hope you’re just quoting the douchebag.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Ben relaxed into Ryan’s hug in cautious increments. “Let it go. You didn’t sound that upset when this place got broken into.”

“It’s easy to fix a smashed door. You’re a very desirable man. Don’t listen to anyone telling you otherwise.” Not wanting to make things awkward, he dropped his arms, though he wished he could keep the hug going. “As soon as I’ve scraped together enough courage, I’m going to ask you out.”

“You what?” Ben spun around. His eyes locked on Ryan’s, searching, studying... and then his lips curled in the sweetest smile Ryan had ever seen. “Wait until you’ve slept and I’ll accept.”



Morris yelled his displeasure when Ben stepped into the hallway. He set down the shopping bags and picked up the cat, cradling him close. “I know, sweetie. I’m late and you’re hungry. Let’s get your dinner first, shall we?”

He kicked out of his shoes as he spoke and carried Morris into the kitchen. The tabby wound himself around Ben’s ankles as he washed the empty breakfast bowl and opened a packet of cat food. “There you go, big boy. Nice salmon.”

Morris scarfed his food, ignoring Ben.

“I see I’m in the doghouse.” He returned to the hallway to hang up his coat and retrieve the shopping bags.

Before he could leave the coffeehouse, a sizeable chunk of filing completed, Ryan had added to his haul. Instead of pie, defrosted and heated in the microwave, he would dine on flatbread smothered in chicken, green chillies, and cheese. There was even a custard tart for dessert.

Ben pondered drink choices and settled on red wine over Earl Grey tea. Ryan O'Shaughnessy had asked him out. That called for a bit of a celebration.

It wasn't until later, when Morris had decided that sharing the custard tart was better than sulking in the kitchen, that Ben considered more than the hug Ryan had given him or the fact that he'd told—actually told!—another person about his breakup with Keith.

"He left me alone in his office," he said to a purring Morris. "Let me see all his paperwork. It didn't bother him at all. There wasn't so much as an order for icing sugar that looked as if something was wrong with it."

Morris meowed, and Ben's grin grew wider. He loved it when Morris talked back. They could have endless conversations, and it used to piss off Keith no end. "Ryan's asked me out. If that goes well, you'll get to meet him, too."

The next meow sounded like a question. "I know I've only just met him. But I don't think he invited me out because he felt sorry for me." He stroked the tabby's head. "It didn't feel like a thank you, either. Did I say he hugged me? It felt good."

Custard tart finished, Morris settled half on the sofa and half on Ben's lap, inviting strokes. "I meant to ask him about the box and the coloured papers. Because really? It'd be a clever way to hand out drugs and collect the money. I didn't in the end because I found out he hadn't slept. Then I offered to help him put his office back in order."

Ben's mind refused to shut down.

He wondered if he should go shopping for rugs at the weekend, booted up the laptop and searched for dining tables,

chairs, a new chest of drawers... all the things he'd not had enough motivation to replace after Keith had left.

He thought about Ryan, who kept the coffeehouse open long after its advertised hours, who baked through the night, and who insisted his staff stay home—paid if he wasn't missing his mark—if a child was ill.

The box was a mystery, the dance of the coloured paper squares a riddle he'd yet to solve. But it was only a matter of time before he found the solution. Meanwhile, he could tell Tarbert that Ryan had no qualms about letting him see his books and papers, and they held nothing suspicious.



Help

“Damn it!” Acrid black smoke oozed around the door of the small oven. Ryan pulled out the tray and threw the charred remains of a cheese and ham croissant into the bin. He switched the overhead fan to a higher setting and flapped a dishcloth. “I need a fucking do-over button. For the whole damned morning.”

He’d shared dinner with Alastair the previous evening. His cousin had been wide awake. Body and mind still out of sync with English time, he’d quizzed Ryan about the goings-on around town. As a means to avoid answering Ryan’s questions, it had worked like a charm. It had also left Ryan exhausted.

Going to bed after one had made him doze past his alarm. Then he’d set the oven to pre-heat at a higher temperature to make up for running late, only to forget all about it. And the pot of tea he’d started at the same time was now stewed beyond redemption.

It shouldn’t surprise him that Ben wasn’t here yet.

Maybe it was just one of those days, though Ryan didn’t think so. All the tiny setbacks strung together gave him a creepy feeling.

Something was wrong.

He pasted on a smile and served the first of his regulars while worry churned in his gut. Ben had never been late. Ever since coming to investigate the break-in, he’d walked into the coffeehouse at twenty-five past seven. Every single day.

Now eight o’clock had come and gone, and there was no sign of Ben.

Ryan fixed coffees to go and bagged pastries and sandwiches while his gaze kept straying to the door, waiting.

Ben arrived when he should long have been at work. He wore neither coat nor jacket, and his face was pale despite the

winter cold. The colour of his aura wavered through shades of grey and sludgy yellow, and Ben's anguish sliced through Ryan like a knife.

It didn't need the sudden fire in his chest, or the vicious tug in his gut to propel Ryan into action. He reached into the cubbyhole under the counter and plucked a square of paper from the stack, a deep slate blue that matched Ben's eyes. He slapped it on an empty tray, then circled the bar and stepped into Ben's path.

"Ben? What's wrong?"

Too preoccupied with the horrors in his mind to breathe, move, and speak at once, Ben stood motionless in the middle of the room until Ryan wrapped an arm around his shoulder and guided him to the nook. He settled him on the bench, not on his usual one giving him a view of all the patrons in the coffeehouse, but on the seat facing away, so he wouldn't have to share his grief with anyone else.

"Ben! Talk to me." Ryan reached for Ben's hands and found them icy cold. "Tell me what happened?" He chafed Ben's fingers between his own, wondering how to get through to a man who wasn't hearing him and didn't seem to understand his words.

Ben needed help. The blaze in Ryan's chest made that clear. But Ben didn't know how the box worked, so how could he tell Ben to write a wish, if Ben wouldn't explain what had happened?

Paula arrived then, bearing a tray with a pot of tea, a slice of cake, and a small jug of milk alongside the blue square of paper and the silver marker pen. Ryan shot her a grateful smile, and nodded when she mouthed, *I'll mind the store*. He poured tea, added a tiny splash of milk the way Ben did, and set the cup in front of him.

"Ben. Drink. You need it."

The scent of tea reached Ben where Ryan's words had failed. Ben picked up the teacup and drank. Ryan waited until

he'd drained half of it before he prompted, "Ben. What happened?"

A deep breath shuddered out of Ben's chest, followed by a sigh that was almost a sob. "It's Morris. He was... I don't know... in an accident. I found him on the doorstep and there was blood everywhere. That's why I was late. I had to take... take him to the vet... and they said... they couldn't tell me... And I can't—"

Ryan hugged Ben's shoulders. He rubbed gentle circles on his back, hoping to soothe and comfort. His mind whirled, trying on this possibility and that, and coming up mostly empty. In the end, he settled for asking. "Who is Morris?"

"My cat. He's the only one I have. He goes out, but he's always there in the morning, wakes me up, better than any alarm clock. Today, he wasn't there when I woke. I thought he'd found something exciting on his walk, but when I stepped out of the house..."

Ben turned anguished eyes to Ryan then. Eyes so full of hurt Ryan almost recoiled.

"He's all I have," he whispered. "If he were..."

Ryan had heard enough. He pressed the silver marker into Ben's hand and set the slate blue paper square in front of him. "Here. Write your dearest wish. Then fold up the paper and put it in the box on the bar."

"What?"

"Write your dearest wish. It's important. It will help, I promise."

Ben didn't argue. He uncapped the pen, wrote two lines of which Ryan only caught the word *please*. Then he folded the little blue square into quarters and held it out. His hand shook.

"No." The pain in his chest restricted Ryan's breathing and turned his voice to rasp and gravel. "You need to put it in the box yourself and ask for help while you do it."

Ben rose, and Ryan scrambled off the bench to make room. He followed Ben to the Box of Wishes, wondering what he thought of Ryan's suggestion. Or whether, worried and imagining doomsday scenarios, he could think at all.

Ben dropped the little blue square into the box and then leaned on the counter, as if he had performed a Herculean task.

Ryan had seen other people act like this. He'd often wondered if asking for help could be as hard as it appeared. Or if all the work went into convincing the logical part of one's mind that magic was real.

He waited for the pain in his chest to ease, waited for the customary wave of lethargy, of Fate letting him know he'd done his job, but it never came.

The heat in his chest resembled severe indigestion that neither a drink of water nor a good rub with the heel of his hand could soothe. The sensation was growing stronger, and that made no sense.

Had Ben made the wrong wish? Or was there another person in the room who needed help? Was that why the pain was so fierce?

School rush was over, but it was still early enough that only six of the tables were taken. Ryan's gaze swept from customer to customer, but they were intent on their conversation, or focussed on their work. None of the men and women showed signs of distress. It was Ben, with his aura like grey sludge, who had triggered the familiar reactions. And Ben had made his wish and asked for help.

Frowning, Ryan stepped around the bar and pulled another square of paper from the cubbyhole.

This one was green.

Ryan's stash of papers was extensive, but no green square had ever come to his hand. More to the point, this shade of green was his own colour. And he'd never required the help he'd seen others ask of the Box of Wishes.

Until now.

Was Morris's case so desperate that it needed two wishes to fix it? Was the paper even meant for him?

Ryan never asked for reasons when he did Fate's bidding. His ability to gauge people's hurts and his body's reactions guided him well enough. Ben's aura was still a sludgy, wavering grey. And the pain told Ryan it was time to ask for help.

He picked up the pen, wrote his wish, and dropped the paper into the box with a silent breath of thanks.

Fate stopped nudging him. The fire in his chest dwindled to embers. And with the warmth came a swell of comfort that reminded him of his ma tucking him into bed when he'd been ill as a child. The wave was so strong he felt his eyes prickle with tears. He sniffled, unwilling to make a spectacle of himself in front of his customers. But when he looked up, he saw only soft, knowing smiles.

A few of the people smiling at him had learned what the box could do. With others, he'd argued over fate, faith, or the spirit of Christmas. Right then, none of that mattered. He tugged Ben back into the nook and they sat in silence, while somewhere in Rothcote a team of vets treated Ben's cat.



The animal hospital called just before the lunch rush reached its peak, and Ben answered his phone with shaking hands. "Yes, I can come right away," he said. "How is Morris?"

Ben's earlier panic had eased under Ryan's ministrations, but the fear was still there, flaring to life when the person at the other end of the line wouldn't give him any reassurance.

"They didn't say he was okay."

Ryan wanted to touch Ben's ice-white face. Wanted to wrap him in a hug and ease his pain. He knew it wouldn't

help. Ben would feel like his world was falling apart until he saw Morris was fine.

“It was the receptionist who called you. They might not know,” he reasoned, grabbing Ben’s car keys from the table. “Come on. I’ll keep you company.” Ryan didn’t trust Ben to drive in a way that wouldn’t get him killed. Not even the short stretch across town. He hardly registered where he was, so spun into his private hell, with his mind running disaster scenarios. But he went where Ryan directed him, and that was all that mattered.

The vet was smiling when he saw them.

Morris lay on a stack of towels in a small pen, an IV in one paw. His tabby coat was a mix of rough, untidy tufts and bald, sore-looking patches, but he was awake and mewed a welcome as soon as he caught sight of Ben.

“You can touch him.” The vet stood aside for Ben. “It was paint,” he said while Ben cradled the furry head and scratched around Morris’s ears, not bothering to hide his wet eyes. “Red paint, not blood.”

“But... but...” Ben stuttered in his haste to get the words out. “He was shaking and not responding when I found him.”

“The paint burned his skin, and he poisoned himself when he tried to groom it off his coat. We’ve cleaned him and given him fluids to help wash out the toxins. We had to shave patches of fur so we could treat the burns. But his heartbeat is strong, and he’s drinking by himself. I think he’ll be fine.”

Ben stroked the cat’s chops. “Can I take him home?”

“We’d like to monitor him overnight, just to make sure we’ve not missed anything. You can collect him tomorrow morning. He’ll be wobbly. Keep him inside, keep him warm, and watch him for the next few days.”

Ben’s face fell. No doubt he was thinking about his job, and Morris being alone in the house. Ryan touched his hand. “I’ll keep an eye on him during the day,” he said. “I can make

him a bed in the office and keep him company while you're at work."

"You... you'd do that?"

"Of course. It's no hardship. I like cats. And he's so very like you."

"Like me?"

"Sure." Ryan smiled. "He was trying to take care of everything himself. Not wanting to bother anyone."

Ben flushed a deep red, but the vet laughed. "You're describing cats, Ryan. They're independent creatures, more likely to hide away when they're hurt than to go to a human for help. But if Morris has the two of you to look after him, he'll be just fine."



Distractions

Ben slumped in the passenger seat of the car, mind numb and body leaden. He should be ecstatic. Delighted. Out of this world happy after he'd spent the morning convincing himself that the vet wouldn't be able to save his Morris.

It was surprisingly difficult.

Maybe the news needed time to sink in.

Ben wasn't a rookie copper. He'd been in fights, had taken part in dicey operations, had been attacked. None of these had scared him as much as finding Morris on his doorstep, unresponsive and covered in blood. He shied from the images his mind replayed and startled when Ryan linked their fingers together.

"You can stop now."

"Stop what?" Ryan squeezed his hand, and Ben felt a trickle of warmth and calm flow into him from the contact. Not a romantic touch, but grounding and comforting.

"You've been imagining the worst all morning," Ryan said. "Don't deny it. You're still shaking and your eyes are so... But you can stop now. Morris is alive and he'll be fine. The vet wouldn't say it if it wasn't true."

Ben ducked his head to hide the heat in his cheeks. "He's just a cat."

Ryan's fingers tightened almost to the point of pain. "Don't lie to me. Or yourself. He's not *just* a cat. He's your Morris. Your companion, who stayed with you so you wouldn't be all alone. He won't leave you now. You do him a disservice by thinking that he might."

"You'd make a good counsellor," Ben muttered, cheeks even hotter. He valued his cat more than he could explain to anyone. And he definitely wasn't as callous as that had sounded.

“I run a coffeehouse.” Ryan’s chuckle brightened the atmosphere in the car. “I get to listen to many people in a day. I love to cheer them up.”

“Yes, I can see that in you. The cafe isn’t *just* your business, is it?”

“It never was. If I’d wanted just a business in hospitality, I’d have gone for event catering.”

“But if you only catered events, you’d miss the people.”

“So I would.” Ryan let go of Ben’s hand to put the car in gear, and Ben missed his touch. “Could I ask a favour?” Ryan said once they’d left the animal hospital and headed back into town.

“Anything.”

“Would you come with me to IKEA? I need new chairs for my office. And a desk.”

“You also want filing cabinets. The thieves ripped out half the runners in yours, and those that are still in there are bent or cracked. The drawers will never close properly again.”

“I might not mind that one so much.”

“Lucky you. It would drive me insane every time I set foot in your place. Your insurance covers replacement furniture, right?”

“It should, as long as I take photos of all the damage. But that’s not why I didn’t have them on my shopping list.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not the greatest with a screwdriver. Building filing cabinets, with drawers and runners and all... It sounds like hassle.”

“It’s your workspace. Surely it should be more than functional.”

“You have that backward. The kitchen and bar are my workspace. The office is the purgatory required to keep the other parts running. I told you, I’m not a fan of paperwork, and I’m lousy at it. My da and my sister helped me with all the

forms I needed to start the business. If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't have got anywhere.”

“Not a fan of school, then.” Ben stretched in the passenger seat, delighted he'd learned something new about Ryan.

Ryan's need to make others comfortable ensured he was a good listener. And while he encouraged his customers to share their troubles, he wasn't prone to talk at length about himself.

“Gods, no. I took a business course in college alongside my catering and baking classes. But it's always been a means to an end.” Ryan negotiated streams of cars and rows of lights on the large roundabout. “What about you?” he asked when he'd joined the dual carriageway section of the A5.

“I enjoyed school. I couldn't be a detective if I hated paperwork. We have to document every little thing if we want to convince a judge. Sometimes, a tiny detail collected in one case can help solve another.”

“And I thought you'd look at someone and know.”

“Now, wouldn't that be nice? You learn to tell when someone's lying or holding back. Doesn't work consistently, of course, or I'd have seen my ex coming a mile away.” Having Ryan beside him eased the sting of bitterness thoughts of Keith brought in their wake. As did the brief brush of Ryan's fingers on his cheek. Ben wanted to return the caress, but he didn't want it to feel like gratitude when it was beginning to be something quite different.

“Maybe you need to take extra lessons.” Ryan didn't let him brood. “Or recruit my ma. I can't get anything past her, even now.”

“Do you try?”

“Rarely. I'm only going shopping because she's bound to call and ask if I've got my office back in order. And I don't dare tell her I'm procrastinating over assembling filing cabinets.”



Canvases and framed prints filled giant racks in the picture section of the store. Ben rifled through them, though his taste in home decor ran more to photographs he'd taken himself. Photography was another pastime he'd abandoned in the last year and while he trailed after Ryan, he wondered what else he'd lost or given up.

The first few weeks after Keith had moved out, Ben had relished the lack of arguments and snide remarks. He'd spent weekends on his couch, Morris on his lap, watching what he wanted without having to apologise. He'd ordered takeaway, not needing to justify his choices. And he'd loved the silence.

When the novelty of being by himself had worn off, he hadn't had the energy or the desire to trawl his collection of photos and choose new ones to frame, just as he'd not felt in the mood to rearrange his books, or shop for new furniture. He'd let Keith dictate his choices even once he was gone, and he'd slipped into a hole so deep, he'd been unable to see daylight.

Maybe a colourful print or several wasn't such a bad idea if it could entice him into making a fresh start.

"Seen something you like?" Ryan pushed a trolley laden with boxes. He hadn't stopped at choosing a desk, chair, and two filing cabinets. His trolley held potted plants, a lamp, packets of coasters, and a box of tiny Christmas trees, as tall as his hand from heel to fingertips.

"Don't judge," Ryan said, noticing Ben's gaze. "They're table decorations."

"Can't have candles?"

"Too many little ones running around during the day. I wanted something to make the place look festive, and these fit the bill. They light up, and we can clip the Reserved signs to

the branches.” He shot a sideways glance at Ben. “Which means less clutter.”

“So customers have more room for their laptops?”

“That too.”

Ryan’s excitement was cute and contagious—as intoxicating as kissing while sipping champagne.

And where had that thought come from?

A smile turned up the corners of Ben’s mouth. He shoulder-checked Ryan out of the way and took charge of the trolley. “I’ll guard your haul. You roam and find stuff.”

Ryan didn’t argue. Relieved of the need to navigate the aisles, he poked through the store’s nooks and crannies like nobody Ben knew ever did, exploring the quirky, the mundane, and the practical. Going shopping seemed as rare an event for him as it was for Ben. Ryan shopped with an eye for colour and vibe, adding small pictures, colourful cushions, and an enormous stack of cotton dish towels to his cart. All while smiling at total strangers and exchanging greetings with people he knew.

Ben followed in his wake, considering furniture and accessories for his own home. Modernist simplicity wasn’t his preferred style, nor was he ready to grab a trolley of his own and load it with everything he needed, but the idea of giving his home a makeover no longer made him want to hide, either.

“How about this?” Ryan held up a large doughnut cat bed, fashioned from maroon faux suede and soft cream fleece. “Is this big enough?”

“For what?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “For Morris, of course. I promised to look after him during the day, so he needs a bed. Right?”

“You don’t need to buy that for him! I can bring his bed from home.”

“And then take it back with you at night? Don’t be silly. You don’t have to drag furniture back and forth, and if Morris is staying with me, I want him to be comfortable.”

Ben spotted a tiny plush mouse in Ryan's trolley. A plastic litter tray. Two earthenware dishes decorated with paw prints. And a fishing rod with a feathery toy dangling from it. Where had his mind been while Ryan had added all those things to the cart?

"Ryan, he's a cat. He sleeps all day."

"Then he needs a comfy bed. So, is this thing big enough, or shall I get the next size up?"

"A stack of old towels will work just as well."

"I'm not making your cat sleep on old towels! He's going to be my guest, and he's going to be comfortable. End of." He dumped the doughnut bed on top of the trolley and started towards the checkout, leaving Ben to follow at his own pace.

"What's with this pile?" Ben asked while Ryan separated his purchases. The pile in question contained three large plushies, tubs of crayons, and colouring books. "You already have a stack of colouring books over there."

"Those are for the shop. They keep the little ones entertained, giving their mums a chance to have a chat. These and the toys are for my girls. They're running the place by themselves so I could go shopping."

"You didn't plan this trip, did you? You only came out because— Ow!" Ben's hand flashed to his ear, which stung from Ryan's sharp flick. "What was that for?"

"For being maudlin. I came with you to check on Morris. And when you offered to help me get all this stuff, I would have been stupid to turn you down," he said, as if the trip hadn't been his idea. "My girls are worth their weight in gold. I always buy treats for their kids when I come here." He set his purchases neatly onto the conveyor belt while Ben watched. "Good staff is a lifesaver. I learned that before I went off to college." He waved at the cushions and blankets on the pile. "There's more to running a business than paying a decent wage. It's about making my staff and their children comfortable, too." His cheeks reddened, and he turned his

head away, fussing with the items on the belt. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to rant.”

“I get it. After all, you’ve kept me from worrying all day.” Without making Ben feel he was being managed, too.

It was remarkable to be taken care of like this, and Ben appreciated the gesture.



By the time they’d checked on Morris, returned to the coffeehouse, and unloaded all of Ryan’s haul, it was late afternoon. Ryan, remembering how much Ben had feared that Morris would die, didn’t want to send the man home to an empty house. He stopped Ben with a beer while he rolled out a portion of the bread dough he’d pulled from the freezer that morning, and topped it with sliced beef, green chillies, and a generous layer of cheese.

His instant creation was a hit with Ben. They enjoyed the pizza sitting in the kitchen, beers to hand, until Ben decided he should assemble office furniture.

“Now?”

“Why not? Your office will feel more habitable with working furniture. Especially if the only stuff lying around are papers we haven’t filed yet.”

“Ben, it’s—”

“Fine.”

“Gone eight was what I meant to say.”

“So what? I can get all your stuff assembled tonight. You can bet on it.”

Ryan didn’t want to bet. He wanted to sit and chat with Ben.

It wouldn’t happen. Ben was fidgeting. Alastair did that when he was trying to avoid a tough conversation. Ben was

more likely fighting his worries, and Ryan didn't want to watch him go down that road. "I'll take that bet. You wave a screwdriver. I restock my freezer and supply you with tea. Do we have a deal?"

Ben pushed to his feet and turned towards Ryan's office. "You're on."



Three hours later, Ben's voice floated across the short hallway into the kitchen. "Right, that's that." The sound of the last drawer in his new filing cabinet sliding home reached Ryan a second after Ben's announcement. Then the man himself appeared, smiling widely. "See? I said it would get done tonight."

Ryan pointed at the clock. "With almost an hour to spare. Not that I'm not impressed, but you should have stopped ages ago."

"Don't make it sound as if I've worked non-stop. I didn't rush your pizza."

"I thought it found favour."

"Best pizza ever. If you grow bored running a coffeehouse, you can open a pizza joint. You'll have people queueing around the block."

"Thank you. Maybe when someone invents a forty-eight-hour day." Ryan rarely made pizza—his regular customers preferred toasties and panini—but tonight it had seemed the sensible thing to do. "Can I see it?"

Ben turned his head, hiding the blush in his cheeks. "It's your office. I warn you, though. It's still a mess."

"It can't be as bad as it was before you got to work."

"Don't bet on it."

Ryan followed him across the hall. Ben hadn't just assembled the new furniture, he'd taken apart the old, damaged pieces, too. They leaned against the wall, testament to the break-in.

"Wish we could toss them out. But you'll need them until your insurance company settles the claim."

"We can park all the stuff in the smoking shed at my da's restaurant."

"What if people want to smoke?"

"Not that kind of smoking shed. My da smokes his own food. Fish, mostly. Sometimes ham and sausage."

"And the shed stands empty in the winter?"

"Yes. He's too busy to smoke at this time of year."

"Right. If we load all this furniture in the back of my jeep, we can take it to your dad's place when you have time. Keeps it out of your way."

"You don't have to—" Ryan felt heat creeping up his neck and cheeks. "No. Sorry. I shouldn't say that. You're not making me feel like an idiot, so I shouldn't behave like one. Thank you. For all your help. Can I see my office now?"

Sleek beech-veneer filing cabinets had replaced his battered metal ones. Three bookcases lined the shortest wall, and a brand-new desk occupied the centre of the room. "Wow. I have more furniture in here than before, but the place looks so much bigger!"

"Decent storage makes all the difference. It will look even airier once we tidy all this stuff." Ben waved at the stacks of box files, folders, and loose papers. "Sorry about all the paperwork. I tried to—"

"Ben, stop." Ryan tugged him around by the arm. "You've done me a massive favour. Don't keep apologising for things that don't matter."

"You've done me a massive favour, too. I would... I felt so lost this morning. I took Morris to the vet, and then all I could think about was coming here. As if it was important."

“It was important. You can always come here if you need help. You know that, right?”

They stared at each other, the silence profound.

The oven timer broke them out of their trance. Ryan grabbed Ben’s hand and tugged him towards the kitchen. “Come on. You’ve worked your socks off and I have a late-night treat for you.”

While he’d been catching up on his baking—fresh bread and panini for the morning rush and cakes for the afternoon one—Ryan had also brewed tea and laced it liberally with red wine. Now he cut squares of spicy gingerbread and stacked them on a plate. “Hand me the teapot?”

Ben picked up the pot, lifted the lid, and sniffed. “Spiced tea?”

“And mulled wine. Just the thing to partner with my favourite snack.”

“Ryan...”

“What?”

“I’ve had three beers. No way can I have this and drive home.”

“Then don’t. It’s midnight. We can kip in the break room.”

“Are you serious?”

Gobsmacked was a cute look on Ben.

“Sure. As you say, we’ve both been drinking. And it’s icy out. I wasn’t planning to go home, and since you challenged yourself to a late-night furniture-building contest, I think you shouldn’t either.” He waved the teapot, making the heady aroma drift in Ben’s direction, until Ben smiled a truly heart-stopping smile.

“Thank you. I put the filing cabinets together, so I could delay going home. I just... I didn’t think I could sleep without Morris there. If you don’t mind me sleeping here...”

Instead of an answer, Ryan poured steaming mulled wine into a large mug and held it out.



Cat Sitting

Warmed by spiced wine and gingerbread, Ben fell asleep as soon as Ryan turned out the light. The long, fear-laden day had exhausted him more than he'd expected, and he slept without tossing and turning until Ryan's alarm scared them awake.

"I should make a habit of borrowing your sofa," he said when he joined Ryan in the kitchen, showered, shaved, and wearing the spare clothes from his go bag. "I slept like a log."

"Glad to hear it." Ryan sleep-walked through his start-up routine. He flipped switches and turned dials, eyes heavy-lidded, T-shirt only half tucked into his jeans, and hair sticking up in all directions. The scruff on his cheeks had a reddish tint, and Ben imagined its touch against his own freshly shaved skin.

"Can I help with anything? I don't think the vet will appreciate me standing on their doorstep at six."

"I need a shower. Could you watch the oven?"

"Is it likely to go anywhere?"

"Idiot." Ryan shoved a fist into his shoulder, but he was smiling. "Croissants are temperamental. I've set the timer, but keep an eye, please? They may have to come out early or bake a minute or two longer. I want them a deep golden brown. Not too pale."

"Right you are. Assam, not Darjeeling." Ryan shuffled out of the room, and Ben started a pot of tea. Despite the brief night, he was wide awake, feeling as if his feet didn't quite touch the ground. Whether to blame the spiced wine or the lack of sleep, he didn't know.

"Don't turn it into a mountain," he told himself. "You're just glad you're getting Morris back."

Ben found the tea—Ryan's well-organised cupboard making it easy—and he had a big pot ready when Ryan returned to the kitchen.

“Wow!” He let his eyes linger on Ryan in tight jeans and a fitted shirt. “Now you’re looking like you own this joint.”

“I always look like I own this joint.”

“Except when you resemble a stray who sleepwalked in.” Ben held up the pot. “Tea?”

“Yes, please. I’ll no doubt be drowning in coffee later, so I’d better start the day the right way.”

Ben poured. “I’m... thanks for yesterday. No, let me say this. You didn’t have to babysit me all day, or find stuff for me to do, so I wouldn’t have to go home.” He held out the mug. “I realised what you were doing, but I... I was too grateful to you to argue.”

“That’s okay, then.” Ryan didn’t meet Ben’s gaze when he accepted the mug. The hint of pink in his cheeks spoke of embarrassment. “It *is* okay, right?”

“More than.”

“Oh, good. I get bossy in a crisis. I wasn’t implying that you can’t manage by yourself.”

Ben remembered the unexpected comfort of Ryan’s hug. Perhaps it was time to return that boon. He set his mug down and wrapped his arms around Ryan’s middle. “You helped a lot.” He breathed the words into Ryan’s hair. “I don’t mind admitting that I would have struggled doing anything yesterday. I was out of my mind with worry.”

Ryan relaxed. He even gave Ben a little of his weight. And Ben held onto him until the second batch of croissants was ready.

The kitchen grew busy after that, and Ben spent the next hour emptying the dishwasher, grinding coffee beans, and ferrying platters of cakes, sandwiches, and stuffed croissants from the kitchen to the bar. He greeted Ryan’s regulars as if it was normal for him to do so, and even made a start at filing Ryan’s stacks of paperwork and stocking the new bookcases.

He never lost sight of the clock.

“I’m off to the vet now,” he said at ten minutes past nine. “Are you sure you still—”

“Yes. I’ll watch over your Morris and make sure he’s safe.”

Ben wanted to kiss him.

He shrugged on his jacket and reached for his car keys instead.

Anxiety spiked as he drove through the town. What if Morris wasn’t fine? What if something had happened overnight? What if—

He turned on the radio, but found that thinking about Ryan was a better distraction. Ryan, and their day furniture shopping and building.

Ben was used to being recognised when he went out. It was a side-effect of his job, even though he’d never patrolled Rothcote in uniform. People knew what he did and approached him if they needed help. He’d not expected to see so many people treat Ryan the same way. From the vet to people in the furniture store, Ryan had been recognised, nodded to, and waved at. And he’d not minded an iota. He’d not minded when people waved at Ben, either.

Not like—

“Get. Fucking. Lost!” Keith had left months ago, yet he was still taking up space in Ben’s life. “It’s time I stop giving you that power.” His voice rose over the chug of the engine. “You don’t deserve my loyalty.”

When he’d first realised how manipulative Keith had become, he’d needed a lifeline. He’d clung to those words while he psyched himself up to end their relationship. And he’d repeated them over and over after Keith had left, and Ben battled guilt over instigating their break. Maybe now he was ready to believe them.

He parked outside the animal hospital, and his heart soared when the receptionist greeted him with a smile.

“He’s ready to go home with you, Mr. Hobart. You’ll find him in room 1.”

Ben knocked and stepped inside the small treatment room, where the vet and Morris waited for him.

“He looks as if he’s been in the wars with hanks of his fur shorn, but he’s doing fine,” the vet said as he handed over the cat carrier. “He’s still a bit wobbly, so make sure he can’t injure himself. Keep him indoors and give the burns time to heal. If the bald patches get red or hot, or if he stops drinking or eating, bring him right over.”

Ben memorised the vet’s instructions. Morris wouldn’t be happy about the locked cat door, but the tabby lying hurt and unresponsive was a sight Ben wouldn’t soon forget. He’d do anything to prevent a repeat.

He left the animal hospital and loaded the cat carrier into the car. The drive to Ryan’s coffeehouse wasn’t long. Fifteen minutes at the most, and then he’d be holding his Morris again.



Ben’s beautiful smile, wide and blinding, lit the room, and he cradled the cat carrier as if it was his most precious possession. Ryan couldn’t help but smile back. A happy Ben, surrounded by a soft blue glow, was a gorgeous sight.

“So all went well, right? Come this way. Gods, this thing is huge!” Even when held against Ben’s broad frame, the cat carrier appeared enormous. Ryan didn’t remember Morris being a monster cat. “I’ve set up the bed and dishes in the office. It’s the quietest space in the back.”

“Thank you so much. I wouldn’t know what—”

“Oh, stop that. It’s getting old. It’s no hardship to look after Morris. Once you’ve properly introduced us, that is.” He

held the door beside the bar for Ben to push past and followed him into the office. “Did the vet say anything interesting?”

Ben set the carrier on the floor and knelt. “Only what he told us yesterday. Morris will be a bit wobbly. He’ll sleep a lot. We need to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself and the burns aren’t getting infected.” His fingers made quick work of the fastenings on the large wicker basket and when he lifted the door out of the way Ryan got his first look at an awake Morris.

Sensing freedom, the tabby pushed to his feet and climbed out of the carrier.

“Oh my God, the vet wasn’t joking, was he?” Ryan grinned as he watched Morris sway a little drunkenly from side to side. “Look! I’ve never seen a cat dragging his tail.”

Ben didn’t laugh. Nor did he respond to Ryan’s teasing. He swept the cat into his arms and cuddled him, nuzzling his face into the soft fur at Morris’s neck. “I’m so glad to have you back, big boy,” he mumbled, not caring that Ryan witnessed his outburst. He rocked the cat in his arms and for a while, Morris seemed perfectly happy to let himself be fussed over.

When he started to squirm, Ben set him on his feet. “This is a new place,” he said, as if the cat could understand him. “And this is Ryan. He’ll look after you today.”

They watched as Morris wobbled around the room, sniffing the hand Ryan held out to him before moving on to inspect the furniture. He ignored the litter tray, stopped by the dishes Ryan had placed beside the wall for a quick drink, and ended his circuit next to the maroon doughnut cat bed.

“I didn’t get why you put your jumper on his bed,” Ryan admitted. “But then... I’ve never seen a cat check things so carefully.”

“Cats do that with unfamiliar places. He maps it, learns where everything is.” Morris explored the edges of his bed, only relaxing when he reached the jumper. “And in a room full of new and unfamiliar smells, the old jumper is familiar.”

As if he'd heard, Morris plonked himself down right in the middle of the garment and curled up. He didn't go to sleep, though. He kept his eyes on his human.

Ben cooing to the cat and scratching his ears was the cutest thing Ryan had ever seen. He had no idea what Morris was like when he was unhurt and in familiar surroundings, but chances were good that he had Ben wrapped around his little finger. Ryan didn't want to interrupt the reunion, but he knew Ben was expected at work. The sooner he could send him off, the sooner Ben would be back.

Ryan found himself surprisingly eager to spend more time with Ben. Having Morris here would help with that.

"Any more instructions for me to follow?" He dropped his hand on Ben's shoulder. "I promise I'll take good care of him. I'll close the door, so he can't wander far, and we'll check on him all the time. He won't ever be alone for long. Okay?"

"You'll call me if anything happens?"

"I will. I promise."

Ben made a face, but he pushed to his feet. "I've never wanted so much to blow a day off work," he admitted.

He wouldn't do it, Ryan knew. He'd called in the day before with an emergency and he was too conscientious to do it two days in a row and leave others to pick up his slack.

Ben grabbed his jacket and hesitated before he cracked an almost successful grin. "Be good, the two of you."

And with a wave, he was gone.



"He didn't wait long to take over, did he?" Ben had a smile on his face and his aura was a comforting, deep blue as he watched Morris sleep in Ryan's new office chair while Ryan

perched on a wooden chair from the break room to order his supplies.

“He didn’t move from his bed for most of the day. Just as you said,” Ryan reported. “Then I decided to wrangle paperwork to keep him company and found him having a bath. A very thorough one. He even washed behind his ears.”

“I love watching him do that. And yes, I know that makes me a card-carrying sap.”

“Not in my book. I stood here and observed the process instead of doing paperwork.”

“Not a ringing endorsement, seeing how you hate admin.”

“Maybe not.”

“You could have moved him.”

“When he’s so comfortable where he is? Don’t be silly.”

Ben rubbed Morris’s velvety ears. “You’re a little shit, you know?”

Morris tipped his whiskers forward, then showed off all his teeth in a wide yawn. Ryan couldn’t hold back his grin. “I’m sure he’s aware, but he makes up for it by being cute. I kept checking on him all day, but he barely twitched until I came in here to work. It’s surprising how comforting it is, having company. Even if I keep looking over my shoulder all the time, making sure that he’s still there.”

“Can’t ever be lonely if you have a cat.”

There was so much weight in the words that Ryan almost choked up. “Spend Christmas with me,” he blurted.

“What?”

“Spend Christmas with me.” After just two weeks, Ryan knew he wanted to see more of Ben Hobart. And that he had no problem with his family knowing about it.

Ben balked at the suggestion. “I can’t. You’ve done all your planning and shopping and—”

“One more person round the table won’t make a difference. Neither will half a dozen if it comes to it. My cousins all have families of their own now. Alastair is home, and my sister is flying in on Christmas Eve. It’s a riot. We’re all used to huge gatherings.”

“Exactly,” Ben said. “Christmas is for families. I don’t want to impose.”

“You couldn’t possibly. Everyone in town who wants to poke their head in is welcome.”

“Here? You open the coffeehouse on Christmas Day?”

“Always do. It’s very cheerful. We set one long table in the centre of the room. Some people stop by for a coffee, others stay longer. Many of my regulars bring other people—and the Box of Wishes can get busy...”

Ben was silent, and Ryan didn’t push. They stood in the half-tidied office, their fingers brushing while they watched Morris sleep.

“About that,” Ben said after a while. “Can you explain it to me? The box and the papers and why some people—”

Ryan thought about it.

Fate had a way of helping when help was needed. And Ryan and the box were the means to make it happen. All people had to do was ask.

It wasn’t true for all cases, of course.

If someone asked to win the lottery to rid themselves of debt, nothing would happen. If they asked for help so their family wouldn’t be homeless... that would be a different matter. Even if it resulted in a lottery windfall.

Ryan had tried to explain it before, but even his ma didn’t grasp the distinction he’d been trying to make. Not surprising, since her idea of happiness had every member of her family partnered and settled down. She was a relentless matchmaker, and she thought all Ryan had to do was make a wish to that effect.

“Ryan?”

Ben's fingers tightened on his, and Ryan took another deep breath. Talking about his gift had brought him trouble in the past. Would Ben judge him because he was different? Ryan refused to believe it. He clutched Ben's hand and took comfort from the press of his fingers. "Do you... believe in magic?"

"A few days ago, I'd have said no."

"And now?"

"Now... now I know there has to be something else." Ben turned to him, and his eyes burned with intensity while the colour in his aura darkened to the velvet blue of a night sky. "I'm a police officer, Ryan. Before I became a detective, I spent three years in uniform. I've seen... all sorts. Even when I'm scared and out of my mind with worry, I can tell the difference between blood and red paint."

"Ah." Ryan had wondered about that himself. "When I handed you the paper and pen... what did you write?"

"Gods... I'm not even sure. Something like '*please, don't let Morris die*'? Does it matter? Can't you tip out the box and check?"

"No, I can't."

"What?"

"The box is locked for a reason."

"And that reason is?"

"To preserve people's privacy, of course. When people come here, they're... distressed. For many, asking for help is a last resort. You wouldn't want to have your wish laid out for all to see, would you?"

"Probably not. Have you ever opened the box?"

"It was open when I found it in Ireland. The padlock and the key were with it. I locked the box as soon as it was mine, and I've not opened it since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Seven years."

“And for seven years, people have been putting wishes in the box? It must be quite full.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? You mean it doesn’t see much use?”

Ryan released Ben’s hand and perched on the edge of the wooden chair, staring sightlessly at his computer screen. The trip to Ireland had been an escape. From himself, from his gift, from people who thought him a freak or worse, a meddling busybody. Finding the box had been... an unexpected boon. And in his need to be helpful, he’d almost made a hash of it. Again. Until he’d opened the coffeehouse and had established rules around its use.

“It gets busy,” he said. “Busier than you might think. Though these days, the box is only out between the autumn equinox and Christmas day.”

“And you know when someone needs the kind of help that—”

“I can see it. I... the colour is all wrong.”

“‘Colour’?”

“I see people... differently. Every person has a colour. You’re a blue. When you’re happy, your blue is bright, deep, and clear. When you came in wearing Morris’s blood, you looked grey and washed out.”

“So... the colour tells you when someone needs help?”

“The colour tells me how someone feels, when they need the kind of help the box gives. Then I reach under the bar and pick a paper square from the stack.”

“You’re the custodian of the box, then. You control access to it.”

“I suppose I do. What are you thinking?”

“That someone whom you didn’t give a chance to make a wish could feel resentful.”

Ryan saw the objection from a long way away.
“Wouldn’t they have taken the box rather than toss my

office?”

“Hm. That would seem more likely.”

“Yes. And another thing. When someone needs the kind of help the box gives, I can’t ignore it.”

“Why not? Does it hurt?”

“Yes. No. Not... precisely. It’s... uncomfortable and debilitating. My entire focus is on the person who needs help. I can’t do a thing until they’ve made their wish. I can’t deny anyone access to the box. Not even if I wanted to.”

Ben nodded. “Understood. But it never hurts to consider all angles.”

“Then spend Christmas with me,” Ryan said for the third time.

“Are you really that desperate for me to meet your favourite cousin?”

“Lame, Detective. I’m sure you can come up with a better deflection than that!”

“What if I was serious?”

“Ben, I want to see more of you. Which means, unfortunately, you’ll have to see more of my family. Christmas Day, while we’re on familiar ground, is a good day to meet them. My ma and da, my uncles, my crazy cousins, my globe-trotting sister, and—yes—my equally globe-trotting cousin Alastair. And—”

He raised both hands to ward off objections that Ben wasn’t making. In fact, Ben looked stunned.

“I didn’t realise...” A faint smile stole onto Ben’s face, and Ryan took it as encouragement.

“Come on, Ben. It’s going to be fun.” He wasn’t above a little pleading. “You’ve only seen the box work once before. Well, twice, but you know what I mean. You didn’t know what you were seeing. Christmas Day is the last day the box is out. And my regulars often bring people to the party who really need help. I can’t guarantee that will happen this year, but—”

“Okay, okay! I give in.” Ben’s barely-there smile grew into a soft chuckle. “You’re persistent, I give you that.” He crossed the room and ran his fingers around Morris’s velvety ears. “Do you think you can cope with a Christmas party, big boy?”

“He’ll be spoilt rotten,” Ryan promised, and Morris rubbed his button nose into Ben’s palm and purred his agreement.



Family

Christmas Day at the Top o' the Morning started before sunrise. Ben pushed through the door at twenty-five past seven and came face to face with Paula and Connie, busy setting out mini-LED Christmas trees on the long table, while Ryan scurried between the kitchen and his usual place behind the bar, hands filled with trays and plates. Music played. Lights glowed, bright and festive. And it smelled good enough to make Ben's mouth water.

"Oh, excellent!" Paula waved the moment she saw him. "We could do with a hand to move the last of the tables. Happy Christmas!" She breezed past him, then pivoted like a ballerina to stick her fingers through the grill of the carrier and tickle Morris's nose. "Hi Morris. You're going to be our VIP today. Or VIC, rather. You'll better get napping before it gets busy."

Ben grinned at her antics, amused by how quickly he'd become comfortable in Ryan's domain, and how quickly Morris had won over not just Ryan, but Paula, Connie, and Rebecca as well. All it had taken was Morris's half-shorn fur and his *'please, may I have food?'* high-five, and they were as wrapped around Morris's paw as Ben was.

As if he knew the kitchen was off-limits, Morris spent much of his day in Ryan's office, out of the way of customers and staff. Now and then he ventured into the break room, and once, when it had been quiet, he'd stepped into the main room of the coffeehouse, scrutinising every nook and cranny. The few customers present at the time had been delighted to see him.

Ben took Morris into Ryan's office. The tabby had returned to his sure-footed ways, and the chemical burns on his skin were healing. His fur still stood in ragged tufts, but Ben didn't care about that. Fur grew back, and health was more important than appearance. He watched Morris settle on

his bed for a nap, then hung up his jacket, and headed to the kitchen to bid Ryan good morning.

Ryan was hyper. He bounced to the music, arranging cakes on one plate and iced buns on another before crossing the room to check on the oven. The grin on his face could have doubled as a floodlight.

Ben watched him from the doorway. "You're cheerful."

"That's because it's Christmas!" Ryan sang, not interrupting his work. "Happy Christmas to you."

"And to you." Ben stepped into the kitchen. "You weren't joking when you said you started early."

"I never joke about that. The night shift workers will turn up any minute and then, in about an hour, it gets properly busy."

"Right." Ben rolled up his sleeves. "What can I do?"

"Have a cup of tea." Ryan nodded to the small table beside the oven where a pot of tea stood on the warmer beside a row of cups.

"I meant, what can I do to help?"

"I heard you. But I bet you haven't had tea yet, so do that first. Then Paula will be grateful for a bit of brawn to shift the last of the furniture."

"She mentioned that when I came in."

"Because it's important. I'll not have anyone sit by themselves on Christmas Day."

Ben submitted to Ryan's dictate and poured himself a mug of Christmas tea. This time it sang out its flavour at full strength, so delightful that Ben didn't even bother with milk. He drank the first mug slowly, enjoying the sight of Ryan at work, then poured himself a second mug and took it with him as he went to find Paula.

The next half hour passed with shifting tables and chairs, placing decorations, and assembling napkins and cutlery. The first night shift workers arrived as Ryan had

predicted, and Ben helped serve tea, cakes, croissants, and toasties.

“If you ever need a job, I’m sure Ryan will employ you,” Paula teased when he returned to the bar with a tray of used dishes.

“Reminds me of my school days,” Ben said. “I helped in our local during the summer holidays. Do you enjoy working here?”

“Love it. Rebecca was the one who met Ryan first. She brought us on board.”

“Is this why she has today off when you and Connie are working?”

“No. Her husband’s folks live in Brighton. That’s why.” She took the tray from his hands and disappeared through the swinging door, leaving Ben alone behind the bar. The banter and the smiles on all the faces left him feeling warm, inside and out. Every so often, he went to find Morris, just to give him a hug. He wished he could hug Ryan, but Ryan was still whirling like a dervish.

“Does he ever slow down?” Ben asked when Connie danced past with a fresh tray of mince pies.

“On Christmas Day? Not much. He’ll sit down when his parents get here.”

Ben flinched. The whirl and bustle of looking after people had made him forget that Ryan’s parents would arrive at some point. “Thanks for reminding me,” he grumbled.

Connie settled the tray on the bar, then merged the contents of two half-empty trays to make room. “You’ll get on like a house on fire, don’t worry. Ryan’s... well, he’s the odd duck in that family.”

“How do you mean?”

She scrunched her brows together as she thought. “Would you say he’s a people person?”

“Totally.”

“Just like the rest of his clan. But guess what Ryan loves to do when he has a day off?”

Ben tried to picture Ryan away from his coffeehouse and found that he couldn't. “I've no idea.”

“He packs a picnic and goes to sit on an empty beach. Unless he was joking about that, of course.” And with that, she was off again, clearing a corner of the long table as people were leaving.

The bucket on the bar jingled and clinked. On Christmas Day, Ryan didn't charge for the food and drink he served. He asked for charitable donations instead, and everyone chipped in.

“Ben!”

Inspector Tarbert and his wife stood behind him when Ben turned. “Happy Christmas, sir.”

“And to you. You're working two jobs now?” Tarbert's eyes twinkled.

“Helping. Keeping an eye as instructed. Why don't you grab a seat? What can I get you?”

“Just tea,” Tarbert said. “We're on the way to meet family. Callie suggested we drop in.”

Ben made tea and joined his boss at the long table. Callie Tarbert chatted with the couple next to her, giving Ben a couple of moments of privacy. He pointed at the Box of Wishes. “The source of all the trouble, sir. Not that I can spot anything amiss.”

“I hope that's not the only reason you're here today.”

Ben chuckled. “Not at all. Ryan's been looking after my cat and...” He shrugged. “I'd forgotten how many people I know in this town. And they all seem determined to remind me.”

“Treat it as a blessing. Besides, you used to have a knack for community policing. Nice to see it's coming back.”



“It’s gone ten, Alastair. Time to rise and shine.” Ryan passed from the kitchen to the main room of the coffeehouse, phone still clamped to his ear. “I’ve not seen Cara yet, but she’ll give you hell if she makes it here before you do.” He waited a heartbeat longer, but Alastair didn’t pick up. In previous years, his cousin had arrived early, helping and fooling around before ending up in the far corner of the room surrounded by children. Ryan had never worked out how he kept all the kids entertained for hours straight.

His absence this morning hadn’t gone unnoticed. Ryan had called him twice already, getting his answerphone each time.

Maybe Alastair’s phone had died.

Maybe he’d managed more than a nap.

Ryan shoved the phone into his back pocket. He’d give it half an hour before he’d try again, just in case his cousin was en route to the coffeehouse.

The cheerful chaos in his kitchen had settled, giving him a chance to take a breath and survey the main room. Groups of runners and cyclists had stopped by for tea and cakes, and now people passed in and out of the coffeehouse as if it were a busy day. The crowd around the table ebbed and flowed until the door opened and Ryan’s mother swept into the room.

“Ma.” Ryan rounded the bar to greet her. “I thought you’d forgotten to get out of bed.”

“Don’t be cheeky.” She wrapped Ryan in a hug. “I’m sorry we’re late.”

“It’s fine. Paula and Connie have only just left, and Ben’s been a champ. Come have tea.”

“I’d much rather give you a hand. You must have been spinning like crazy.”

He had, but since he enjoyed it, he hadn't minded at all. "First you must come and meet Morris."

"Is that your detective? I'm sure you said—"

"Wait." He lead the way into the back and cracked the door to his office. Morris sat up and meowed a greeting. "Hi, big boy. Would you like to meet my ma?"

"Oh, my... precious! Look at you." Before Ryan could blink, she'd scooped up Morris. She cradled him exactly the way Ben did and nuzzled her face into the cat's neck in just the same way, too. "Isn't he lovely?" She turned in a circle, holding the cat in her arms. "And your office looks so much brighter, too."

"Ben came shopping with me. And put the furniture together."

"Yes, I was wondering who you'd call to help with that."

"Ma!"

"What? You've never had an affinity with power tools."

"Rub it in, why don't you?" Ryan grumbled, but he couldn't hold back his grin. "Morris looks after my office for me when I'm not in it, and keeps me company when I am."

"Where did you find him?" She brushed her hands over Morris's ragged coat. "And what happened to him?"

"He's Ben's. He was in an accident last week. I'm watching him while Ben's at work. And I told Ben to bring him today because he shouldn't be home alone."

"Who? Ben or the cat?"

Both of them, really. Not that he wanted to make a big song and dance about it. "Cara isn't here yet," he said. "Or Alastair."

"Sleeping in, I suppose? It wouldn't be surprising. Java's a long way away."

"Singapore."

“What?” She took Ryan’s chair and settled Morris on her lap. “Cuddling you is like carrying a baby around,” she said to the tabby. “That hadn’t even occurred to me.”

“Alastair was in Singapore,” Ryan said. “I’ve called him, but he doesn’t answer.”

“He’ll turn up. You know how he is with the jetlag.”

“Yes, I know. And he looked exhausted. But... Ma, he’s sad. Really sad. I’ve... I’ve tried to get him to talk about it.”

“No luck?”

“None.”

“That’s our Alastair. Ignores anything that makes him uncomfortable or pretends there’s nothing wrong. He’ll come around.”

Ryan hoped she was right. Alastair shouldn’t look so weary.

“Cheer up. He’ll be here, all sheepish about sleeping past his alarm, you’ll see. If he doesn’t show, your da and I will drive by his place later and check on him. As for Cara, she’s stuck in Toronto. We’ve been on the phone with her all morning. That’s why we’re late.”

“Oh no. Is she in trouble?”

“Snowstorm, closed the airport. They had enough warning, so she’s still in her hotel.”

Ryan felt another pang of regret. He’d not seen his sister in two months, and now he’d not see her for Christmas either. “That’s a shame.”

“Aim for New Year. She’ll call you tomorrow, unless she’s on a plane. Doesn’t want to make today crazier than it already is.”

Morris lifted his head, demanding chin rubs, and his mother complied immediately. It was cute beyond belief, and it made Ryan smile. “He’s trained me to do that, too.”

“He’s a clever boy. When are you going to introduce me to your detective?”

The door to the office swung open before Ryan could reply, revealing a smiling Ben. “There you are. Your dad is looking for pink peppercorns which aren’t pepper at all? That’s beyond me.”

Ryan blinked twice before Ben’s words registered. He’d dragged his ma off to meet Morris and hadn’t thought about introducing Ben. His mother wasn’t giving him a chance to perform proper introductions, either. She jumped up and headed towards Ben, Morris once more cradled in her arms. “So... you’re the detective?”

“Ben Hobart.” Ben stuck out a hand, then chuckled when he realised Ryan’s mother didn’t have a hand free to shake. “We can do the handshakes later. Morris doesn’t like to be jostled.”

“And that matters to you?”

“Of course. He’s been training me for years. I won’t show him up by displaying bad manners.”

He grinned, and Bridget narrowed her eyes at him. “Dutch courage?”

Ben’s smile grew even wider. “Paula may have doctored my tea before she went. I’ve already met your husband, and he needs Ryan to find pink peppercorns. Please come sit with us. Nobody should be alone today.”

Ryan groaned. He’d never seen Ben as bouncy as this, not even after three beers and a mug of mulled wine. “What has Paula been feeding you?”

“Christmas spirit, I think. Go find the pink peppercorns,” his ma admonished and traded grins with Ben.



DI Tarbert had been right twice over. Ben used to love community policing, and he had done little of it in the last year. He’d made up for it today, exchanging a few words with

everyone who'd come through the door. He'd even introduced himself to Ryan's father and uncle without Ryan there to back him up. Nobody made a fuss over his presence as he joined Ryan and two dozen other guests around the long table, sharing food, drink, and company.

Ryan didn't serve a traditional Christmas dinner, since he never knew how many people would walk through his door. Instead, he offered Christmas food buffet style.

Platters piled high with slices of turkey, ham, and roast beef sat at the ends of the table, with plates of sides and finger foods in between. They'd set out chipolatas wrapped in prosciutto, phyllo pastry triangles stuffed with spinach and pine nuts, bite-sized tarts filled with pesto and roast tomatoes, goat's cheese and watercress, caramelised onion and walnuts. And the coffeehouse's long bar offered trays of Christmas cake, shortbread, and mince pies for those who wanted to end their meal with something sweet.

"I need an extra-long run tomorrow." Ben patted his stomach and watched Ryan check his phone. "You've been fiddling with that thing all morning. Anything wrong?"

Ryan typed out a message before he shoved the phone into his pocket and faced Ben with a lopsided smile. "I don't understand why Alastair isn't here. He's usually the life of the party. Now he doesn't even answer his phone."

Ben had heard that story from three different people. "Your dad said he struggles with jetlag."

"I know. But why doesn't he at least answer his phone? It's Christmas Day."

"Maybe all he wants to do is sleep. Does it worry you that much? Do you want me to call my colleagues? Send a car to his place to check on him?"

Ryan's eyes popped wide. "Don't be silly. That would be..."

"What?"

"A waste of police time," Ryan's father called from the other end of the table. "Ryan, you can't look after everyone."

Alastair's a grown man. He probably had a few to help him relax. Just let him sleep."

Ryan breathed out. "You're right. I'll try him again later." Then he pointed. "Just look at that cat!"

Ryan's mother had fallen under Morris's spell. The tabby lay sprawled across her lap, snacking on slivers of chicken and turkey. He basked in the cuddles and attention until Ben wondered if Morris had felt lonely living in a half-furnished house with only Ben for company.

"You okay?" Ryan leaned until their shoulders touched. He kept a weather eye on everyone, making sure nobody at his end of the table was without food or drink. Ryan's father did the same at the other end, and Ben could have watched the two of them until the cows came home. Physically, Ryan resembled his mother. But his mannerisms, the way he worried about people and made sure that everyone had what they needed... that was a trait he'd got from his father.

"Ben?"

"Hm?"

"Are you okay?"

Ben settled his palm on Ryan's knee and squeezed. "Relax. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I was only wondering whether I was leaving Morris alone too much. Just look how he's loving all the attention."

"You're not leaving him alone. He's coming here every morning. And before you beat yourself up, he actually waits for you to turn up after work. It's like he has a built-in timer."

"He does. He wakes me just before my alarm goes every morning."

"That's just weird."

"No, cats."

They smiled at each other, and Ben leaned a little more. When he'd attended a break-in at a coffeehouse, he'd not

expected to meet someone like Ryan: a man who was sexy and sweet, who found pleasure in looking out for others. Ben loved every minute he spent in Ryan's company. Could he dare hope for more? Should he try? "Did you mean it?" he asked, for once without second-guessing himself.

"Did I mean what?"

"That you want us to see more of each other?"

"I wouldn't joke about that." Ryan settled his palm over Ben's and twined their fingers, not caring if others could see. "You already agreed to go out with me."

"I did, didn't I?" Ben kept hold of Ryan's hand. In all the craziness, Ryan's invitation—and his own acceptance—had slipped his mind. But with Morris safe and Ryan's parents okay with him here... "Your dad said he'd cook for us. Do you think there'll be pink peppercorns?"

"We'll not have our first date at my parents' restaurant. I want to enjoy time with you, not watch my back!"

Ryan beamed and Ben smiled back, glad to be exactly where he was.

To his relief, there was no need for Ryan to dive behind the bar in search of squares of coloured paper. He couldn't forget his fear for Morris and it had given him an idea of the level of despair that triggered the box. He didn't wish that on anyone, especially not on this day, when anyone who needed help would have to brave a crowd of cheerful people.

Knowing he had other, much less unbelievable, avenues to explore left Ben content to wait a year for another magical demonstration. Instead, he spent the day talking more than he'd talked in months, cuddling Morris, and sharing glances with Ryan. It was sweet and sappy, and all kinds of perfect.

When the party thinned out, Ben found Ryan, and they escaped from the cheerful uproar into the dark courtyard where the white tree with its single red bauble glowed and glittered.

Ben poked the bauble with a fingertip and watched it swing back and forth. "The first time I saw this, I wondered if

it was a signal.”

“I knew you were a clever man.”

“You mean it *is* a signal?”

“Of course. It’s our way to say that everyone is welcome, whether you’re like everyone else or one of a kind, whether you’re in a crowd or on your own. That’s what hospitality is all about. We always make room for one more. Or two.”

Ben swallowed past the lump in his throat. He reached for Ryan and smiled when Ryan leaned against him with a deep sigh. “Tired?”

“You said it. I could happily sleep standing here.”

“Recovering from exposure isn’t pleasant. And if you fall asleep right now, you’d miss... this.” He didn’t give Ryan a chance to ask. He wrapped his arm around Ryan’s shoulders, drew him close, and kissed him.

Ryan’s lips were dry, and a little rough, but he leaned into Ben’s hold and kissed him back, sharing the taste of cinnamon and custard, and the elusive flavour of Earl Grey tea.

It was the most perfect end to a perfect day.

Ben hadn’t forgotten that they stood in front of a lit Christmas tree, that anyone who cared to peer out into the courtyard could see them, wrapped around each other.

He didn’t mind.

He wanted to show the people who were important to Ryan that Ryan was important to him. Even after having known him for only a few short weeks.

“What did you wish for?” Ben asked before he could stop himself. Because during the afternoon, while listening to people talk, he’d remembered that on the morning he’d begged for Morris’s life, Ryan had also placed a square of paper into the Box of Wishes. But Ryan hadn’t been in pain, or worried... not as far as Ben had been aware.

The expression in Ryan's eyes told of a different pain, and the deep blush that covered Ryan's face gave Ben a clue. He wished he'd kept his trap shut and not ruined the moment. "Don't tell me. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"I asked you."

"It's not a competition. I was just going to test a theory, and that can wait."

Ryan shook his head. "It can't wait. Because you look as if you're going to grab Morris and run." He held out a hand and Ben took it, let Ryan pull him close. "I don't want you to run. I want to get to know you better. You and Morris, both. I want to see the sadness fade from your eyes."

Ben's breath stuttered. He thought of his home, of how he'd never even tried to fill the gaps left by Keith's departure. How he'd wallowed in his misery. He didn't deserve the man beside him. But he'd try to make it work.

By unspoken accord, their lips met once more. And this kiss was... different. Still soft, still sweet, but with a slow burn that took Ben's breath away and made his knees wobble. It was a promise he had no trouble returning.

"Now," he said as they drew apart. "About this date you've promised me..."



Plans

“Come on up,” Alastair’s voice came through the intercom before Ryan had had time to announce himself. The lock clicked a moment later.

Ryan took the stairs, one bulging bag over his shoulder, the other cradled in his arms. His da had texted him, late the previous night, to let him know Alastair was fine.

Ryan hadn’t believed it.

His parents, excellent though they were, didn’t know Alastair as he did. They hadn’t noticed how much Alastair had changed over the last year. They still saw the old Alastair, who travelled the world and worked himself to exhaustion to forget what bothered him. The one who played the clown and told stories to shield himself from scrutiny. The one who, despite all the fronting and deflecting, wouldn’t have lied to Ryan.

If Ryan had to guess, he’d say that his cousin had spent Christmas Day hiding in a bottle.

And that hurt.

“Goodness! How many people are you planning to feed?” Alastair stood on the landing. “Give this here.” He took the bag from Ryan’s arms and vanished into the flat, leaving Ryan to kick off his boots and follow.

“Mm, pork pies with relish, my favourites.” Alastair rifled through the bag.

“You could have had them yesterday, fresh from the oven.”

“But then I would have had to share. Or defend myself against accusations of gluttony.” He flashed the old, familiar grin and stuffed half a pork pie into his mouth. “Now I don’t have to,” he mumbled around his mouthful. “And I can—” He pulled a paper bag from a cabinet, fished out a black pork pie hat, decorated with holly leaves, and slapped it on his head. “Enjoy your delicious pork pies wearing the proper attire.”

He struck a pose and Ryan laughed as he remembered the previous year's Christmas, when a horde of children had demanded pork pies after spending an hour in a corner of the room fashioning hats from crepe paper.

"We missed you," he said, bending to unpack the second bag.

"You missed the pork pie hat."

"We missed you. And the pork pie hat."

Alastair ignored his comment. He was good at ignoring anything requiring honest emotion, except for when it mattered—and didn't directly concern him. Like it had mattered on the day Ryan had found the Box of Wishes and hadn't had enough money to take it home with him. Alastair's casual generosity could be breath-taking. His tendency to sidestep and avoid... not so much.

Ryan took a breath. Time. Alastair needed time. And for Ryan to back off and not push.

He set all his treats out on the kitchen counter. "How about this, then? Pork pies, spiced beef, baked ham, smoked salmon... and all the trimmings."

"Sweets?"

"As if I'd forget. I even brought booze, though I'm not sure you need more of that. Let's eat while you tell me about Singapore."

They let deeds follow words, and Ryan heard about five-minute rainstorms and Alastair getting his jeep stuck in the mud on the way to a plantation.

"They had to come and tow me out. Not the impression I wanted to make. But they laughed it off, so I followed along."

"Did they sell to you in the end?"

"They did. But we agreed that they'd deliver the produce to the port where we would pick it up." Alastair grinned. "I've never been called a crap driver in quite such polite terms."

Ryan tried to picture the jungle, the people Alastair interacted with, the strange dinners he attended... all for the sake of spices Ryan took for granted. "I'd love to visit all the places you go to," he said.

"You wouldn't be able to cope."

"What?"

"I'm serious. Life's so very different in Asia or the Caribbean. Some plantations... they look dilapidated. Backward. They'd make you itch to fix things. Only people out there think nothing needs fixing."

"Are you calling me an interfering busybody?"

"Not at all. But Ryan, you get off on looking after people. Even if they don't need or want looking after." He waved a hand over the multitude of dishes. "Case in point."

"You didn't want me here?" Ryan found it hard to swallow, harder to breathe.

"I didn't *need* you here, which isn't the same thing. I enjoy your company, just as I enjoy having the family around, but sometimes I prefer to be by myself."

"I know that. Remember our trip to Ireland? You'd drag me to some place with music and crowds, and then you'd just sit in a corner, watching. Not talking, not even drinking most nights. As if you could find peace in a crowded room."

Alastair relaxed. "Not in a crowded room, kiddo. I find quiet spaces in my head. My own worlds, just as I like them. It's how I handle all the travelling without blowing a gasket. It's a talent."

"That I'm disrupting with my need to look after you?"

"Sometimes. I'm... not good at saying no. Or with talking about things that bother me."

"We've all known that for years. And you've only just figured it out?"

"Hardly. Just... give me a bit of time, okay?"

Ryan heaved himself out of the sofa. He wanted to stay talking, but he'd heard what Alastair hadn't said, and his own crazy schedule was catching up with him. A long night's sleep sounded marvellous.

"Do you really mind so much that I wasn't there?" Alastair asked as Ryan shoved his feet into his boots.

And wasn't that just like Alastair all over? He'd realised it all along, Ryan was sure. He'd just not wanted to bring it up when there was time for Ryan to ask questions. "We all missed you. You're family. You should have been there with us." He took a deep breath. "And I wanted to introduce you to someone."

"Your detective?"

"Yes. He's... I don't know... nicer than anyone I've met in a long while. I wanted to show him I was serious about dating him."

"He met your parents, I assume?"

"Yeah. But Cara was stuck in Toronto, and you weren't there. I was missing the important people."

Alastair fiddled with the coats hanging on the rack. "I didn't realise. That you wanted me to meet someone, and that Cara wasn't there, I mean. Why don't you... why don't you ask him to our New Year's lunch? I promise to turn up and talk to him."



Ben cradled a mug of tea, content to watch Ryan turn risen dough into individual buns. He cut and shaped with deft movements, filling the waiting trays until the ball of dough was gone. When they came out of the oven, Ryan would spread soft white icing over the buns and top them with a glace cherry, making them a perfect accompaniment to a cup

of tea. Ben's mouth watered just thinking about having a couple in his bag to treat himself in the middle of his shift.

"How about Sunday, then?" he asked. He'd wanted to take Ryan out for dinner on Boxing Day, but Ryan had been so exhausted at the end of his Christmas celebrations that he'd begged off. Ben had a night shift today, which made Sunday the next available day.

"Sorry, can't. I'm promised to my da. I don't mean to blow you off. Honestly. December is crazy, and with all of us working in hospitality, I'm lucky to find time to breathe. I'm sorry. Truly."

"Right." Ben didn't hide his disappointment, but since his own hours were far from regular, he didn't complain. "I suppose you're working on New Year's Eve?"

"In my uncle's pub, yes. I don't just make coffee, you know? I can pull a pint, too."

"Does it get quieter in the new year?"

"A little. Most years, I even get a few days off before work starts again. We all slow down a bit at the start of January before business kicks up with late Christmas parties and early Valentine's Day ones. It might not seem like that to you, but... I run a coffeehouse because the hours aren't as erratic."

"And I thought it was because you enjoyed baking."

"That, too. But unlike my da and the men on his side of the family, I'm not built like a stormtrooper. I hate dealing with drunks, too, so running a pub was never an option."

"And you being Irish. The shame of it."

Ryan laughed, and the apologetic look was gone from his face. "Go ahead and mock me. I suppose in your job, dealing with drunks comes with the territory."

"You said it. I spent three years in uniform up in Manchester. Some days, it really wasn't pretty."

"Are there ever good days?"

“More than you might think.” Ben poured himself a fresh cup of tea. The pot held Lady Grey tea this evening, and Ben drank it without milk or lemon to appreciate the delicate flavour. “My good days are probably not what most people would even consider, but... finding a missing child unharmed, delivering a baby... these are the things that work for me.”

“Catching the bad guys doesn’t make for a good day?”

“It makes for a satisfactory one. A worthwhile one. The real good days are about the little things. When nobody’s hurt, and everyone goes home.”

Ryan moved the tray of buns to the oven and cleaned his workspace. A worried frown creased his brow. Ben had seen it twice since they’d kissed on Christmas day and could guess what it meant. He opened his mouth to reassure Ryan when Ryan beat him to it.

“You really delivered a baby?”

“Don’t remind me. The mum-to-be did all the work. It was her third, and she knew more about the process than I ever will. Because she was so together, it felt like the training we’d had. I had it all under control and was just wondering how best to cut the cord when the ambulance screeched up. The paramedics took over from there. At least they had sterile equipment and all.”

“And what did you do?”

Ben’s ears heated, but he couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “I staggered out of the way to the next corner and threw up. Still a good day, though. An excellent one, in fact.”

He took his empty mug to the sink and washed it. In the last three weeks, he’d spent plenty of time in Ryan’s coffeehouse and had enjoyed every minute. Was it selfish of him to want to claim Ryan’s off-work hours for himself, too? To want to know him even better?

“Ben, I... Maybe we could—”

Ben turned to face Ryan, whose eyes held an apology Ben couldn’t doubt. “Don’t worry about that date of ours,” he said, stepping closer. “We’ll find a better time for it in the new

year. And meanwhile...” He ran his fingertips up the side of Ryan’s face and into the auburn waves. They were soft and smelled faintly of vanilla when Ben squished the long strands between his fingers. “I’ll trade some shifts, so I’ll be working on New Year’s Eve. That way, I can pop into your uncle’s pub and wish you a Happy New Year.”



Ryan hadn’t considered how much he would miss seeing Ben first thing in the morning and sharing a cup of tea in the quiet of the near empty coffeehouse. He’d even missed Morris wandering through the room, noting when a chair was out of place with a promptness that amazed Ryan. All day, he’d looked up whenever the bell over the door jangled, hoping to see Ben step through. Knowing that Ben was sleeping after working the night shift hadn’t stopped him waiting.

Ryan shifted the phone to his left hand so he could unlock his front door. The bike leathers and layers of thermal underclothes made him move like the Michelin man, but better clumsy than frozen to a brick.

“Did you change your shifts?” He wished he’d invited Ben to meet at the pub at midnight instead of letting him try to switch shifts. But that would have meant Ben spending New Year’s Eve by himself, and Ryan hadn’t wanted that either. Ben had spent far too much time alone already.

“Yep. I’m on night shift all week,” Ben said. “Going on at ten.”

“Are you up by five? In the afternoon, that is. Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Ben hesitated, and Ryan bit his lip. Ben didn’t like to be pushed. In his job, Ben had to make decisions under pressure. No wonder he preferred something a little more peaceful in his private life.

He unlocked his front door and stepped inside, switching on the light and closing the door behind him. His hallway wasn't large and struggling out of his leathers while keeping the phone stuck to his ear required a level of dexterity that was difficult to find at nine o'clock at night.

"What are you doing to yourself?" came Ben's voice from the phone.

"Trying to get my biking gear off without stopping to talk to you. I've waited all day to hear your voice. I'm not letting a recalcitrant zip get in the way."

Ben laughed, and Ryan imagined his cheeks turning a little pink. He loved that expression almost as much as Ben's sweet smile, or the way the skin drew into fine lines at the corners of his eyes.

"You were out?"

"Took pastries to my parents' restaurant and then checked on my cousins." As with many Irish families, the term cousins covered a multitude of sins. It wasn't something he wanted to spring on his solitary detective all in one go, or as part of a telephone conversation. Better to ease him into the clan, one cousin at a time as he'd done on Christmas Day.

"You're all set for tomorrow night, then? Still going to be at your uncle's pub?"

"That's the plan. I'll close the cafe at lunchtime, then get some sleep before I head out. Don't make that face," he admonished, able to picture Ben's appalled expression, even when he stayed silent. "My ma is coming in to help tomorrow morning. She's bound to kick me out at ten."

"Take care when you're driving," Ben said. "Keep in mind that some drivers may not be sober. And—"

"Ben, it's fine. I'll be careful. And I look forward to seeing you at midnight." Ryan set the phone down and finished freeing himself from his leather riding gear. He wanted more time with Ben. Wanted more than just brushes of fingertips in passing or the sweet kiss Ben had given him in

the kitchen after he'd nixed Ben's third attempt at arranging a date for them.

He wanted Ben in his home, meeting his sister and cousin, but he'd heard the uncertainty in Ben's voice and had forced himself to stop pushing. He would see Ben the following evening, when the church bells chimed in the New Year. And with a bit of luck, they would exchange a New Year's kiss like everybody else around them.

Still thinking about Ben, Ryan stripped and showered before he fell into bed. He was exhausted. 4:00 a.m. and his wake-up call would come far too soon.

But instead of lulling him to sleep, the image of Ben kissing him as the clock struck midnight kept him awake for a long time.



Meetings

“I’ll be there in a while. I’ve finished my round and I’m heading to Rothcote next.” Ben pressed the phone closer to his ear so he wouldn’t miss Ryan’s words over the hubbub of voices. The crowd seemed to be having a fabulous time.

“Can’t wait to see you.”

“You saw me just this morning.” He’d dropped into the coffeehouse at the end of his shift, and the delighted smile on Ryan’s face when he came through the door had been worth the detour.

“Yeah. As surprises went, that one was epic. Did I mention how much I loved you doing that for me?” A shriek pierced the air as something shattered. “Oh, for heaven’s sake! I need to run. Drive carefully. Later.”

Ben held on to his smile as he dropped the phone into the cup holder. He could never have had this kind of conversation with Keith.

His ex had barely tolerated his working shifts. Had Ben dared to call him, only to drop the call the moment anything came up, Keith would have given him the silent treatment for the rest of the week. Having a prospective partner who didn’t just proclaim his support but expected the same consideration was refreshing.

Ben’s shift had been uneventful. He’d monitored crowds in Northampton town centre and around the most popular nightspots and had attended a couple of pick-pocketing calls.

Both were washouts.

On the first shout, the victim’s wife had taken possession of her husband’s car keys after the third round of drinks. And on the second call, the missing mobile phone appeared from the depths of a capacious handbag after Ben had prompted the lady to empty it onto the bonnet of his car.

Ben had continued on his way, praying for a night without major traffic accidents. People being what they were, it was a waste of time to pray for a night without fights, but Ben hoped the fights wouldn't start until after the clock had chimed midnight. By then, he'd be back in Rothcote, which wasn't as much of a trouble hotspot. And he would have seen Ryan.

He was about to pull into the thin stream of traffic when he noticed a man slumped in a doorway. He didn't seem to be moving.

Ben switched off the engine and got out of the car. The man was too well-dressed to be homeless. His shoes alone would fetch enough to buy a decent meal or several, which pushed *passed out drunk* and *mugging* to the top of his list. When he drew closer, he saw that what he'd taken for a doorway was an alley leading between rows of houses to the retail park at the bottom of the hill. It was narrow and shadowed, the streetlights along its length vandalised or broken. If the man hadn't lain right in the entrance, Ben wouldn't have spotted him.

With half an eye on the people behind him, Ben crouched and placed his fingertips under the man's jaw. The skin was chilled, but the pulse beat slow and strong against Ben's fingers.

"Can you hear me, sir? I'm a police officer. Open your eyes if you can hear me."

The man's eyelids fluttered, and Ben heaved another sigh of relief. The third one came immediately on the heels of the second when the man groaned, and alcohol fumes hit Ben's face.

Drunk.

Ben grabbed the man by the coat and heaved him upright. He wasn't much shorter than Ben's own six-foot-two, but he was lighter than Ben had expected. A broad palm braced him, just as Ben feared he might go over backwards and land on his arse.

“Whoa, there. You need a hand, mate?”

Ben turned his head and found a uniformed officer at his shoulder. “DS Hobart from Rothcote nick,” he said. “Saw him slouched in the doorway and went to check.”

“PC Hendrick. Is he hurt?”

“Doesn’t look like. Pretty out of it, though. Could you check for ID while I keep him upright?” Ben held the man at arm’s length to give Hendrick room to work. Their charge was clean-shaven, with sensual lips and strawberry blond hair. He would have been handsome if he hadn’t been out for the count. There were lean muscles under the expensive wool coat, too, as if he didn’t spend his days behind a desk.

A close-up inspection confirmed that Ben had been right about the pricey clothes. Handmade shoes and the heavy charcoal wool coat would run to at least four figures. The man’s wrists were bare, but he wore a gold chain around his neck and a signet ring on his little finger. Muggers wouldn’t have left him those.

“Here we are.” Hendrick held up a wallet. “Alastair Brendan Cedric Donohue,” he read out. “With an address in Rothcote. 17 Foxglove Gardens.”

“Someone’s got a sense of humour.” Ben shook his head. “I’m headed back to Rothcote. I’ll drop him off at home. He doesn’t look as if he’s up for a taxi ride.”

Hendrick nodded assent. “Where are you parked?”

“Over there. The blue Renault. Did you find door keys?” Ben asked as they manhandled their charge across the pavement.

“Yes. Bunch in his coat pocket.”

“Excellent.”

Hendrick pulled them out. “Here. Easier if you have to heave him up the stairs.”

Ben took the keys. “Thanks for the assist. Add him to your report? He’ll be in mine once I’ve dropped him off.”

“Will do. Have a quiet one.”

Ben checked that the man’s seatbelt was secure before he settled in the driver’s seat. He hadn’t expected to play taxi, but he was glad for the chance to get back to Rothcote a little earlier than planned.



Alastair Brendan Cedric Donohue was a loose, uncoordinated drunk. He flopped like a rag doll when Ben pulled him out of the car and was too sozzled to keep his eyes open for long. Ben preferred sleepy drunks to the belligerent variety, for purely selfish reasons. Even when they’d started the fight and had done most of the damage, angry drunks complained the next morning and spread blame far and wide.

Ben had roused his charge several times on the drive to Rothcote, getting little more than grunts in return. Handing him his keys and expecting him to make his way up to his flat under his own steam was out of the question. He’d have to take him inside and make sure he slept safely.

Ben called in his plans, then left his car at the kerb.

Donohue lived on the first floor. No lights showed in the windows, and when Ben rang the bell, nobody answered. So he either lived alone, or the people he shared the flat with were still out celebrating.

Ben draped the man’s arm over his shoulder, gripped his waist and heaved him up the single flight of stairs. Donohue neither helped nor hindered Ben’s ministrations, leaving Ben to unlock the door and get them inside.

The entryway had room enough to scramble out of coats and boots without hitting walls or furniture. On the right, a doorway led to a dining kitchen, while an open door on the left gave Ben glimpses of a couch and flat-screen TV.

The living room was neat, if impersonal. An almost empty bottle of whisky on the table suggested that Mr Donohue had started the celebrations at home. Had he gone out to meet someone to celebrate New Year with, or just to have company for a few hours?

Ben located the bedroom, stripped the man's coat and removed his belt and shoes before he settled him on the bed. He found water in the fridge and aspirin in the bathroom cabinet and set both on the bedside table. After that, he checked the kitchen for a bucket. All he could spot was a washing-up bowl.

When he brought it to the bedroom, he found his charge asleep, curled into a ball on top of the covers. Ben settled a blanket over him and took his pulse. It was as steady as it had been the whole time Ben had watched over him.

He was about to leave the flat when the phone rang. Ben picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Alastair?" It was a woman's voice on the other end.

"I'm sorry, no. This is DS Hobart, Northamptonshire Police. I've just helped Mr Donohue back to his home. He's been... celebrating a little enthusiastically."

A wry chuckle met his ear. "Passed out drunk, is what I'm hearing?"

"Something of the sort, yes," Ben said. "I've made him comfortable, and he's sleeping."

"He's okay, isn't he?" The woman sounded worried suddenly, as if her mind had only just caught up with Ben's identity and his revelation.

"He's not hurt, I assure you."

"But if he's... Can you give me ten minutes? I can be right over."

"And you are?"

"Oh. His cousin, Cara O'Shaughnessy. He's struggling with jet lag. I was calling to see if he wanted me to come over and keep him company while he couldn't sleep."

“Night owl yourself?” Ben’s grin hurt his cheeks. How much of a coincidence was this? He could still hear Ryan’s voice, bemoaning the fact that his favourite cousin hadn’t turned up for Christmas lunch, and that his globetrotting sister wouldn’t be home for their Christmas Day get together either. And here he was, meeting them both, and without Ryan there to introduce him.

“Also jet-lagged,” Cara said. “Sufferers united, that’s us. You’re sure Alastair’s okay?”

“He’s not injured,” Ben repeated.

“Okay. I’ll be right over.”

Ben placed the receiver back in the cradle and checked on Ryan’s cousin once more. The man hadn’t moved, and his breathing was steady. Ben dropped the keys onto his bedside table before heading back out, first into the living room and then the kitchen.

Cara O’Shaughnessy was as good as her word. She arrived within ten minutes, letting herself into the flat with her own key. “Thank you for bringing him home,” she said, holding out a hand in greeting. “I’m Cara.”

“DS Hobart.” Ben looked her over, amused by how much she resembled her brother. She had the same auburn hair and brown eyes, the same sensual mouth over a stubborn chin. “Will you be staying with him?”

She nodded. “I’ve nowhere else to be. The rest of my folks are all working. I would be, too, if I hadn’t just flown in this morning. I’d be a menace in a kitchen or behind a bar.” She blushed and scrubbed a hand through her hair. “And I’m waffling. Sorry. I hope he didn’t give you any trouble.”

“None.” He led the way back to the bedroom and pushed the door wide enough for her to see the man on the bed. “I’ve made him comfortable, and he went straight to sleep. Couldn’t even get him to drink any water. He’ll have one hell of a hangover.”

“That’s what you think, officer. Alastair can get drunk as a skunk and never suffer the next morning. Not like the rest of

us. Thank you again for bringing him home.”

Back in his car, Ben logged the house call with Dispatch. Assured Alastair Donohue would be fine, Ben peeled away from the kerb and headed to the top of the High Street and Ryan’s uncle’s pub.



Ryan dropped onto the sofa in the break room and blew out a breath that came from the soles of his feet. His day had started at 4:00 a.m. Now it wanted twenty minutes to midnight. He’d kept himself going all day with the image of a smiling Ben Hobart stepping through the door of the coffeehouse just after six o’clock this morning, and with the taste of the kiss Ben had given him just before he’d left. More enjoyable than remembering the loud argument in the flat next door that had stopped him from getting a wink of sleep during the day.

He wanted to crash where he sat, but he was buzzing too much to fall asleep. Not to mention that the party would continue for another three hours at least. A touch of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ at midnight, and then a return to power ballads and trance beats. Another reason Ryan had never wanted to run a pub. He’d never learned the skill to tune out music. And the racket in the bar made it hard to concentrate.

Despite the thumping beats vibrating the floorboards, he heard the squeak of the door opening.

His exhaustion faded when he saw Ben in the doorway, dapper and smiling.

“Hey. Your security guys said I’d find you here,” Ben said, shutting out the noise once more. “You look all done in.”

“Hey yourself. You look far too chipper.”

Ben joined him on the sofa. He smelled of cold air, cigarette smoke, and petrol fumes, and Ryan wanted to bury

his nose in Ben's neck. Or keep staring at that wonderful smile.

"I had a quiet night so far. A couple of pick-pocketing calls, a few overly cheerful drunks. Fingers crossed the streak continues." He brushed strands of hair from Ryan's face, as if he couldn't help himself. "A quiet night doesn't describe what you're handling out there, does it?"

"No. And my neighbours were yelling blue murder at each other when I tried to sleep this afternoon." Ryan hadn't meant to say that, but he loved it when Ben wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

"Just relax. They said you've not stopped all night so you could have a break when I got here. You can sleep. I'll wake you."

"Too buzzed to sleep. Just being off my feet and somewhere a little less noisy is nice. You being here is like a bonus. I just don't..."

"Don't what?"

"Do you think it's weird? The two of us connecting so quickly, I mean? Does it feel too fast to you? I don't want to be pushy." And why the fuck was he even spouting this crap? Ryan tried to sit up, but Ben's arm tightened and kept him where he was.

"Don't move," he said. "You're a touch spun out, and I don't... I really... I like it, is what I'm trying to say. It doesn't feel rushed. It feels right." He huffed out a laugh. "And that's my sappy comment for the evening."

Ryan snuggled closer, enjoying Ben's warmth. "If you don't mind... this... us... then will you please come to my place for dinner tomorrow?"

Ben hesitated.

"Bring Morris. He can stay with me overnight while you work, and I'll bring him to the cafe with me in the morning."

"You're starting to know me too well."

"Is that a bad thing?"

“N-no. No, it’s not.” Ben straightened a little, almost as if he was bracing himself. But as Ryan expected a put down, he felt Ben’s lips in his hair. “It’s a new start,” he whispered. “With someone who wants me.”

Ryan released the breath he’d been holding. “Then, please, will you come over? I’d love to feed you before you have to go to work.”

“Okay.”

Ben rubbed circles on Ryan’s back and Ryan let himself go boneless and enjoy it. Ben would come to dinner. Ryan would introduce him to the people who meant the most to him, and Ben would understand how much Ryan wanted him.

The sounds of many voices singing drifted into their sanctuary. “They’re starting up the Auld Lang Syne. Does that mean I can kiss you?”

“You didn’t have to wait for a bloody song,” Ryan said and mashed their lips together.

They were kissing when the clock struck midnight. And for a long, heated while after that.



Fresh Start

Ben woke with X-rated images featuring himself and Ryan looping through his mind. They'd caused his racing heart, his short, choppy breathing, and a significant case of morning wood. He sought a distraction, found it in the silky fur of Morris's ears and the little snores he blew out when Ben stroked his nose. Touching Morris calmed his heart and slowed his breath, but with the cat draped over his lap and fast asleep, there was little he could do about the other affected parts until he stepped into the shower.

His alarm clock told him that the new year was twelve hours old. Five hours of sleep had left Ben feeling rested, and with the prospect of dinner with Ryan ahead of him, rolling out of bed was no hardship.

Ryan was good for him.

Thoughts of Keith had no room in Ben's mind when he was with Ryan. And when old memories intruded, they didn't focus on his own shortcomings, but showed him instead how well rid of his ex he was. He'd grown to like Ryan in a shockingly short time, and their New Year's Eve kisses had proved the liking was mutual. Ben had needed a while after Ryan had gone back to work before he'd felt comfortable appearing in public.

Not that many people had taken notice of him in the crowded pub. He'd had to step over several couples welcoming the New Year, and while their behaviour wasn't acceptable to the statute book, he'd been in too good a mood to ruin their celebrations. After all, he and Ryan had kissed in the empty staff room as if they'd both meant it. Not soft and sweet, as they'd done beside the Christmas tree in view of Ryan's parents, but with urgency and passion and a decided lack of decorum.

Ben had thought he wasn't ready to take matters with Ryan to the bedroom, but his dreams said otherwise. And more of last night's incendiary kisses wouldn't go amiss.

Ben sat up, lifted Morris from the duvet, and cradled the tabby to his chest. “I much appreciate that you didn’t wake me at eight this morning for your second breakfast.” He rubbed his scruffy cheek against Morris’s furry one. “How do you feel about going out for dinner later?”

Morris snuggled into Ben’s hold as if there was a prize on offer.

“Did you miss me, big boy?” Ben stroked the patches of regrowing fur, the last reminder of Morris’s close brush with disaster. “I’ll be home with you all day today. And tonight, you’ll stay with Ryan when I go to work.”

He gave Morris one more hug before settling him on the duvet and rolling out of bed. He took his time in the shower, and he whistled as he made his way to the kitchen. When he wandered back into the living room with his cup of tea after feeding Morris, his gaze snagged on the empty patches of wall and the gaps in the rows of books on his shelves.

“Look at this mess, big boy. I’m a disgrace.”

Morris flicked an ear to show he was listening, then settled in his corner on the sofa and washed.

Ben kept his eyes on the bookcase. “I can’t believe I haven’t found time to tidy the shelves and rearrange the pictures on the wall. You know what this looks like? As if I’ve spent the last nine months waiting for Keith to come back.”

Which he hadn’t.

“Well... January 1st is a good day for a fresh start.” Ben pulled the books off the shelves and piled them on the coffee table. “There. That’s looking better already.” He brewed another pot of tea—chai this time, fragrant and with a noticeable black pepper kick—and drank a cup before he wiped down the empty shelves.

He read a lot. He listened to audiobooks, too. Keith had considered owning both the audio and the paperback a waste of money and had said so, over and over, until Ben had first stopped arguing and then stopped listening.

He'd done that a lot towards the end. The more controlling Keith became, the more he blamed and belittled Ben, the more Ben had given up fighting or even arguing for what he thought was right. Keith had made all the choices in their relationship. Right until Ben decided it was time to end his reign.

Arranging his books to his liking was an enjoyable task. He took his time, read a snatch here and there, or just held a book, remembering the case he'd worked while he'd listened to the audio. He stopped for a sandwich when his stomach rumbled, but then continued sorting and shelving. As the afternoon drew in, one corner of his living room looked homely, the gaps gone and shelf space waiting for new books.

The picture frames beckoned, but he decided against taking them down. Having them topsy-turvy all over the place would bother him more now than the gaps where the pictures of him and Keith had been.

He let Morris out into the garden, and the cat returned a few minutes later, as if he knew Ben had plans. It sent Ben's good mood up by another notch. He dressed in dark moleskins and a blue-grey polo top that he knew suited him, settled Morris into his basket, and drove to Ryan's house.



Ryan lived in a three-storey, late-Victorian house an enterprising owner had converted into six flats. Parking spaces stretched along the front of the building, and Ben spotted Ryan's bike beside a black-and-white Beetle. The same car Cara O'Shaughnessy had driven the previous evening.

Ryan had company.

Ben had imagined a cosy dinner for two before he headed off to work. He wasn't sure how he felt about facing Ryan's sister across the dinner table.

They'd been very careful, so far, to keep their interactions to public spaces. Ryan had blurred the line on Christmas Day, bringing his family into the mix, and Ben had been skittish enough that it was no wonder Ryan had sprung a surprise. If he'd known that Ryan wasn't alone... he'd have said no.

Morris meowed a query from the passenger seat.

"You're quite right, big boy. When the car stops, we get out. And I've sat here long enough."

He counted the cars parked outside the building. It couldn't be a large party. And he'd already met at least one guest. Joy and a touch of mischief bubbled up from where he'd kept it locked away when he thought of Ryan's sister's face. This... could be fun.

"I was worried you'd overslept." Ryan held out a hand for the carrier. "Give this here. The bottles, too. You can't undo your boots with your hands full." He turned, and Ben stopped him before he could vanish through the door and into the hallway. He dropped a peck on Ryan's cheek and nuzzled his face against his hair and ear.

"I wouldn't stand you up, even if I didn't know you'd invited me to a party." The pink washing Ryan's cheeks was enough of an apology for Ben. He laid his fingertips over Ryan's lips. "It's fine. Your family being here ensures I keep my hands to myself." He turned towards the shadow in the doorway. "Good afternoon, Miss O'Shaughnessy. Nice to see you again."

"Oh. My...." Cara's mouth dropped open. "You're Ben?"

"I was last time I looked."

"When did you meet Ben?"

"Last night. He brought Alastair home."

"You... What?" Ryan sputtered. "When? Before or after midnight?"

“Before.” He bent and unlaced his Doc Martens while Ryan opened the carrier to let Morris out. The cat allowed Ryan to cuddle him before squirming away to investigate. Cara followed Morris as if she’d never seen a cat before, and the bubbles of joy in Ben’s chest went to his head and prickled over his skin.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ben ran his palm from Ryan’s neck to the swell of his rear and then pulled him close. “I had other things on my mind. Other... people.” *And I didn’t want to worry you, tired as you were.*

Ryan returned the hug. “So I won’t have to introduce you to Alastair.”

“You’d better. I doubt he’ll remember me.”

“Then come on in.”

Unlike the coffeehouse, which mixed the comfort of dark oak with cheerful colours, Ryan’s living room was light and serene. The soft grey upholstery of his sofa, armchairs, and dining chairs held a hint of purple that returned in the coloured specks of the darker grey carpet. What brought the room to life, and drew Ben’s eyes, were the watercolours, and the tiny, amazingly accurate sketches of plants dotting his walls.

“Ah, yes,” Ryan muttered when he caught Ben’s gaze. “I’m not much use with paperwork, but I do like to draw.”

Ben stepped closer, saw the same care that Ryan took decorating cakes and squaring off sandwiches applied to pencil and brush strokes, rendering results that were accurate and pleasing to the eye.

Ben was grateful he hadn’t turned the car around when he realised Ryan had guests. He pulled his attention from Ryan’s walls, directed it at the fourth member of their party, and wondered what else he could learn during this unexpected afternoon.

Dressed in jeans and a close-fitting rollneck, Ryan’s cousin looked slimmer and rangier than he had in his heavy

wool coat. His eyes, when open, were a striking blueish-green, and the strawberry tone in his blond hair was more pronounced in daylight. He'd shaved and smiled a welcome as he stood and held out a hand. "I'm—"

"Alastair Brendan Cedric Donohue. At least, that's what your driving licence says. Your parents have a sense of humour?"

"How do you know—" Alastair closed his mouth and took a breath. "You're a detective. And you were working last night."

"True."

"Did you arrest me?"

"Not at all. I merely gave you a lift home. Your cousin, equally suffering from jet lag and unable to sleep, came to check on you."

Alastair fell back into his seat, neither embarrassed nor ashamed by what had happened. He seemed content to accept the ribbing that would no doubt rain down on him in due course. He pushed out the chairs around the table, grabbed hold of Ryan's sleeve, and pulled him into a seat.

"I thought I'd seen Cara around." He turned to Ben. "I don't remember a thing about you. Come sit. Did I make a nuisance of myself?"

"Not at all. I prefer sleepy drunks to belligerent ones, and you're definitely one of the former." Ben narrowed his eyes. "You're remarkably awake for somebody so out of it at midnight. I'd still be hiding in a dark room with a damp cloth over my face."

"As would most of us," Ryan told him, finally over his surprise. "He's the only one who can drink until he passes out and wake up fresh as a daisy."

Alastair grinned like the cat that had snagged the cream *and* the canary. "It's just not fair, is it?"



A Japanese meal created an astounding quantity of dishware. Ben stacked small bowls, smaller plates, and tiny dishes onto a tray before his third trip to the kitchen. Ryan and Alastair took no note of him, caught up in a discussion about—as far as Ben could tell—cinnamon and essential oils. He'd never met a spice trader before, and didn't know whether Alastair habitually got lost in his speciality, but seeing Ryan all lit up and excited was a thing of beauty.

Ben lifted the tray and scanned the room for Morris. He found him curled into a corner of Ryan's sofa, relaxing after his lengthy round of lap-hopping. Cara and Alastair had spoilt Morris, and the tabby had enjoyed the pieces of delicious sashimi as much as Ben.

Keith had hated fish.

And Ben no longer cared.

Accepting Ryan's dinner invitation and bringing Morris along hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

He set his load of dishes beside Cara before he reached for a dishcloth.

"You don't need to help."

"Of course, I do. You wash, I dry. It goes faster that way." He tilted his head towards the living room. "I couldn't follow that cinnamon argument beyond the first three sentences."

"Once Alastair gets going on spices, you won't get him to stop. He's always been that way. I caught the food-buying bug from him. I don't have his nose for spices, so it's food fairs for me rather than farms in the jungle."

"And then you make your cousins test your discoveries?"

“You said it.” Cara topped up the hot water in the sink. “Everyone in our family works in hospitality—with Alastair and me the odd ones out. We’re still in the industry, but we’re the least directly involved with feeding the masses.”

“And in exchange,” Ben guessed, “you travel more than the others put together?”

“Quite. But we don’t mind.”

Ben dried and stacked dishes and picked at the snacks lining the counter. Rice crackers, spiced nuts, and things he had no names for... each tasty and exceedingly moreish. “Knowing you guys is lethal for my waistline.”

“Hogwash. There’s not a spare ounce on you.”

“Only because I’ve upped my gym time since meeting Ryan.” It was true, though not the whole truth. Before Ryan, gym had been a way to get away from Keith, then a means to pass the time. Now he worked out because he enjoyed it.

“Seeing Ryan had company bothered you, right?”

“I deal with the unexpected every day,” he said. “In my private life, I try to keep the unexpected to a minimum.”

“You wouldn’t enjoy a surprise birthday party?”

“Gods, no. I like to be prepared for events and situations. Surprises and secrets? My idea of hellfire.”

Cara eyed him thoughtfully. “Then you probably don’t like being pushed around either. Not even if it’s for the best of reasons.”

“Who would?”

“Someone who knows my brother. He loves to help people—”

“I didn’t miss that one.”

“Well, he doesn’t hide it. He got in so much trouble when he was younger because he’d just... help. Rather than ask if the other person needed a hand. Or wanted it. Drove us all nuts until we worked it out. I could tell you stories...”

Ben smiled as he imagined it. “How old was he? When you worked it out, I mean.”

“About eight? One of our cousins had got married, and my ma put on this huge family dinner. And I mean *huge*. Ryan decided Ma was too tired to wash up and that he would do it for her, never mind that he needed to stand on a step stool to reach the sink.”

“Smashed china, I suppose? What did he break?”

“Pretty much the whole dinner service.” She mimed pulling a laden tray over the counter’s edge. “The big tureen that stood on top of the plates was still half full of soup. Ryan stood in the middle of the devastation, saying he was only helping, hurt that nobody appreciated his intention.” She shook her head, remembering the scene. “We found out three days later that our mother had pneumonia and shouldn’t have been rushing around cooking and hosting parties.”

“But he knew?”

“He knew she needed help. And he hasn’t changed all that much, you know? When he sees someone who needs help, he helps, whatever it costs him. So... if you want to build something with Ryan, watch out for that and cut him some slack.” She touched his arm. “And that’s me done giving you *the talk*.”

Ben wondered why she’d not mentioned the Box of Wishes. Or the unusual way Ryan saw people. But if she already felt uncomfortable sharing... “I really don’t mind you smoothing our path. I don’t want to hurt him. Ever. Finding out more about him helps. He’s not the most forthcoming.”

“No. That he isn’t.” She handed him another dripping plate.

“What’s he like when he gets seriously bent out of shape?”

Cara laughed. She’d imbibed a good bit of the sake she’d served with all the Japanese treats. Ben hoped she wouldn’t regret sharing family gossip. Or get in trouble with Ryan for it.

“He keeps secrets and hoards like a squirrel. I used to tell him that’s because he looks like one, which pissed him off no end, of course.”

“What about you? You must be similar.”

“Similar, yes. But not the same. I don’t share his gift. Or his insane need to help everyone he meets.”

“How do you resemble him, then?”

“We both want to excel at what we do, even if we go about it in different ways. Ryan will tell you that I put my hand up twice when they handed out the confidence. And I know that he’s a lot harder on himself than I am. I imagine you are, too. Hard on yourself, I mean.”

“Psychology?”

“Sure. I’m a buyer. But I don’t need my degree to notice Ryan smiling. I think you’re good for him, Ben. Whatever it is you’re doing, keep doing it.” She pulled the plug and wiped her hands on a dishcloth. “And now I’m going to snuggle with that adorable cat of yours.”

Ben couldn’t hold back his grin. “You do that. I’ll head off to work.” He gathered his jacket and found his boots, not surprised when Ryan joined him before he could sneak out.

“You weren’t going without saying goodbye, were you?”

“Actually, I was. You were talking to your cousin, and I didn’t want to interrupt.” He caught Ryan’s disbelieving glare and shrugged. “I was going to call you later.”

“You’re not interrupting.” Ryan twined his arms around Ben’s neck. “You’re heading to work. The least I can do is—”

Ben pecked him on the cheek before he could finish. “Hold that thought, or we’ll scandalise your sister.”

“Not my cousin?”

“I can’t see much getting a rise out of him.”

Ryan chuckled. “Maybe not. Did you have a good evening? I’m sorry if I’m—”

“I had a lovely, relaxing dinner, and an illuminating chat with your sister, thank you.” He wanted to stay. Wanted to curl up on the sofa with Ryan in easy reach and listen to the three of them trade news and insults. They were comfortable with each other, and they’d drawn him into their circle as if he belonged there.

Ben saw his wish mirrored in Ryan’s eyes. “I’d love to do this again when I’m not working the night shift,” he said, and tasted sake on Ryan’s lips when he kissed him goodbye.



At Odds

“Can you even sleep?” Ryan’s voice wove in and out as he walked from room to room, the phone signal weaker in parts of his flat. It was just past eight on Sunday evening, and Ben was ready for bed.

“Sure. It’s hardly my first night shift.” Ben lay on the sofa, Morris on his lap. The remains of his dinner sat on a corner of the coffee table, along with a half-empty bottle of red wine. “I didn’t go to bed when I came home this morning, and I’ve been to the gym. I’ll be out like a light in a few, and back to my normal schedule by tomorrow morning.”

He’d be tired tomorrow, and probably the day after, but he’d deal. “What about you?”

They’d not seen each other since Ben had picked up Morris on the morning of January 2nd. Ryan had been busy with family commitments while the coffeehouse was closed, and Ben had worked nights for the rest of the week. In the afternoons he’d continued sorting through his bookshelves, content to be at home with Morris.

He hadn’t tried to set up another date. Now Ryan’s laugh felt like fingers brushing down his spine, and Ben couldn’t wait to see him again.

“Worked with my da in the restaurant, restocked the freezer in the cafe. And I had lunch with Alastair today.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“How do you mean?”

Ben hesitated. Alastair Donohue had set all his professional alarm bells ringing. He reminded Ben of someone standing on a ledge. “Does he always drink as if drowning isn’t optional?”

“No. Yes. I mean, he’s Irish and we like our whisky.”

“But there *is* something wrong with him is what I’m hearing?”

Ryan sighed. “You’re good. Or it’s so bad that you’re picking up on it when you’ve only just met him.”

“I’m that good,” Ben chuckled. “I’m also trained to notice potential dangers. Though he doesn’t come across as a brawler.”

“God, no. Not like that. When something bothers him, he drinks. Quietly. By himself. Which is how Cara and I realised that something is wrong.”

“And he won’t tell you what it is? Better watch him.”

“Thanks, Ben. I have an idea what bugs him, sort of, but we’ll keep at him until we find out for sure.”

Ben heard the sound of the kettle turning on and smiled, knowing what was coming. He wasn’t wrong.

“Get yourself to bed, so you won’t be late for your tea tomorrow morning. And don’t forget to bring Morris.”



Ben had forgotten how many things he needed to catch up on after a week of night shifts. He’d breezed into work on Monday morning intent on picking up where he’d left off... only to hit a wall of virtual and actual paperwork.

Reports.

Case file updates.

Incident forms.

Communications logs.

Rothcote was a small town with a crime rate to match, but the stream of paperwork was never-ending. National bulletins and local alerts. A spate of motorbike thefts. Burglary

with property damage. Another meth lab in Buckingham discovered during a routine water quality inspection.

Ben had to read and acknowledge each one and add necessary actions to his list. It took him until Friday before his desk was clear, and it didn't stay that way for long.

"Ben?" Tarbert held up a folder. "More complaints about your favourite coffeehouse."

"Crimestoppers?"

"Yep. This time they're asking how Ryan can put on free food for a day if he's not raking it back in by supplying drugs."

Ben's eyebrows hit his hairline. "That's spiteful."

"And anonymous, of course."

"I've not seen any evidence of drug dealing in all the time I've spent there."

"Just because you've not seen it doesn't mean it isn't there."

"Sir?"

"Proving that Ryan is innocent isn't the same as trying to find the truth." Tarbert pulled up a chair and sat.

"Sir. I've done nothing to compromise the investigation."

"I wasn't suggesting that. But Ben, it's not all about work. You deserve a home life, too. And if that life includes Ryan—"

"You want me to hand off the investigation to someone else? You think I can't be objective?" Out of sight under his desk, Ben curled his fingers into fists. Did Tarbert truly think he was untrustworthy? That he'd compromise an investigation? When he'd—

"Ben, focus." Tarbert's voice cut through his growing disquiet. "No, I don't think you'd throw an investigation. Neither do I think Ryan is a drug dealer. I've known the O'Shaughnessys for years, and none of their businesses cause

trouble. But I want to know who's making the complaints and why they're spying on Ryan." He took another sheet of paper from the folder. "The cafe owner parks his bike in the alley beside the coffeehouse. People leave messages for him there," he read out.

"Really now. They saw someone leave a message on a parked bike, but they failed to spot the break-in?"

"Interesting, isn't it?" Tarbert shoved the paper back into the folder and handed it across the desk. "Did you advise Ryan to install CCTV?"

"Yes. I've also convinced the other store owners in the courtyard to upgrade their security. They're a mini cooperative. Ryan's coffeehouse draws foot traffic into the courtyard that they all benefit from, so a couple of years ago they agreed to coordinate their marketing, pool networking resources, that kind of thing. They were all ready to help when I went to talk to them."

"Because it's in all their interests."

"Yes. And everyone brings skills to the whole. Andrew Hall, the owner of the tackle shop, was a procurement specialist before he set up on his own. He buys supplies in bulk for them all, and everyone shares the savings." The support the business owners showed each other had impressed Ben. And after spending Christmas Day at the coffeehouse and observing who talked to whom, he knew Ryan's parents and uncle also purchased through the group. "Could be that Ryan's just a scapegoat," he said, leafing through his notes. "Or convenient."

"You think someone is targeting the cooperative?"

"It's more likely than someone having it in for Ryan. Widens the field of enquiry."

"It does that. Where are you going with this?"

Ben opened his action list. "I'm running checks on all the businesses involved in the cooperative. Nothing so far. After the break-in, I only spoke to the businesses in the courtyard, so now I'm going to interview all of them. I'm also

going to review the CCTV footage in the courtyard. See if I can spot who's watching Ryan's place. And the bank in the market square has a CCTV camera pointing at the entrance to the courtyard. I've just sent a request for their recording."

Tarbert nodded his approval. "Good. This sounds like a plan. What bothers me is that it keeps coming back to drugs. I suppose you've checked the coffeehouse for stray recipes?"

"I did Ryan's filing, sir. Purchase orders, receipts, customer orders, random scribbles... I've seen the lot. And found nothing that shouldn't be there. I've even rifled through the books Ryan keeps on the shelf beside the fireplace."

"What about the box?"

"What about it?"

"Did you look inside?"

"It's locked." Ben flushed. "That's to say... I didn't ask Ryan if he'd open it, sir."

"Maybe you should." Tarbert stood. "And Ben, you've worked straight through the holidays..."

He was going to mention the working time directive or the overtime budget. Ben knew it. He held up his hands. "I have the weekend off, sir."

"Make sure you take the time. You've earned it." He waved his hand at the stacks of papers on Ben's desk and the forms on his screen. "Good work, Sergeant."

When he'd disappeared into his office, Ben blew out a breath. That had gone better than he'd expected. He had a plan his chief approved of and a weekend off.



Sleet, freezing fog, and icy roads kept Ryan's coffeehouse busy as people took the time to warm up while out and about. The annual post-Christmas diet and fitness craze made no dent

in the number of people wishing to eat out, keeping his parents' restaurant fully booked. The only drawback was the wave of seasonal flu sweeping the town.

Paula was home with a sick child. Ryan's parents were three staff members short. And too many customers stepped into the coffeehouse haloed by muddy green and bilious yellow, telling Ryan that they, too, would soon join the ranks of those coughing and sneezing.

Helping out wherever he was needed took Ryan's mind off the anxiety that plagued him every time he packed the Box of Wishes away, when he ended his annual stint offering help to those who needed it. He fought the gloom with cinnamon and allspice, with freshly ground coffee and cheerful music, and—most of all—with relentless hours of work.

The bell over the door jangled and a couple crossed the room to an empty table. They shed their heavy winter gear, but the weight that bowed their shoulders didn't lift and the flat grey of failure darkened their auras.

Despair scraped the back of Ryan's throat, and the burn in his chest was familiar.

It was also wrong.

He'd stored the Box of Wishes on Christmas Day. He shouldn't feel as if he'd swallowed a hot brick.

Ryan rubbed at his chest with the heel of his hand, trying to dispel the heat and pressure. The discomfort grew, tightened his throat until he struggled to breathe.

Don't fight it. Just...go with it.

Ryan set out cups and saucers on a tray and added a pot of tea.

"I'm sorry," the woman said when he set the tray on their table. "We realise you should be closing. We just—"

"It's not a problem," Ryan soothed. "The coffeehouse is open. You're welcome here. And you'll be fine if you wish it."

He didn't offer a square of coloured paper, nor did he expand on his oblique answer. But the little he'd done seemed

to have been enough. The burn in his chest eased and exhaustion took its place, adding to the vague ache in his muscles that had bothered him all day.

Ryan tidied the bar, stacked the crockery, and sorted teaspoons into their bins. The couple drank their tea in silence and left soon after, giving him grateful smiles that held a touch of hope. Morris came to join him, and then Ben was there, his aura blazing blue and beautiful, the sight cheering Ryan like nothing else had done all day.

“I missed you,” he said, once he’d locked the front door and turned the OPEN sign to CLOSED. “It’s been a long day.”

Ben cuddled Morris while Ryan made tea, then followed him to the table that had been his since the first morning he’d come to the coffeehouse. “You look all done in.”

“I feel like it.”

“Anything go wrong?”

“No. Just one of these days where you feel you’ve worked a week, and it’s not even lunchtime...”

“Ah.”

Ryan poured tea for them both and waited until Ben had taken his first sip. “What about you?”

“I’m all caught up. Finally. And I have a question.”

“Ask.”

“You still have no idea what your burglars were after?”

Ryan shook his head. “None. I would have told you if I’d thought of anything.”

“Quite. Ryan... what about the box?”

“What about it?”

“The burglars went through your desk and your filing cabinets. That suggests they were looking for a document. Paper. A note.”

“I know. But we checked everything.”

“Not quite. What happens to the papers people put in the box when they ask for help? Do you shred them, burn them, put them in the bin? What?”

The very idea hit Ryan like a punch to the gut. “I don’t do anything with them.”

“You leave them in the box? All the time? You don’t... clear it out when you put it away?”

“No.”

“Then whatever the burglars searched for could be in the box. Can you check?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“No.” Ryan caught Ben’s eye. “I told you how it works, remember? The box sits on the bar between the autumn equinox and Christmas Day. Then I put it away.”

“But that’s your choice, putting the box away? You *could* open it if it was needed?”

“Ben...” Coming on top of the anxiety already making him jittery, this wasn’t a conversation Ryan wanted to have. He slid off the bench and crossed the room to the bar where he braced both hands on the counter as if to steady himself. The headache that had been lurking all day pushed to the fore.

“What’s wrong?” Ben’s palms settled on his shoulders, solid and warm.

“Nothing, really. I’m just bushed and I still have to get the pastries prepared for tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe you should stop working for a while and let me take you out to dinner. Not tonight,” he added before Ryan could object. “But how about tomorrow?”

Ryan wanted to say yes. He hoped Ben could see how much. “I can’t. My parents are three staff members short and fully booked for both lunch and dinner. I promised to help.”

Ben said nothing.

“It’s this flu. It’s wreaking havoc, but Rebecca says she can hold the fort here tomorrow morning, so I can go and—” Ryan realised he was babbling and stopped. “It’s a crazy time of year.”

“So you said. I didn’t realise how crazy.”

Ryan followed Ben back to the nook and the teapot, at a loss for words. He shouldn’t have to apologise for doing his job. But neither should Ben have to beg for a date.

The silence between them stretched and grew until the teapot was empty. Ben settled Morris into his carrier and pecked Ryan on the cheek. “Get some sleep,” he said. “Maybe we’re not destined to meet outside of work.”

“Wait.” Ryan opened the fridge and took out a bag. “I made you some food.”

“I prefer you to a care package. You know that, right?”

“Food is all I can offer right now.”

Ben cupped Ryan’s cheek. “It isn’t, and you know it,” he said. “You don’t have to earn my attention, either. Your sandwiches are fabulous, as are your cakes, but that’s not why I keep coming here. I like you, Ryan. As you are.” He dropped his hand and the blue in his aura dimmed with the grey of doubt. “If food is all you want to offer me, then tell me and I’ll back off. Okay?” He brushed his thumb over Ryan’s lips as if he couldn’t help himself. Then he picked up the bag and the cat carrier and left the cafe.

Ryan stared after him, touched by Ben’s declaration. He was messing up a good thing, and he didn’t know what to do. Running after Ben wouldn’t help. Not if he couldn’t accept his invitation or offer one of his own. He couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing Ben again. He’d become as much a fixture in the coffeehouse as his cat, and Ryan looked forward to Ben walking through the doors first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

“See you Monday morning,” he whispered to the disappearing taillights of Ben’s car. “And I truly am sorry.”

The year had started with hope and kisses. Now, ten days later, the hope was turning to so much misery it was giving him a headache. More than a headache, even. His knees and shoulders had been aching all day, and the headache was just the icing on a crappy cake.

If he didn't want to lose Ben, he had to convince him that the reason he kept bottling out was nothing more than a lack of time. Or maybe... maybe he needed to say no to requests for help now and then. Make time for himself.

He would think about it after he'd slept.

Ryan donned his leathers and locked up the coffeehouse. His bike stood in its usual parking space, but something fluttered on the seat. Half a brick weighed down a scruffy piece of paper.

Another advert or offer he shouldn't refuse? They'd turned up once or twice before, and Ryan had binned each one. What was wrong with people that they couldn't come into the coffeehouse and talk to him? He wasn't an ogre. He even had a letterbox.

Ryan set the brick aside and unfolded the sheet.

WHERE IS THE RECIPE? read the message in an untidy scrawl.

What the fuck? What recipe? Once or twice a year, a bunch of local chefs got together to chat about food and trade tips, but Ryan wasn't aware that he'd promised anyone a recipe he'd not sent. Even if he had, why not call him or email? This was a ludicrous way to get information.

Ryan shoved the paper into his jacket pocket, too done to bother with it. Time to take his headache home and feed it aspirin. With any luck, the stupid message was a prank. Or maybe he'd remember something later, when his head wasn't pounding.



Ben stroked Morris's soft coat and scratched around the base of the cat's silky ears. Ryan's bag of food sat on the kitchen counter. Everything it held would be delicious, but Ben couldn't bring himself to open it and check.

"Do you think I made a mistake asking him out again?" he asked the cat. "I want to spend more time with him, but—"

Ryan had been dead on his feet. He needed a good night's sleep and a weekend of someone else taking care of him for a change. And he wasn't going to get it.

"He'll open the coffeehouse tomorrow morning as if it's a workday. And once he's assured himself that Rebecca has everything under control, he'll head to his parents' place and work a long day in a busy restaurant. And all for what? To earn the gratitude of people who already love and appreciate him?"

Ben had wanted to wrap Ryan in a hug and tell him he could stop and rest.

He'd known officers so desperate for approval they'd sacrificed relationships with partners and families to their work. Ben understood that need. Keith had loved nothing more than to make Ben feel inadequate, and it had taken a long time for Ben to see it and do something about it. Without Tarbert as his boss, he might have lost everything he'd worked for since joining the police force.

Tarbert wasn't just an excellent detective. He was a wonderful mentor, even if Ben had forgotten it for months. Ben had clung to the parameters of his job until he'd recovered enough of himself to step out of the fog he'd wallowed in. He didn't want the same to happen to Ryan, but—

"Tell me, big boy... what can I do that Ryan's family can't?" Morris squirmed to get down. Ben set him on his feet and poured kibble into his dish. "Not fair asking you, I know."

Cara had warned him that Ryan didn't take kindly to being stopped when he tried to help. But Ben had done just that. When he saw Ryan again, Ryan might send him packing.

“And that would hurt, you know? But always taking second billing to some other task? I promised myself I wouldn't do that again.”

Ben took a deep breath and blew it out. He'd been honest with his feelings and had said what he'd needed to say. The next step was up to Ryan.



Samaritan

“Hobart,” Ben juggled the phone and a shopping basket, dodging people left and right. It was Saturday morning, the store was a scramble, and Ben wished for working hours that lent themselves to online deliveries.

“Ben? Are you there?”

He finally recognised the number Ryan’s sister had added to his phone on New Year’s Day. “Hi, Cara. Yes, I’m here. Just had to get out of the scrum.”

“Rugby?”

“Food shopping, but you’d hardly know the difference. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Actually, there is. Could you... This will sound weird.”

“I’m good with weird. I’m the police.”

“Not that sort of weird. I was wondering if you could check on Ryan?”

“Check on Ryan? He’s working in your parents’ restaurant this weekend, right?” Doubt stirred and he squashed it, waiting for Cara’s answer.

“He was supposed to, yes, but he’s down with the flu as well.”

“As well?”

“Alastair has it, and half of our O’Shaughnessy cousins. Plus three of my parents’ staff. I’m sorry to bother you, Ben. But I’m flying out early Monday and still need to pick up samples for my next job and check on Alastair before I head to the restaurant.”

“It’s fine. I’ll go over. Is there anything he needs?”

“I don’t know.” Cara’s frustrated sigh carried over the noise of the shopping crowd. “I’ve not spoken to him. He texted me that he’s down with the flu and staying in bed. And

now he's not answering his phone. I have no idea what he needs, or what he has in his cupboards, or—”

“Breathe,” Ben told her. “You have enough on your plate. Don't worry about Ryan. I'll check on him and let you know how he is.”

“He keeps a spare key in the flowerpot to the left side of his front door.”

“That's good to know. I don't want to break the door down. Or drag him out of bed.”

Cara ignored Ben's tasteful innuendo. “Thank you, Ben. I owe you.”

“Don't mention it.” Ben shoved the phone into his pocket and revised his shopping list. Ginger, lemons, and grapes went into his basket before he added a bunch of coriander, chillies, and a pack of chicken pieces—ingredients for hot and sour soup, his favourite remedy when a cold laid him low.

Between his regular groceries, food for Ryan, and a stack of cold medicine, his basket bulged by the time he was done. Ben didn't mind. Ryan's repeated refusals to go on a date with him had soured his mood, but Cara's call had helped him put the disappointment into perspective. If Ryan was too ill to help his parents, he wouldn't have been up for an evening out.

Ben hoped it had been as simple as that and they could revisit the topic when Ryan felt better.



Ben found the key to Ryan's front door in the flowerpot and let himself in. Apart from a stack of unopened mail on the shoe cupboard, the hallway and kitchen appeared as neat as Ryan's cafe. The living room was less tidy, with three half-empty mugs and a water glass on the coffee table next to Ryan's

phone. A rumpled blanket draped one end of the sofa, and the cushions had migrated to the floor as if Ryan hadn't been comfortable using them to support his head.

Ryan was curled up in bed, so deeply asleep he hadn't heard Ben come in. The quilt wrapped around him, but beneath it, Ryan wore clothes. And the hoodie, jogging bottoms, and thick socks did little to stop his shivers.

The layers of clothes and the beads of sweat on Ryan's upper lip and forehead spoke of chills and fever. Ben returned to the living room to fetch the blanket from the couch and Ryan snuggled deeper into the bed under the extra layer of warmth. He didn't wake, and Ben closed the bedroom door behind himself.

Cara answered on the second ring. "How is he?"

"Asleep. And yes, he's down with a fever. I'll see how he feels when he wakes, but I can't imagine him working like this. How's Alastair?"

"Coughing up a lung. And also feverish."

"Give him aspirin or paracetamol if he has any."

"Is that what you're doing for Ryan?"

"When he wakes. I've bought some Night Nurse, too, though he seems to sleep just fine without it."

"I'm getting Benilyn for Alastair. Is there anything you need?"

"I'm set. You take care of yourself."

He put the phone down and saw about unpacking the food, glad the pots and utensils he needed to make soup were easy to find. It felt strange to stand in the kitchen chopping ingredients and stirring dinner without Morris twining around his feet, even as it helped him to remember where he was. He pulled up an audiobook and listened to the *Tales of Max Carrados* until the creak of Ryan's bedroom door brought him back to awareness.

And then Ryan stood in the kitchen, looking lost and rumpled, squinting from puffy eyes. "Ben?"

“Live and in colour. You’re not hallucinating, don’t worry. Cara asked me to check on you.” He crossed the kitchen and touched the back of his hand to Ryan’s forehead, feeling the heat radiating off him.

Ryan leaned back. “Don’t come closer. I don’t want to give it to you.”

“I’ve had my jab. And most germs bounce right off me.” Ben went back to stirring his soup. “I’m more likely to catch a cold in July or August. Summer germs are evil.”

“If you say so.” Ryan shivered and wrapped his arms around his middle.

“Would you like a cup of lemon and ginger tea now, or do you think you can manage a shower first?”

“I want to die, not shower.”

“No doubt. But you’ll feel better after a shower, trust me. Then you can dose yourself up with the good drugs and go back to sleep.”

“Can I smell something spicy? My nose is crap.”

“I’ve made hot and sour soup. Ginger, garlic, chilli, chicken, and lots of coriander. You need food in your stomach or all that cold medicine will make you sick.”

“Soul food.” Ryan found a smile. “You’re good at looking after people.”

“I’ve done my share.” He frowned as another shiver ran through Ryan. “Your teeth are chattering. Go shower.”

“You could come and scrub my back.”

“You’re a long way from death, if you can think of that.” He leaned over and planted a kiss on Ryan’s cheek. “Off with you.”

He had bowls of steaming soup set out on the dining table when Ryan came back. “Mind if I eat with you?”

“To prove you didn’t poison it?”

“So that’s why you share my tea every morning?” To Ben’s relief, Ryan was hungry. He finished his bowl of soup and even picked at the bunch of grapes Ben had placed in the centre of the table. “I’ve made a pot of lemon and ginger tea,” he said. “Do you want a cup?”

Ryan made a face. “I don’t like honey.”

“I know. That’s why I made it with sugar.”

Ryan reached for the cup. “I feel like I could sleep some more.”

“Good idea.” Ben set the pills beside Ryan’s mug. “You’re still feverish. Once the fever breaks, you’ll feel much better.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Then you’ve got something nastier than a cold. But let’s not worry about that until we need to. Come on, bed.” He led the way, turning the quilt and fluffing the pillows until Ryan came in, cradling his mug of hot tea.

“I feel like a cliché.” He took a sip before he pinned Ben with a gaze. “And before I forget... I don’t want you to think that I don’t want to go out with you. I do. It’s just—”

“You promised help to people. I get it,” Ben said. “Don’t stress about us for now. That’s probably what made you sick. The stress, I mean. It’s always easier to catch a bug when you’re stressed.”

“I don’t want to push you away.”

“Then don’t. Talk to me instead. Or better yet, show me that I’m not an afterthought on your long list of chores.”

Ryan stiffened. “We only met four weeks ago. And a lot of my plans were made—”

“Long before then, I know. I’m not saying you should ditch your friends and family for me. I understand that you have commitments, and that Christmas is a busy time. Just... put us first every now and then?”

Ryan took his hand and twined their fingers. “I’ll do that. I’ll show you that I can put us first. Because... Because I do want to see more of you. And I’d love to go on a date.”

“Good. That’s good. Focus on getting better and then we’ll find time for a date.” Relief made him dizzy. “It’s not as if my schedule is the easiest to handle. Now get into bed and snooze some more.”

“You don’t have to sit and watch me sleep.”

“Wasn’t going to. I’m heading home to make sure that Morris doesn’t starve. I’ll be back later.” He produced a thermos flask of hot lemon and ginger and set it on the bedside table. “Drink more tea when you wake up. It will help.”

Ryan snuggled into the bed. “You make an excellent nurse. Even without the uniform.”



Ryan straightened the sofa cushions and folded the blanket into a neat square. “I’ve finished all your delicious chicken soup and I feel miles better,” he said into the phone. “I’ll be at work tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? You were pretty out of it yesterday. And cute and sleepy this morning.”

“It was a cold, Ben. I don’t think I have Alastair’s bug. Cara says he’s coughing as if he has a three-packs-a-day habit.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Tidying up,” Ryan said. “Just around the flat, in case you’re worrying.” He normally spent a couple of hours in the cafe on Sunday, preparing bread and cakes for the Monday morning rush. “I’ll use what I have in the freezer tomorrow and I’ll close on time.”

“You don’t have to justify your actions. You’re a grown man running your own business. I’m sure you know what you’re about and when to ask for help.”

“Well, I did,” Ryan said, feeling more cheerful. “I really appreciated you coming by. All blue and gorgeous.”

“Blue?”

“The light around you. I told you. Don’t you remember?” Ryan cursed himself for the slip. He knew better than to harp on about his differences. But backtracking would be worse. “It’s part of how I know when people need my kind of help.”

“I remember. What shade of blue?”

“This morning? Blue like your eyes. It’s beautiful.”

“Right.”

Ryan blew out a breath, glad Ben wasn’t making an issue of it. “I feel much better. Slept like a log after you made me breakfast, and your soup tasted just as wonderful warmed up.”

“It’s liquid penicillin, that soup. Nothing warms you up better than hot ginger, chilli, and coriander broth. Nothing.”

“Who taught you to make it?”

“Lady who ran a stall at the food market. She also sold stir-fry and fried chicken skewers, but I went for the soup. Before I moved from Manchester, she gave me the recipe. It’s one of the few things I can cook from scratch.”

Ben’s voice had gone soft with memories, and Ryan wished he could be beside him. “It’s a genuine hug in a mug. If you teach me how to make it, we can add it to the lunch menu at the cafe. Something warm that isn’t hot chocolate, coffee, or tea.”

“I like that idea. But I imagine your dad can make it better than me.”

“Fiddlesticks. You’re the one with the super-secret recipe. You’ll bring Morris tomorrow morning, yes? And don’t

ask me if I'm sure. I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't."

"Yes, sir. Of course I'll bring him, sir." Ben mock-scraped, and Ryan could hear the smile in his voice. "Haven't you realised that Morris is my spy? He's watching over you when I'm not there."

"You're a sap."

"I know. Now get some more sleep. Five o'clock will be here before you know it."

The line went dead before Ryan could say anything snarky. Ben did that a lot, end a phone call right after he'd made a point, giving Ryan no chance to start an argument. They both had their bossy streaks, wanting to take charge and take care of others. Ryan couldn't fault Ben for what he'd do in a flash if their roles were reversed.

Ryan reached for the stack of mail Ben had set on a corner of the kitchen counter. He worked his way through the items, mostly junk offers, which ended up in the recycling. Two letters were bills, and one was from his landlord.

A formal notice to terminate his rental agreement.

.... we are in the process of putting the building on the market.

... and your tenancy will end on January 28th.

Please ensure that you have removed all your possessions before that date and the flat is in good order.

Ryan sagged against the wall, knees shaking. The warm, content feeling that had kept him going after talking to Ben had vanished. Now his chest felt tight and his eyes burned as if the fever was making a comeback.

This was a complication he'd not dreamed of in a month of Sundays. Moving house during the busiest time of the year, when he'd had so little warning...

Ryan re-read the letter, but its content hadn't changed. He had three weeks—less than three weeks, since the letter was dated Friday—to find a new place to live and to move house. All while he had two staff members out sick, had

promised to help his parents—also plagued with staff sickness—at the weekends, and owed Ben at least a night out.

When would he find time to go house-hunting?

Was it even possible to get a rental agreement in place in under three weeks? There were ID checks, and credit checks, and references, and God knew what else he had to provide to prove to a prospective landlord that he wouldn't trash the place and pay his rent on time.

Couldn't his landlord have allowed him a little more breathing room? Shouldn't he have given him at least four weeks' notice?

Ryan didn't panic easily. When he ran Fate's errands, he saw people who were desperate or at their wits' end. And he stayed calm and did his best to help.

He didn't feel calm right then.

He was shaking and sweating, with the leftovers of his cold or reaction to the contents of the letter.

Ryan had meant to check on Alastair, but he couldn't face any more drama that evening. He pulled the bottle of Redbreast from the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, poured himself a healthy slug and downed it in one.

Then he turned out all the lights, crawled into bed fully dressed and curled into a ball. If he hid here for a while, maybe the madness would stop.



Secrets

Ben was the first customer through the door of the coffeehouse that Monday, and he took full advantage of the momentary privacy. He let Morris out of his carrier, then reached for Ryan, and pulled him into a hug. “How are you feeling?”

“I could have slept longer, but I’m here.”

“I may have to come around at three to make sure you’re closing.”

“You would, too.” There was an odd note in Ryan’s voice.

“You wouldn’t want me to?”

“Ben, I had a cold. I’m hardly a delicate flower.”

“You’re not, I know. You’re just very good at taking care of everyone except yourself—or so your parents tell me.”

“Traitors.” Ryan reached for a tray. “Looking after people makes me happy. It makes my parents happy, too, and we all want to do the best job we can.”

Ben took the tea tray from Ryan’s hands before he could bang it on the bar to make his point. “I met your parents, and yes, you are peas in a pod. I’m not complaining. Just looking out for you. You can’t meet everyone’s sugar and caffeine needs if you’re in bed with pneumonia.”

“Meooooow!” Morris had never made himself heard at such a volume. He stood on his hind legs with his front paws resting against the side of the bar.

“Someone’s feeling left out.”

“Or maybe he doesn’t like raised voices.” Ryan’s smile was back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

“You were hardly yelling.”

“Not to your ears, perhaps, but Morris has cat ears.” Ryan scooped the cat into his arms. “Were we too loud for

you? Is it time for your breakfast?”

“Second breakfast,” Ben said, but he couldn’t hold back his smile when Ryan collected a small dish with chicken pieces from the bar. Ryan didn’t just accept Ben’s love for Morris without calling him sappy. He was well on the way to spoiling Ben’s furbaby as much as Ben did himself.

Ryan made for the nook, plate in hand, and Morris cradled in the crook of his arm. The cat squirmed and shifted, trying to get his feet on the floor and his face closer to the chicken. Ryan moved with Morris, teasing him, but not letting him go, and Ben’s heart melted. He bit his tongue to hold back the words that tried to get out.

He’d made a promise to value himself more, but he wouldn’t make a fuss if mornings and evenings at the coffeehouse were all Ryan could offer. Not if he got to see Ryan like this.



“Yes, I realise that. Please let me know if anything suitable comes up. Thank you.” None of the twelve rental agents he’d called over the last days had any properties available before the end of January, as if nobody moved house in the first month of the year. His other worry had been just as valid: arranging a rental agreement took more time than he had.

He could speak to his landlord as several of the rental agents had suggested and remind him that the law required him to give two months’ notice. But Ryan didn’t want to argue. Nor did he want to stay where he wasn’t welcome. If the man wanted to sell the building in a hurry, Ryan wouldn’t stop him, even if the law was on his side.

He had too close a connection with fate to curse when his plans went awry, but he wished his emergencies would arrive one at a time. Ben was neither blind nor witless. He’d seen that the aftereffects of his cold left Ryan wishing for his

bed. He could tell that Ryan was worried. It was only a matter of time until Ryan would forget himself and tell Ben about his housing troubles.

He touched the space on the bar where the Box of Wishes would sit for three months of the year. Ryan had put it to sleep with a tribute of incense and cinnamon, to rest undisturbed until the autumn equinox. His sudden need to find a new place to live was not a disaster requiring the help of Fate.

Morris hopped up onto the bar and rubbed his cheek against Ryan's.

"I don't know why I don't want to tell him," Ryan said, as he lifted the cat off the bar and cuddled him. "Ben is... special. If I tell him, he'll help. He'll ask me to stay with him, and that's not... Not what I want. Not this way. Just because I don't want to let him go home at night doesn't mean that he wants to play house with me, right?"

He hadn't told his parents, either.

His ma would love nothing better than to use his temporary lack of a home to push him and Ben together and Ryan didn't want that kind of help. He didn't want to jinx the gossamer accord growing between him and Ben. Ben smiled when he stepped into the coffeehouse, his aura a brighter blue now than it had been since they met. Falling ill or blowing Ben off to go house hunting hadn't been on his to-do list.

In the end, he called his uncle and explained his situation.

"You know what he's doing's illegal, right? He has to give you a lot more notice than that. Do you want me to talk to Dan Green?"

"I don't want a solicitor. I don't want to fight over this. I've registered with all the local rental agencies. They'll find me a new place soon enough. I'll just need—"

"A few brawny lads to help you move out and somewhere to park your stuff?"

“Exactly.” Ryan doodled on a serviette. His da’s brother was the most down-to-earth man he knew and didn’t fuss over things he couldn’t change. He rolled up his sleeves and got on with it. That he had a large van and owned a storage barn helped, too.

“I’m sure we can sort something out. You want to leave as quickly as, right?”

“I have until the twenty-eighth, but—”

“We’ll do it this weekend and send in the cleaners on Monday. Don’t waste your time cleaning the place yourself. Arse of a landlord doesn’t deserve it. And Ryan, if he gives you any more grief, you *will* talk to Dan. Understood?”

“Yes. Thank you. I owe you.”

“Yeah? I’m sure you know how to repay me.”

Ryan remembered the menus and shopping lists from his stint of working the bar on New Year’s Eve. “Pretzel twists?”

“As many as you can knock up before you die of boredom. Bacon, chilli cheese, and cinnamon ones, preferably. They sell like crazy when we put them on the menu.”

“I’ll add them to my list and get you a steady supply.” He’d do more than that if his uncle took care of his possessions and helped with the move.

“Where are you gonna stay while you look for your new place, m’boy?”

“In the shop. It won’t be for long, and I’ve done it before.” That it wasn’t the most comfortable way to live was an excellent incentive to schedule house-hunting time.

“Ben wouldn’t even offer you a bed?”

“Don’t you go say anything to him!”

“Ben doesn’t know that your landlord chucked you out? I assume that’s why you don’t want to tell your parents?” His uncle didn’t sound in the least surprised.

“Ma would go matchmaking,” Ryan grumbled. “And Ben would let me move in.”

“Why is that a bad thing?”

“It should be his choice, not something he’s forced into. He’s already on guard duty all the time. I feel like I just keep taking and taking, and that’s not what I want.”

Declan O’Shaughnessy heaved a sigh. “You’re a right idiot.”

“Maybe. But you won’t tell Ben or my ma?”

“No, I give you my word. I won’t say anything to either of them. Now go home and start packing. We’ll be there in the morning.”



A couple of aspirin and two beef and cheese sandwiches took care of Ryan’s headache. A tall mug of strong black coffee, laced with a generous tot of Redbreast, banished his need to crawl into bed and sleep.

He had to pack. His uncle, or more likely a bunch of his cousins, would be here in the morning.

Kitchen first, he decided. Empty the cupboards, wrap everything and stuff it into boxes.

After that, he’d pack the clothes he needed until he found a new place and throw the rest into bin bags for storage. His living room mostly held books and games, plus his paintings and sketches. The rest was furniture.

He got to work packing his possessions until his phone interrupted his industry.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” Alastair bellowed as soon as Ryan answered the call. “I just had to hear it from my uncle.”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, my arse. Your landlord throws you out and you don’t know why you didn’t tell me?”

Ryan clutched the counter to stop himself yelling back. A loud argument might be a good stressbuster, but it would also wake his neighbours. “Alastair.” He forced calm into his voice. “Can I explain?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

“Jackass.” Ryan fished a tin of beer from the fridge and popped the top. He took a deep pull to steady himself. “The notice to leave was in my letterbox last Friday, but because I felt like shit, I didn’t see it until Sunday night. Then all I could think about was that I didn’t want to tell Ben.”

“Why not? I thought the two of you were on the way to... you know.”

“That’s exactly why. I don’t want him thinking I only keep him around to help me out.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not. I met him when he came to investigate the break-in. He’s helped me buy new office furniture and put it together. He checks on the courtyard every day and when Cara told him I was sick, he turned up to cook me soup and feed me pills. The fucking *last* thing I want is him hearing about this mess and offering me a place to stay!”

“You wouldn’t want to stay with him?”

“Alastair Donohue. If you’re too fucking drunk to understand English, get the hell off this phone and sleep off the booze.” The silence at the other end was so profound that Ryan pulled the phone from his ear and checked the line. “Alastair?”

“Right. I get you. This sucks.”

Ryan swallowed more beer. Three towers of taped and labelled boxes blocked half his kitchen, but his cupboards were bare now. Two, maybe three, boxes would take care of the rest.

“What about Ben?” Alastair asked.

“What about him? He’s busy with work.” *And I’m not exactly at my most inviting, putting him off every time he asks me out.* Ryan kept that bit to himself. He knew what Alastair was asking. Since Ryan had pointed out that he could manage his own affairs, Ben had kept his Samaritan tendencies to himself. For now. “I don’t want to scare him off,” Ryan said. “Or make him think I’m using him.”

“Keeping him out of the loop isn’t a useful tactic, either.”

“I know.” Ben might walk away when he found out that Ryan was keeping secrets. Ryan didn’t want that to happen, but he was too tired to negotiate this minefield. “If you have any helpful ideas, I’ll listen.”

“Let me think about it. First, we’ll get you out of that place, then we’ll sort out what to do. I’ll be over with the guys first thing.”

“Thanks, Al. The kitchen’s ready to go. I’ll do—”

“Get some sleep,” Alastair said. “There are five of us. We’ll get this done.”

This was the Alastair he’d known growing up. The general who devised all their crazy adventures and bossed them around until one of them complained. He hadn’t heard Alastair sound like that in far too long.

“You still owe me a story,” he said, and heard his cousin chuckle.

“I know. Let’s get you sorted out first. My story is six years old. It will keep a few weeks longer.”

“Hm.” Alastair was good at ducking and diving, and his own drama had distracted Ryan too much to pay attention. “I won’t let you get out of telling it this time.”



“That’s the last one.” Alastair folded down the lid on the box and ran the tape dispenser around the seams. “A job well done,” he said, lifting the box to his shoulder.

He’d been unfailingly cheerful, just like Liam, Owen, and Colin. They’d shifted furniture and boxes, razzing each other to the nines. None of them had commented on Ryan’s low mood. Nor had they tried to make him join in the banter, and Ryan had been grateful for the respite.

He’d said little all day as he’d slung his possessions into boxes, taping and labelling as he went, feeling none of the excitement that usually came with moving house.

His landlord’s behaviour annoyed him more than he’d admitted to himself, and a heavy load of guilt topped his annoyance.

He was keeping something as significant as losing his flat a secret from his parents.

Keeping it from Ben felt even more of a betrayal.

His parents knew him. They’d forgive him.

Ben might not be so generous.

They’d packed up Ryan’s possessions and cleared his flat in under seven hours. The place already looked as forlorn as empty spaces often did.

“You build a house with walls and beams, you make a home from hopes and dreams,” Alastair recited their grandmother’s favourite saying. He sounded wistful, and Ryan wished he’d paid better attention, had asked the right questions when there’d still been a chance to help Alastair fix what had gone wrong. If his mistake lay six years in the past, how much of a chance was there to fix it now?

“I’m a crap cousin, aren’t I?”

“Don’t make me laugh or I’ll end up with another fucking coughing fit.”

“I’m not joking. I didn’t see that you were hurting.”

“Maybe there was nothing to see.”

“Now who’s trying to be funny?.” Ryan gave him a slow once-over. “You used to look like a birch tree in spring. Now there’s barely any green to your aura.”

“Yeah, well... You see more than most people and you look out for everyone. Why do you think we’re here today? Now stop being maudlin. That’s the cold talking, and your anger. You know that.” Alastair left the room, having dodged another conversation he wasn’t keen to have.

Ryan watched him go. Some things just never changed, and Alastair was one of those.

When the bells rang in the New Year, Ryan had wished for change, though losing his home only weeks later hadn’t been on his list.

“You make a home from hopes and dreams,” he whispered to himself. Alastair was right. This flat had been a house. He was still looking for a home.

He went from room to room, checking they hadn’t forgotten anything, and then he joined Alastair and his cousins out on the landing.

“I don’t feel homeless,” he said as he pulled the key from the lock for the last time.

“That’s because you aren’t.” Liam, the most demonstrative of his cousins, wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “You can stay with any of us, and I hope you will. Nobody makes breakfast like you do.”

Ryan laughed. “Nice to know what I’m valued for. But breakfast can wait. I want a drink. The beer and the curry are on me tonight, and if you tell anyone about this before I’m ready to let them know, I’ll end you.”



Rescue

Ben blinked, his eyes dry and gritty. Tarbert's reminder that finding the truth was not the same as proving Ryan's innocence had nagged at him all week. He had kept his interactions with Ryan shorter and shorter each night, while he reminded himself that Tarbert was right, however uncomfortable it made Ben feel.

"I like Ryan. You've noticed that, haven't you, big boy? And that's the problem."

Instead of visiting the cafe or calling Ryan and chatting to him for hours, Ben had spent his weekend sifting through CCTV recordings from the shops in the courtyard and the camera monitoring the market square.

The recordings from the daytime hours were at least marginally entertaining, with traffic in the town and shoppers coming and going. But once the last shop had closed its doors, activity in the courtyard dwindled to passing wildlife and the odd householder sticking their head out of the window.

"It's like I'm doing penance for losing my professional objectivity." Ben ran his fingers through Morris's soft fur. The tabby hadn't minded Ben's sojourn on the sofa. He'd settled on Ben's lap and gone to sleep, unbothered by Ben talking to him, and even sometimes purring his support.

"I'm not expecting a breakthrough. Just hoping to spot the person leaving messages on Ryan's bike. I wonder why he never mentioned that someone did that."

Was it so common that it didn't surprise him? Or was the report claiming that someone had left messages on Ryan's bike just another red herring?

Ben paused his audiobook when he realised he was thinking about the case instead of listening to the story. Theorising ahead of his data. The shame of it.

“Checking through surveillance footage bores everyone to death eventually,” he said as he shifted a sleeping Morris off his lap.

His stomach had been telling him for the last twenty minutes that he needed a break, and Ben decided he deserved a beer with his pizza. He popped the top on the bottle, and while the pizza baked, he noted down questions he wanted to ask the next morning. When he saw Ryan again.



Ben reached for the cup of tea. He added a drop of milk before he raised the cup to his face and inhaled the fragrant steam. “Lady Grey,” he said. “Are you making it easy for me because it’s Monday?”

Ryan watched him, and Ben wanted to ask what he saw. He’d not quite understood Ryan’s explanation of auras and colours. But then Ryan smiled and Ben’s questions became much less important. “I was thinking of making you a pot of the Earl, but you seem in need of something with a bit more zing.”

Ben lowered his face over the cup again. His eyes still felt as if they’d been sandpapered, but the steam coming off his tea was soothing. He’d found nothing in the hours of footage that could exonerate Ryan from the suspicion of being a drug dealer. Police work was a slog and could sap your resolve, but the hints of orange and lemon in his tea lifted his spirits. Set him up for trying again. “Thank you,” he said, not looking up. “I spent too much time in front of a computer this weekend.”

Ryan didn’t ask. He sipped from his own cup, watched Morris explore, and let Ben enjoy his first cup of tea. Ben couldn’t imagine not coming here every morning for this tiny slice of bliss.

“I have some more questions—”

A loud buzzing interrupted the peace of the coffeehouse.
His phone.

Ben wrestled the thing from his pocket. “Hobart.”

“Major incident,” the dispatcher said. “We need you at the station.”

Ben’s spine snapped straight. “I’ll be there in ten.” He threw a longing glance at his chicken pesto panini before he grabbed it and took a huge bite. “I need to go,” he said around a mouthful of food.

“I can see that.” Ryan was already on the move, heading for the bar and the trays of sandwiches and muffins. “I’ll fix you a bag.”

“Ryan, you don’t need to—”

“I know I don’t. But you’re going to give yourself indigestion by inhaling your breakfast like this. And who knows when you’ll get lunch? You haven’t even had time to drink your tea.” Ryan filled a travel mug with spiced tea, brewed strong enough to keep its flavour even if it cooled, and added milk and sugar. “One for the road.” He smiled as Ben took it, then held out a paper bag with sandwiches and muffins. “Be safe.”

Ben hesitated, caught between conflicting desires. Needing to go. Wanting to stay. Wanting to say... He touched Ryan’s cheek with the back of his hand. “Thank you for all of this. I wish I could stay here with you.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“I... Ryan, I don’t know what they need me for. I could be late back.”

Ryan caught Ben’s hand. He turned his head and brushed his lips over the knuckles. “Go do your job. And don’t worry about Morris. He’s safe with me until you get home.”



“He hasn’t forgotten you,” Ryan said many hours later as he wiped down the big steel table where he did his baking. Morris had been pacing from the entrance of the coffeehouse to the kitchen for the last half hour and nothing could distract him from his vigil.

He’d leave the kitchen on stiff legs, pass through the hallway into the main room of the coffeehouse, and walk the length of the bar to the door. He’d sit there, staring out through the glass into the empty courtyard that was lit by little more than moonlight now the large Christmas tree was gone. At some invisible signal, he rose and retraced his steps until he stood beside Ryan in the kitchen, meowing his displeasure.

It was beyond cute.

“He told us this morning that he might be late. And Ben not being here doesn’t mean you’ve gone without food or cuddles, now has it? Don’t you dare tell him it has.”

Morris blinked big, green eyes at him, his little face one of such misery that Ryan interrupted his cleaning, bent, and gathered the cat to his chest.

“He’s fine,” he cooed, scratching behind Morris’s ears.

Then he stopped.

He didn’t know if Ben was fine.

Ben was a police officer. He could walk into a dangerous situation at any point, and Ryan couldn’t ever say with conviction that Ben was fine unless he had the man in his sight. It wasn’t a comfortable thought.

Morris head-butted his chin. An admonishment to Ryan to keep stroking him. Ryan did so while he headed to his office to check if Ben had left him a message.

His phone lay silent, the message screen blank. Ben texted rarely, was more likely to phone. And Ryan, who was part of a clan who treated telephone conversations as normal interaction, appreciated it. Right now, though, he wished for a simple text.

Ryan had worked late the previous night, restocking his freezers to stop himself from reaching for the phone to call Ben. Going to bed exhausted hadn't stopped him from dreaming of Ben, but at least he'd woken in time to tidy away his blankets and sleeping bag and make himself presentable before Ben arrived with Morris.

Seeing Ben had cheered Ryan's heavy heart. His aura matched the deep blue of his eyes, and he'd looked as content as a child on Christmas morning. The first time Ben had sat in the nook, his aura had held more grey than blue. Loneliness had rolled off him in waves, and he'd cradled his tea as if it were his only comfort. The change was staggering, and Ryan could have watched him forever.

"We can't always have what we want," Ryan reminded himself. "You know that."

Morris wriggled out of his arms, but instead of resuming his vigil, he curled up on Ryan's office chair and washed his paws.

Ryan returned to the kitchen. It was just after eight. The last batch of buns was in the oven, ready to be iced first thing in the morning. If Ben hadn't turned up by the time Ryan had cleaned up, he'd text him. And then tackle the paperwork while he waited.

Linear plan established, Ryan zipped through his evening tasks. Fifteen minutes later, he stepped out of the back door, bin liner in hand. He tossed it, ready for the next morning's rubbish collection, and was heading back inside when a man's brawny arm wrapped around his throat.

A second man appeared in front of him and drove his fist into Ryan's stomach without uttering a single word.

Ryan gagged. Bile burned the back of his throat and he fought for breath. He threw back an elbow, hit something soft and heard a grunt. The small sound spurred him into kicking and thrashing. He needed to break the stranglehold. Needed to curl into a ball to protect himself. Needed—

“Where is the recipe? Give it over and we’ll leave ye in peace.”

The man holding him yanked him upright, gave him a little air.

“What recipe?” A second punch caught his jaw hard enough to make him see stars and taste blood. “What fucking recipe?” he demanded.

A third punch doubled him over, and he sucked air in a wheezing gasp. Nausea clawed at his gut and if the goon in front of him wasn’t careful, Ryan would throw up all over him. He ran a coffeehouse for Heaven’s sake. And he’d never heard of anyone getting beaten up over recipes for iced buns or gingerbread.

“What fucking recipe? I’ve no idea what you want!”

“Pretending ignorance won’t save you.”

“I have cupboards full of recipe books,” Ryan shouted, temper spilling over. “Which one of the friggin’ things are you after?” Ryan braced himself for another punch when the man holding him in place suddenly jerked and let go, sending Ryan to his knees.

“Police!” Boots thudded on wet asphalt.

The man who’d held him careened into the wheelie bin, bounced off and hit the wall. The second attacker turned to run, stumbled, and keeled over like a felled tree.

Ryan gasped for breath. The cobbles swam in and out of focus. He knew he should get up, put distance between himself and his assailants, but if he moved, he might be sick.

“Ryan! Ryan, talk to me.”

Ryan staggered to his feet, found Ben standing like an avenging angel over Ryan’s two assailants. He held a club... a

baton?... and looked ready to inflict more damage.

“Ryan. Talk to me.” He held out a hand.

Ryan gripped it, surprised by how wobbly he felt. “I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

“He only hit me a few times.” The taste of blood was stronger now, and Ryan ran his tongue over his teeth, checking. Nothing seemed to be loose.

“Your lip is split and bleeding.” Ben touched Ryan’s chin, and Ryan winced when the light hit his eyes. “Go inside. Put some ice on that cheek. We need to get you checked for a concussion.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be with you in a minute. Just going to take care of these two.”

“Do you need a hand? You can’t let them lie out here in the cold.”

Ben muttered something Ryan didn’t catch before he bent and zip-tied both men’s hands behind their backs. Then he had his phone to his ear, calling in the assault.



Rewards

“Come home with me,” Ben said two hours later, when his colleagues had taken Ryan’s statement and carted his assailants off to the local nick. “They didn’t get what they came for, so your place may not be safe.”

Ben had made tea and located the cocoa nibs Ryan liked to nibble on. Settled in the corner booth with Morris on his lap, Ryan had let Ben fuss over him. A sign, if Ben had needed one, of how much the attack had rattled Ryan.

“Come home with me,” he said again, and felt warm all over when Ryan agreed.

It wasn’t until he parked in his usual spot that he remembered the state of his home.

“It looks a little... unfinished. Just ignore the gaps.” Ben’s face burned as he led Ryan inside. “I’ve been meaning to go furniture shopping, but every time I make plans, work gets in the way.”

“Today, that may have been Providence. If you’d been earlier, you might not have caught those two guys.”

“If I’d been earlier, they wouldn’t have attacked you.”

“You can’t know that. If they’d realised that you were there, they might have come back mob-handed. My uncle says that’s what often happens in pub fights.”

“True.” Ben breathed a sigh of relief when Ryan didn’t comment on the empty spaces on his walls. At least his bookshelves no longer looked like a mouth with missing teeth. He found tumblers and poured a finger of Scotch for each of them. “Here. Something to combat the adrenaline.”

Ryan fell onto the sofa, wincing a little. “Does this actually help?”

“It numbs for a little while. I’m not one for drowning in a bottle, so I can’t comment on the effects of large quantities

of the stuff.”

“What do you do to de-stress?”

“Lift weights. Go running. The more stressed I am, the more I work out.” He settled on the sofa beside Ryan and wove their fingers together. Having Ryan in his home was comforting. The missing furniture, the empty spaces on his walls where pictures had been, even the memories of hours in the gym... they vanished into insignificance with Ryan here.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t in time to stop them.”

Ryan sat stiffly. “Don’t be silly. I’m beyond grateful you turned up when you did. I had no fucking clue what they wanted. They kept asking—”

Ben put his fingertips over Ryan’s lips. “Wait. Do you really want to go over this now? You’ve already had it twice and tomorrow, we’ll all ask you several times more.”

“I don’t think it makes a difference when I tell the story or how often. They asked me where the recipe was. I run a coffeehouse, and I bake for a living, for Christ’s sake! I have hundreds of recipes. Have you ever heard of someone being assaulted over a recipe for gingerbread?”

“Maybe it was your lemon cheesecake they wanted,” Ben suggested, mouth watering at just the idea.

Some of the anger and tension bled out of Ryan at the sight, and he leaned into the cushions. “I’ll make you an entire tray of lemon cheesecake tomorrow.” He lifted their joined hands and dropped a kiss on Ben’s knuckles. “I have to keep my hero fed.”

Ben’s cheeks heated, but his smile didn’t lessen. “I’m already the envy of all my colleagues. You keep this up and you’ll have coppers falling over themselves, wanting to guard you and your shop.”

“Guard the cheesecake, more like.”

“And the gingerbread with the cinnamon frosting. Not to mention the beef and chilli melts and the iced buns.”

The conversation deteriorated into silliness. They both lost it when Morris hopped up, intent on settling on a lap, and caught a whiff of the whisky in Ryan's glass. The disgusted expression on his little face was as hilarious as the haste with which he shot off the sofa, and the loud meow that proclaimed his distaste.



“Oof!” A heavy weight landed on Ryan's tender stomach. He flailed in panic before he realised he was in Ben's bedroom and the wrecking ball that had attacked him was Morris.

Dislodged from his perch by Ryan's startled movements, the cat balanced along Ryan's thigh, skirted his crotch, and plopped down on Ryan's chest, purring up a storm. Green eyes blinked, their colour amplified by the light from the alarm clock on the bedside table.

Ryan scratched under Morris's chin.

“You startled me,” Ryan whispered. “I'm not used to having a cat to snuggle with at night. Ben doesn't even stir when you do this.”

Ben lay on his side with his arms wrapped around a pillow, breathing slow and steady. He hadn't been so relaxed earlier in the evening when he'd admitted that his spare bedroom no longer had a bed in it. He'd even offered to sleep on the couch.

Ryan hadn't wanted that. He'd been loath to admit it, but the attack had shaken him and he'd wanted Ben close.

Ben had realised it before Ryan grew too embarrassed, which was how they'd ended up in Ben's bed. Where Ben slept, undisturbed by wandering cats.

Morris turned his head and regarded his human. Whether he was judging Ben for not paying attention to him, or pointing out that he'd found another perch, Ryan couldn't

have said. The purr grew louder and Ryan found Morris's warm weight and the steady rumble wonderfully relaxing. He kept his hands on the cat, stroking now and then, and drifted back to sleep.

The purr dwindled. Morris hooked needle-sharp claws into Ryan's chest for a fraction of a second, and then hopped off the bed.

Ryan didn't know whether to yelp in alarm, laugh at Morris's antics, or curse that he was now awake again. He shifted, trying to get comfortable, and the movement brought his leg and hip into contact with Ben's warm bulk.

His body took immediate notice.

Last night he'd been scared, hurt, and tired, but now Ryan couldn't get his mind off Ben. His fingers itched to touch and Ryan fought a losing battle. *I'll just snuggle up to him and go back to sleep*, he promised himself, and settled his palm on Ben's upper arm, just under the edge of the T-shirt's short sleeve. He'd not been with anyone for so long, the need to explore the soft skin was the worst kind of compulsion. Ben made little snuffling noises in his throat, and then he chuckled.

Ryan froze. He even held his breath as he waited for Ben to fall back to sleep.

Ben did nothing of the sort. He turned until he faced Ryan and gave him a sleepy smile. "Morris wake you up?"

"Twice," Ryan whispered back, as if he was sharing a secret. "First, he landed on my stomach like a rock dropped from a great height. Then he purred me back to sleep. That was nice."

Ben was grinning now, the flash of teeth visible in the glow from the alarm clock. "And then he dug in his claws, for just an instant, before he wandered off."

"He does that to you, too?"

"It's his way of letting me know that he's going out. I've long stopped noticing when he walks all over me, so he had to come up with a different signal. Sometimes, he sleeps on me for hours and I wake up feeling like a ninety-year-old, because

I've not moved a muscle all night. He's also quite persistent when he wants something. He wants to sleep on your lap, he'll sleep on your lap. Whether you want him to or not."

"Oh, really?"

"Hm-hm."

"So what do you do when he wakes you in the middle of the night?"

"Go back to sleep?"

"Oh."

"Unless I have a reason not to." Ben's smile morphed into something softer and warmer. "How are you feeling?"

Ryan thought about his answer. He could say he was fine and let Ben make the choice where this would go. But he was tired of holding back and he didn't want to lie when the truth would be obvious the moment Ben came a few inches closer.

"Randy as a goat," he admitted. "I'm sorry if I woke you, but my fingers were itching and I don't have a lot of resistance when it comes to you."

"You didn't wake me. I've been more aware of Morris since the accident. I woke the moment he landed on top of you." Ben slid his hand under Ryan's pillow, settled his other one on Ryan's hip. "There's nothing wrong with snuggling until we go back to sleep."

"Is there anything wrong with kissing?"

"Not if you're offering."

Ben's voice was deeper now, with a touch of gravel that tightened the coil of desire in Ryan's belly. Dear God! If that was what Ben sounded like in bed, then Ryan wanted to grow roots right where he was. Ben's hand on his hip prompted him to come closer, and Ryan obeyed with alacrity. Ben was warm. He smelled of musk and shower gel, and his embrace was as comforting as it was arousing.

They'd both gone to sleep in T-shirts and boxers, and Ryan looked forward to getting rid of both. He wanted to see Ben, touch Ben... but there was no need to rush.

Ryan buried his face in Ben's neck. Ben's warm breath stirred his hair, and when Ben slipped a hand under his T-shirt to settle in the small of his back, Ryan sighed in bliss. Seemed he wasn't the only one craving skin.

Ben was the first to move, sliding his fingers up Ryan's spine to his neck, then back down to the waistband of his boxers. He did it over and over, as if he was learning the shape and feel of Ryan's back. Or as if he tried to soothe Ryan back to sleep.

If that was Ben's intent, he was failing abysmally.

Ryan nuzzled a spot right under Ben's ear. "This... is nice." He nipped Ben's earlobe, then soothed the sting with his tongue. The strangled gasp that came out of Ben's mouth was an amazing sound. Even better was the full-body shiver Ben couldn't hide.

"Oooh, seems I've found a hot spot." Ryan took another bite.

"And I've realised you're a little tease," Ben growled. Then he flattened his palm across Ryan's lower back and yanked their bodies together. "Or not so little."

They were both hard, and a moment later they were kissing as if it was the only thing keeping them alive. Ben's hands were on Ryan's arse, kneading and rubbing, and Ryan was about to lose his mind. He'd thought their New Year's Eve kisses had been hot. But they'd been tepid nonsense compared to Ben's tongue in his mouth, Ben's teeth tugging at his lower lip, Ben's hot mouth on his neck, and Ben's firm grip holding him in place.

Ben Hobart pushed all his buttons. At once.

The only way this could be better was if they were naked.

If he was writhing under Ben.

The very idea almost sent him over the edge.

“Ben. Do. Something.” He babbled without knowing what he was saying, and clutched at Ben’s skin, his body burning. He couldn’t catch his breath. All he knew was that he... wanted. And that Ben was careful.

He mauled one side of Ryan’s jaw and brushed butterfly kisses over the other. And while his grip on Ryan’s hip might leave marks, his touch on Ryan’s midriff was gentleness itself.

As if he sensed Ryan’s growing desperation, Ben rolled onto his back and pulled Ryan on top of him. “I want you so much,” he whispered against Ryan’s neck. “But I don’t want you hurting.”

Ryan smashed their mouths back together. On a sob or a moan, he couldn’t say. How had he found a man as perfect as Ben? What had he done to deserve such a boon?

He pushed himself up far enough to let him slide his hands under Ben’s T-shirt, rubbed his palms over hard abs and pebbled nipples, and raked his fingers through the smattering of hair. He wanted to see what his hands discovered, but he was too far gone, rubbing against Ben, mindless and wanting. Until Ben found enough coordination to reach between them and gather both their cocks in his fist.

They groaned in unison at the sensation, and Ryan rocked his hips, pushing into Ben’s hold. Hot, silk, salt, blue... his mind disconnected. Ben, stretched out beneath him, panting and moaning, commanded all his focus. Their mouths, together. Ryan’s hands in Ben’s hair. Ben’s hand stroking them both.

It wasn’t the sweet, languid lovemaking Ryan liked to indulge in. This was hot, and messy, and all kinds of wonderful until it ended—far too soon—in white-hot bliss.



Insights

A wet nose on his cheek and a paw on his chin woke Ryan before Ben's alarm could. He rubbed his jaw against the cat's and stretched, glad when his midriff issued only minor complaints. He turned his head, caught sight of the clock on Ben's bedside table, and shot upright so fast, he had to grab Morris before he sent him flying.

"What?" Ben stirred.

"Your cat really is better than an alarm clock," Ryan said. "Unfortunately, he's calibrated for your workday not mine. I'm late!" He slid out of bed and set the cat back on the quilt. "Can I grab a quick shower?"

"Of course." Ben turned on the bedside light, and Ryan's lips curved into a smile. Hair sticking up every which way, sleep-shadowed eyes, and a delicious shadow along Ben's jawline tempted Ryan back to bed. A second look at the clock sent him racing for the bathroom.

"Gods! I'm late!"

There was no time for sleepy kisses let alone anything more vigorous. Ryan minded that. A lot.

He reviewed the contents of his freezer while he took the fastest shower ever, and brushed his teeth wondering which of his regulars would be happy with iced buns and a panini while the bread baked.

The bedroom was empty when he returned, the bed made.

"Ben?"

"With you in a minute." Ben's voice carried over the sound of water, and Ryan hustled into his clothes. It wasn't the way he'd wanted to start his morning. Not after the way Ben had taken care of him the previous night. And not after getting off together so sweetly.

“Opening the cafe and feeding the caffeine-deprived masses is an important job,” he reminded himself.

“I’m not arguing. Much.” Ben dropped a kiss on Ryan’s cheek as he slipped past in a cloud of aftershave. “Sorry about the alarm. Didn’t occur to me last night that your day starts before mine does.”

It wasn’t until they were in the car that the aches and pains of the previous night’s attack made themselves known. Ryan’s sore jaw and bruised cheek had spawned a nasty headache, and the muscles in his torso protested every time he moved.

“I didn’t even check if I’m presentable,” he muttered. “And I didn’t mean to drag you out of the house like this.”

Ben’s fingers were warm on his, comforting and reassuring. “Feeding the caffeine-deprived masses is an important job, remember?” He pulled into the courtyard and turned off the engine. “I’ve brought painkillers. And to make up for making you late, you can put me to work.”

“Put you to work?”

“Why not? I can stock the counter and stuff.”

“I don’t doubt it, but you have a job, too.”

A rush of cold air filled the cab as Ben pushed open the door and stepped out. “You’re my job today,” he said. “I’ll stick to you like glue until my governor has talked to you.”

Ryan didn’t know why having Ben close by should feel so comforting. He just knew that it did.



Opening the cafe and handling the morning rush took all Ryan’s concentration and left him little time to spend with Ben. By the time Rebecca arrived, he felt wrung out.

“Go sit down,” she said once she understood why Ben was hovering nearby. “You need a cup of tea yourself.”

Ryan didn't argue. All morning he'd been jumping at shadows and battling feelings of unease. None of which were helped by Ben growing quieter and more distant by the minute.

It hurt.

“Did I ruin things between us?” he asked when Ben had joined him in the nook.

Ben curled his palm to Ryan's undamaged cheek and ran his thumb softly over Ryan's lower lip until Ryan nipped at him. “Not as far as I'm concerned.”

“But you're... pulling away.”

Ben busied himself with the teapot while he contemplated his answer. “You could see it that way,” he said.

“Tell me why?”

“Because I didn't plan this. And I don't want you to resent me for it.”

“Plan what? Offering me a safe place to sleep after some nutcase beat me up? Helping me back to sleep after Morris woke me? The first was as much out of your hands as it was out of mine. And the second was... lovely. I thought we both wanted it. I know I did.”

“I did, too.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“I was trying to finish my job first.”

“You're not making sense.”

“No, I suppose not.” Ben sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. “There have been... complaints. Several over the last few years, usually during the winter. All claiming that you're dealing drugs.”

“And nobody thought to mention that to me?” Ryan wanted to jump up and pace. Unfortunately, the coffeehouse

was busy, and venting his frustration would upset his customers. Ryan leaned down and held out a hand, pleased as punch when Morris came and rubbed his chops against it. “I know, big boy,” he murmured, using Ben’s endearment for Morris. “You have cat ears. I promise I’ll keep my temper.”

“Nobody was accusing you.” Ben pulled a box of pills from his pocket and set it beside Ryan’s plate. “Take a couple. You’ll feel better for it.”

Ryan breathed out. Reminded himself that none of it was Ben’s fault and took the pills. “Tell me about the complaints. Am I a suspect?”

“You’d be amazed by the number of complaints we get. A lot of them are unsubstantiated gossip and spiteful nonsense, but we still have to follow up each and every one.”

“Doesn’t this waste police time?”

“Of course. If we can prove it was done deliberately, there are consequences. But that’s not what we’ve been talking about.”

“We’ve been talking about me being a drug dealer.”

“Ryan, no. Please.” Ben reached for Ryan’s hand and twined their fingers. “That play with the papers and the box made someone think you’re dealing drugs. We take that seriously. Add the break-in where nothing was stolen...”

“You think they were looking for drugs in my office?” Ben rubbed circles on Ryan’s wrist, sending little shivers rippling up and down his arm. The contact kept him calm. Calmer than he’d usually be if someone accused him of—

“Could be. It’s also possible that one of the local dealers wanted to make sure you weren’t playing on their turf. And if that’s the case, I’m grateful they didn’t ask questions later.”

Ryan closed his mouth. He took a slow, deep breath and let it out. “I don’t deal drugs,” he said.

“I believe that. After the break-in, my governor asked me to keep an eye on your place. See if I could find the person making the complaints while looking for the burglars. I’ve

explained about the box and the paper squares. I mean, I have first-hand experience with those. But I'm afraid that last night's attack will just open that whole can of worms again."

"That's why you've been blowing hot and cold?"

Ben looked affronted. "I didn't. I made it clear that I want to go out with you. But I've also been trying to hold back starting anything serious until I'm off this case. I didn't want to come to you under false pretences. I'd be worse than Keith if I did that."

"Ah, yes." Ryan had been waiting to hear the arsehole's name. "Next you're going to tell me he had something to do with it, too."

"Well, yes." For the first time, Ben almost smiled when he mentioned his ex. "He was a controlling bastard. Undermining, you know? I'm trained to recognise that behaviour. But I didn't see it when it was right in front of my eyes."

"So you lost your confidence."

Ben shrugged. "Pretty much. He was never able to poison my mind when it came to my work, so my work's been my solace. And then I met you."

"And?"

"I started to want things I've not wanted in a very long time. I didn't want to tell you any of that until the investigation has been put to bed."

"Fair enough. Seeing what happened last night, isn't there a good chance it will be put to bed today? You arrested the two men, right?"

"We did. Whether that ends the investigation, I don't know. Let's see what my boss has to say when he gets here."

They finished their late breakfast, and for the rest of the morning Ryan hid his bruised face in the kitchen and let Rebecca run the show out front.

Ben stuck close. He loaded the dishwashers and ferried trays of sandwiches, muffins, and cakes as they were needed.

And if he brushed Ryan's back or shoulder as he passed him, Ryan wasn't going to complain.



DI Tarbert arrived promptly at 3:00pm, just as Ryan closed the coffeehouse.

“So you think I'm a drug dealer?” Ryan demanded as soon as he'd shaken Tarbert's hand. “Really?”

Tarbert unbuttoned his coat. “If Ben has told you that much, you'll know that we think it unlikely.”

“But you need to follow up all complaints. Yes, Ben said that.”

“There you are, then. We don't want to make your life difficult. But we don't want a turf war in the town, either. Especially not if it's caused by someone reporting you out of spite.”

They settled in what Ben had started to regard as “his” nook. Tarbert on one side, he on the bench beside Ryan. He didn't think Ryan needed his support, certainly not against his governor, but when he saw Ryan's tense shoulders and unhappy eyes, the choice had been easy. He wouldn't deny that Ryan was important to him. Not ever.

“I don't see how anyone would report me out of spite,” Ryan said. “I get on with people.”

“That would make you quite unique. How about the people around here? The other businesses? Residents?”

“There are only three rental properties in the courtyard. Two are contractor accommodation. If they're occupied at all it's Monday night to Friday morning. The third belongs to Isabelle Helling, who travels more than my sister and cousin together. And that's a feat, let me tell you.”

Tarbert scribbled in his notebook. He did it to assure Ryan that his information was being taken seriously, Ben knew. The case file of the break-in contained a list of tenants and detailed backgrounds on each. Ben could recite names and addresses for each contractor who'd stayed in the courtyard over the last year. He also knew the names of all the residents whose windows overlooked the courtyard.

"Ms Helling does what?"

"She's a fashion journalist. If you want to know what magazines she writes for, you need to talk to my ma. She and Isabelle are old friends."

"Thank you. That covers the residents, such as they are. How about the other businesses?"

Ryan sighed. "I didn't think the police had enough resources to do everything twice. I've already been over this with Ben. And I'm sure he's written reports or filled in forms, or whatever it is you do."

"I'm sure he has," Tarbert said. "In fact, I know he has. But that's not how it works. Have you ever made a cake, exactly the way you always do, and have it come out different?"

"Sure."

"Better?"

"Sometimes."

"And if that happens, did you try to work out what tiny thing you changed that made it better?"

"Yes."

"That's how we work. We keep asking the same questions and pay attention to the minuscule differences in the answers. Not to trip anyone up, necessarily, but to find out what really happened."

"DI Tarbert is here, because I've been talking to you for weeks now," Ben said. "I've become accustomed to the way you see things. Last night's attack is an escalation. We want to make sure we didn't miss anything."

The explanation did the trick. Ryan calmed and listened. “I still don’t think that anyone has a grudge against me,” he said, his voice much softer now. “But please ask and I’ll try and answer.”

“Has anyone ever left a message on your bike?”

Ryan froze. Then he held up a finger. “Wait just one minute.” He disappeared into the back, returning a moment later with a crumpled piece of paper. “I’d completely forgotten about this,” he said, and handed the paper to Tarbert.

“When did you get it?”

“Friday. Not last week. The one before. That’s why I forgot about it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was coming down with a cold. I had a stinking headache and all I wanted was to go home and sleep. This paper was on the seat of my bike, weighed down with half a brick.” Ryan shrugged. “I just shoved it into my pocket, and then I forgot all about it.”

Tarbert inspected the sheet before handing it to Ben. “Is it normal for people to leave messages on your bike?”

“I wouldn’t say *normal*. It’s happened once or twice. Advertising flyers, though I never understood why someone would bother to leave them on my bike. I mean, I’m right there. They can come in if they want to flog something.”

“Do you trade recipes with people?”

“Occasionally.” He slumped in the seat, palm rubbing his midriff. “If I’d really promised a recipe to someone and had forgotten to send it, they’d call me or send me an email. Sticking a sheet of paper onto my bike seat has to be the least effective way to contact me.”

“That’s probably true.” Tarbert tapped his pen on the table in a slow, steady rhythm. “What if it’s not a recipe for cake or pastry?”

Ben suddenly remembered an update from the Buckinghamshire drugs team about water samples

contaminated with MDMA and the seeming rise of ‘hobby cooks.’ Ryan, without the benefit of Ben’s training, caught on a little bit later.

“You think they’re looking for a recipe for drugs? Like meth or something?”

“It’s possible.”

“How? How is that possible? How can anyone think I’d cook up that sort of shite in my kitchen?”

“I don’t think they do,” Tarbert said. “Not that you’re cooking. But you do have people come into your coffeehouse and put bits of paper into a box. What if someone dropped off a recipe?”

“That’s... ludicrous.”

“Is it? Have you never found anything unexpected in that box of yours?”

“No.”

“Never?”

Ben opened his mouth, but Ryan wasn’t done. “When I bought the box, I also bought the lock that holds it closed. I locked it the first time I set it up on the bar here. I’ve not opened it since.”

“How long have you had the coffeehouse?”

“Four years.”

“That box must be crammed full of paper.”

“Maybe.”

Ben leaned until his shoulder touched Ryan’s, relieved when Ryan relaxed and gave him a little of his weight. He moved stiffly, and Ben wasn’t sure whether pain or irritation had prompted that change.

“We should check that,” Tarbert said.

Ryan went rigid. “If you’re going to ask me to open the box, you can spare your breath. I’ve put the box away and won’t bring it back out until the autumn equinox.”

“That’s next September.”

“Correct.”

Ben hadn’t forgotten how Ryan had reacted the last time they’d discussed opening the box. It was a topic that made Ryan uncomfortable, and as far as Ben was concerned, he’d suffered enough discomfort for a while. He tried to catch Tarbert’s eye, but his governor was focussed on his notes.

“Surely that’s—”

“Let me ask you something, inspector. If you were investigating a crime in a church, would you ask the priest to open a shrine?”

“Would I what?”

“Break into a shrine?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

Tarbert sputtered. Ben remembered the first time he’d seen the box in action. He’d watched an elderly woman write a wish and place it into the box. Witnessing the event had left him feeling like a voyeur, and it had only occurred to him later that he wouldn’t have batted an eyelash if he’d been in a church instead of a coffeehouse.

“I might ask to have a shrine opened if someone’s life was in immediate danger,” Tarbert said. “I’d not disturb the dead at any other time.” He took a breath. “You’re saying that you regard the box as something... sacred?”

Ryan leaned his elbows on the table and scrubbed both hands over his face. “I have no idea,” he said again. “It’s a box. And treating it as anything *but* a box is completely cuckoo.”

“Then—”

“No. Wait. I can’t explain it, nor do I try to. I found the box years ago in Ireland. I wasn’t looking for it, but the moment I set eyes on it I knew it was mine. That it would help me help other people. Because I can feel if someone is truly

desperate. So desperate that they need... a miracle. If that happens, I give them a square of coloured paper and a pen. I ask them to write a wish and place the paper in the box.”

“And they get the help they asked for?”

“They do,” Ben chipped in. “In one way or another.” He held Tarbert’s gaze. “A few weeks ago, I found Morris on my doorstep, unresponsive and covered in blood. He’d clearly been in an accident. I took him to the vet and then I came here. I was convinced there was nothing the vet could do, and that Morris would die. Ryan made me write a wish. And a few hours later, the vet told me that what I’d thought was blood had been red paint. That it had burned Morris’s skin, and that he’d poisoned himself trying to lick it off his fur.” Ben’s hands shook with remembered fear, and he was grateful when Ryan twined their fingers. “Sir, I can tell blood from paint. I know what I saw, and I know what I was afraid of. But I wrote a wish and asked for help when Ryan told me to. And as you can see... Morris is fine.”

To Ben’s relief Tarbert didn’t laugh. He took a sip of coffee, set the cup back into its saucer and regarded Ryan. “If you were to open the box, the wish Ben wrote would be in it?”

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I’ve never checked what happens to the wishes.” He held up the carafe and Tarbert nodded and lifted his cup for a refill.

They sat in silence until Tarbert had finished his coffee. “Unexplained phenomena are not part of our brief,” he said in the end. “Nor is the desecration of sacred objects. But there’s still the matter of someone reporting you as a drug dealer, and someone else searching for a recipe. The two men who attacked you have been charged with assault and we’re checking their background. If you could try and remember the names of people who used the box, that might also help.”

“Thank you, I will,” Ryan said. The angry, frustrated frown remained on his face, and Ben couldn’t think of an easy way to erase it.



Thisgivings

Ben was used to the unpredictability of his job, but the next few days brought call upon call without pause. His plans to go furniture shopping fell by the wayside, and he'd even had to call Ryan and warn him he'd be late. It left him wondering whether he needed to rethink leaving Morris with Ryan every day, now that the tabby was recovered.

"What are you still doing here, Hobart? Go home."
Tarbert showed no surprise to find him at his desk.

"I'm done, sir. Only wanted to have all my notes straight." He turned off the computer and stood, stretching. Tarbert hadn't moved from his place beside the door. "Was there something you needed, sir?"

"Just making sure you're not going back to work." He held out a folder. "That's for tomorrow. Background on Ryan's attackers."

Ben riffled through the small stack of forms. "Anything interesting?"

"The companies they've admitted working for. Debt collection agencies, tenant rent recovery services...."

"Bullies for hire."

"Quite. Do not even look at it now. I'm clean out of overtime budget for the month."

"Maybe I'm angling for extra days off. I'd meant to go furniture shopping this week."

"Have you thought of doing it online?"

"Doesn't work for me," Ben admitted. "It's fine for cat dishes or a new TV. Not furniture, though. I like to touch and see it."

"Doesn't mean you can't check stuff out online and then do a concentrated shopping trip. Or even better, why don't you ask Ryan to come with you? You're dating, aren't you?"

Did sharing tea twice a day constitute dating? Ben thought of Ryan in his bed, Ryan's hands in his hair... "Sort of. Maybe. This time of year is even crazier for him than it's for us. I don't really want to hog the few free hours he has with stupid stuff like that."

"Stop putting yourself down. I'm convinced that if you asked Ryan, he wouldn't consider it unimportant."

The flush raced all the way up to Ben's hairline. "Sorry, sir. Slip of the tongue." He'd learned to see Keith's comments for what they'd been. Had been doing much better at putting them out of his mind. Only sometimes, when he was tired—

He jumped when Tarbert's hand landed on his shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up. We saw it earlier than you, but not by much. He was such a slimy piece of work. Coming back from that takes time."

"I've had months. Don't you think that's enough?"

"I'm no counsellor, but what you did last year was not coming back from an unhealthy relationship. You curled into a ball and waited for the other shoe to drop. Now you're coming back from it. And you're doing a damn good job." The hand on Ben's shoulder tightened to an almost painful squeeze, and then Tarbert let go. "Give yourself time. Don't be hard on yourself. And if you feel you're struggling go and talk to someone. There's no shame in asking for help."

Ben nodded, grateful for Tarbert's gruff compassion and no-nonsense insight. Counselling was available to all police officers. After especially harrowing cases, counselling sessions were mandatory, but it wasn't something most of them embraced easily. Talking about things that shamed him, and talking with strangers, wasn't Ben's way. He had Morris to talk to.

"There you are. I knew there was a face under that gloom." Tarbert waited for him by the door. "Now get out of here."



“Rachel has handed in her notice. She wants to go travelling before starting uni in September. I’ve no idea how long it will take to replace her, and with Valentine’s Day coming up. Ryan, dear, do you think you could help us out that weekend?”

Ryan opened his mouth, closed it again and sighed. “I’m not sure, Ma. I was hoping... Ben and I have been working so much, we wanted to—”

“You see him every day, Ryan. Surely one day won’t matter?”

Ben hadn’t been happy the last time Ryan had turned down a dinner invitation. They’d since spent a night together, but that had been in response to yet another emergency. Yes, they drank tea together most days, but that wasn’t all the interaction Ryan wanted with Ben. And—judging by the disappointment in his face—neither did Ben.

“Ma. Ben is important to me.”

“Of course he is, but I’m sure he’ll understand—”

The phone was snatched from his hand before Ryan could muster an argument he’d lose anyway.

“Aunt Bridget, you’re being grossly unfair,” Alastair said. “Ryan helps every time you’re in a pickle. Hell, he helps every time you ask! Can’t you give him one weekend to go out with his man without heaping on the guilt?”

“I was doing no such—”

Ryan winced. He *was* grateful for Alastair’s intervention, but he’d no doubt hear about it later.

“Sure you weren’t. You forget that I know you. It’s cheaper and easier to ask Ryan, so he’s the first one you call. Maybe you should try calling an agency first. He does have a business and a life of his own.”

“Alastair Donohue—”

“That’s me. And you wouldn’t sound ready to deliver a broadside if you didn’t know I’m right.” Alastair ended the call and tossed the phone onto the counter. “Am I glad I walked in when I did. A few more moments, and you’d have said yes. And then where’d you be?”

Ryan dropped to a stool and sighed. “I was trying to...”

“I heard. You were trying to make time for yourself and Ben. But she’d have guilt-tripped you regardless and you would have caved in the end. I’m sorry to say it, but your ma is ruthless when she wants to get her way.”

“Don’t make her sound like that. She wants to do a good job and keep her business running.”

“She can do that with agency staff. Or she can hire more people. Same as you do.” Alastair reached for a teapot and hunted through the caddies of tea for one that appealed to him. “Helping people is what you do, I get it. That doesn’t mean your ma should take advantage. Or that you should let her. You deserve time and space to do what you want as much as anyone else.”

“Says the man who never asks anything for himself.” Ryan stood and took the teapot from Alastair’s hand. “Give that here. We want the Irish for that discussion.” He pointed. “The deep green caddy at the end of the row.”

“We weren’t talking about me.” Alastair brought the caddy to where Ryan stood beside the kettle. “I’m happy with what I have.”

“Bullshit. You go along with the majority and make do with what you get. That’s not happy.”

“Funny how it’s always others we see clearly, isn’t it?”

The strange note in Alastair’s voice made Ryan look at him. *Really* look, as he hadn’t while struggling to stand his ground against his mother’s demands. His cousin’s brief spurt of indignation was gone and had wiped the animation from his face in passing. Alastair Donohue was so far from happy, it was laughable.

Eyes dulled by lack of sleep and circled by shadows. Unruly stubble. Hair that needed scissors as well as shampoo and a comb. Only the quality of his wardrobe ensured he was even remotely presentable.

Ryan was glad that Alastair had sought him out. That he could feed him lunch and watch over him for a while—even if it was all Alastair would let him do. Because Ryan had seen that hunched-over posture many times before. And it presaged nothing good.

He filled a plate with pastries, added toasted sandwiches to another, and set both in front of Alastair. Teapot and cups followed, and then he took his seat opposite his cousin.

“You’re not going to tell me what bothers you, are you?”

Alastair took a sandwich and then stared down at it rather than meet Ryan’s eyes. “Don’t think I’m ready for that,” he said.

Just as Ryan had known he would.



“Your two attackers work for a debt collection agency,” Ben said during his usual evening stop to pick up Morris. A boisterous birthday party had taken over the main room of the coffeehouse, and he sat at a table in Ryan’s kitchen while Morris snoozed on the second chair.

“I don’t owe money to anyone, so they were definitely at the wrong address. And working extremely late.”

“Like you will tonight?”

“Yeah, but this is Paula’s mum’s party. It’s fun.”

Ben contemplated the sleeping cat. “Morris doesn’t seem to think so.”

“Don’t let him fool you. He’s been making the rounds, soaking up the cuddles. He’s a company cat. Did you know that he makes an excellent babysitter? Paula had her baby daughter with her this morning, and as soon as Kimberley woke up there was Morris, meowing and waving a paw at Paula to alert her. It was hilarious!”

“I’m sorry, big boy,” he said, stroking the cat’s velvety nose. “I had no idea you felt lonely when I wasn’t home.” Morris chirruped and blinked big green eyes at Ben as if he understood every word Ben said.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Ryan said just as Tarbert had done earlier. “He loves it here. And I love having him around.”

“Are you sure? My hours can get as out of hand as yours and I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage.”

“You’re not.” Ryan’s cheeks took on some pink, but he forged on regardless. “Seeing you first thing in the morning and last thing at night is... a sweet routine. It makes me think I won’t lose you, even if we have so little time for more.”

“‘Routine’. Who’d have thought that I’d be grateful for it one day?” Ben leaned over and pecked Ryan on the cheek, wishing he could linger, kiss and touch until they were both riled enough to set the place on fire.

The shouts of laughter from the other room held him back.

Paula could drop in on them at any moment, and while she didn’t object to the two of them together, Ben had no plans to give her a show.

“Routines are a godsend,” Ryan said. “Just look at Morris. I didn’t believe you when you said you can set your watch by him. But you were right.”

“Cats like their routines. They also change them without warning, and then you’re left standing there like a muppet, unable to make sense of what just happened. When I first adopted Morris, he only ate fish. Fresh fish, cooked fish, fishy cat food... just fish and nothing else. And then, one day, I gave him his breakfast and he looked at me as if I was trying to

poison him with that plate of tuna. Flat out refused to go near it. And I had a cupboard full of fishy cat food and nothing else in the house.”

“I bet you went shopping in your lunch break and went home to feed him just so he wouldn’t starve.”

Ben felt his cheeks heat. He drank his tea, his fingers tangling with Ryan’s on top of the table. He’d have to go soon, leave Ryan to his duties as party host, but until the teapot ran dry, he could enjoy his company. When he set his empty cup down Ryan met his eyes.

“See you tomorrow morning?”

Ben nodded. “Nice and early.” He thought of the folder Tarbert had handed him before he left. “I have a few busy days coming up.”

“I’ll be here,” Ryan said. “Always am. And there’ll be roast chicken for our favourite tabby.”

Ben was settling Morris’s carrier into the passenger seat when it occurred to him that there had been a strange note in Ryan’s voice along with an uncharacteristic hesitation. As if he’d wanted to share something but hadn’t.



“You need to watch over him, Morris, my boy,” Ben said as he pulled the seatbelt through the cat carrier’s handle. “Ryan works too hard. You must make him sit down every once in a while, or he’ll slip through our fingers like smoke.”

Ben started the car and pulled out of the courtyard, leaving the brightly lit coffee house and the boisterous birthday party behind. To his right, the trees lining the hill were still swathed in their strings of golden light. The decorations would come down after Valentine’s Day. It was a great reminder if he needed it. Ryan had done so much for him in the two months since they’d met. Ben wanted to do

something for him for a change. He wanted to see Ryan back in his home. Wanted to share a romantic meal with him. Take him to bed and make love to him.

If he wanted to make any of this happen, he had to get his skates on, and stop using his hours as an excuse.

“If it wasn’t for Ryan, I’d have new furniture already,” he grumbled. “Spending the evening in the coffeehouse is just more fun.” Talking to Ryan, watching him bake, and playing with Morris, was better evening entertainment than trawling through late opening furniture stores and fighting his way through the nose-to-tail traffic on the way home.

Still, a plan was a plan, and Ryan was worth the effort.

Imagining Ryan at his new dining table, not far away from the couch, didn’t hurt either.

Ben was done with moving at a snail’s pace. In the beginning, thoughts of Keith and his cheating ways had intruded at odd times and he’d been reluctant to take things further. Now—and especially after the night they’d spent together after the attack—he no longer denied that he wanted Ryan.

Ryan was the sweetest man he’d ever met. He cared for everyone who stepped through his door and didn’t say a bad word about anyone. Ben had waited for that, for the moment when Ryan’s temper would lash out. At him, a customer, or a supplier.

The moment had never come.

Ryan wasn’t just polite, he was genuinely kind.

The day that revelation had made it through his thick skull was the day he started to fall in love with Ryan O’Shaughnessy.

All he needed was a convenient moment to tell Ryan.



Backlash

Ben spent the next few days talking to debt recovery agencies before adding all the tiny bits of information he'd collected to the police database. He had a knack for seeing patterns and making connections, but to be able to do that, he first needed data. And collecting that data needed time. Each evening, he stumbled into the coffeehouse, tired and hoarse. And his day turned brighter as soon as he saw Ryan smile. He still hadn't told Ryan how he felt, he'd had no time to buy furniture, and they hadn't spent more than an hour together each day. But Ben was happier than he'd been in months.

On Thursday morning the clouds hung low and dripped rain. Ben ignored the weather and took pleasure in Ryan's face lighting up as he saw him.

Ryan held up the teapot and waved in the direction of the booth. "Morning. Go sit down. I'm about to get the tea on."

Ben let Morris out of the carrier. The cat walked ahead of him and sat beside the booth, waiting for his morning treat. Stopping off at the coffeehouse had become a fixture of Ben's day. When he'd previously begrudged five minutes, he now happily traded half an hour's sleep for the chance to see Ryan.

Ryan joined him at the table. "Here." He set the teapot and cups down and leaned to peck Ben on the cheek. "Good morning."

Ben didn't let him straighten up. Not until he'd converted the peck into a proper mesh of lips and tongue that dragged a soft moan from Ryan's throat. Then he drew back. "Now it is a good morning." He smiled. "And yes, that was sappy."

"And in public."

"Nobody here yet."

The bell over the door called him a liar. Ryan hurried back to the bar, while Ben set down the dish of chicken pieces for Morris. The cat pounced on his treat, purring as he ate. Ben watched both the cat and the man behind the bar while the tea brewed.

He had to stop himself every morning and evening from asking Ryan out again, and he wondered—often at odd times in the day—whether he was being sensible or just a coward. Once he'd gotten over his first embarrassment, it had felt right to have Ryan in his home. Could they have that again, with a little less drama now Ryan's bruises had healed?

Ben poured tea, added a little milk and inhaled the steam before he took his first sip.

"Kingdoms will fall before you give up on that ritual."

"It's not hurting anyone. And for me, this is bliss. The only bliss I'm going to get all day, I imagine."

"Busy day?"

"Yep. Preparing for revenge attacks, suicide attempts, and rafts of stolen flowers. Never my favourite."

"You can't be serious."

"No, really. Anything that gets people emotional requires extra policing effort. Reality TV, Cup finals, village shows... Valentine's Day more than most."

Disbelief was clear on Ryan's face. He wasn't sure whether Ben was pulling his leg. Ben didn't offer anything else. He didn't want to revisit memories of the previous year's Valentine's Day, which had been an unmitigated disaster, both at a professional and personal level. It was time to make new, better memories—preferably with the man sitting opposite him.

Ryan drank his tea as he did every morning, but the longer Ben watched him, the more he felt something was wrong. Ryan's eyes were heavy-lidded as if he'd not slept well. And while the colour of his slate-blue shirt suited him, the fabric hadn't seen an ironing board after its last wash. It wasn't at all Ryan's style.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked.

“Sure.”

“No more threats? Messages? Men hanging around where they shouldn’t?”

“None of that. I would have told you.” Ryan set his cup down. “Maybe they had the wrong guy after all.”

“Maybe.” Ben didn’t think it likely. And he could tell when Ryan was being economical with the truth. “You *would* tell me if you were in trouble, right?”

Ryan pretended he hadn’t heard the question. He turned the conversation to rugby, and Ben took the hint. Even though he didn’t like it one little bit.



Ben had taken Morris home. Ryan had turned off the lights and closed the door between the kitchen and the main room of the coffeehouse. He’d been about to unroll his sleeping bag and grant himself an early night when Alastair had knocked on the door.

Now Ryan’s cousin sat on the counter beside the kitchen door and stared disconsolately at the mug of coffee in his hand. “I can’t believe that you don’t have a drop of whisky in this place.”

Ryan wasn’t as out of booze as he’d let on, but Alastair was better off not knowing that. “There’s no need to add to that pickle jar you call a liver.”

“Ha ha. Look who thinks he’s funny.”

“Telling nothing but the truth.” Ryan swallowed the rest of what he’d meant to say and focused on the croissant dough he was rolling and folding. He loved the quiet afternoons and evenings spent in his kitchen, and had never regretted that his

love life had taken a nosedive when he'd opened his coffeehouse. He had ample compensation right here.

It wasn't unusual for his parents or one of his cousins to drop by of an evening, either. In the last four years, Ryan had listened to many a sob story or rant, whenever there'd been disagreements, or an affair had gone sour. He dispensed tea, sympathy, and cake, with the occasional slug from a bottle of Redbreast.

Not today, though. Alastair didn't need any more alcohol in his life. Especially since he had yet to explain what was driving him to drink in the first place. Instead of offering whisky, Ryan had brewed coffee and then started early on the next day's tasks while Alastair worked his way to the bottom of his mug.

The familiar setting soothed Alastair as much as the work soothed Ryan, and they'd talked companionably about the cafe, food, and Alastair's work... until Alastair finally came to the point of his visit.

"I'm flying out again after Valentine's Day."

"Anywhere interesting?"

"The Caribbean. Jamaica first, then Nevis, then St. Vincent. Trade show in Brazil after that."

"You'll be gone for weeks!"

"Quite." He took another sip of his coffee. "Have you found a new flat yet?"

"I've got queries running with all the local letting agents and even a few over in Northampton. Not a lot happening so far."

"Tell me why you're being such an arse about it."

"How do you mean?"

"You have a large family in the area. None of whom would like to see you sleep on a sofa in your break room for weeks on end."

Ryan shrugged. “If I knew how long this will last... If I could say ‘can I borrow your sofa for three days’, I’d do it right away.”

“Hogwash. I have a perfectly good flat with a spare bedroom where you could stay as long as you wanted without being in anyone’s way or being beholden to anyone. And I’m sure your Ben would be only too happy to help if—”

“I’ve explained why I don’t want to tell Ben.”

“Yes, you’ve explained. You didn’t make sense then, and you don’t make sense now. Have you thought about what will happen when he finds out? You said his ex lied to him. How is what you’re doing any different?”

“I don’t want to be a burden!”

“Telling him what’s going on doesn’t make you a burden. It just makes you honest. You’re being irrational about it, and that’s not like you.”

“I don’t want—”

“Save it. I understand why you don’t want to tell your ma because she *would* take advantage, and we both know it. And if you don’t want to bother the family, who—by the way—are ready and happy to be bothered, then don’t. But why not rent one of the contractors’ flats across the courtyard. They’re both standing empty, I’ve checked. The agencies don’t care who they let them to, as long as they let them.”

“Do you know what they cost? I’d need a mortgage! The rental agreements for those are designed for big corporations with deep pockets. Not for the likes of me.”

Alastair set down his mug. “Fine. Have it your way. Do whatever you want. I just wish you wouldn’t lie to me. Or yourself.” He slid off the counter. “I’m for home,” he said and reached for his coat. “Since I’m very clearly talking to the wall.”

Ryan didn’t know how to reply to the embittered rant. Every time he had to justify his choices, the words came a little bit slower. If Alastair was right— “You know me. Bull-headed,” he said, pushing his misgivings aside.

Alastair didn't reply. He stood with his head tilted towards the door as if he was... listening?

"Alastair—"

"Wait. Do you have any other animals besides Ben's Morris come visiting?"

"What?"

"I hear... scratching? It sounds as if someone's trying to unlock the back door."

Ryan stepped into the hallway and heard it, too: small scratching sounds, less assured than a key being pushed into the lock. He hurried to the break room and found the cricket bat he'd bought after the recent attack. Anyone trying to break into the coffeehouse would learn how stupid an idea *that* was.

In the kitchen, Alastair had his phone to his ear, speaking quietly and rapidly. "The doors are locked and there's no light showing. They may think the place is standing empty. Yes, right. We'll wait for you."

When Alastair caught sight of the bat in Ryan's hand, he showed neither anger nor surprise. If anything, he looked sad. He took two quick strides to Ryan's side and wrapped him in a hug. "None of that, kiddo. There's a patrol just coming down the High Street. They'll be here in a sec."

Ryan didn't want to wait for help.

Again.

He didn't want to be rescued.

Again.

He wanted to take out the whole angry coil of emotion in his chest on someone's head. And that was a reaction so unlike him, it brought him out of the rage. He shuddered and leaned against his cousin, wondering how his life had gone so far off the rails in so short a time.



The ringing phone jerked Ben upright. He snatched the handset from the bedside table and clamped it to his ear. “Hobart.”

“Hey Ben. It’s Rob Guillen. Get your arse over here. Two men just tried to break into your boyfriend’s coffeehouse.”

“You got them?”

“We did. Your guy isn’t half livid. He almost went at them with a cricket bat.”

Ryan was at the coffeehouse at—Ben squinted at the clock—one o’clock in the morning? He pushed the thought aside, focused on the here and now. “I’ll be right over.”

Ben dressed but didn’t bother with a shave. Or a jacket. The only thing he allowed to distract him from his dash out the door was Morris’s empty crunchy dish.

“I need to go check on Ryan,” he told the cat while he topped up his food. “I’ll be back in time for breakfast. You look after the house for me, okay?”

The trees along the High Street, still draped in their strings of lights, guided him into Rothcote. He sped up the hill, flew around the roundabout, and pulled the car to a stop before the archway.

Two police cars blocked access to the coffeehouse and Ben crossed the courtyard at a run. Worry ate at him until he burst through the backdoor and found Ryan sitting on the break room sofa talking to his cousin.

What was Alastair Donohue doing in the coffeehouse at this hour of the morning? Had Ryan called him instead of Ben?

“Ryan?”

“Ben!” Ryan met him in the middle of the room.
“Breathe, Ben. We’re okay. We heard someone trying to pick the lock on the back door and called the police. Your colleagues were here in minutes.”

“We were just coming down the High Street,” Rob added from Ben’s other side. “And guess what? It’s the same two guys who attacked Mr O’Shaughnessy the other day. I doubt the judge will give ‘em bail this time around.”

“Did they say anything?”

“The usual.” He made a face. “I know me rights,” he grumbled in an atrocious Brummie accent. “I don’ say nothin’ without me solicitor.”

“Of course.” Ben listened with only half his attention. The rest was focussed on Ryan, who seemed far too awake, and Alastair, who appeared as if he wished he were anywhere but here.

“Your chief is coming in early to question the two,” Rob said. “He wants them processed right away. He’s convinced there’s something here they want, and the sooner you find it the better.”

“Fair enough,” Ben said. Then he caught sight of Ryan’s face. “What?”

“You keep saying there’s something here,” he said. “I still can’t think what it’d be.”

“Let’s see if they tell us. If they don’t, we may have to search for it.”

“Oh joy!” Ryan’s shoulders sagged. “I’ve no idea where to start looking. Or how I’d know I’ve found... whatever it is. Let me put some coffee on.”

Ben held him back. “How come you’re here? Were you working so late?”

“That’s my fault,” Alastair said before Ryan had a chance to open his mouth. “I had dinner with my uncle and popped by on my way home. We got chatting.”

“Alastair was trying to convince me to stay at his place,” Ryan cut in.

“Why? Did you expect a disturbance?”

“No, nothing of the sort. Alastair’s been on at me for the last two weeks about it.” He took a deep breath. Then another. “Ever since my landlord booted me out of my flat.”

The dark circles under Ryan’s eyes and his less than impeccable clothing suddenly made sense to Ben. Not a lot else did. “You’ve been living here?”

“I thought it’d be just for a few nights until I found a new flat. But January and February are unpopular months to move.”

“Where’s all your furniture?”

“My uncle’s storing it for me.”

“And you never once mentioned that you’ve been moving house? Or that you’re technically homeless? We’ve been seeing each other twice a day, and that never came up?” Ben didn’t want to imagine Ryan sleeping on the break room sofa, with none of his personal possessions close by and only the barest of comforts. Ryan worked hard. He took care of people. He deserved somewhere to relax at the end of a day.

Ben struggled to make sense of the situation. Why had Ryan’s landlord turfed him out? And why hadn’t Ryan mentioned it? Did he think Ben wouldn’t help, or worse, turn away from him?

Thoughts tumbled about like chaff in a breeze, until one of them snagged on another loose end. “You’re sleeping here? In the coffeehouse? Why would you do that? I would have offered you my spare room if you’d asked. You’re surrounded by family. I’m sure they would have done so without you even asking.”

Ryan didn’t meet his gaze. “I didn’t want to tell anyone. I didn’t want them to feel... obligated.”

Alastair scoffed. “Hogwash. You didn’t want to be beholden. Not even to those of us who won’t take advantage

of you.”

Ben ignored that. “One break-in, one attempted break-in, plus common assault. And you’re sleeping in your break room. Do you know how this looks? Like you’re protecting something. A recipe maybe?”

Ryan’s face turned ice-white, and he finally met Ben’s eyes. “You can’t possibly believe I have anything to do with that!”

“Can’t I? We’re suspicious bastards, us coppers.”

“You’re nothing of the sort.”

“Then why haven’t you told me about losing your flat? About sleeping here. If you had nothing to hide, that is.”

“It isn’t like that!”

“No?”

“No. Remember how you said you didn’t want to take anything between us forward under false pretences? I felt like that. I didn’t want you to think that you were just convenient because my landlord kicked me out. I wanted us to have time to get to know each other.”

The mix of hurt and anger made Ben’s head spin. “That’s not the same thing at all. When you have nowhere to go you don’t pretend that everything is fine. You ask for help. You reach out to your family, or your friends. If you trusted me at all, you’d have asked *me* for help!”

“Fine. Okay. You’re both right. I’m stubborn. I wanted to solve my own problems and I put my pride in front of everything else. Can’t you understand that?”

Ben thought of the mornings they’d spent quietly sipping tea in the nook. He thought of the evenings when he’d watched Ryan bake. He thought of Morris, of walking in on two men hitting Ryan, of Ryan in his bed. Had all of that been a lie?

The thought hurt so much, Ben couldn’t breathe.

He cupped Ryan's cheek and ran his thumb over his lower lip. "No, I don't understand. A relationship needs a foundation of trust. I believe that you have nothing to do with whatever is going on here. I believe that you don't deal drugs. But we can't build anything meaningful if you don't trust me to have your back."

He dropped a kiss on Ryan's forehead, turned and left the coffeehouse.



Words

Coppers gossiped as much as anyone else. More so, perhaps, since many a tricky case had been solved by a nugget of information spoken without thought. Ben kept his head down as he walked through the station, not wanting to see the pity that'd be on many faces.

Not when he was still reeling.

Ryan had lied to him and had kept secrets. Memories of Keith reared their head, and Ben was too rattled to send them packing.

Ryan had lost his home. He'd lived in the backroom of his coffeehouse. And he'd kept that information from Ben, had pretended that nothing was amiss.

It made no sense.

Or did it?

Alastair had said that Ryan didn't want to be beholden to his family. Not even the ones who wouldn't take advantage. Had he been serious? Was Ryan spending all his time helping out because he was being pushed into it?

Then why hadn't he asked Ben for help? Had Ryan been afraid that Ben wouldn't offer him a place to stay? Or that he would?

Ben fell into his chair as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Despite what he'd said, he didn't believe that Ryan was a drug dealer. That interpretation felt all wrong. Not the rest, though. He wanted to take care of Ryan the way Ryan was taking care of him, but Ryan didn't trust Ben to have his back. And Ben had been an idiot to believe he and Ryan could build something solid from shared breakfasts and evenings in a coffeehouse. Their cosy conversations didn't generate trust any more than a chat with a random stranger in a pub.

The thought had barbs. Its touch burned like salt and lime, and Ben had to swallow the lump forcing itself up his throat. It'd be him and Morris again, now, and dwelling on what he might have had would change nothing.

He started up his computer, opened the first email on his list and started reading.

His desk phone interrupted him just after lunch. "Ben, a word?"

Ben trudged to his chief's office and sat when invited. The stint of focussed work had numbed the initial pain. Now all he wanted—

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Sir?"

"I recognise that expression. You're cutting yourself off from everything."

"I'm sure you've heard what happened."

Tarbert sighed. "I heard that you and Ryan had a disagreement.

"A disagreement'?" Ben wanted to laugh. Or cry. "Ryan lost his home. He's been living in the coffeehouse for the last couple of weeks. And he didn't mention it once! Not even the night he was attacked and stayed with me. That's not a disagreement. That's—"

"Ryan not asking for help when he needed it. I'm sure he had a reason."

"Of course he did. It was a day ending in Y."

"You would know."

"What?"

"Have you forgotten how you kept all your troubles to yourself? Pretended that Keith wasn't the lying, cheating sod he was? It took us far longer than it should have to realise you needed help—because of the way *you* acted, Ben."

“I was—” Ben swallowed. His pride had been the only thing left to him at the end. It was also what had finally made him end things with Keith. “I was protecting my pride.”

“Is it so impossible to imagine that Ryan was doing the same?” Tarbert didn’t wait for an answer. “You look like hell warmed over, Ben. Take the rest of the day off, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Ben wanted to protest. Point out that he had plenty of work on his desk to keep himself occupied and bury himself in reports and actions.

He didn’t.

Neither did he go home.

He took the A5 south to Milton Keynes, trailed through a few furniture stores, and bought a dining table and chairs.



Ryan poured the cold tea down the drain before he rinsed the pot and set it into the dishwasher. Ben hadn’t returned to record the attempted break-in. Another officer had arrived to take their statements, and then several more had searched the coffeehouse. They made quick work of the front of house and were done before the breakfast rush started. The search of the rooms in the back had taken longer but had yielded just as little in the way of evidence.

Ryan hadn’t had even a glimpse of Ben. He hadn’t brought Morris. And—without Morris to collect—he hadn’t come around at closing time either, though Ryan had had tea, cakes, and sandwiches ready and waiting both times.

Maybe he should have expected that, though he’d only tried to be considerate.

“I hope he’s eaten,” Ryan whispered. “I hope he had a little time to himself.” Most of all, he wished Ben would walk through the door and give him a chance to explain.

Being different had taught him that if he wanted people to like him, he needed to give them a reason. People saw him if he reached out and offered help. It was as easy as that. And as complicated.

For years, he'd been content to reach out and ask nothing in return—until Ben had stepped into his coffeehouse. He liked Ben. Had loved watching the sadness fade from his eyes and the grey from his aura with every cup of tea and conversation they shared. He'd helped when Morris had been hurt and had been quietly grateful for Ben's presence and support when he'd needed it.

He thought he'd made it obvious how much Ben meant to him, but all Ben had seen was reluctance on Ryan's part, secrecy, and lies.

He should have shared his landlord's message with Ben. He could see that now. Ben took care of people, as much as he did himself. Being denied the opportunity to help had hurt him more than Ryan keeping secrets.

Ryan took a step back from the sink, picked up a plate and threw it against the wall.

Destroying his tableware wouldn't bring Ben back. Neither would it repair Ryan's misstep.

Ben's ex had lied. Ryan knew it, yet he'd done the same. He'd not lied outright, but he'd kept secrets.

“Gods I'm an idiot!” His voice echoed in the quiet kitchen, and that was another sore point. Most evenings during the last months he hadn't been here alone. Morris would be there, and then Ben when he finished work. And why had Ryan never noticed how lonely the place felt when he was by himself? How many times had he told his mother that he couldn't possibly be lonely because he had his coffeehouse? Now here he was, alone and more heartsore than he'd been in years.

If Alastair hadn't come to check on him, his secret might have been safe a little longer. “Yeah, still with the

idiocy, O'Shaughnessy! Ben would have found out eventually. And he would have reacted just as he had today."

Ryan started the dishwasher. Then he took off his apron and hung it on the hook behind the door. Back in his office, he reached for his phone.

Alastair answered on the second ring. "Ryan. Are you okay?"

"You're right," Ryan said without preamble. "I need to get out of this place, at least for a night or two before I go stir crazy. Does that offer of your spare bedroom still stand?"

"Always. Come on over. I'll throw a pizza in the oven."

Ryan hung up without another word. He didn't want Alastair to hear the tears clogging his voice.



Alastair set the second pizza on the coffee table and topped up their wine glasses before he collapsed back into the couch. Ryan hadn't asked whether Alastair had run out of whisky or if he was being considerate since Ryan had to work the next day. He just ate and drank what Alastair put in front of him and tried to ignore the grey haze enveloping his cousin like a cloud with rain on its mind.

"I'm sorry I landed you in it, kiddo."

"You were just there. Ben would have found out anyway."

"If you'd told him yourself, in a private conversation, it might not have felt—"

"Quite like so much of a betrayal?" Ryan took a bite of his pizza. He wasn't in the least bit hungry but holding a plate and a slice of pizza stopped him from clinging to a wine glass. Despite being miserable, he hadn't yet forgotten that his alarm would wake him at half past four.

“You didn’t betray Ben, you know? You didn’t lie, you just kept secrets.”

“How’s that any better?”

“I didn’t say it was. Just... there’s a difference. Besides, you trying to explain yourself pissed him off a lot more.” He sighed. “I’m sorry to say that making arses of ourselves is a family trait.”

Ryan jumped on that. Anything to take his mind off Ben’s shocked expression. “I’ve never seen you make an arse of yourself.”

“Lucky you.” Alastair drained his wineglass and refilled it immediately. “I should be fucking over it, you know? It’s been six years.”

“But?”

“It catches me every so often, like a punch to the gut. This time was at the airport. The guy at the check-in desk looked just like Troy. Haven’t really slept since.”

“And drunk like a fish.”

“That too.”

“What went wrong? With the two of you, I mean.”

“I went wrong. We were together literally from Freshers Week, and we were good. Comfortable, you know? But we never really talked. He was very private. He... he needed me not to ask questions, so I didn’t.”

“And you never told him what *you* needed.” Ryan was sure of it. Alastair made other people’s needs his own, even if they ran counter to his true desires. Just as he’d taken Ryan to Ireland one summer, just because Ryan needed to find a means to protect himself.

“It didn’t seem important, at the time.”

“It never does. Then what happened?”

“I stuck to our unspoken agreement, too much of a coward to put my heart on the line and tell him what he meant to me. The day after I finished my finals I went home. When I

came back three days later he was gone. He'd packed his stuff and moved out, and I haven't seen him since."

Ryan could picture Alastair, turning his back and marching in the other direction, never showing his hurt, or admitting to what he needed. Not even to himself. "You've never contacted him?"

"I wanted to. I thought I might, but... I've no idea where he is. I realised... oh, about six months later... that after all that time together I didn't even know where he lived."

"Social media?"

"I've looked, but if he is there, I can't find him."

"He wouldn't have changed that much in six years."

"True. But none of the photos that came up looked anything like him."

"Anyone else you studied with?"

"No."

"Have you thought of asking Ben?" The words slipped out, innocent and without thought, and then Ryan curled forward as if *he'd* been punched. He struggled to breathe and then—to make matters worse—tears filled his eyes and clogged his throat.

All day, he'd not allowed himself to look too far ahead. Now it dawned on him that he might never sit down and talk to Ben again.



Morris wasn't happy. He told Ben so, loudly and at length, while Ben assembled his new table and chairs, and he'd ignored the roast chicken Ben had picked up, still warm from the rotisserie.

"I know you're missing the coffeehouse, big boy." Ben reached for the tabby, but Morris evaded him and hid behind

the sofa. “In the doghouse, am I? It’s not all my fault. Ryan didn’t tell me he had to move out of his flat, you know? He didn’t let me help him. He kept secrets and—”

Ben had hoped for a good rant—a chance to let his frustration spill out in one big wash. It didn’t happen. Tarbert’s reminder that he’d done the self-same thing had nagged at him all afternoon until he’d had to squash the urge to phone Ryan.

He wanted to hear Ryan’s voice, if only he knew what to say.

Ask for an explanation and actually listen to Ryan’s words?

Apologise for overreacting?

Beg for another chance?

For all he knew, Ryan was as furious with him as he’d been with Ryan that morning.

“I hope he’s at least gone to stay with his cousin,” he said as he turned the assembled table right side up and set the new chairs around it. “I’d feel better if he didn’t stay overnight in that place.”

Morris twined through chair and table legs, inspecting each one before he disappeared behind the sofa again.

Ben sighed but didn’t try to coax the cat from his hiding place. He was tired, but too keyed up to sleep, and an itch had developed in his brain that was impossible to ignore.

He changed into running gear, stuffed headphones in his ears, and went outside. A mile and a half into his run, the itch coalesced into a form and a name: Alastair Donohue.

Here was a man who travelled the world to buy spices. Who was an infrequent visitor to the coffeehouse but had come home every Christmas since Ryan had opened. And who usually brought gifts.

Had Alastair been late returning from his last spice-buying trip? Had someone tossed Ryan’s office because they’d grown impatient?

Ben didn't know.

He was only sure of two things: that all the Crimestoppers reports had been made in the winter months and that Ryan had been attacked after the one Christmas celebration Alastair had missed.

It was thin to the point of threadbare. Too flimsy an idea to share with Tarbert, but maybe just enough to justify a chat with Ryan's cousin.

Ben turned homewards. He showered, fixed himself a chicken dinner, and watched TV until it was time for bed.

That was when he saw the blinking light on his phone.

Ryan had sent two messages, and Ben read the first with his heart in his throat.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you what was going on. I don't like asking for help for myself. And you'd helped me out so much already that asking for even more seemed... just wrong. Unfair. That's not how you saw it when you found out, I know. But it was all I could think about.

The second message was short. It stabbed at the tightness in Ben's chest even as it soothed.

I missed you today. You and Morris. I really don't want us to end this way.

Ben read the words over and over until he could quote them from memory. Then he stared at the small screen until his vision blurred and his heart raced. Accepting Ryan's explanation and making up was tempting, but should he really do so? Or was it the first step on another slippery slope of lies and deceit?

He didn't want to believe it, but memories of Keith were hard to shake. They jumbled together with Tarbert's words until finally, close to midnight, he typed out his reply.

I don't want us to end this way either. But I have some thinking to do before I'm ready to talk. Sleep well.



Wishes

Ben dragged himself out of bed the next morning determined to talk to Alastair Donohue. It broke his heart to see Morris walk into his carrier the moment he picked up his car keys.

“I know, I know,” he whispered, stroking the cat’s velvet nose and trying to entice him out of the carrier and into his arms. “You don’t want to be here all by yourself. I get that. But I need to talk to Ryan before I can take you back to the coffeehouse, and...”

He wasn’t ready to see Ryan yet. Not while he felt so torn. If he returned to Ryan, it had to be because he believed it would work.

Morris stepped out of the travel box and rubbed the length of his body against Ben’s hands until Ben picked him up and buried his face in the soft fur.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, big boy.”

Morris squirmed and Ben set him down, offered an extra treat and escaped before he could change his mind. He was still mulling things over when he knocked on Alastair’s door.

“Morning. Could I have a word, please?” he asked when Ryan’s cousin answered his knock.

“Sure. Come in.” He led the way inside, and Ben followed. “Coffee?”

“Wouldn’t say no.” Ben hitched himself up on a barstool and watched Alastair prime the coffeemaker. The man appeared to have slept less than Ben, his pale skin sallow and dark shadows under his eyes.

“You here to talk about Ryan?”

Ben blinked. “Not really. Do you *want* to talk about Ryan?”

Alastair set milk and sugar on the breakfast bar and added brimming mugs as soon as the coffee was done

brewing. Then he looked Ben up and down. “It might be useful, seeing how the two of you walk around bleeding. Yes, I know that’s blunt. I’m nothing but blunt if it’s helpful. And there are things that Ryan won’t ever tell you.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t either.” Ben spoke around the lump in his throat, his voice rough and scratchy.

Alastair leaned back in his chair. “Maybe not. But Ryan needs someone to lean on. And ever since I met you, I thought that someone was you.”

“I allowed myself to think that, too. But how can you build something without trust? And how can I trust Ryan when he lies to me?”

“He didn’t *lie*. He just... kept things private. I’m sure you’ve done the same at some point.”

Ben remembered Tarbert’s words. He’d kept many things private. For a long time, too. It wasn’t something he was going to discuss with Ryan’s cousin.

“What I want to tell you has nothing to do with your... disagreement. Or more than you realise, if you’re struggling to understand what makes Ryan tick.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, sending strawberry blond strands in all directions. “Ryan was born to help people. When he sees someone who needs help, he can’t just walk away.”

“I know. Mrs O’Shaughnessy pointed that out to me at Christmas.”

“I strongly doubt that,” Alastair said. “I love that woman, don’t get me wrong, but she only sees what she wants to see. If you’d said you talked to Ryan’s da, that’d be a different matter. Ryan has a gift. He can tell when someone needs help just from looking at people. And I do mean that literally.”

Ben knew some of that already but decided that he might as well listen. “Carry on.”

“Ryan, Cara, and I grew up together. When he was little, Ryan would talk of blue men, orange women, green dogs. By the time he started school, he had a colour vocabulary most

adults couldn't match. And every so often he'd start crying or curled over in pain and he'd complain about the grey. His ma dragged him from doctors to psychologists, but they couldn't explain it either. Not the colours, not the sudden pains, or the... I suppose these days you'd call it anxiety."

Alastair drained his cup and got up for a refill. He'd been keeping his face expressionless, but Ben hadn't missed the tightly leashed anger in his tone. Ben wasn't so far away from anger either. He could picture a small Ryan, hugging himself in pain, breathing through tears, at the mercy of something he didn't understand.

"That must have sucked," he said, meaning it. "How did he get over it? How did he find out how his gift worked?"

"My mother figured it out." Alastair made a face. "Maybe because she had more to hide than the rest of us. She realised that the colours Ryan sees are a person's aura. I'm not sure if she got any further than that, because she didn't tell us. But she did double down on Ryan. She was the one who called him a freak and an abomination, usually when nobody was around to help Ryan defend himself."

"What?" Ben didn't think he'd heard right. Ryan spoke of his family with deep affection. He'd never hinted at anything like this.

"Ryan isn't stupid. He watched himself and others and realised that the grey, the pain, the... whatever... meant that someone needed help. And that he felt better when he could convince that person to make a wish. So, of course, he went out of his way to reach out. Not that he got a lot of thanks for it."

"He told me... a bit about that."

"Being told to make a wish is a bit out there, and Ryan could be rather persistent."

"And not everyone who needs help actually wants it?"

"Quite. Besides, I'm convinced my mother is responsible for much of the nastiness that came Ryan's way as we grew up."

Ben set his mug down. “I haven’t met your mother.”

“Be grateful. Aunt Bridget is a bit much most days, but at least she’s not spiteful.”

“What happened?” Ben checked himself. “Sorry. I understand if it’s private.”

“Don’t tie yourself in knots. I wouldn’t have started this conversation if I minded. My da was about to have a heart attack, though it was Ryan who’d felt ill all morning. The doctor later told us that if he hadn’t badgered my da to get it checked out, he could have died.”

“And your mother resents that? That Ryan saved her husband?”

“She resents that Ryan’s alarm sent all of us looking for her. Because my aunt Bridget found her in bed with some guy, cheating on my da. Everything fell apart after that. My mother blamed Ryan for her lies, my parents got a divorce, and I chose to stay with my da while she buggered off back to Ireland.”

“And Ryan thought it was all his fault.”

“You got it. For a while there, Aunt Bridget wasn’t the most supportive either. She tried to stop Ryan helping people—never mind that he can’t control his gift—and she did little about the slurs and abuse.”

“You did, though, right?”

Alastair chuckled. “Gods, the fights we got in. Cara, and I, and our O’Shaughnessy cousins. We could throw fists, but none of us could stop Ryan hurting and trying to help. It was horrible.”

“You’re right.” Ben shivered. “He hasn’t told me any of this. He said he gets a feeling when someone needs help, and then he hands them a square of paper and makes them write a wish. He did it for me, too.”

“That’s what happens now. I’ve seen him huddle in a corner, shivering. He’s had nosebleeds. We had the ambulance ‘round when he couldn’t catch his breath or when he was in so

much pain he couldn't bear it." Alastair's voice was bleak. "For years, there was nothing between him and the misery around him."

Ben didn't want to imagine Ryan in so much pain. "But now he has the box?"

"Ryan's da, he doesn't meddle, usually. But when Ryan turned sixteen, he took him aside and told him to visit the old country. Told him that he couldn't tackle all the woes of the world, and to find himself a shield."

"And that's the box?"

"You got it. It's somewhere Ryan can lock his gift away, so it doesn't hurt him." Alastair gestured a little vaguely, and Ben had the sudden urge to hug this man who cared as deeply about Ryan as Ryan cared about strangers. "He used to be open about his talent and got nothing but grief. He keeps it quiet now, and focusses on people who come to him for help. He's made himself a life in his coffeehouse. He's made rules for himself and for that box. But I don't think he'll ever forget what happens when he shares too much of himself."

"I was wondering where you were going with that tale," Ben said, the weight on his chest lifting a little.

"Yeah. But did you hear me?"

"I did, yes."

"Good. And since you didn't come to hear me prattle, what questions can I answer for you?"

Ben found the first smile of the day. "You already have. Your erratic schedule and mysterious packages aside, you're not a man who'd use his cousin's coffeehouse to drop off consignments of drugs."

Alastair's brows climbed his forehead. "You thought that was likely?"

"Not really. But it was a possibility. You always come home for Christmas. You bring packages from faraway places. All complaints against the coffeehouse were made in the

winter. And the people who attacked Ryan demanded a recipe.”

“I thought you searched Ryan’s coffeehouse for stray recipes.”

“We did. Twice.” They’d searched everything except Ryan’s box, and after hearing Alastair’s tale, Ben was more reluctant than ever to push him to open it. He slid off his seat and stretched. “Back to old-fashioned police work,” he said. “Thanks for talking to me. It helped.”

Alastair’s answering smile didn’t reach his eyes. Ben wanted to ask what bothered him, wanted to offer his help, but knew he didn’t have the right. All he could do was wish the man a good day and be on his way.



Three days passed while Ryan buried himself in work and ignored the flowers, posters, and pink hearts taking over the town. It seemed that every merchant, regardless of the products they sold, turned their shop pink. He usually joined right in and found enjoyment in watching his customers have a good time.

This year, everything felt different.

Ben had been there, and now he wasn’t. And Ryan couldn’t face another Valentine’s Day watching other people in love. The whole damned festival irritated him as much as the radio, which trotted out the sappiest tunes, when all Ryan was left with was heartache.

Literally.

He rubbed his sternum, wondered if he’d wolfed his breakfast too quickly... and then realised he’d skipped food altogether. Last night and this morning.

Alastair had fed him pizza, the first night he’d turned up at his door, but the last two nights he’d been out, and Ryan

hadn't bothered with dinner. And without Ben to share his tea in the morning...

Ryan didn't notice he was pacing until he nearly ran into a customer entering the coffeehouse.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "Please come in."

"Ryan?" A hand grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Ryan, what's the matter?"

"Ma? What are you doing here?"

"I asked first. Tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ryan blinked. "I just..."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're feeling ill."

"No. Not ill." Ryan felt as if he was going to have a heart attack. His chest burned, and the tug in his gut almost doubled him over. Most of all, he felt jittery, and ready to come out of his skin.

"You need to make a wish."

Ryan shook his head. "I've made a wish, Ma. When Morris was hurt." After all this time, surely his mother understood now how these things worked. Fate didn't grant wishes willy-nilly.

"And you wished for what?"

"That Ben not lose Morris."

"I knew it. Ryan, love, I'm sure you're allowed a wish for yourself."

"Maybe. But all I'd wish for right now is that Ben would forgive me, and that's not gonna help anyone." Ryan froze mid-stride. Ben. "What if I feel this way because there's something wrong with Ben?"

His phone jangled and he dove for it, answering the call without looking at the screen. "Yes?"

"Ryan." Cara's voice sang with relief. "Thank goodness. Are you home?"

“It’s lunchtime here. Of course, I’m not home. What’s this about?” Ryan’s chest felt so tight, he struggled to breathe.

“Alastair’s not been answering his phone. I call him every day and I just can’t get hold of him. And Ryan... I have a horrible feeling that something’s wrong.”

Ryan exhaled with an effort. Cara didn’t share his gift, but he couldn’t argue with her assessment. The pain in his chest was proof of that.

Was it Alastair? He didn’t know. He’d been so stuck in his head that he couldn’t say if Alastair had been at home and asleep this morning. Or the morning before.

He gripped the phone tighter. “I’ll take an early lunch and pop round to check on him.”

“Call me when you find him, okay?”

“I will.” Ryan reached for his jacket. “Ma, I can’t talk now. Alastair’s not answering his phone and Cara is worried. I’m heading over.”

“Of course, love. Go make sure he’s okay. We’ll hold the fort here.”



Paula was restocking the cake display when Ben stepped into the coffeehouse. It was too late—or way too early—for him to be here, and tension spread across his back like a cloak.

“Ben! It’s about time you stuck your head in. Ryan’s been so miserable.”

Ben shot a glance towards the kitchen entrance. “Is he here?”

Paula shook her head. “You’ve just missed him. It’s one thing on top of another today. He’s been feeling ill all morning. Then his sister called to say his cousin isn’t answering his phone, so he’s gone home to check.”

Ben didn't know what to say to that. He'd nerved himself up to come and speak to Ryan, both about the case and... personal matters. Not having the chance to do so left him feeling unmoored, adrift, all dressed up with nowhere to go. It wasn't a comfortable feeling.

Not that any of the last few days had been comfortable. He'd lurched between regretting his reaction and trying to convince himself that he'd been justified to walk away. Neither choice felt right. And the conversation with Alastair had left him reeling.

“Did you say that *Alastair's* not answering his phone?”

“That's it. He's not been his usual cheerful self for a while, and what with Ryan feeling ill...”

Ben opened his mouth to ask another question when it clicked. Alastair appearing as if all the cheer had been sucked from his world. Alastair explaining how Ryan felt when his help was needed. And now Ryan had... and Alastair wasn't... Damn.

He gave Paula a wave. “Could you tell Ryan I've stopped by and that I'll be back?”

“Of course.”

“Now, not so fast, Ben.” A firm grip fastened around his bicep and stopped his progress towards the door.

“Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. I was just...”

“Running away again? Did you come here to talk to Ryan?”

“I did. But he's out and I—”

“You can sit and talk to me for a moment. The way the two of you mope around is ridiculous. Why can't you talk to one another like grown-ups?” She wrapped an arm around Ben's shoulders. “Don't answer that. I know it hurts to be honest. And sometimes it hurts more than you can bear. But letting lies sit and fester hurts more in the long run.”

“I know,” Ben said. “It's why I'm here. I said some things I maybe shouldn't have.”

“Well, at least you know it. And if you want to make amends, I’ll count that doubly in your favour.”

“I’m in love with Ryan.” Ben found it surprisingly easy to say it. “I thought he felt something similar. Which is why it hurt when he didn’t even think to ask me for help.”

“If Fate wants you to take a certain way, she’ll make it impossible for you to take any other.”

“You’re saying that’s why he can’t explain why sleeping in the break room at the coffeehouse was more logical than staying with you, or Alastair, or telling me?”

“Quite. There’s no malice involved. Not from his side. The sooner you can accept that, the easier it will be for the two of you if you continue seeing each other.”

Ben recognised a question, even when it wasn’t phrased as one. And while, at Christmas, he’d found it easier to talk to Ryan’s da, today he had no problems opening his heart to Ryan’s mother. “I would like to keep seeing him—if he’ll still have me. I’d also like to do something special for him on Valentine’s Day. But he keeps telling me—”

“That he’s helping out at the restaurant.”

“Yes.”

“It wasn’t a lie, Ben. I did ask him. Only—” She didn’t meet Ben’s gaze. “Alastair pointed out that Ryan has his own business to run, and that stepping in every time I ask means he has no time to himself. I... What were you planning to do? For Valentine’s Day?”

“I want to take Ryan out for the day.”

“Then you’d best find a way to ask him. And don’t worry about the coffeehouse. I’ll make sure it’s taken care of.”

“Really? Thank you so much!” Ben felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. One he’d not even been aware he’d carried. There was, of course, the chance that Ryan wouldn’t want to see him anymore, but that was a risk he had to take. “I want to make things right with him,” he said, voice rough. “I can’t tell you how much.”

Her smile held all the encouragement Ben needed. “You’ll be fine. I have all confidence in the two of you. Just make sure you’re here tomorrow morning. With that adorable cat of yours.”



Alastair wasn't at home. His shoes, coat, and wallet were gone. His phone lay on the coffee table, the message light blinking. The way he relied on his phone for his work, it was unlikely that he'd forgotten to take it. He'd deliberately left it behind.

The burn in Ryan's chest took on a different meaning.

“He isn't home,” Ryan said when Cara picked up. “He took his wallet, but he left his phone.”

“Damn. Not again.”

“What?”

“Don't you remember how Ben found him on New Year's Eve? He didn't have a phone on him then, either. And when Ben spotted him, he was off his trolley.”

“Rats.” Ryan wished he could phone Ben. He had a knack for dealing with emergencies. And as a police officer, he'd know how to go about finding a missing man. But wishes weren't helpful. Not here. Not now. “He was in Northampton when Ben found him, right? Maybe he's gone there again. I'll drive over and check.”

“That will take ages.”

She wasn't wrong. Once they'd outgrown Rothcote, they'd made Northampton their place to hang out. It had everything from a rugby stadium to coffee shops and nightclubs. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Not really. Call me when you get there and I'll stay on the phone with you,” she offered. “And drive carefully.”

Ryan drove. Carefully.

Slow traffic on the main road into town left him time to worry. About Alastair. About the pain in his chest, the clench in his gut, and his trouble drawing breath.

None of this should be happening.

It was past the time of year when his gift should respond to people's needs. The box was in his safe, asleep until the autumn. Was he feeling Alastair's anguish because they were cousins? Or was his gift escaping the shackles he'd made for it?

"I don't want to imagine Alastair in so much pain," he told whoever was listening.

But neither did he want the full force of his gift to return. Finding the box had been like finding middle ground. For the first time in his life, he'd been in control. And he didn't want to give that up.

Blue flashing lights and sirens recalled him to the present. He passed under the M1 before turning right onto the ring road. Northampton was home to nearly a quarter million people, and Ryan desperately didn't want to think of needles and haystacks.

"My cousin needs help," he said aloud. "I'm here for him."

The tug in his gut grew stronger. Ryan gritted his teeth, kept his focus on the road and the cars sharing the space with him. For no reason he could discern, he turned left at the next roundabout and followed the road down the hill.

He told his phone to dial Cara's number.

It rang twice.

"Where are you?"

"Far Cotton. No idea why."

"Just go with it. You know how this works."

"Do I?" Ryan wasn't at all sure. Handing someone a square of coloured paper and a pen and suggesting they write a

wish was child's play compared to driving through Northampton trying to spot one man.

The road into the town centre was lined with parked cars. Pedestrians moved along the pavement. And a shock of strawberry blond hair caught Ryan's eye.

"I have him," he said, voice high with disbelief. "I fucking have him. On the Nene Bridge!" He parked in the petrol station, never mind that he didn't need to fill up, and ran back the way he'd come. "It's him. I found him. The stupid sod. What is he thinking?"

"He doesn't think. That's the fucking trouble," Cara reminded him. "Asking for help is weak. Remember that line of his? *If I can't fix it myself...*"

"... *it stays broken until I can,*" Ryan finished one of Alastair's favourite sayings. "Ben said he could be struggling with depression. That's not something he can fix himself."

"Tell me about it. And neither one of us can keep running around scraping his drunk arse off the pavement. What if he falls and hits his head? Or walks into traffic? He could get arrested and lose his job, for heaven's sake!"

Ryan couldn't answer. An invisible force had grabbed him by the throat the moment he'd stepped onto the bridge. The inferno in his chest grew hotter than anything he'd ever felt before. And the tug towards Alastair's still form made it clear he had no choice in the matter.

The sensations were familiar and wrong at the same time. Between the autumn equinox and Christmas Day, he would have been reaching for a square of coloured paper and a marker. What was he to do now, three days from Valentine's Day and without the box nearby?

"Alastair! Talk to me, you oaf!" Ryan grabbed his bicep and gave him a shake.

Alastair leaned against the parapet, eyes closed and face almost as grey as the stone behind him. He wasn't unconscious. Ryan's rough treatment made him open his eyes and mutter something Ryan couldn't decipher.

“Alastair? How much have you had? Just the one bottle or more?”

Ryan didn't think he'd get a sensible answer. The burn in his chest said he was running out of time. He pulled a notepad and pen from his pocket and shoved it at his cousin.

“Here. Write a wish.”

Alastair shook his head. “No,” he mumbled. “This isn't... I don't deserve... I—”

“Stop arguing and write your fucking wish!” Ryan snapped. “Or I'll write it for you and then you'll be epically fucked!” He pushed the pen into Alastair's hand and held the pad for him. “Write, damn you!”

Alastair obeyed.

He smeared two lines across the page, then let the pen drop from his hand.

Ryan stood on the bridge, waiting for inspiration. He'd put the box to sleep on Boxing Day. He shouldn't be feeling what he felt. But if Fate was ready to help Alastair... he needed to find a way to accomplish that.

His boot touched the discarded bottle. It clinked against the parapet, then rolled a couple of steps.

A bottle.

A bottle instead of a box.

Why not?

Ryan snatched it up and unscrewed the top. He emptied the few remaining swallows of whisky into the gutter, rolled up Alastair's wish and pushed it into the bottle. He replaced the cap, screwing it on as tight as it would go.

“Here.” Alastair was unsteady on his feet, but Ryan didn't care. He shoved him against the parapet and pushed the bottle into his hands. “Throw it.”

“Wha—”

“Throw it in the river.”

Alastair flailed, almost catching Ryan in the face. Then Alastair let go and the bottle dropped, his lips shaping a thank-you as his message hit the water.

A bottle instead of a box.

And a river instead of... well, that was the question.

Whatever they'd done had worked, because the fire in Ryan's chest went out and the tug in his gut disappeared.

"Come on. Let's get you home."



Hope

On a normal day, the drive from Northampton to Rothcote was an easy one. Once away from the river and out of the town's sprawl, the road was dual carriageway, with only a couple of roundabouts interrupting the flow.

Today, the drive was anything but swift. Ryan got stuck behind a hearse going up the hill. Then the lights outside the police station turned red to let a stream of fire engines and ambulances deploy. And a string of lorries clogged the access to the motorway.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he was past the motorway junction and traffic thinned out. Alastair hadn't said a word since he'd thrown the bottle into the Nene, and Ryan didn't know how to start a conversation.

Were you planning to kill yourself? was the question he most wanted an answer to. The very idea horrified him so much, a phantom pain in his chest shortened his breath once more. He didn't want to fight with Alastair. Neither could he dispense advice when he'd made such a hash of his own affairs. Maybe Alastair was right and making arses of themselves did run in the family.

"I don't want you to be alone," he said, just before they reached Towcester and the junction with the A5. "Join me in the coffeehouse?"

Alastair roused himself. "I'll be fine," he said. "I promise, Ryan. I just want to curl up and sleep. I won't do anything that will drag you away from work again."

"You didn't—"

"All I want is sleep." He watched fields and rows of solar collectors out of his side window. "I never thought of writing a wish. Do you... Do you think...?"

"You made a wish and someone listened," Ryan said with as much authority as he could muster. "That I'm sure of."

What shape the result will take? I really don't know.”

“Would you recognise Troy? If he walked into your coffeehouse?”

Ryan thought of a pair of piercing green eyes and pitch-black hair softening high cheekbones. He found a smile. “I should. He could dye his hair and wear contacts, of course, but he couldn't disguise those cheekbones. Not that I think he'd walk into the Top o' the Morning.”

“Why not?”

“Because it was your wish. Troy would only turn up at my place if you were there.” He threw another glance towards the passenger seat. “Changed your mind over coming with me?”

“No. But I will be home when you get in from work. No funny business. I promise.”

“Okay.” Ryan negotiated roundabouts, turned left into Alastair's street. He stopped outside the block of flats. “Want me to make you a coffee?”

“That'd be ace.” Alastair tumbled out of the car, clutching the door for support.

Ryan had no idea how much he'd drunk, but he didn't want to ask. Better not to remind him. He got the door open, Alastair inside, and the coffee started.

“You never needed the box for your gift to work. How had I forgotten that?”

Ryan poured coffee into two mugs and slid the sugar bowl towards Alastair. “I'd forgotten it, too. For four years, it worked the way I'd set it up. Now something's changed.”

“Changed how?”

“The last few weeks have been... different.” He thought of the couple who'd come into the coffeehouse distraught and had left comforted. Was that when it had started? Or had he missed other instances? “I felt when people needed help, even though the box wasn't out. I panicked that it wasn't the time for wishes and almost didn't try to... Do you remember the

old man in the shop? He told us a story. I'd forgotten that it *was* just a story."

"It had its uses."

"More than you know. It let me fashion the box into a shield I could hide behind."

"Sometimes, kiddo, hiding is all we can do while we grow stronger."

Ryan threw a sharp glance Alastair's way, but his cousin's expression was calm.

"Don't worry about me. I have faith. I'll wait for your gift to surprise me. After all the trouble I put you to, it's the least I can do."

"Okay." Ryan pushed away from the kitchen counter he'd been leaning against. "I'll love you and leave you, then. Because there's something I must do."

"Talk to Ben."

"That, too. And phone Cara, will you? She worries." Ryan swung out of the door and clattered down the stairs. Heat prickled over his neck and down his spine, and he wiped his sweaty palms on his coat before he reached for his phone. "Can I please speak to Detective Sergeant Hobart?" he asked when the call connected. "This is Ryan O'Shaughnessy."

"One moment, please."

The line went silent. Ryan had started his car by the time the voice came back.

"DS Hobart isn't available at the moment. Can I take a message?"

Ryan took a deep breath. Then another one. "Is Inspector Tarbert free?"

Again, the line went silent.

"DI Tarbert," came the man's voice a moment later.

"Thank you for taking my call, sir," Ryan said, before he could change his mind. "Are you still interested in seeing

inside the Box of Wishes?”

The unexpected question didn't seem to surprise Ben's boss. “We told you what we suspect, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. You've been in the firing line three times now. It would be in your best interest if we find out what's going on.”

“I know. And Ben—DS Hobart—he's helped me out of more than one tight spot. If you care to come down to the coffeehouse after three this afternoon, I'll get the box out for you.”

“Did something happen to make you change your mind?”

The thread of worry in DI Tarbert's voice soothed Ryan's agitation. “Yes, but it had nothing to do with your investigation. I won't touch the box until you're here. You can open it yourself.”

“We'll be around after three,” Tarbert said a moment later. “Thank you.”



Ben parked the car in the courtyard and turned off the engine. Despite it being close to four, and therefore well past Ryan's advertised closing time, the large window of the Top o' the Morning coffeehouse was still lit, and he could see Ryan pacing inside. He seemed lost in his head, too, not taking any note of anyone.

“You said nothing had happened,” Ben said. “That doesn't look like nothing.”

“Agreed. Let's see what's changed his mind.”

Ryan stopped his pacing as they entered, and Ben struggled to stay professional when all he wanted was to wrap Ryan in a hug.

“Are you okay?” he asked instead. “Paula said you’ve been feeling ill all morning.”

“Alastair was in need of a wish.”

Ben thought of Ryan’s cousin as he’d first seen him, dead to the world on a Northampton street. “What’s the matter with him?”

“He ballsed up a relationship. Remember you telling me about the holidays always causing trouble? I now believe it, too.” He locked the front door and drew the blinds. “Thanks for coming. I’ve decided I’ve been an arse over that box, and I want—”

“Wait!” Tarbert held up a hand. “I want your assurance that this is truly your decision. I wouldn’t want to think that I’ve desecrated a shrine.”

Ryan looked startled. “Please. It’s not as if someone’s forced me or anything like that.”

“Then what changed your mind?”

“My cousin Alastair. He needed the kind of help I usually go to the box for. Only, the box was nowhere near, and it’s well past the time I tend to make it available. But I couldn’t deny what I felt, so... I made him write a wish and it was heard.” He flushed a little, trying to explain the unexplainable. “I didn’t always have the box, you see. Finding it... saved me. And then I made myself forget that it was a prop, a means to keep my gift manageable. There’s really no reason we can’t open it.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He pulled a key from his pocket and held it out. “It’s the way I left it when I packed it away on Boxing Day.”

“Which is where?”

“In my safe.”

Ryan led the way to his office, tidy and organised now, the desk bare except for a large mug filled with pencils and

rulers. Morris's bed sat in a corner, waiting beside clean, empty dishes, and Ben's heart clenched at the sight.

His tabby wasn't happy home alone after getting used to company in Ryan's coffeehouse, and Ryan was still waiting for Morris to come back. Ben wanted to pull Ryan aside and apologise. He had to remind himself that he was here to work, not fix his mistakes.

Ryan removed the wooden crate with a wine merchant's brand on the side from the safe and set it on the desk. "All yours."

Ben had been with Ryan when he'd lowered the box into the crate. He'd watched him fill the gaps with holly, rowan, and witch hazel twigs. "It looks exactly as it did on Boxing Day," he told his boss. Then he turned to Ryan. "May I?"

Ryan nodded, and Ben reached into the crate and lifted out the Box of Wishes. Tarbert moved the crate aside, and Ben settled the box on the empty desk. The metal-bound slot gleamed in the overhead light, and the clover leaf-shaped padlock held the latch closed.

There was no reason for Tarbert to hesitate. They had Ryan's permission. And yet, the inspector stood, looking down at the box and turning the key over and over in his fingers.

"Nothing horrible will happen if you open the box," Ryan assured him.

"Then why were you so vehemently opposed to it before?"

"As I said... I'd tried to forget that it is a prop. Having a gift like mine isn't exactly easy, inspector. I used the box as a shield to hide behind while I figured things out. And I feared that breaking the rules I'd made for myself would... I don't know... take me back to how things used to be."

"And that has changed?"

"I don't *need* the box to help. I've never needed the box. But I needed to grow up enough to remember that. And not be afraid of it."

Ben had the feeling that Ryan's words, while in answer to Tarbert's question, were meant for him. They were the explanation Ben had demanded and not listened to.

Talking to Alastair had shown him there was more to Ryan. It had also reminded him that he was no different. He'd hidden behind layers of protections and had judged people by his past experiences instead of theirs. He needed to grow up, too.

"I'm happy to open the box myself, if you trust me to do so," Ryan said into the lengthening silence. "If you need proof that I have no issue with it."

To Ben's surprise, Tarbert held out the key. Ryan took it and removed the padlock holding the box closed. That task completed, he stepped away from the desk and Tarbert reached out and lifted the lid off the Box of Wishes.

Ben had expected a spill of colour. Instead, he had to lean forward to see anything at all.

A long, narrow sheet of paper, a little grubby around the edges, lay on the bottom of the box. When Tarbert lifted it out, Ben saw that it was the only thing in there.

Not one coloured paper square.

Not a single wish.

Not even the one Ben had written and placed in the box himself.

"Where did they go? All the wishes people made? Where did they go?"

"Where they needed to be heard. I know it makes no sense, but it's all the explanation I have. And as my da would say, as long as it works, don't meddle with it." He met Ben's gaze while he spoke, and his tiny smile warmed Ben to his core. He returned the smile and was so busy watching Ryan that he jumped when Tarbert swore.

"Sir?"

Tarbert didn't lift his eyes from the papers in his hand. He held three sheets of paper not one, Ben saw, covered in

diagrams and tiny writing. “You had the right of it after all,” Tarbert said. “This is a recipe for synthesising MDMA. From the Buckingham lab would be my guess.”

Ben locked gazes with Ryan. “We have to let people know that we found these. Or you and your coffeehouse will never be safe again.”

“You think this is the reason for the break-ins?”

“They did demand a recipe. And we’ve never been able to think of any other reason for you becoming a target. Maybe now, when we question the two men who attacked you, we’ll get to the bottom of it all. You’ve been most helpful, Mr O’Shaughnessy. I really can’t thank you enough.”

Ryan’s face showed neither relief nor elation.

“If you want to talk about it,” Ben began and then caught himself. Yes, they needed to talk. But before they could start to discuss the peril Ryan had been in, they needed to have a different conversation. “I could come by when I’m done?”

Ryan’s lips curled at Ben’s carefully worded suggestion. “I’ll have tea waiting.”



Made from Hope and Dreams

Ben knocked on the backdoor of the coffeehouse, when—before their quarrel—he would have walked right in. His heart beat faster than it had all day and while he was pleased there would be no witnesses for the discussion he and Ryan had to have, a few customers providing a distraction might have been welcome.

And then Ryan stood in the door, eyebrows raised as if to ask what Ben was doing before he recollected himself.

“Come on in,” he said and turned back to the kitchen. “I’ll make tea.”

“Ryan. Wait.” Ben caught up to him with two steps. “How much more do you have to do? Only, I’d love to have dinner with you. Talk while we’re both sitting down. Do you think we could...?”

Ryan scanned his kitchen. “I’m done here. Just need to start the dishwasher and lock up.” He looked down at himself. “Though I’m hardly dressed for dinner out.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ben said. “I’m cooking.”

If Ryan was surprised, he didn’t let it show. He started the dishwasher, then took off his apron and hung it over its hook on the door. While Ben waited on the doorstep, Ryan turned off the lights and locked the coffeehouse.

He climbed into the passenger seat when Ben held the door for him, not commenting on the gesture. Ben breathed a sigh of relief. He’d expected Ryan to follow him home on his bike. That he didn’t gave Ben hope.

Traffic between Rothcote and Kingsmead was negligible, and Ben took full advantage, driving as fast as the narrow roads allowed.

It had been Tarbert who'd suggested that Ben should feed Ryan for a change. Ben had thought it an excellent idea. His kitchen repertory wasn't large, but he'd decided to cook hot and sour soup, and follow it with rice and chilli beef. Just the thing for a cold February night.

“What did you do about the recipe? The one from the box, I mean.”

“Record it, file it in evidence.” Ben turned into his driveway and parked his car. “Then I spent over an hour talking to our Buckingham colleagues about the lab they busted. If we can prove that the recipe we found came from their lab, then it's their case. They may want to talk to you, too.”

“I can't think what I can tell them. I've no idea who dropped the recipe in the box. It must have happened after that lab got busted and before we met, but you hardly need me to tell you so. As for the box... I told your boss a lot more than I usually tell strangers. I've been treated like a freak enough times in my life to invite that kind of scrutiny.”

Ben wanted to hug him so badly his fingers itched, but he didn't reach out. “Alastair told me a little when I questioned him. And—”

“You questioned Alastair? When? Why?”

“A few days ago. I wanted to make sure he wasn't the reason you were in trouble. He explained about the box being a shield. And... why you needed one.” He got out of the car and waited for Ryan to do the same. “And now you've done your bit to help, Ryan. It's up to us to get them off the street and make sure you're safe in your home.”

Ryan didn't comment, but the tension melted from his shoulders. He moved with more assurance when he followed Ben up the stairs to his front door.

And then Morris was there, meowing at a volume that spoke of his displeasure.

Until he caught sight of Ryan.

Like a flash, he evaded Ben's grasp and crossed the hallway. He stood on his hind legs, one paw braced on Ryan's thigh, the other stretching in the highest high five.

"Hello, Morris." Ryan lifted the cat and cradled him like a baby. "I've missed you too. So much."

Watching Ryan cuddle Morris stirred a tide of feelings in Ben's chest. "I'm sorry I've been an arse," he said when Ryan's gaze found his.

"I'm sorry I kept secrets," Ryan replied, still holding the cat.

Ben took two steps forward and wrapped his arms around them both. "Let's not do that again," he begged. "I was so darned miserable."

Ryan dropped his forehead onto Ben's shoulder. "Yeah, me too."

They leaned on each other, close and comfortable in that moment, until Morris wriggled in their hold.

"Dinner time, is it?" Ben straightened. "I think that goes for us, too."



Ryan had a cold beer on the table in front of him. He had a purring Morris in his lap. And Ben stood at the stove, searing beef strips in a pan. Ryan should be at ease and relaxed, especially since he and Ben had put their quarrel behind them. So why wasn't he? Why was he waiting for something to go wrong?

"You look as if you left the gas on," Ben said.

"Do I?" Ryan stroked Morris's soft ears and then decided to explain himself. "I feel as if... I don't know... as if I'm in the wrong place?"

“Because you’re not cooking? Or because you’re in my kitchen?”

“Either. Neither. I’m used to looking after people rather than the other way around. Makes me feel... awkward.”

Ben took the pan off the heat and came to Ryan’s side. “I want you here,” he said. “I want to look after you. But that awkward feeling you talk about? Yeah, I get that. This house... it looks as if I’ve just moved in, with bits missing everywhere.”

“You have a new dining table.”

“So I do. But—”

It was Ryan’s turn to reassure Ben, and that was something he knew how to do. “I want to be here, Ben. With you and Morris. And... I’m starving. So why don’t we dispense with the awkward and cook together so we can eat together after?”

Ben’s smile lit the room. And grew into a grin when Ryan discovered that dislodging a cat who wanted to stay put wasn’t an easy thing to do.



It was sweet how Ben took nothing for granted. He didn’t expect Ryan to cook or wash up. He didn’t expect Ryan to stay the night or for Ryan to share his bed.

Ryan loved him for it, even as he wished Ben *would* expect a bit more from others. Or, at the very least, from him.

Cooking with Ben had been fun. Clearing the kitchen afterwards had been as companionable as if they’d been in his own kitchen in the coffeehouse. And curling up with Ben in Ben’s bed was no hardship. Neither was touching Ben and making him moan.

“You’re all about fulfilling wishes, aren’t you?” Ben panted, breathless after reaching his release. “I’ve bloody dreamed of doing this again. Especially after we—”

“Me, too.” Ryan stretched, relishing the gentle drag of skin on skin. They’d have to get up and shower in a while, and Morris the alarm cat would wake them before they were ready, but for the moment he didn’t want to move. He wanted to bask.

If only his mind would let him.

Their dinner conversation had been light and careful. But there was something Ryan hadn’t said, and it nagged at him now.

“It doesn’t really matter,” he said, staring at the ceiling.

“What doesn’t?”

“How much furniture you have in your house. Or whether I sleep in the break room.”

“How can that not matter? Surely, moving out of your flat made you feel... sad, unsettled?”

Ryan remembered the day and nodded, even though Ben couldn’t see it in the dark. “Unsettled, certainly. But only because I had no other place lined up to move into. Not because I was particularly attached to that flat. It was just a house.”

“How do you mean?”

Ryan turned onto his side so he was facing Ben. “My gran told us that you build a house with walls and beams, but you make a home from hope and dreams. When I moved out of my flat, I realised that she was right. It was a house, not a home.”

“Despite your beautiful drawings?”

“Despite... My drawings didn’t make that flat any more home-like. Nor did I leave them behind.” He traced his fingertips over Ben’s scruffy cheek, along his strong jaw to his lips, back and forth until Ben caught his hand and twined their fingers.

“Would you want to make a home with me and Morris?” he asked, barely loud enough to be heard.

Ryan didn't answer with words. He leaned over Ben and kissed him instead.



Rothcote High Street was busy with shoppers. With only a day to go, the race for cards, chocolates and flowers was hotting up. Ben ignored the queue at the florists and the groups milling outside the town's gift and stationary shops. He had his eye on bigger game.

When the pavement cleared a little, he sped his steps and caught up to Paula. “Can I have a word, please?”

Paula squealed. Loudly. “Ben! For crying out loud, warn a woman! You almost gave me a heart attack.” She grinned up at him. “Why aren't you at work?”

“Because I need help and I knew you were finishing your shift. Can I... I don't know... you must be sick of coffee. Lunch? Can I buy you lunch?”

As if she had eyes in the back of her head, she stepped out of the way of an elderly couple and pulled him with her. “You're too sweet for your own good, really you are. I'm glad you and Ryan have made up.”

“So am I, believe me. Now, lunch?”

“No, thank you. I have a baby to collect from the nursery. What is it you need?”

Ben felt his face heat. “I want to take Ryan out for Valentine's Day.”

“I know,” she said. “His mother told us. Have you asked him yet?”

“That's what I need help with.” Ben fished a tiny envelope from his pocket, red and pink and barely two inches

long. “Do you think you could clip that to Morris’s collar tomorrow morning and make him take it to Ryan? I’ll come and pick Ryan up at nine.”

She didn’t roll her eyes, but Ben reckoned it was a close thing. “You two, honestly.” She took the envelope. “Did I say I’m glad you made up? Ryan can do with a spot of romance, even if it’s sappy. Consider it done.”

She didn’t wait for Ben to thank her.



The town hall clock struck nine, and Ben checked the basket in the backseat for the fifth time. It took up one whole seat and Ben had tied it down with the seatbelt to stop it moving. The basket held breakfast, a substantial lunch, a bottle of fizz, and a sketchpad and set of pencils. Ben had assembled it after dropping Ryan and Morris off at the coffeehouse, and before loading the car with cushions, blankets, and two umbrellas, even though no rain was forecast.

His plan to treat Ryan to a day out had come together without a hitch. Paula and Rebecca were managing the coffeehouse, while Alastair had offered to take Morris home for the night and spoil him rotten.

So why was Ben sitting in his car with hands shaking and heart beating almost out of his chest? Did he really believe that Ryan would turn him down?

“Hobart, you giant idiot! Stuff the past into its box and enjoy the present.”

Which was easier said than done.

His phone chimed and he almost dropped it in his haste to check it. Ryan’s text was a video of Morris walking around the cafe with a rosebud tucked into his collar, and a shot of the specials blackboard with a giant YES chalked on it.

Ben swallowed the lump in his throat and got out of the car to hold the door for Ryan. At least they were as sappy as each other.

“Will you tell me where we’re going? And why you couldn’t tell me this morning?” Ryan queried after a curious glance at the heap of clothes and blankets in the other backseat.

“Because I wanted to surprise you, of course.” Ben revved the engine. “Buckle up. We can talk on the road.”

Ryan settled into the passenger seat and pulled the seatbelt across his chest. “What’s the hurry?”

“I’m trying to beat the traffic.”

“Traffic where?”

“Lynn.”

Ryan frowned, clearly flipping through his mental atlas. “Lynn, as in... Kings Lynn?”

“The same.”

“We’re going to Kings Lynn?”

“No. Past Lynn, out the other side, up to Cley. One of your many cousins—or maybe it was Paula?—mentioned at Christmas that you have a thing for empty beaches. It sounded just the thing after the hullabaloo of the last few weeks. Nice drive, empty beach, picnic.”

He’d expected some kind of reaction. He didn’t expect Ryan to go bright red and struggle to choke out words. “Oh my God! That’s perfect. For a date that’s perfect.”

“Wait till we’re there before you say that.” Ben set his hand on Ryan’s knee, rubbing small circles. “An empty beach seems a good place to start from. Don’t you think?”

Three hours later they stood high on the shingle, with not another person in sight. Norfolk’s wide skies spanned above them, and the sea rolled at their feet, unhurried and ceaseless.

“I could live here,” Ryan breathed, and Ben laughed.

“No, you couldn’t. You’d miss all the people and their problems, just as I would. But we can come here whenever we need a break and a breather.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Ryan blinked against the wind and the salt spray. His smile was an invitation Ben didn’t turn down and they kissed, there on the shingle, with only the wind for company.

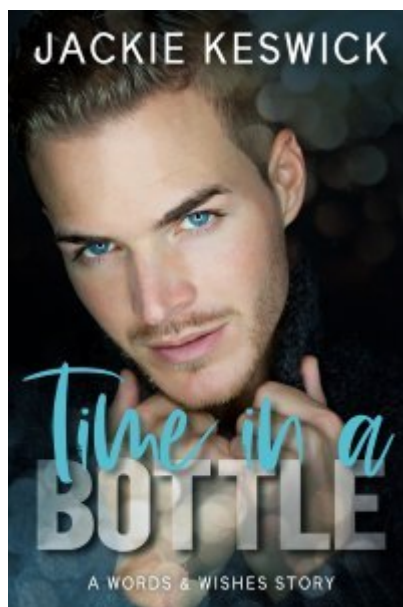
The End

Thank you for reading!

I hope you've enjoyed meeting Ryan, Ben, and Morris the cat. If *A Box of Wishes* left you feeling all warm and fuzzy, please consider leaving a rating or a brief review. You'd be helping other readers discover my books - and you'll definitely be making my day!

There will be more from the Words & Wishes crew in a little while.

Because, after all, Alastair deserves a HEA of his own!



To be the first to hear when Alastair's story is ready - and to read snippets and sneaks in between... [subscribe to my newsletter.](#)

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Meet Jackie

Jackie Keswick was born behind the Iron Curtain with itchy feet, a bent for rocks, and a recurring dream of stepping off a bus in the middle of nowhere to go home.

She's worked in a hospital and as the only girl with 52 men on an oil rig, spent a winter in Moscow and a summer in Iceland and finally settled in the country of her dreams with her dream team: a husband, a cat, a tandem, and a laptop.

Jackie writes a mix of suspense, action adventure, fantasy and history, loves stories with layers, plots with twists and characters with hidden depths. She adores friends to lovers stories, and tales of unexpected reunions, second chances, and men who write their own rules. She blogs about English history and food, has a thing for green eyes, and is a great believer in making up soundtracks for everything, including her characters and the cat.

And she still hasn't found the place where the bus stops.

To chat with Jackie about books, boys and food, read snippets, and hear first about deals and offers, you can:

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