

CLARE  
INSTALOVE

BADGE OF  
*Tenacity*

INDIA LORD

# Badge of Tenacity

---

A Steamy Small Town Romance



India Lord



## **Badge of Tenacity**

Copyright © 2023 by Shelley Munro

Editor: Evil Eye Editing

Cover: Sarah Kil Creative Studio

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any manner without prior written permission from the author, except in the case of a brief quotation embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Munro Press, New Zealand.

First Munro Press electronic publication January 2023

# Contents

[Introduction](#)

[1. Chrissie](#)

[2. Jarrod](#)

[3. Chrissie](#)

[4. Jarrod](#)

[5. Chrissie](#)

[6. Jarrod](#)

[7. Chrissie](#)

[8. Jarrod](#)

[9. Jarrod](#)

[10. Chrissie](#)

[11. Jarrod](#)

[12. Chrissie](#)

[13. Jarrod](#)

[14. Chrissie](#)

[15. Chrissie](#)

[About India](#)

[Also By India](#)



# Introduction

**Can a retired military man finally claim his childhood friend as his lover when they've both changed, and a world of experience and problems lies between them?**

*Jarrold*

I've retired from the military and moved home with two goals:

1—to go into business with my best friend.

2—to stake a claim on Chrissie, the gorgeous woman who haunts my dreams.

Number two bothers me because, while she's currently single, I know nothing about her private life or marriage. I'm about to find out...

*Chrissie*

Since my husband died, life has been challenging. I work long hours to pay the bills, and someone is playing nasty pranks on me. The anxiety messes with my mind and causes big-time stress, but I keep going. That's what I do.

Jarrood reappears in my life with perfect timing, and he's no longer a scrawny kid. He's muscular and easy on the eye—a generous man who appeals to me on every level. We might not have a future, but he's perfect as Mr. Right Now. If only the rest of my existence ran as smoothly.

*Contains a determined ex-military man, a hard-working lady farmer facing skullduggery from a mystery foe, and a little small town instalove, which makes everything better.*

## Chrissie

I SQUELCHED THROUGH PUDDLES, the mud sucking at my old gumboots. Frigid liquid nipped my toes, my waterlogged merino socks no longer trapping in warmth. I shivered, downright miserable and cranky after a frustrating morning. A curse slipped free when I spotted a black farm vehicle sitting in my driveway.

*Great. Just great.*

An already shitty day was about to become worse. I stepped forward and forced a bland smile.

“Oliver, why are you here?”

My brother-in-law climbed out of his vehicle, his handsome and florid face wreathed in a welcoming greeting, the breeze ruffling his well-groomed black hair. “I came to check on you. I promised Doug I’d help and ensure you needed nothing.”

Oliver had told me that before, but my husband hadn’t liked how his brother had bossed him around and fired orders at him. The two men had different farming styles, which was

why their father had subdivided the land and given his two sons half each.

“Thanks, but I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” His brown gaze moved up and down, and I felt naked under his scrutiny. “What happened?” His expression blazed, full of curiosity.

“Got distracted and tripped over my feet.”

“I see you got your cows out of my paddock.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Someone cut the fence.” I’d need to repair it before I used that paddock again for grazing.

Oliver tutted. “You should’ve rung me and asked for help.”

“If I’d realized they’d gone onto your land, I would’ve called you. I needed to muster them and returned to the house to get ear tags. I’m selling the calves at the sale next week.”

“You look tired. Still working at that pub?”

“Yes.” Another contentious matter and none of my brother-in-law’s business.

“Doug would hate to see you serving drinks. I’ve seen the guys hit on you now that he’s gone. If you’re not careful, someone will take advantage.”

Anger flared in me. Oliver discomfited me more than any of the pub’s patrons. My boss kept customers in line and didn’t stand for any disrespect toward his female staff.

“Chrissie, you’re stressed and tense. Let me give you a massage?”

I stiffened, my posture turning rigid.

“I have a free hour,” he continued. “Why don’t you go inside and take a shower? Relax under the hot water before I do the massage. Do you have any baby oil or lotion?”

He had to be freakin’ kidding. No way in hell I’d let him intimately touch me. Nor any of the other local men who thought their attentions should thrill me. What was wrong with Clare’s residents? The women eyed me as if I intended to steal their men. The older ones with unmarried sons thought I needed a man to save me, and the elderly pensioners patted my hand and told me I was still young. I should catch a man and bear children.

“Chrissie, what do you say?”

I backed up a step. “No, I don’t think—”

“I only want to help.” The lustful gleam in his eyes, the one he couldn’t entirely hide, gave him away. Help wasn’t the only thing on his dirty mind.

Footsteps sounded behind us—loud on the gravel. I jolted as masculine arms wrapped around me.

“Hi, angel. I’m home.”

He drew me firmly against his chest, ignoring my mud-splattered, wet clothing as I whirled to face him, the adrenaline rush making me dizzy. Tanned fingers tipped up my chin. Eyes the color of a stormy sky twinkled at me.

*Familiar eyes.*

I slumped against him, and his mouth closed over mine before I could utter a word. His grip on me wasn't tight, but mindful of Oliver, I didn't halt the kiss. Instead, I enjoyed the hell out of the soft lips teasing mine.

I was vaguely aware of words—a *wah-wah-wah*—coming from behind us. Oliver's protest. Finally, the kiss ended, and Jarrod Whiting pulled back to grin at me, his teeth extra white in his tanned face. He rubbed his nose against mine and loosened his embrace.

"What are you doing here?" Oliver's angry voice dragged me from my trance.

"Were you hitting on my girl?" Jarrod drawled.

Oliver spluttered, sounding much like my old chainsaw last week. "I'm here to help Chrissie with her cattle." His voice was stiff, and suspicion rose in me.

"Why didn't you drive to the yards?" I asked.

"You had everything in hand," Oliver said. "I figured you'd return home to change. I noticed you'd taken a spill."

*The bastard.* He'd been spying on me. He'd probably seen me trip during the goose attack. I'd kept eye contact with the furious bird and intimidated it into backing down. It wasn't my first face-off with the flock of geese who considered me the devil.

Before I could accuse Oliver of snooping, Jarrod spoke. "Thank you for helping my girl, but now that I'm home for good, I can take over."

The subtle squeeze at my hip stopped me from blurting the accusations tingling at my lips. Confusion kept me speechless. Nothing about Jarrod's sudden appearance made sense, and if I couldn't hear the bawling cattle or the honk of geese, I would've suspected I'd disappeared down a rabbit hole.

"Chrissie." Oliver scowled at me. "You and him?"

The squeeze at my hip repeated, and I managed a stuttering affirmation.

"Your teeth are chattering, angel," Jarrod said. "Why don't you change clothes and warm up with a hot drink before we sort out those ear tags?"

Oliver's fish impression lightened my mood. He might resemble Doug, but he had a weak chin. If anyone should grow a beard, it was Oliver.

"Thanks," I said simply and walked off, leaving the two men alone. As I strode across the deck, muddy footprints claimed my attention. I glanced back to check, and both men wore boots, but surely neither would wish me harm?

Sighing, I shoved aside my suspicions and walked inside. I kicked off my gumboots in the mudroom and held them upside down over the washtub. Water spilled from them. I peeled off wet socks and shucked my outerwear before stuffing everything in the laundry hamper—another job I needed to tackle before I ran out of clean clothes. I'd already raided the pile of men's T-shirts I'd set aside to take to the charity shop.

And I was procrastinating.

I stomped to the bathroom and turned on the shower. The pipes clanged, and I grabbed a towel and stripped off my remaining clothes. When I stepped under the water, it was lukewarm. Not that it mattered. This was a quick shower to rid me of mud.

When I reentered the kitchen, Oliver had departed, and Jarrod sat at my table, a teapot and two cups in front of him.

“Hey, angel,” he said. “You look tired.”

I dropped into a chair and accepted the cup of black tea he offered. “Is that an insult? If so, you’ve wasted it on me. I don’t have time to sleep. Why are you telling Oliver that we’re together? I haven’t seen you for years.”

“You’ve lost weight,” he said.

“Doug always told me I was overweight. If ghosts are real and he can see me, I’m sure he’ll approve. And you haven’t answered my question. Why did you kiss me?” I demanded.

“You looked as if you needed rescuing.”

I ruffled up like an irritated goose, but Jarrod placed his hand on my knee before I could speak.

“Connor and I arrived home today. Connor and Milly dropped me off at home. Someone has trashed my place.” He shrugged, but irritation flashed in his blue eyes. “My brother promised to look after it and mow the lawns. None of that happened. The place isn’t livable, and I wondered if you’d take pity and give me a bed—at least for tonight.”



“Oh, I’m sorry. I should’ve checked on it for you.” I’d known Jarrod owned the house, but he was never there, and I’d last seen him when he and Connor had joined the army during our last year at high school. Jarrod had grown from a skinny boy into a confident man with an eye-candy body. His light brown hair hit his collar, and the tawny streaks in his locks told me he’d spent recent months in the sunshine. A beard covered his lower face, trimmed and tidier than his hair.

His shoulders slumped, and fatigue shadowed his recognizable-to-me eyes. He wore a faded black T-shirt but had discarded his black jacket, which hung on the back of his chair. A pair of faded jeans clung to his muscular thighs, and I caught a hint of skin through the hole at one knee. He’d left his muddy boots at the door, something that’d never occur to Oliver or Doug.

“Can I stay here until I sort myself out?” His face turned guarded.

I couldn’t read him but didn’t hesitate. “Stay as long as you want.”

“I’ll work in exchange for board.”

“No need. You’ll have enough to do without taking on my chores.”

“I’ll hunt down my brother first,” he said in a frigid voice. “I’ll help you with your cattle and anything else you need doing today.”

“Did you have a long flight?”

“Not too bad,” he said, avoiding a straight answer. “I’d prefer to stay awake until bedtime to get my body clock back in sync. Honestly, I’m happy to help. Way better than worrying about people shooting at me.”

His stark words held secrets, but I didn’t probe. Several military men lived in and around Clare, and it was an unwritten rule not to question them. I understood even if I was curious.

“All right,” I acquiesced. “I’d love help. I’m weaning the calves and tagging them ready for next week’s sale. Also, the fence is down between my property and Oliver’s. I need to fix that today.”

“Has Oliver been a problem?” Jarrod asked with a growl.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” I said in a light voice, conveniently ignoring the trail of footprints on my deck, the fence-cutting, and the recent episode with the lightbulb above the deck—a few of several weird occurrences that had caused me sleepless nights. I wasn’t confident Oliver was the culprit, but he wasn’t helping either.

## Jarrood

“I WAS ON MY way back to the cattle when you arrived,” Chrissie said.

“Is Oliver harassing you?” Instinct had me persisting.

She frowned and cocked her head a fraction. God, she was beautiful with her tawny-brown hair, flashing blue eyes, and that sexy sprinkling of freckles on her nose and cheeks. My memory hadn’t done her justice. She had an air about her—a crackle of energy and determination that was damn sexy. I’d dreamed of kissing her, and I could still taste her on my lips. One kiss wasn’t enough.

“I wouldn’t say harassing, but he makes me uncomfortable. Today was the first time he’s mentioned anything sexual.” Her full lips curled in distaste. “Why did he think I’d want him to give me a massage?”

I held my tongue. I’d love to run my hands over her bare skin so I could see the attraction. Judging by her earlier comments, she didn’t understand her allure. While most

people wouldn't call her a beauty, she was gorgeous to me. I loved her mental strength and determination. I'd grown up working on a farm and understood how hard my father worked, and for her to hold everything together after Doug's death was a credit to her. It couldn't have been easy.

I hadn't liked the man, and the rumors floating around Clare about him hadn't endeared him to me. I'd heard them even though I'd been overseas. That he'd scooped Chrissie from under my nose before I'd gathered my bravery to confess my feelings hadn't gone well with me either. Damn, if his slimy brother would swoop in and steal her this time. I'd had a thing for Chrissie since I'd been a shy kid at school. We hadn't progressed beyond friends, but it wasn't because of a lack of interest on my part.

My time in the army had changed me. I'd grown, matured, and understood what I wanted from life. I glanced up from my empty teacup to catch Chrissie staring at me. It was a combination of curiosity and open attraction that answered my questions. Chrissie returned my interest. She hadn't rejected my kiss, and I couldn't wait to repeat the intimacy.

I carried my cup to the sink, rinsed it, and placed it on the dish drainer to dry. "Let's get these jobs underway before the weather changes. Milly said we've had a lot of rain this month."

"Understatement," Chrissie said. "This feels like the first bit of sunshine we've had for months. Winter seemed never-ending."

“Will you hate me if I say the rain makes me feel at home? The variety of greens and the lush plants here contrast to where I’ve spent the last year. This is a treat. You won’t catch me complaining about the rain.”

I followed Chrissie into the farm shed to the right of the house. The door creaked as she opened it. Not that I noticed. My attention focused on her curvy butt. The urge to touch her, to steal another kiss, shot through me, but my instinct was to wait, to give her time to become used to the idea.

She picked up the bag of tags, and we left the shed. I noted the lack of farm implements and machinery but didn’t comment. I’d already noticed the unloved air of the place. Chrissie’s parents had run a supermarket in Clare, and she’d stayed when they’d moved to Auckland a few years ago. She wasn’t from farming stock, and I admired her for trying to keep things going.

“How come you never sold the farm?” I asked as I fell into step with her, and we headed to the yards.

“Can’t. I inherited the farm but can’t sell it before five years are up. It was a condition I inherited from Doug’s parents. Oliver can’t sell his land either. We can sell or lease the land to each other, but I must retain ownership for five years until it becomes legally mine.”

That made the situation clearer. Chrissie hadn’t had an option, and my admiration ratcheted up a notch higher. Most women chucked into her position would be full of woe and attitude. Chrissie got on quietly with the job and did her

best. A glance around the property told me she was fighting a losing battle since the fences needed repairs and the tractor shed held little in the way of equipment. How did she feed out hay and silage, or do some of the other farm chores where heavy horsepower was necessary?

I didn't put my many questions into words but retreated into my watchful state, where I gathered clues and added them together to present answers. A prominent trait for a military man and one that had saved our skins several times.

We worked quickly to tag the calves, but separating them from their mothers took considerably longer, given the disrepair of the yards.

“Dammit!” Chrissie shouted, stomping her right foot when a feisty calf smashed through a rail to reunite with its mother.

She looked kinda cute with her temper high, but I didn't make the mistake of telling her this. No, I had plans for Chrissie, and they included warming my bed. I'd watched her all afternoon, and I was sure the attraction wasn't one-way traffic.

I tore my gaze from Chrissie and manhandled the calf back through the gap it'd made.

“Thanks,” Chrissie said when we closed the gate behind the calves.

We'd already driven the cows to a different paddock, out of sight of the calves, but the cows' bellows and the calves' distraught calls rang out. Sleep tonight wouldn't be easy.

“That would’ve taken me ages,” she added. “I’ll cook you dinner before I go to work. It’s the least I can do.”

My brows lifted as I ripped my gaze off the sea view. “You work?”

She stretched, digging her fingers into the small of her back. “Yeah, I have a part-time job to help with expenses. Doug was more experienced with stock than me. I hate sending cattle to the sale when I know they’ll end up at the works. I’m not a natural farmer.”

Already noted. Chrissie was hesitant, and the animals sensed her fear. Anyone who didn’t work with animals might think them dumb, but they had decent brains and used them.

“Show me this fence, and we’ll work out what tools we require.”

I followed Chrissie up the track and tried to keep my gaze off her curvy butt. Her jeans weren’t skin tight, but they still left little to my imagination. Her legs were long, and given how she powered up the hill, I’d bet she rocked a pair of shorts.

Chrissie reached the top of the track and plowed through ferns and blackberry brambles growing on the edge of a block of native trees. We stopped before a sagging fence. I squatted to check the old, rusty wire and frowned. Chrissie was right. This fence hadn’t broken from wear and tear. Someone had used a pair of wire-cutters, snipping downward in a neat line and shearing each wire strand.

“Do you have fencing strainers? Battens and a post? We can pull the wires tight and nail them or wrap them around a post. We’ll need a hammer and staples.” I listed off the items as they occurred to me, no stranger to fence repairs. Despite my years of absence, one didn’t forget how to do farm chores.

Chrissie frowned before her expression cleared. “I have most of that. If not, I can get supplies tomorrow morning.”

Up close, her exhaustion was apparent—the pale, freckled cheeks and shadowed eyes. I hid my concern, instinctively keeping my opinion to myself. Since it was a simple repair, I could probably scrounge what she didn’t have from my father. I’d have to face my parents and brother tomorrow, anyway.

She checked her watch and let out a yelp. “I didn’t realize it was so late. I’d better hustle if I want this repaired before I head to work. Are you hungry? I don’t have much in the fridge since I haven’t shopped this week.” She bit her lip. “I can do sandwiches.”

“Sandwiches are fine. And don’t worry. We’ll have this fence sorted in no time. When are you due at work?”

“Five-thirty this afternoon, but I wanted to do a grocery shop beforehand. I normally stash the stuff that needs chilling or the freezer in the pub and grab it before I come home.”

She worked at the pub? “What time do you finish?”

“Depends. If everything works to plan, I should be home around midnight.” She didn’t wait for my reply but hustled back down the hill, her long ponytail bouncing with each step.



I made mental calculations as I followed her through the stand of native trees and ferns and out into the sunshine. The track was slippery underfoot, but that didn't deter Chrissie, and she walked at a furious pace. The air was full of the scent of native botanicals—a pungent herbal and a hint of citrus. Lemon. This warred with the cattle manure and volcanic clay underfoot. It got me thinking about a conversation I'd had with Connor in a bar a few months ago about producing gin.

We passed a clear babbling stream, and my thoughts sharpened. I lengthened my steps to catch up with Chrissie. “Where do you get your water supply from for the house and stock? Do you collect rainwater?”

“No, we have this stream and an underground spring close to the house. Doug's parents had the water tested, and it's high quality, with no contaminants. The spring has never failed, not even during the last terrible drought. We've never run out of water.”

“Handy,” I said, my thoughts returning to gin. My grandfather had experimented with making spirits. Despite my teenage years, he'd showed me the fascinating process and let me taste the result. My friends always gave me a hard time, but whenever we'd ended up in a place civilized enough to have gin, this was my first drink of the night. I'd concentrate on the different flavors and aromas and think of my grandfather. I missed the old man, but he'd lived to a decent age and died in his bed. He'd taught me a lot, and an idea had formed since my discussion with Connor.

At the house, Chrissie said, "I'll make sandwiches."

"Point me in the direction of the fencing gear, and I'll get what we need," I said.

Chrissie waved a hand at the shed. "Everything I have is in there."

Nodding, I opened the side door and strode inside. It was a sturdy building, well-made and in excellent nick. I flicked a switch to my right, and light filled the interior. My initial thought had been to use my property, but this might serve better. If Chrissie agreed, I could rent the shed, monitor her, and maybe even advance on the romance side.

I made quick work of my search for fencing gear and found everything I needed. After stacking the equipment outside the door, I hunted for Chrissie.

I left my dirty boots in the mudroom and headed to the kitchen. The kettle whistled as I reached the doorway. Chrissie sat at the kitchen table, her head bowed and a stack of mail in front of her. I was about to speak when she stood abruptly, and I glimpsed her face.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she brushed them away with an impatient hand, not seeing me as she made her way to the kettle. My heart twisted, and I stalked forward, ready to slay dragons for her. Nobody made my Chrissie cry.

## Chrissie

WORKING WITH JARROD HAD made the day go faster, and I couldn't believe how much we'd achieved in one afternoon. I collected the mail and strode to the rear door. After sliding off my boots, I prepared a snack.

Jarrold still hadn't come inside, so I rifled through the correspondence, my heart sinking when I saw one was the quarterly rates bill from the council and another was from the local lawyer's office.

The rates bill had me blinking in shock. I'd need to pick up extra shifts at the pub.

Lots of extra shifts.

There weren't enough hours now. I'd booked the calves for next week's sale and mentally crossed my fingers for a reasonable price for the twenty-four head of cattle. Of course, commission and transport costs would come off that.

I slit open the second envelope and read through the contents. "Are you kidding me?"

I reread the official letter, the truth slowly sinking in. This wasn't some horrid joke. Oliver wanted the boundary issue sorted. Apparently, he and Doug had discussed the incorrectly placed fence, but Oliver had visited a lawyer instead of talking to me. The quote Oliver had obtained included surveyors, fencing materials, and contractors, and the number of zeroes on the paper had my stomach churning. The words blurred, and I realized I was crying.

One thing was black and white. I didn't have this sort of money and had no access to it. I was stuck in the middle and couldn't sell the farm. My ability to earn cash was severely limited.

Another tear ran down my face, and once they started, they kept coming, rolling one after the other.

“Chrissie?”

My entire body jerked because I hadn't heard Jarrod enter the kitchen. For a big man, he walked lightly.

He crouched in front of me, his handsome face full of concern. “What is it? What's wrong?”

I couldn't speak past the knot in my throat. In lieu of an answer, I shoved the letter at him.

Jarrod straightened to his full height and pulled out another of the chairs at the kitchen table. He handed me a paper towel before he sat and silently read through the letter.

“This is crap. Wasn't the property surveyed before Doug's father split it? How long ago was the farm divided?”

I blew my nose. “Not long after Doug’s father became sick. A few years ago.”

“And that worm didn’t mention this before?”

“Never.” Oliver must have realized I had financial problems. Doug had run up debts before his death, and paying those had taken most of our reserve. Now, I worked every hour I could to pay the bills. I was barely keeping ahead and couldn’t envision keeping up this pace until the farm became mine. Oliver’s mother had told me they’d considered challenging Doug’s will after he’d died. She’d blamed me for her son’s death and informed me if I hadn’t been such a selfish bitch, I would’ve gone looking for him. He wouldn’t have died of exposure while trapped beneath his tractor.

We hadn’t spoken since.

“When are you heading to work again?” Jarrod asked.

“Around five. I should shower and get ready. The fence can wait until tomorrow.”

“Will you drop me at my parents’ place? I need to collect my vehicle.” He sighed. “I should probably get supplies to clean my house, or maybe I could hire someone. As for the fence, we’ll do it first thing tomorrow. Have you talked to the local cops about someone deliberately cutting the fence? You said it has happened before.”

“I will mention it, but it’s a petty crime rather than a criminal one.”

“What happens if your cattle get on the road and someone hits them? You’re legally responsible.”

Jarrood was right. Vandalism and petty theft had become commonplace. At least if I showed a pattern—twice was the start of one—the police could see I’d done my best if my fences ended up trashed again.

“Don’t pay someone to clean your place,” I said. “I’ll help you in exchange for today. You have no idea how long this would’ve taken me without you. Fencing is not my forte.”

“Would it help if someone leased part of the property from you? You can do that, right?”

“As long as I remain on the land. Do you have someone in mind?”

“I have an idea I want to run past my army mate.”

“Sure, go ahead. I’m willing to listen to proposals,” I said, shunting the plate of sandwiches at him.

Jarrood placed his hand over mine, and I jumped. Not because I was frightened. It was more the shock of awareness that punched through me. Throughout the day, I’d had trouble keeping my eyes from straying to him, and my tummy did a little flip when he squeezed my fingers. My gaze darted to him.

“Don’t worry. You’re not alone.”

I wasn’t sure how he could assist, but knowing he was willing helped my eyes to dry and my looming headache to back off.

“Which room should I sleep in?”

“Take mine,” I said instantly. “I’ll sleep on the couch. That way, I won’t wake you when I come in from work.”

“I’ll take the couch,” he said, his voice firm.

He hadn’t removed his hand from mine, and now he turned my fingers and clasped our hands. His was warm, and the heat traveled up my arm and directly to my face. It had been ages since a man had touched me, and this seemed too intimate.

“Chrissie.”

“Yes.” I met his gaze, my heart pounding, and my face felt beet-red.

“The couch will be fine. I’ve slept in a lot worse places.”

I nodded.

“You’re pretty when you blush.”

I snorted at this, and he chuckled.

“Don’t believe me, huh? I thought you were gorgeous when we went to school together. My opinion hasn’t changed.”

Suddenly, I was breathless, and a new tension slid into focus. I caught his intent gaze. He was staring at my mouth. Somehow, I found myself leaning toward him. Our lips met, and I froze, but Jarrod didn’t hesitate. He placed his hands on my shoulders and drew me closer, the pressure against my mouth growing deeper. I gasped, and Jarrod took advantage, claiming my mouth and tugging me off my chair and onto his knee.

At first, shock held me still, then I melted into him and responded to his kiss. He grunted approval and set about teasing my lips and rocketing sensations to places south that had seen little action since before Doug died.

Finally, he pulled back enough to gauge my reaction. “Not going to hit me?”

“If I hadn’t wanted to kiss you, I would’ve made that clear. Um, it was nice.”

“Nice? I can’t have been doing it right. Next time, I’ll steal your breath and leave your knees quivering.”

I went with my gut. “That sounds like a promise.”

“Count on it.” He kissed the tip of my nose and lifted me to my feet. “Clock is ticking if you want to shop before work.”

In a daze, I wandered the passage to my bedroom. A king-size bed and the classic dark wooden furniture I’d inherited from my parents filled most of the room. The quilt cover and sheets were the ones Doug’s mother had given us and not to my taste, but I couldn’t afford to replace them.

Toward the end of our marriage, I hadn’t liked Doug much. We’d been heading toward a divorce.

I’d toiled at jobs outside the farm while Doug had taken care of the stock and other farming duties. Except, I’d often had to work hard once I’d arrived home—feeding calves and shifting cows. Although I hadn’t had proof, I had my suspicions about Doug.



I unclenched my balled fists. No use worrying about lost opportunities. Right now should be my primary focus because I'd lose everything if I weren't careful.

## Jarrood

IT WAS LATE AFTER I'd visited my parents and demanded info on my younger brother's whereabouts. Exhaustion tugged at me, and my mood hovered near black and pissed. My younger brother wasn't home, and my parents refused to disclose his location. Probably wise, given my fury. My parents thought he'd been mowing my lawns but hadn't checked. Instead, the lazy git had been inviting his friends around to party and hadn't cared what damage they'd inflicted.

"Tell Matt I'll keep track of the repair bill when you speak to him. I expect him to pay for the damage," I snapped.

My parents exchanged a glance before my mother spoke. "Jarrod, don't be so hard on him."

I stood abruptly. Time to leave before I blurted something I shouldn't. "If he's not willing to pay for damages, tell him to stay the hell away from me."

"Jarrod," my mother protested.

I exchanged a glance with my father and understood that while he agreed with me, he intended to keep the peace. My problem to deal with. Fine. War had changed me, increasing my strength and honing my muscles and mind. My motto—life was too short to persevere with idiots. Matt was a selfish jackass who thought the world owed him. Too bad. He'd get a quick shift if he arrived, expecting my help.

The drive to Chrissie's place took ten minutes, and I reveled in the freedom of driving again. Dad had lent me his fencing strainers and given me a dozen battens. I'd have enough to fix the fence tomorrow with what I'd found in Chrissie's shed.

When I parked outside Chrissie's house, the place was in darkness. I frowned. Not welcoming or safe for her coming home late. I climbed from my truck and grabbed the curry and rice my mother had sent with me. Chrissie had given me a spare key, and I used that. With the door open, I fumbled for the switch. Soon weak light illuminated the front door area, and I walked the two steps to stare at the outside light. It had a bulb in it, but when I reached up to touch it, I noticed it was loose. Strangely, it was warm.

I twisted the bulb, and illumination flicked on again. A yawn cracked my jaw, and suddenly I felt every one of my muscles.

Chrissie wanted me to take her bed because the couch was too short. I'd agreed, but privately, I decided when she arrived home, we'd swap back. Right now, all I wanted was to lie flat

and close my gritty eyes. After a quick shower, Itoweled dry and pulled on a clean pair of boxer-briefs.

We'd had a long, zigzag flight home, and now it'd caught up on me. I should go straight to the couch. *Should*. But I glimpsed the temping bed and succumbed. I stretched out with a heartfelt groan when my head hit the pillow.

I came to consciousness hours later, confusion striking me when I realized I wasn't alone in the bed. Early sunshine hit the curtains, and even though they were still closed, I realized it was morning. I lifted my right wrist and blinked several times to focus on my watch. Ten minutes after eight. Hell. I hadn't slept this long for ages.

A feminine arm tightened around my waist, the sweet scent of soap and flowers filling my breaths. When I turned my head a fraction, I saw Chrissie. She lay still, unmoving apart from the faint rise and fall of her chest, looking as exhausted as I'd felt the previous night. I should let her sleep, but selfishly, I wanted to enjoy this slice of heaven.

When Connor and I had joined the army, I'd left the town of Clare with one regret. I hadn't let Chrissie understand how much she meant to me. I'd promised that if I survived the fighting and came home unscathed, I'd suck up my bravery and tell her how I felt.

Of course, I hadn't thought she'd be married. I'd ended up signing on for another term, as had Connor. This time, I'd decided I'd finished, but I hadn't expected Chrissie to be a widow.

I'd known Doug and played rugby with him. He hadn't been the man I'd envisioned Chrissie might marry. He'd always had multiple women, and his locker-room boasting had sickened me. Yeah, me and him had never been friends.

Chrissie stirred, and I held my breath. I hope she didn't freak. I mean, she'd offered to let me use her bed, and it was a king, so there was plenty of room. But she was mighty close. The weight of her breasts pressed against my back, and her warm breath puffed on my neck. She'd let me kiss her yesterday, and now I was second-guessing myself. Did she want me, or did she want a man short-term? A little fun and companionship.

“Jarrod?”

“Yes?” My voice was husky and laced with sleep, but I was fully awake. My dick especially.

“You were sleeping on the edge, so I figured it wouldn't hurt if I slept here, too.”

I turned to face her and came nose to nose. We were sharing the same pillow.

She bit her bottom lip, and I couldn't help but stare at the deep red of her mouth.

“You know how I kissed you yesterday?”

She released her lip to reply. “Yes.”

“I want to do it again.”

“Oh. Why?”

I laughed at her apparent bewilderment. “You don’t think I kissed you as an act of charity?”

“I thought you were comforting me. I needed it yesterday.” She paused. “Maybe today too.”

I grinned and didn’t give her a chance to say more. It took milliseconds to close the space between us and drag her against my mostly naked body. She was wearing a long, faded T-shirt. It was thin and not much of a barrier since I could feel the thrust of her nipples against my chest. This time, our kiss was slow, and I used persuasion. Tenderness. She melted against me and, more importantly, kissed me back. Despite wanting more, I kept up the unhurried pace, not wanting to scare her.

“Jarrod,” she murmured when our lips parted.

We were both breathing harder, and it seemed we were thinking the same thing. We wanted more. At least, I hoped I wasn’t misreading the situation.

“Yeah,” I said, tracing my fingers over her cheek.

“Touch me,” she commanded.

“You realize if I touch you, I’m gonna want to do more.”

“I want more,” she said, her tone almost strident.

We stared at each other for long seconds while I tried to read her. Yeah, the same outcome I desired, but I’d hate for her to tell me we were one and done. No, I wanted a hell of a lot more from Chrissie.

“What exactly are you thinking? I don’t want any misunderstandings.”

Chrissie released a snort. “I thought guys were all about sex. I’m offering. Are you turning me down?”

No, I wasn’t strong enough to act the gentleman, but I didn’t want Chrissie to stomp over my heart.

“I like you, Chrissie, and I don’t do casual. I used to, but I’m no longer a kid.”

She frowned, scrunching her smooth brow as she stared at me. Finally, she huffed out a breath. “You’re saying scratching an itch with you and walking away isn’t an option.”

My laugh emerged with an edge of brittle. “Yep. I refuse to be anyone’s fuck toy. I have my pride.”

## Chrissie

CONFUSION FILLED ME AS I studied Jarrod. Not a hint of laughter filled his tanned face. His expression held a seriousness I hadn't expected. I hadn't meant to get into my bed and fall asleep, but exhaustion had made it too much trouble to drag my weary body downstairs. Jarrod had been sleeping on the far side, so I'd succumbed to impulse and slid beneath the blankets, falling asleep almost instantly.

Jarrod remained in the same spot. It was me who'd slid across the mattress to cuddle. I liked Jarrod. I'd always enjoyed spending time with him, but the army had scrubbed away his soft edges, leaving hard muscle and cool confidence. Added to that was the fact he'd helped me with farm work. Not one man had aided me, despite my struggle. Anyone with a pair of eyes could see my difficulties.

Oliver only came around to harass me. He'd never once offered to help with a task.

"I understand this is a weighty decision," Jarrod said.



Oh, god. He was gonna get out of bed.

“No!” I placed my hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back until he lay flat. I straddled his hips and took pleasure in the way he blinked. I fancied there was a little shock too, and that emotion in him built my confidence. “Do I get a chance to test what I might be getting myself into?”

Jarrold spluttered out a laugh, and his blue eyes glowed with humor. “I can tell you’re gonna be a handful.”

My amusement died, and Doug surged into my mind. His insults about my body had made me feel inadequate and small.

“I don’t have a handful,” I said in a clear voice.

Confusion seeped into his features, then his expression cleared. “Ah,” he said. “To me, everything about you is perfect. Your smile. Your character. Your body.”

“I...” I trailed off, seeing his sincerity. He wasn’t trying to spin a line. “All right.” I leaned over him and placed a lingering kiss on his mouth before I sat back and tugged my T-shirt over my head.

His blue eyes softened. “Just as I imagined. Beautiful.”

And that was it. I caved and melted against him. His arms closed around me, our lips pressed together, and I surrendered. Part of me had expected him to jump into action, and everything would be fast and frantic. That wasn’t what happened. Jarrod lingered on each body part, exploring and kissing my face. He sucked a bite from my neck, then licked away the sting. He closed a big, callused hand over one of my

breasts. His fingers engulfed my flesh, and I flinched, Doug's harsh words flooding my mind.

"Stop," he said, a flash of anger crossing his face. "I'm not the man who insulted you."

I inhaled, hoping to control my racing pulse. He was right, but Doug's barbs were like ghosts who haunted me.

"You are not," I agreed, and in a silent apology for the slight, I kissed him. Instantly, Jarrod relaxed, and the tension between us faded.

Jarrod lifted his hand from my breast and sucked my nipple into his heated mouth. The pull of his lips created a chain reaction, sharp darts of pleasure surging downward and gathering between my thighs. Once again, we were in harmony.

My nipple popped free. "More than a mouthful is wasteful, and your responsiveness is a turn-on."

"Wait," I said, the practicalities jumping to the fore. "I'm not on birth control."

"I have a condom in my wallet," Jarrod said, unconcerned, and he kissed his way down my body, roughly parting my thighs and lifting me to his mouth. Seconds later, his lips hit my flesh. Talk about magic. Sensations roared through me from the point of contact, and suddenly, I was aware of every part of my body. My stomach turned fluttery, and I felt the build of moisture. He made suggestive circles with his thumb against my thigh while his tongue stroked, caressed, and

teased. My pulse did a bump and grind, and every downstroke of his tongue, every tiny circle, and teasing foray shoved me into sensory overload. Heat prickled to life, and it took me long moments to understand the needy sounds pouring from my throat.

I was the one pleading for more.

Jarrold lifted his head, and I opened eyes I hadn't realized I'd closed to meet his intent gaze.

“Come for me, angel. I want to see you come apart.”

His blue eyes were bright, and arousal heated his sculpted cheekbones. He was stark, masculine beauty with rippling muscles and intense concentration. I wondered why he'd settle for me—a hard-up widow—when he could pick any fresh young Clare beauty. Then I shoved away my moment of insecurity, especially when Jarrold applied his mouth to my flesh again. Heat curled through me, gathering momentum with each slide of his lips, his tongue. His was a deliciously sinful mouth, and he was obliterating my dry spell.

Jarrold made a purring sound of approval when I lifted, increasing the pressure and friction of his mouth. Sensations twisted through me, the darts of heat coming quicker and deeper, gathering force and blossoming until I writhed and begged. The bundle of nerves he was working became my sole focus. Jarrold gave me one more languorous lick, and I was flying, the acute pleasure detonating in me and stealing my breath.

Gradually, I returned to myself, my breathing easing down a notch, my pulse rate slowing to something resembling normal.

“Wow,” I said, not even trying to filter my words. “That was amazing. Haven’t done that for ages.”

Jarrold pinned me with a sharp look but didn’t ask questions. Thankfully. I wasn’t ready to explain my wreck of a relationship and my suspicions that Doug had other women on the side when it suited him. After my sham marriage, I was grateful for this slice of pleasure.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, concern on his pretty face.

“Yes.”

“You’re crying.” He reached out and carefully swiped his thumb under my eye, holding the evidence of my tears for me to see.

I swallowed hard. “I didn’t mean to. This—I can’t remember having an orgasm this intense before.” If Jarrod walked away from the host of problems I dragged behind like a yoke, at least I’d know the unselfish touch of a man intent only on giving me pleasure.

Jarrold moved up the bed and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. My mouth moved beneath his and extended the kiss into something longer and way more intimate. When he lifted his head again, I gawked at him as if he were male chocolate. I certainly wanted to nibble and explore and savor every part of

him. I sank down on the bed, leaving a trail of kisses across his splendid pectoral muscles.

He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “If you do that, I’ll explode before I get anywhere near a condom. Haven’t had sex for ages, and I’m craving the feel of your snug pussy.”

“How long?” The second the question was out there, I wished I could haul it back, but to my surprise, Jarrod answered without a blink.

“Eight months. I broke up with my girlfriend before I returned to my last assignment. My job with the constant danger terrified her. I understood because I’d come home with a broken arm and a bullet. Some women don’t cope well alone. She wanted me to give up the army and take a job with her father’s car-sale business. I couldn’t picture myself selling automobiles and told her so.”

“She didn’t take it well?”

“An understatement,” Jarrod said with a shake of his head. “It felt like a battleground. The woman had a temper.”

So this was merely breaking a dry spell for him. He was taking advantage of the opportunity. *No, that wasn’t fair.* He’d indicated he didn’t want casual. Besides, I was the one who’d climbed into bed with him. I was the one who’d welcomed his touch. Not a single no had fallen from my lips.

“Whatever you’re thinking. Stop,” he snapped, his words full of angry male. “I’m not with you because you’re the first

offer. Taking advantage of you is the last thing I'd try. I would've waited for as long as it took."

Confusion filled me, and I stared at Jarrod's bare butt as he sprang from the bed to rifle through his clothes. Once he located his wallet, he returned to the bed with long strides, determination written on his face.

"If you want to stop, say it, but I want you, and having already witnessed you coming apart in my arms, I want to watch again. Many times," he added in a firm voice. "Ball is in your court, angel. Yes or no."

I hesitated, but his hand landed on my breast, and he strummed my nipple while he waited for my answer. Silken tendrils of heat twined through me, tempting me. Seducing me when I understood I should walk away now. I had enough drama in my life—debt and responsibility. Did I want man complications, too?

## Jarrood

ONE TOUCH AND I'D been gone. Making love with Chrissie surpassed my imagination, but something was bothering her. She'd been willing, but then she'd gone into her head, her brain lining up obstacles of why we couldn't be together.

“Your decision, angel. Do I use this condom or boil the jug for tea?”

Her expression read torn, and disappointment welled in me. Never mind. I'd back off and woo her until she succumbed to my way of thinking.

Even as I decided this, she climbed off the bed. She stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“We fuck,” she said.

While I approved of the decision, I hated her terminology. I didn't want to fuck her. I wanted to worship her sexy body and make love to her in the way she deserved. Since we were

teenagers, I'd loved her, and if I had to wait longer, that's what I'd do.

“Are you sure?”

A tiny frown appeared between her eyes. “Don't you want to?”

I grasped her hand and placed it on my swollen dick. “Does this feel as if I'm uninterested?”

A shudder worked through me as her fingers curled around my shaft.

She tipped back her head and grinned. “This is the best morning, and it'll rate as my favorite part of this day. Please, don't leave. Let's enjoy this slice of heaven and start our morning the right way.”

Mental fireworks exploded in my head in a silent celebration. I scooped Chrissie off her feet and deposited her on the bed, then followed her down seconds later. Her smaller body was warm against mine, and this time, I noticed more. Her scraped and callused hands, her slenderness, and I'd already registered her fatigue. The woman was working herself hard. Time for that later. The clock was ticking, and the burn of desire was growing stronger in me.

I started with the enjoyable kissing. Chrissie's lips were soft as they moved against mine. I let her actions guide me, and it was easy to tell she adored a variation of pressure and the slide of a lingering, unhurried caress as much as a demanding exchange that left us both breathless.



Her hips moved against mine in urgent demand, but I didn't intend to hurry our first time. I'd answered several of my questions already. She tasted divine and kissed like an angel and, although responsive, acted insecure about her body. I didn't have a problem with her pert breasts and curvy backside.

She was perfect.

She rocked her hips against mine, trapping my erection against her belly with friction that had me shuddering with need. Even so, I lingered, exploring every curve. I lifted her on top of me, and her mouth met mine with eager pressure while I cupped her arse, then pinched and kneaded the flesh. She nipped at spots I hadn't known were sensitive, and I clenched my butt muscles, trying to control the raging need consuming me. Her lips lingered against my neck, and her tongue traced the rim of my ear.

A choked and breathless sound escaped me—a groan, followed by her soft laugh. I tumbled her off me and rolled, my control at breaking point. My fingers burrowed beneath the pillow where I'd stashed the condom. It took seconds to open the foil packet and roll the latex down my shaft.

I tested her readiness and found her drenched. She stirred restlessly beneath me as I positioned myself. Then my cock invaded her hot, tight flesh. I surged inside her heat, luxuriating in the wetness I encountered. Balls deep, I paused, and I swear I could feel my heartbeat in my dick.

I glanced at her and caught her wetting her lips.

“Okay?” I asked, needing verbal reassurance because I’d loathe hurting this woman. As far as I was concerned, she belonged to me, although she didn’t understand that yet.

“Please move.” Her sex gripped me, tightening momentarily in a way that had me seeing stars.

“Your wish is my command.” I stole a kiss and withdrew before gliding back into her. Sweet. She was so sweet and loving, her hips moving in concert with mine. The hunger grew, stirred by each thrust, each kiss. Desire exploded in me, pleasure rushing from my balls and whooshing outward. I was vaguely aware of Chrissie crying out, but then my orgasm was on me. My cock thickened, and semen exploded from me in long, convulsive spurts that left me lightheaded.

Chrissie’s fingernails dug into my biceps, the tiny bites of pain centering me. She twisted against me, straining and reaching, and my brains unscrambled enough to understand she needed a little more. I slipped my hand between us and stroked her clit, giving her firm strokes around the edge of the swollen bud. She shuddered against me, her gaze meeting and connecting with mine as she toppled over the edge. Watching her come apart was awe-inspiring, giving me a primal sense of satisfaction.

We lay still for long moments, enjoying the lingering closeness.

Finally, Chrissie stirred. “That was amazing.”

*Understatement.* Making love with Chrissie had rocked my world. *It had always been her.* Now came the work to get her

to see the possibilities. I was ready to settle down, and it was her I wanted.

We showered together, soaping each other's backs but didn't waste time because the water soon ran cool. I exited first and, once dressed, headed to the kitchen to start breakfast. The fridge held a bounty of food this morning, and I prepared scrambled eggs and toast.

"I don't normally have breakfast, but this is delicious," Chrissie said. "I was hungry."

"Are we still fencing first?"

"Yes," Chrissie said. "Once we fix the fence, I can shift the cows to that paddock. I prefer a few paddocks between the cows and their calves. Weaning the calves and sending them off to the sale is my least favorite part of farming, although this group has settled well. I can't hear any calves bawling for their mothers. They were quiet last night when I arrived home."

We finished eating and washed the dishes together before donning boots and heading outside to start our day. Beside me, Chrissie stiffened and muttered a rude word.

"What's wrong?"

"The cows and calves are in the same paddock. That's why it's peaceful around here."

"Let's mend the fence. Once that's finished, we'll separate the cows and calves again. Will that work for you?"

“Yes. Thanks, but don’t stay if you have other commitments. I can manage.”

“I’m aware,” I said, admiring her tenacity. “Spending time with you is no hardship.” Nothing less than the truth.

We piled the fencing equipment into my vehicle, and I drove us up the mud track and along the ridge of the hill. Once there, we unloaded the battens and fencing equipment and worked together to repair the fence. It took an hour, and despite the cooler temperatures this morning, sweat coated our skin, and our clothes clung by the time the battens and wires were animal-proof.

“Thank you,” Chrissie said. “Mending that would’ve taken me an entire day.”

We drove back to the house and walked to the yards. The gates that had separated the two herds of cattle stood wide open.

“I shut those gates,” I said, staring at one. “You watched me do it.”

Chrissie sighed. “Weird things happen here.”

I narrowed my eyes, studying her while I processed her words.

She inclined her head in a sharp nod to the silent questions zinging between us.

“You should contact the local cop.”

“I’m hesitating because what am I meant to tell him? For all I know, it might be local kids making mischief.”

She had a point, but my nape prickled insistently. I recalled the outside light and the loose bulb. Chrissie frequently worked late. She’d use that light often, and there was no way it’d worked free. My mind wandered to the cut fence.

“You need to report these things. Sure, they’re nuisance pranks, but I repeat, what if the cattle wandered on the road? You’d be liable for any accidents. Why don’t I drive you to the police station once we’ve finished with the cattle? The police should have a report on file. That might be useful if we discover the culprit’s identity.”

“I don’t understand why someone would pick on me when I’m too busy to upset anyone.”

Oliver’s expression haunted me. “What about your brother-in-law?”

“Oliver?” Chrissie laughed. “He’s harmless. Annoying but innocuous.” Then her humor faded, replaced by a scowl. “That lawyer’s letter stating the boundary fence is in the wrong place confuses me. I still don’t understand why Oliver didn’t discuss it first.”

Given Oliver’s behavior on the day I’d arrived, I understood, and my suspicions solidified. I’d watch Oliver closely. I hated seeing Chrissie slogging away and failing because her brother-in-law was stacking the odds.

## Chrissie

THE MORNING SPED BY with Jarrod's help. He worked hard, his manner competent, and his demeanor calm even when the calves balked at separation. Given yesterday, the little beasts decided big fences were a no-go zone. It helped that we worked together well as if we'd done it for years, and I couldn't help but contrast Doug with Jarrod.

Even though I shouldn't show this disloyalty, my husband had been more façade than substance. He'd been a handsome man and wielded an instinctive charm that had fooled everyone. His charisma had duped me. When I'd worked with Doug on the farm, he'd barked orders. I'd been a town girl, and the task's foreign, but I didn't react well to demands. Doug and I had argued, but we'd muddled through, and I'd thought we had a decent marriage until the end. I sighed and shoved the well-trod path of thoughts away. Despite rehashing my marriage many times, I didn't understand what had gone wrong.

Jarrold's manner was different. His patience came along with intelligence and farming experience. I shot him a sidelong glance.

"What?" he asked.

"You said you're finished with the army?"

"Yeah. Connor and I left at the same time."

"Do you have any plans?" I asked, curious and a little breathless. *Please don't say you're leaving Clare.* Yeah, my one-and-done thing—blasted into the water. After making love with Jarrold, I wanted a repeat. Sex with Jarrold would improve my world and make me happy. Our thoughts ran parallel, but what did I know? I'd bombed with Doug, and that failure burned.

Jarrold twined our fingers together. I started at the intimacy but didn't pull away. When he lightly squeezed my fingers, I glanced at him.

"I wanted to discuss something I've been considering for months."

"Tell me. I'm all agog." I cocked my head and suppressed my grin. Whatever he intended to verbalize mattered because a tinge of red highlighted his cheekbones. My big, tough soldier had a soft side. A tender side he'd shown me this morning.

He rolled his eyes. "Connor and I discussed our future. I've never wanted to be a full-time farmer, but I'm interested in setting up a whisky distillery. My idea would be to grow the grain and work through the entire process. It takes years to

mature the whisky in the barrels. I like gin, which has a faster process for a quicker turnaround on financial return. We could manage both.”

“Wow!” I said, impressed. “That’s a brilliant idea. We have dozens of boutique hotels and lodges in the area that love buying local. Once you set up, you could do tours or classes.”

Jarrold beamed, more relaxed after my enthusiastic input.

“Where will you start your business?”

“I haven’t spoken to Connor yet since I didn’t want to bother him. He and Milly need quality private time to celebrate their pending parenthood. When I saw your shed and looked closely at your land, I thought it suited our needs. We’d rent your shed to house our distillery and lease a couple of paddocks to grow our grain crops. You have a natural spring. We’d test the water, and if the results are favorable, that will meet our requirements. What do you think? Would it run you short of grazing land if we used the flatter paddocks at the front of the property to grow crops?”

I tried to visualize everything he was describing. “You can use the shed for free, Jarrod.”

“No,” he said. “You’ll still pay rates and other expenses. Payment is non-negotiable, but I’d still confer with Connor.”

I considered the practicalities. “What renovations would you require to make the building work for you?”

“It’d need cleaning and improved security, but it has the bare bones for everything we’d need.”



“You’d have to plant your crops soon.”

“Yeah, we’d probably buy grain to experiment with and determine which direction we’d like to go and whether we grow corn, rye, barley, or wheat to make our whisky. A crop this year would put us ahead in our plan.”

“I’m in,” I said. “I have no idea of the amount to charge you, but if Connor agrees, let me know what you think it’s worth.” The extra money might mean I could cut my shifts at the pub. The luxury of sleep—wow. I might get rid of the bags beneath my eyes. “If you’d still like to lease the land for crops, you’re welcome. The geese might present a problem. They’re multiplying rapidly and eat as much grass as a cow. If I could find them a new home, I would. I’m sick to death of them attacking me.”

“Have you put an ad on the Clare social media page?”

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

“They’re worth money. There’s no need to give your geese away when you need the money. Ask people to make offers. Right, any urgent jobs?”

There were always tasks, but what Jarrod said about reporting the farm shenanigans had merit. “No, I need food while I itemize the pranks and the approximate dates they occurred.”

My list was impressively long by the time we’d eaten sandwiches and drank a pot of tea. I stared at the things I’d noted, a twist of tension gripping my belly. I needed to face

the facts. This wasn't merely mischief. Someone wanted me off kilter and nervous, and their strategy was working. I lived on the farm alone, and my nearest neighbor was nowhere within shouting distance. If my prankster upped the ante, I could be in danger.

## Jarrood

THE LOCAL COP, A grizzled man with a potbelly and a relaxed air, listened to Chrissie and took her list, but his body language suggested he thought she was exaggerating the danger.

Didn't matter. Connor and I had friends in the region. Ex-army friends who wouldn't mind helping. I'd give Connor a call once Chrissie headed to work.

"He didn't believe me," Chrissie said once we walked outside.

"Doesn't matter. It's on record now, and each time something new happens, you'll report it again. Then, once we catch whoever is toying with you, we have a pattern of behavior and a list of misdemeanors."

"I don't care about punishment. I want the culprit to leave me the hell alone."

"Do you have chores in town?"

"No."

“Why don’t I buy you afternoon tea at the café before we leave town? Do they still make those huge cheese scones?”

“Yes, they do, but they’ve probably sold out by now.” Chrissie brightened. “They make excellent cakes too.”

I hooked my arm through Chrissie’s and led her toward the café. Halfway there, we came face-to-face with my parents.

“Jarrod, what are you doing here?” my mother asked.

“Chrissie and I had errands,” I said, recalling it was sale day. No wonder we’d met so many locals. I hadn’t stopped to talk to any, instead merely nodding a greeting. Gossip was probably already flying around the town with Connor and me arriving back in Clare. “Is Matt at home? He hasn’t contacted me yet.”

My parents shared a glance that made me want to curse. I bit back the instinct and struggled with patience. My brother had promised to take excellent care of my place, and I’d believed him at the time.

I tried again. “Will Matt know what happened to my flat-screen television or who trashed my place?”

“It can’t be too bad if you’re staying there,” my mother said with a careless shrug that had me gritting my teeth. She smiled at Chrissie. “How are you, dear? I didn’t realize you knew my son.”

“We attended school together,” I said. “Chrissie is my neighbor and was nice enough to offer me a place to stay since my house is inhabitable.”

My parents exchanged another glance that had my suspicions rising.

“Where is Matt?” I snapped out the question, letting loose a little of my temper.

“Don’t speak to your mother like that,” my father said, curling his arm around her shoulders. “Matt has gone to Australia. He has a job in the mines.”

I felt my eyes bug out, and I was so angry I spluttered. “Did Matt and his friends have a farewell party at my house?”

My mother flinched. “Matt has matured since you’ve been away. Is the damage that bad?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Mum, Dad.” I grasped for calm. “Chrissie and I are having coffee. If you hear from Matt, tell him I’ll send him the bill for repairs, and he *will* repay me.”

My mother opened her mouth, and I sensed she intended to protest with her usual mantra that family should stick together. I’d spent most of my life while I was in Clare fixing my little brother’s messes. I was done.

“No,” I said, and to my surprise, my voice was utterly calm. “I’m done cleaning up after Matt. It’s time for him to grasp the concept of personal responsibility. I gave Matt a chance, even though my gut told me not to. He won’t get any more.”

“Jarrod.” My mother’s tone held reproach.

“No,” my dad said. “Matt should make restitution. Jarrod, send us the repair bill, and I’ll make sure Matt repays you. I

told the boy having his farewell party in Jarrod's house was a bad idea, but he laughed in his usual way."

"Thanks," I said, surprised by my father's stance since he usually sided with my mother.

"Send me photos of the damage and missing items," my father said.

"We'd better go since Chrissie has work later. I promised to feed her first."

"Bye, son." My father ushered my mother away.

Chrissie said nothing until we'd entered the café, placed our order, and had taken a seat in a private alcove. "I've heard stories about your brother."

"Matt is the last person I wish to discuss." I grimaced. "Although I'm going to need to face the cleanup." My brother had always left chaos in his wake.

"Can you claim insurance?"

"I'll try, but since Matt had a hand in the damage and I'd given him a key, the insurance company might balk at a payout."

An elderly, pinny-wearing woman approached, bearing a tray. She set down the teapot, a jug of milk, cups, saucers, and two slices of Victoria sponge cake, complete with whipped cream and strawberries. There was also one cheese scone, which we'd agreed to split.

"Thanks," I said to the woman. "This looks delicious."

She beamed, pleased with the compliment, and shuffled back behind the counter.

We fell upon the food as if we hadn't eaten for hours. Surreptitiously, I watched Chrissie. She was eating with gusto and enjoying the afternoon tea.

“Are you okay with me staying with you for longer? I could clear a bedroom enough to at least move home.” I didn't comment about the destruction of my furniture. Luckily, I'd left my valuable stuff in storage at Connor's place. I'm not sure what made me do it, but I was glad I'd followed my instincts.

“Yes,” Chrissie pulled her bottom lip between her teeth before glancing at me and away again.

“What?” I asked.

“I feel safer with you around. Last night, I wasn't awake in the small hours.”

I leaned closer and traced the dark circles under one of Chrissie's eyes with my thumb. “Am I allowed to share your bed?”

“Yes.”

“I slept well too.” A miracle. I always had trouble settling down after returning from a mission. Sleeping in Chrissie's bed with her scent surrounding me had done the trick. That and hours of flying and hanging around airports. “Waking to find you beside me was an excellent bonus.”

Her cheeks grew pink, but she lifted her chin and didn't dodge my gaze. "Thank you."

I nodded and stuffed a piece of sponge into my mouth. I hated to get ahead of myself, but I hoped this could be the start of a happy-ever-after romance. And yeah, that made me a softy, but I'd wanted Chrissie for years. I'd fallen for her when we were kids in the playground, and she'd doctored my skinned knee. I'd always measured other women against her. Yeah, there had been lovers, but Chrissie had remained front of mind. We were single and free, and I'd made my move.

I refused to retreat because I craved the entire shebang now that I'd had a taste.

A future with Chrissie.

Love. Marriage. Kids.



## Jarrood

ONCE CHRISSIE LEFT FOR work, I called Connor and told him about my plan.

“What happens if she sells or remarries or wants to use her land another way?” Connor asked, his sharp mind already busy working the angles. Given his wealthy background, industry and resourcefulness weren’t something I’d expected, but the man worked hard and led from the front. His discipline and patient charm made him an outstanding leader and inspired loyalty from his men. I respected the hell out of my friend.

“We haven’t discussed details yet. I told Chrissie I’d run it past you, but the shed is sturdy, with excellent lighting. It has power. The property has a natural spring that might work for our water supply. The front paddocks are flat and accessible, and we could plant a crop this season.”

“Why isn’t your friend using the land?”

Although I hadn't asked her, I had my theories. "She's having trouble coping alone and can't make enough money farming full time. She has an extra outside job to pay the bills. Farming isn't her dream."

"When can I talk to Chrissie and check out the property?"

"Come tomorrow around ten," I suggested. "Would you mind picking up something from the bakery so Chrissie won't fuss? She works damn hard, and she's exhausted. Do you know Oliver Anders? He's her brother-in-law and neighbor. Someone is cutting her fences and opening gates to let her stock wander. It's nuisance pranks, but they're scaring her."

"You suspect this Oliver Anders?"

"Yeah. Do you remember Doug?"

"Vaguely," Connor said. "Gossip says he was a player."

"Yup," I agreed.

"I'll gather intel. See what I can learn."

"See you tomorrow."

I'd promised Chrissie I'd clean the kitchen for her, and I did the dishes and wiped down the surfaces before planting myself in front of the TV. I must've fallen asleep because I awoke with a start, my senses pinging. *My phone*. I grabbed it, noting the time as I answered the call.

"Yeah," I barked.

"J-Jarrold."

Everything inside me went still. “Chrissie, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“My car has conked out. I’m halfway home.”

I scooped up my keys and pulled on my boots before I replied. “Are you safe? Will anyone hit you?”

“I’ve switched on my hazard lights and steered onto the gravel shoulder.”

“Stay in the car and keep the doors locked until I get there.”

“Okay.”

“Stay on the line with me,” I added.

I pulled out of her driveway, scanning the vicinity. Nothing appeared unusual, and I continued driving, trying to hurry but conscious of the possibility of wandering stock on the road.

“Shouldn’t be long now,” I said, working to keep my anxiety in check. My gut told me there was something suspicious about Chrissie’s car breaking down. “I see you.”

“That’s you?”

“It is. You can hang up now.” I pulled up and climbed from my vehicle. Chrissie met me halfway, flinging herself into my arms, her entire body shaking. “It’s okay,” I murmured. “I’ve got you.”

“I had my car serviced last week. The mechanic tweaked a few things, but nothing needed replacing. Car maintenance is one thing I focus on because I’m aware of my late hours. I need a reliable car.”

“Why don’t we lock your vehicle and return in the morning?”

A set of headlights pierced the darkness, and I edged off the road, dragging Chrissie with me. The vehicle crawled to a halt when the headlights illuminated her car. Chrissie sucked in an audible breath.

“It’s Oliver,” she said.

My arms tightened around her. I’d had my suspicions but hadn’t followed up with an investigation yet. No matter what Oliver said, this sudden appearance when Chrissie’s vehicle had broken down had my intuition humming.

The window of the farm utility vehicle whirred down. “Chrissie! I thought that was your car.”

The bastard stared through me as if I was invisible.

“I’m fine,” Chrissie said, her voice as stiff as her body. “Thanks for stopping, but Jarrod is giving me a lift home. I’ll sort out my car tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I’ll look,” he said in a smooth voice that prickled the hairs at my nape.

The bastard. It was something about his manner that suggested this situation wasn’t a coincidence, and it was lucky I’d reached Chrissie as soon as I had.

“Thank you for the offer,” Chrissie said. “But I’m tired. I’m going home and will deal with everything tomorrow. Goodnight, Oliver.” And she turned away from the conniving bastard in a firm dismissal.

I hid my satisfaction. “Chrissie, do you have everything?”

“Yeah.” She yawned hugely. “Sorry. I’m about asleep on my feet. It was a busy night. Sale day always is, and we had a bachelorette party. Honestly, the amount some people drink is incredible.”

When Oliver didn’t leave, I escorted Chrissie to my vehicle and ignored the prickle at my back. The man was glaring daggers. Too bad.

When he finally accelerated away, it was with a screech of tires. Once I was sure he’d gone, I opened the driver’s door and peered in at Chrissie. “Is your car locked?”

“Cripes. The keys are still in the ignition.” She made to exit.

“Stay there. I’ll do it for you.”

With Chrissie’s car secured, we drove home. Chrissie must’ve been tired because she fell asleep, and I had to wake her once we arrived at her place.

“Come on, sleepyhead.”

Under my guidance, she stumbled from the vehicle. It was then I noticed the outside light was out again. It’d been working when I left. I cursed under my breath and swung Chrissie into my arms. I had the key in my pocket and unlocked the door with minimal fumbling. Once inside, I set down Chrissie and turned on the light. She stood there blinking at me, and I gently shunted her toward her bedroom.

“Crawl into bed.” I slapped her lightly on the butt to emphasize my suggestion. Once she’d shuffled away, I walked

outside to check that damn light again. Yep, as I'd suspected. Someone had unscrewed the bulb enough to stop it from working. I tightened the bulb, and illumination flooded the entrance.

When Connor dropped by tomorrow, we'd be discussing more than Chrissie's property. My friend had contacts, and we'd put a stop to Oliver, or whoever was trying to frighten Chrissie off this land.



# Chrissie

I WOKE IN JARROD'S arms again, having slept better than I had for weeks. With his eyes closed and relaxed in sleep, he appeared less warriorlike. He was lying on his side, facing me, his magnificent chest bare. A thought occurred, and I lifted the sheet to peer beneath. My breath caught, and I let the sheet drift back into place. When I glanced at him again, he was smiling.

That made me frown. "Jarrod, are you awake?"

The curve of his mouth increased, and I shoved at his shoulder, pushing him flat onto his back. Seconds later, I straddled him. "Now, who's laughing?" I demanded, my chest heaving at my exertion. After months of struggle and hefting around beer crates, I was no wilting daisy, but Jarrod was a solid man. I wriggled my hips against the spike digging into my butt.

The man groaned.

"That will teach you. How long have you been awake?"



“A while,” he confessed. “You’re so cute with those tiny snuffling noises you make.”

“I don’t snore.”

“Never said you did,” the wretch said, his grin widening. “You know, the way you’re rubbing against my dick, I might think you want another round of sex this morning.”

“Yes, please.” I slapped my hand over my mouth. Had I said that aloud?

Jarrood’s gaze widened, then his grin did the same, tiny crinkles fanning out from the corners of his eyes. “A woman who knows what she wants is sexy as hell.”

I gulped air, my breasts moving and attracting his closer attention. While he was naked, I still wore a T-shirt and a pair of panties. Reality slid over me, along with regret. “We don’t have condoms.”

“I picked up two boxes yesterday after you went to work.”

“An intelligent man who thinks for himself is pretty damn sexy,” I said.

We grinned in perfect charity. I reached for the hem of my shirt and whipped it over my head. Heat gathered in my cheeks since having a man study my breasts made me self-conscious. I rushed into speech. “I think it is only fair that I should explore you this morning.”

Jarrood lifted his left wrist. “Connor will be here at ten, and we need to check on your car.”

Okay. That might spike my plans. I grasped Jarrod's wrist and checked the time. "Right. Here's the plan. I get to suck you off, and we'll continue part two tonight."

"Works for me." He lifted me off him and kicked off the sheet, leaving his entire body bare to my gaze.

Wow. Sex on a stick. I practically drooled as I took my sweet time checking out his many muscles. His shaft was already erect, and aware that time was in short supply, I straddled his legs and then moved toward his feet to position myself. I curled my fingers around his shaft and caressed him with a quick pump before I lowered my head and took him into my mouth. His taste exploded over my tongue, and I hummed. His cock grew even harder and a bead of pre-cum formed. I swept it away and glanced up when Jarrod's fingers dug into my hair. His blue gaze connected with mine, and heat roared through me.

"God, Chrissie." His voice emerged deeper than usual with a rasp. "That feels amazing."

My head bobbed, and Jarrod shifted his hips, unable to hold still. I took him deeper, right to the back of my throat, and alternated between licking and sucking. His fingers tightened in my hair, tugging, and the tiny needles of pain sped downward, frisking my breasts. Reveling in his enjoyment, I used my lips, tongue, and hands to give him pleasure.

His hips jerked, and his muscles tensed. "Chrissie, I'm gonna come," he said, stark desire and need in the harsh words.

I doubled down on my effort, not bothered by him coming inside my mouth. This was about mutual pleasure. I selfishly took what I wanted and pleased myself.

I licked the delicate underside of his cockhead and sucked hard while giving him some hand action. His hips bowed upward, forcing him deeper. A rough growl vibrated in his chest, his dick swelled, and he was coming, spurting down my throat, his guttural groan of pleasure pleasing me as I swallowed. Once he reached completion, I cleaned him with careful licks and pulled back.

Jarrold held out his arms to me, and I fell forward into his embrace, savoring his masculine strength and the thud of his heart beneath my head. He rolled us and smiled down at me. His kiss was eager and sensual and had moisture pooling between my thighs, the sultry promise of an orgasm prickling, yet I wasn't in a hurry. I could wait.

It seemed Jarrod was of the same thought as me, and he trailed kisses down my neck and across my collarbone, slowly building the passion between us. The delicate brush of his fingers left a trail of goosebumps across my chest, and they turned to edgy heat when Jarrod drew my nipple into his mouth. He bit me, the streak of pain quickly turning to pleasure, but then I'd always enjoyed a hint of rough in my loving.

A mew escaped me, and Jarrod chuckled as he continued to stroke and kiss and caress. Even mundane touches took on new meaning. Every part of me sizzled as he built the

sensations, piece by piece. My legs stirred restlessly as his fingers coasted along my inner thigh. I lifted my hips in silent entreaty, but Jarrod shook his head.

“Not yet, angel. Touching you is no hardship, and I’m nearly ready to go again—inside you.”

I didn’t have an argument for that, so I let him touch me while I wandered my hands down his muscular back. Instead of teasing or kissing my sex, he moved up my body and pressed his lips to my mouth. Our tongues tangled in a slow kiss that ricocheted sensations down my torso. They centered in my pussy, and I groaned in protest.

“Impatient much?” he whispered in my ear.

Who knew ears were so sensitive? Everywhere he touched me burned.

“Jarrod, please.”

“What is it about you that is so addictive? From the moment I walked up your driveway and spotted you...” He trailed off and curiosity burned in me because I wanted him to finish that sentence.

I was reasonably sure Doug had never found me irresistible or compelling. Cripes! I shoved this thought from my brain. I’d wasted enough time on my husband, and after his death, I’d stepped forward confidently. Letting Doug drift into my mind now was not moving into the future.

Jarrod reached over me, and I realized he was after the box of condoms, despite our time constraints.

“Hurry,” I said.

Jarrold laughed, a light, carefree sound that had my lips curling. Lovemaking should be about fun and laughter. Enjoyment. While he donned the condom, I kissed every part of him I could reach.

After suiting up, Jarrod didn't waste any time. He parted my legs, notched his cock to my entrance, and pushed inside until he was balls deep. Once there, he paused and stared down at me.

“Okay?” he asked in a gruff voice.

The sense of fullness thrilled me, and I issued a contented sigh. “Yes, you could thrust now.”

“That, I can do.” And he did, withdrawing and surging back into me with hard strokes. With each drive, he twisted his hips, and I shuddered. I lifted my butt, trying to increase the stimulation. Jarrod captured my lips with his and slid inside me again. My entire body hummed in anticipation. I gripped his shoulders, and when he thrust again, I bucked and moaned beneath him. A shudder rippled through me as my channel clenched his shaft. His next surge pushed me past the point of no return, and I convulsed, the spasms sharp and spearing outward from my core.

Jarrold pulled back and pushed inside me, remaining embedded in my wet flesh. He groaned into my neck, collapsing momentarily and giving me his weight.

Before my need to breathe became desperate, he rolled to the side, turning me with him and clutching me against his chest.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” he whispered, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Seconded,” I said with a yawn.

“You’re still tired. Why don’t you nap while I make us breakfast?”

“I’ll get up.”

“Stay. You’re exhausted.”

I didn’t argue, and he returned with tea and toast half an hour later. “I should get out of bed.”

“Relax,” Jarrod insisted. “Eat your toast and drink your tea, then move. After Connor checks out the shed and the land, I’m all yours to help with jobs.”

“But what about your house?”

Jarrod sighed. “That’s on my list. I’ll ring the insurance agent before Connor arrives, and once the assessor has done his thing, I’ll start clearing the mess and making repairs.”

“When will you move back?” No! That wasn’t what I’d meant to say. I hated the idea of Jarrod moving out. I enjoyed his presence. He listened to my opinions and never belittled me. Of course, it was early days, but I’d known Jarrod for years. He wouldn’t play away behind my back or spread gossip. The man was loyal to his friends. “Just so we’re clear.

You don't believe in cheating? The reason I ask is I suspect my husband had another woman. I'm not positive, but my gut tells me something about our relationship was off."

Jarrold sat on the bed. "You're the only woman who interests me. I've always liked you, but I was slow at communication, and you married while I was overseas. Finding you single is my second chance, and I don't intend to blow it."

"Oh." The word popped out of my mouth in total understatement, while Jarrold's grin held pure masculine satisfaction.





# Jarrood

THE URGE TO WHISTLE struck me when I was halfway down the passage. I gave in without a fight, and a modern tune followed me into the kitchen. This tightness in my chest and the thumping of my heart was happiness. I'd told Chrissie what I wanted, and she hadn't objected.

With a grin on my face so wide my mouth hurt, I popped two slices of bread into the toaster and picked up the tea I'd poured for myself. It was lukewarm, but I didn't care. The sound of a vehicle outside had me glancing at my watch. Connor was early.

“Hey, angel! Do you want me and Connor to tow your car back before we do our tour?”

Chrissie appeared in the kitchen, dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a T-shirt that was too big for her. Unable to help myself, I walked to her and curled my arms around her waist. “You look adorable.”

“Thanks. Towing my vehicle would be an immense help. I have a grasp of basic mechanics, and I’d like to check over my car before I seek an expert opinion.”

“Look at you, Miss Efficient,” I said, admiration filling me. Most women I’d met—my mother included—would wail and perform and call in a mechanic. Chrissie wanted to see if she could fix the car herself. “No problem.”

A knock sounded at the door. Chrissie handed over her keys, and I wandered out to greet Connor and inform him of our change of plans.

It didn’t take us long to return with her car.

“Is that the land you mean for our crops?” Connor pointed at two flat paddocks near the house.

“Yeah, they’d be ideal, right?”

“Let’s do a soil test first, but the neighboring farms are growing crops. I’d assume the soil would be similar. Does Chrissie not need these paddocks?”

“Chrissie says it herself. She’s not a farmer, but her husband’s will means she has to keep farming the land for a few more years before she can sell it.”

Connor nodded. “Would she sell it to us?”

“If everything works out, and we can use her land meantime, there’s an excellent chance she’d accept an offer from us. We’ll write that into our legal agreement—we have the first option to make an offer for the land if she sells.”

“Perfect.”

I showed Connor into the shed before we walked up to the spring.

“You’re right,” Connor said, studying the paddocks, farmhouse, and shed farther down the hill. “This place is exactly what we want. I’ll arrange the soil and water tests, and we’ll go from there. Do you know what Chrissie might charge us?”

“No idea. I’ll talk to her.”

When we arrived back at the house, one glance at Chrissie told me she was livid.

“What’s wrong?” I watched Chrissie wipe dirty hands on her cloth and noticed her tight shoulders and strained expression.

“Someone has poked holes in my fuel line.”

Connor stepped forward. “Are you sure it’s not normal wear and tear?”

“I’m anal about car maintenance because I drive late at night. My vehicle has traveled from here to town and back, and that’s it. There were no petrol fumes, but the car wasn’t performing properly, and that’s when I noticed the empty fuel gauge. I filled up yesterday.”

After considering the number of pranks and odd occurrences Chrissie was dealing with, I suspected this was another. “Where do you leave your vehicle?”

“In the staff car park behind the pub.”

Connor’s eyes narrowed. “Someone could’ve done this before you left for home.”

“Yeah, and isn’t it strange Oliver happened along once my car died?”

I had thought Oliver’s appearance unusual, especially that late at night. “He’s your neighbor, but do you see Oliver often?”

“He hunts. I see him occasionally after dark.”

“Are you seeing him more than usual?” Connor asked, his blue eyes narrowed as he considered the facts.

Chrissie wrinkled her nose. “He used to drop around most days. Lately, he has made me uneasy, especially when he offered a massage.”

“A massage?” Connor’s dark brows arched.

I snorted. “Yeah. He told Chrissie she looked stressed, and he could help with that. I arrived to overhear his pickup line.”

“It was perfect timing,” Chrissie said.

Connor barked out a laugh. “Jarrod has always had excellent timing.”

I smiled at my friend and my lady, even as I acknowledged my skill had truly benefited me this time. Chrissie was free, and I’d turned up in time to help her. The spark I’d always carried for her had never died, and now that I’d found myself in her life, my feelings burned brighter than they ever had.

Chrissie made me damn happy, and I wasn't about to let anyone snatch this away from me. No. I intended to woo Chrissie and return the sentiment.

She was my future.



### *CHRISSIE*

“Thank you so much!” The instant Jarrod, Connor, and I exited the lawyers’ office and reached the sidewalk, I whirled to Jarrod and hugged him hard. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

Today, we’d signed an agreement, using a friend of Connor’s for the legal paperwork. We’d agreed on a price for the lease of my land and the use of my shed. It was reasonably straightforward, and I now had money in my account. I could pay the rates and my other outstanding bills.

“I had a feeling Oliver was lying about the boundary fence. A surveyor drew up the boundary lines when his father split the farm, and since it happened so recently, I couldn’t understand why or how the fence wasn’t in the right place,” Jarrod said.

“He *was* playing you.” Connor radiated disapproval with a black scowl. He’d tied his black hair into a stubby tail at his nape, and his blue eyes flashed with ire on my behalf. “Trying to take advantage of your situation. What happens if you decide you want to move on elsewhere?”

“I’ll lose everything. If either Doug or Oliver wanted to sell before five years of ownership, they had to give their brother the first option to purchase.”

“Oliver is attempting to scare you away,” Connor said.

“Or court you to get his grabby hands on your land,” Jarrod said.

“*Ew!* I would never. Oliver is...*was* my brother-in-law. I never thought of him as anything but Doug’s brother.”

“Do you know the land value?” Connor asked.

I shrugged as we reached Jarrod’s vehicle. “No idea.”

“You inherited the farm from your husband,” Connor said. “Was there any pushback from the family?”

I frowned, thinking back. “Oliver and his mother consulted a lawyer, but he told them I was Doug’s wife and Doug’s will left everything to me. They couldn’t grab the land back. As long as I stuck to the rules set out by their father, I could fulfill the conditions. The agreement didn’t specify a blood descendant. I think they argued, but the lawyer told them a court would follow the wishes of Doug’s will, especially since I worked on the farm at his side. They tried to say I had no input into the farm, which wasn’t true. That experience has stood me in good stead since I’ve been on my own.”

“Poking around might be interesting.” Connor glanced at Jarrod. “What do you think?”

Jarrod winked. “You read my mind.”

“When will you start work on planting your crops? Have you decided what you’re going to plant?” I asked. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“You could put your cattle in there to eat down the paddocks,” Connor said. “I’ve arranged for a friend to plow the fields on Tuesday. I’m going to order our equipment tonight. We’ve decided on barley and will make our whisky in the Scottish style. Later, we might branch into wheat. We can go into experimental production with the gin straightaway.”

Enthusiasm filled him, the same excitement I saw in Jarrod. “Let me know if I can help. It will be fantastic to see the farm productive again.”

“Have you made a plan for what you’ll do?” Connor asked.

“I’ve always been interested in alpacas. When I had time, I used to spin my wool and design garments. I thought I might branch out in a direction that excited me.” Wow, I’d said it aloud, so it must be true.

Neither man gave me odd looks or accused me of idiocy. Doug had done that when I’d first asked about purchasing alpacas.

Jarrod cocked his head. “Don’t they do better in the mountains?”

“They’re native to Peru, so my hill paddocks will work well. I could feed a few calves each year for income while building my alpaca herd.”

Jarrood leaned into me and kissed the top of my head. “That sounds like a fantastic plan. We’re all going to be busy.”

My grin widened, and hope surged through me for the first time in months—heck, since Doug had died.





# Chrissie

THE FOLLOWING WEEKS FLEW by, and Jarrod and I fell into a routine. The former tractor shed was now pristine with a copper-colored still for whisky and equipment for gin-making, which comprised lots of silver pipes and other mysterious shapes.

I'd decided to sell my entire herd of cattle, and we planned to visit an alpaca breeder with the object of purchasing two to begin. In between, we'd started to clean and make repairs at Jarrod's house. I'd also cut down on my shifts at the pub, and I felt better with more sleep.

Meanwhile, Connor was busy plowing the fields while Jarrod was driving a machine that planted the barley. He'd become my partner, in bed and out. I'd met Connor's wife, Milly, and we'd hit it off. I was happy. Contentment and Jarrod's presence had improved my life immensely.

I was busy clearing the shed Doug and I had used for calf feeding. When I purchased calves, I wanted everything ready. I'd decided six was enough to cope with since it meant feeding

them twice daily. The outbuilding led into a flat and sunny paddock. It also had a hedge along one side to shelter the stock on windy or rainy days and a lean-to for the animals.

“There you are,” a strident male voice snapped from behind me.

I stiffened and turned without haste. “Oliver.”

“What the devil are you doing to the land? You’ve dug up the front paddocks.” His face blushed red with temper, and I stepped back, uneasiness assailing me.

“I leased it out. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I wanted that land for grazing,” Oliver thundered.

“Then why didn’t you approach me and ask?” The law was on my side. If I farmed the land, Oliver couldn’t take legal action.

“Stop them!”

I lifted my chin. “This is my land.”

“It should’ve reverted to family when Doug died. That’s what Dad intended.”

I eyed Oliver’s balled fists. “You’d kick me out of my home after the back-breaking work I’ve put into this land. Who ran the farm when Doug went hunting and on boys’ trips?”

Oliver released a derisive snort.

I squared my shoulders, my hands fisting now. “What does that mean?”

“Doug and I didn’t go on any trips together. Your husband had a woman and a child in Hamilton. He used to visit them. He told me he’d intended to divorce you and move them in here.”

“What?” I stared, shock a hard punch in my chest. I wheezed my next breath. “What are you talking about?”

“My darling brother was a bigamist, and you never clicked. So here are the facts, Chrissie. My brother intended to kick you to the curb. He didn’t want you, and he didn’t want you to inherit this land. It was a mistake and shouldn’t have happened.”

“You should’ve mentioned this at the will reading.”

“My parents didn’t know. They loved Doug, and I hated to burst his halo.”

“What about the other woman? Does she know about me?”

“Doug took care of her. He had an investment my grandparents left him, and she had access to that.”

“And the boy is Doug’s son?”

“The spitting image,” Oliver said, his smile nasty.

“Why are you here?”

“You’re going to sign over your land to me.”

“Or what?” My pulse raced, my mind more sluggish than usual. I didn’t understand. How could Doug have done this? Anger for myself and the other woman had me clenching my

teeth while a vein pulsed at my temple. Neither of us deserved this shabby treatment.

“If you don’t, I’ll make your life difficult. Rumors will spread around Clare about what a bitch you were to Doug and how you drove him from your marriage, constantly berating him and resorting to physical violence.”

“That’s not true.”

“If I say it enough times, it will be real,” he said confidently.

“Your parents won’t believe you.”

“They will,” he said. “Once they see the boy, they’ll believe everything I tell them. We’ll take legal action and force you off the land. You’ll wish you’d left at the start.”

His tone had me leaping to conclusions. Surely farfetched ones? The cunning in his expression had my breath hissing between my teeth. “You’ve been causing the trouble around here. You’ve been trying to scare me.”

Oliver’s smirk told me I was on the right track.

“Leave! Don’t let me see you here again, or I’ll be taking out a trespass order against you.”

“Do your worst. You won’t win.” Oliver’s laugh was nasty as he strode to the door.

He disappeared. I waited before shuffling to the doorway to check he’d left. When I couldn’t see him, I returned to the broom I’d discarded on Oliver’s arrival. I should’ve used it to

knock him over the head, then he would've had something truthful to report.

My mind spun as I attempted to make sense of everything he'd told me. Doug had attended farm sales, searching for farming equipment such as the calf feeder I'd cleaned earlier this morning. He'd loved to hunt and had gone duck shooting or deerstalking during the relevant seasons, leaving me to run things at the farm.

Thinking back, I tried to pinpoint when our marriage had drifted and gone wrong. Money had been short, and during one argument, I'd told Doug he needed to work at home instead of spending money like water. He hadn't listened and had left for a month. I was too numb to cry, but I wondered if I was to blame or, if I'd done something different, my marriage might've survived. Then there was the other woman. If she hadn't known about me, Doug's behavior toward her had been abominable.

A grandchild.

Doug's parents had never liked me, considering me unworthy of their son. We'd visited weekly, and I'd sucked up the tiny barbs his mother aimed at me. Some had been about children or the lack thereof. How would she react when she learned she had a grandchild?

The more I thought about the hardship I'd faced and the work I'd put into this land, the higher my anger flared. I cleaned the shed interior in double-quick time and stomped back to the house.

Jarrold and Connor had finished in the field, and Connor drove off at speed as I arrived at the house.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Milly’s in labor. Connor is nervous as hell. Milly told him she didn’t need to go to the hospital yet, but Connor headed home, anyway.”

“That’s great. Milly was tired of not seeing her feet. I had a visitor.” I poured out Oliver’s story.

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“Why would he lie? He has admitted he’s trying to scare me off. He was adamant the land belongs in his family, and I shouldn’t have it.”

“The lawyer says otherwise.”

“That won’t stop him trying to blacken my name around Clare.”





# Jarrood

“DO YOU HAVE A plan?” I asked.

“Yes. Let’s have a cup of tea.”

I followed Chrissie into the kitchen, mesmerized by her curvy backside beneath her faded jeans. Satisfaction pulsed in me. This was my woman. *Mine*, and I’d never been happier.

“You sit,” I said. “I’ll make tea.”

“I’ll do sandwiches. My stomach is complaining about the time since breakfast, and we’ve been working hard.” She pulled out sandwich fillings as she spoke. “Ham and mustard okay with you?”

“Sounds good.” I filled the kettle and measured the tea leaves, enjoying the domestic tasks more than I’d ever thought. It was this woman. “You know I want to marry you, right?”

She turned to face me, her beaming expression telling me everything. “I’ve been married before, but I’ve experienced

more joy with you than I ever did with Doug. You're a good man, Jarrod Whiting, and even better, you make me happy."

"Angel." I made a mental note to purchase a ring at the first opportunity because I'd hate her to have second thoughts. We military men—Connor and I—knew our minds when we met a woman who completed us. No hesitation once we found our one.

"As for Oliver and Doug," Chrissie continued. "Now that he's more or less confessed, I can go straight to the cops if he causes further mischief to the farm or me. I'm inclined to leave him to his devices unless he tries messing with me again." She frowned. "Doug's other woman—that's another story. Oliver indicated she wasn't aware of me. Even if Doug has left her money, if she has a son, she's probably struggling. Doug didn't leave me with much cash. Now I have an inkling of what happened to our reserves."

"You're not thinking of meeting with the woman and her kid?"

"Yes, I am." Her chin lifted. "If she knows nothing about me, I wonder what else Doug didn't tell her. Does she know Doug's parents and brother live in Clare? Doug's parents were very vocal about grandchildren. It used to irk me, but they'd dote on a grandchild. They deserve to know."

"You're going to tell them."

"Maybe. It depends on the woman."

"How are you going to find her?"

“I haven’t searched Doug’s old business papers—just the farm stuff. I should clear away all of Doug’s things, anyway. Maybe keep a few mementos for his child—if he truly has a son and Oliver isn’t trying to play me.”

“Do you want help?”

“As much as you can give me. I haven’t even cleared out Doug’s clothes, which are all in the spare bedroom. Now that you’re living here, you’ll want more space.”

“I love you, Chrissie,” I blurted.

Once again, instead of my declaration throwing her, she beamed. “Jarrod, you’re amazing, and I’m so happy to have you in my life. I kinda thought you got that when I agreed to marry you.” She sent a cheeky wink in my direction.

I poured two mugs of tea and shunted one toward Chrissie. “Are you positive you want to locate the mystery woman? It might buy trouble.”

“The truth is important and has a side benefit of scooping Oliver. He’s expecting me to hide and lick my wounds. That might’ve been what I did before, but you’ve bolstered my courage. Doug’s parents would love a grandchild. They’re not bad people, and I suspect Oliver might’ve told tales about me. He wants my land.” She snorted. “He had the cheek to order me to stop you and Connor from plowing the paddocks because he wanted them for grazing. He has been trying to intimidate me, hoping to scoop up my land. That, and trying his version of romancing on me. He would’ve gone with whichever method worked best.”

It took us two days before we started clearing Doug's clothes and possessions from the house. Chrissie boxed up the clothes to take to the local charity shop.

"Check the pockets," I said. "Guys shove things in their pockets."

Her expression brightened because we'd found nothing of interest in Doug's papers or the drawers. Chrissie tipped the first box upside down and searched each trouser and jacket pocket before refolding and replacing the garments in the box.

About halfway through her search, she issued a cry of satisfaction. "I've found something."

I stopped my search and sat back on my heels as she unfolded a paper.

"It's an invoice. I can't believe I almost missed this."

"What's it for? Address?" I fired the questions at her.

"It's a Hamilton address—an invoice for a stove repair. I'll keep searching pockets. I wonder where Doug's bag is—the one he used to take on his trips. It was an old backpack. I bought us two suitcases, but he clung to that pack. It's black with a little neon yellow trim. It might be in the wardrobe or spare room."

"I'll look."

I discovered the pack under the spare bed, tucked right in the corner, although I didn't see it straightaway because it blended with the shadows.

“Found it,” I told Chrissie when I reentered her bedroom.

“Is it empty?”

“Doesn’t feel empty.”

“You search through while I finish this. I’ve got nothing.”

The bag contained several shirts and boxers. I removed them. In a concealed pocket, I came across a manila folder. Several photos dropped out as I lifted it free. I picked them up and stilled on seeing Doug with his arm around a woman. She held a toddler in her arms as they grinned into the camera. “Chrissie.”

She placed the last item of clothing in her box and stood, crossing the room to join me. “Oh,” she said on spotting the photos. “Doug looks happy.”

“Yeah.” I opened the folder to discover more photos and several papers. It wasn’t Doug’s name, but someone called Chase Morrison.

Chrissie read them over my shoulder. “Well, it seems Oliver was telling the truth. I want to talk to her.”



# Chrissie

THE HOUSE SAT ON the outskirts of Hamilton—not new, but a well-maintained, single-level wooden home. A dark-haired child played in the front yard, and a curvy blonde woman worked in the garden nearby, a pile of weeds beside her. Despite the warmth of the day, a chill rippled through me.

I wasn't sure what I'd say, but I wasn't angry at her. No, I reserved that for Doug. My mind might change depending on what I learned during this visit.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Jarrod asked.

“Yes.” I climbed out of Jarrod's SUV and walked to the driveway. The instant I stepped foot on the lawn to walk toward the woman, the boy ran toward me. I froze and swallowed hard because he resembled Doug with his black hair and brown eyes. I had no doubt this was Doug's child. The woman looked up, a polite smile curving her lips when she spotted Jarrod and me.

“Can I help you?” she asked, standing.

She wasn't as tall as me but bore a distinctive hourglass figure with the curves that Doug had disliked on me. A pang of hurt reverberated through me, and I shoved it away, reaching for Jarrod's hand. He squeezed it lightly, and immediately, I felt stronger, a better version of myself.

I cleared my throat. "I wondered if you had a few minutes. Could we talk inside? I want to speak to you about your husband."

Her brows drew together. "Chase? I don't understand. He left. I haven't heard from him since. He kissed my son and me and left, saying he'd be back after his business trip. He was often away." Her confusion and pain were apparent.

This was so unfair. Oliver had known about her, but he'd done nothing because she might've had a claim on the land. My brother-in-law wanted to get his grabby hands on every hectare.

I met her gaze. "I have news about him. We're not here to do anything except talk. Please, it's important."

She glanced at her son and nodded. "Come inside. I'll make tea. Liam, it's time for a snack." She held out her hand, and the boy ran over to her and clasped her fingers.

Jarrold and I followed her and Liam into the house. It wasn't anything flashy, but it was scrupulously tidy. She led us to a spacious, sunny kitchen with views over stunning gardens. Each flower bed glowed with shades of pink and red and splashes of yellow.



“Someone has a green thumb,” I said.

“Me,” she said with a smile. “I love gardening.”

“I’m Jarrod Whiting. This is my fiancée, Chrissie Anders.”

“Victoria Morrison. Can I make tea?”

“Yes, please.” Anything to delay ruining this woman’s day. Although since she thought Doug had left her, she’d already gone through a major heartbreak. Jarrod and I had checked the marriage register and found details for Doug’s second marriage. He must’ve acquired fake papers somehow, but neither Jarrod nor I had discovered them during our search.

We waited while Victoria settled her son with a plastic cup of milk and a banana chopped into pieces. She made a pot of tea and pulled a plastic baking container from the cupboard. Once we were all seated at the table, with our tea and slices of date loaf in front of us, she sent me an expectant glance. I hesitated, unsure where to start. My panic must’ve shown since Jarrod offered me an encouraging nod. I sucked in a steadying breath. After exhaling, I turned to face Victoria.

“This is difficult,” I said. “I was married to a man called Doug Anders. We lived in Clare and farmed land owned by Doug’s family.”

Victoria frowned. “Why are you telling me?”

“Recently, Jarrod and I discovered Doug had another wife.”

“But my husband’s name was Chase. Chase Morrison.”

“I know.” Sympathy tightened my chest. He’d hurt me too, but I’d had longer to process the truth. This would be a shock, no matter how much tact I used. I picked up my handbag and dug for the photos I’d brought at Jarrod’s suggestion. “Doug died in a tractor accident nine months ago.” I pushed the pictures toward her and watched her world break apart.

Jarrold and I stayed for two hours, and we told Victoria everything we’d learned and how we’d gone to school together.

“Will you be all right?” I asked as we stood to leave.

“I... Thank you for coming to tell me. This can’t have been easy for you, either.”

“Learning the truth has explained questions I had. One more thing—Doug’s parents. They’d love to meet Liam since he is their only grandchild. They don’t know about him, but this is their phone number. I think they’d be welcoming, but I’ll let you decide. You have my phone number if you have more questions.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said.

I followed Jarrod out of the house. After Doug’s death, I’d wondered about our marriage and what might’ve happened. From what Victoria had told us, they’d been happy together, although his frequent business trips had meant he was often away. He’d doted on his son and had been a decent husband. Thinking about it now, I had sympathy for Victoria. It was Doug who deserved my anger. *Our anger*. It had been

challenging to read Victoria, but I'd liked her, and she was clearly a wonderful mother.

Jarrood and I didn't speak until we were in the vehicle.

"She was nice," I said. "I liked her."

"I did too," Jarrood agreed. "Do you think she'll come to Clare?"

"I don't know. Victoria didn't give away much. She turned very pale when I gave her the pile of photos and my marriage certificate."

"Doug always was an arrogant arse. What the hell was he thinking?" Jarrood muttered.

I leaned over and placed my hand on his arm. "It's all right. Doug and I had grown apart. He was away more often than not. If he'd lived, I doubt our marriage would've lasted."

He sent me a sideways glance. "I love you, Chrissie. I've wanted you ever since I became interested in girls, and that has never changed. While overseas, I thought of you often. I care for you deeply and would never, ever cheat on you. Eventually, I intend to marry you and hopefully we'll have children. I love you, and we will have a wonderful life together."

I smiled at him, sure of my answer. "Yes," I said. "All of that."



# Chrissie

## Six months later

THE SUN SHONE AND glistened on the ocean waves. Overhead, a seagull wheeled through the blue sky, and behind me, a baby fussed. I turned away from the window to smile at Milly. She'd styled her long brown hair in a casual updo, highlighting the scars on her cheek, but her sparkling brown eyes and happiness lent prettiness to her face.

"Is Sam all right?" I asked.

"I think he's starting to teeth. He's showing all the signs," Milly said. "You look stunning."

"I feel beautiful," I said, glancing down at my simple white gown. "This marriage is right. From the moment Jarrod informed Oliver to stop flirting with his girl, my life changed."

"Sometimes, the heart knows what's best for us before we do," Milly said. "Popular opinion says instant attraction doesn't lead to a strong marriage. They're wrong. Connor and I are testaments, and it's easy to see the love between you and Jarrod."

“It helps that we knew each other at school. We were friends before, even though I’m two years younger.” I brushed my finger over the engagement ring on my left hand. The sapphires and diamonds sparkled in the sunlight, and everything in me pulled tight. Excitement. A hint of anxiety. Anticipation.

Jarrold and I were flying to Rarotonga for a week-long break tomorrow. Connor had promised to monitor my alpacas and the farm. He was always here and mentioned it was no hardship playing farmer. His broad grin when he’d told me his parents would never recognize him still made me chuckle.

“Are you ready?” Milly asked.

“Yeah, any last words of advice?”

Surprise blanketed Milly’s face before she winked at me. Given her scars, she received lots of rude comments, and people who didn’t know her whispered behind her back. While I’d blinked the first time I’d met her, her scar didn’t define her. She was the best friend I’d ever had, and I no longer saw her ruined cheek when I glanced her way. I saw my huge-hearted friend and looked forward to our time together.

Milly tapped her chin. “Have loud, noisy sex in different rooms before the children arrive, never go to bed on an argument, and find common interests plus do activities you enjoy alone. Although your man will become the center of your world, keep your friends close. Nurture them because friendship is priceless.”

I gaped at her. “Wow.”

She giggled. “Come on. They sent me to get you.” She handed over the daisy bouquet she’d made for me. “We don’t want Jarrod to think you’ve changed your mind.”

“Never,” I said. “I can’t wait to step into the future with Jarrod at my side.”

“Connor told me Oliver is keeping away.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen him for weeks, but if he hassles me again, I’ll go straight to his parents.”

“What about Doug’s second wife? Have you heard from her?”

“I have, actually. Victoria called me last night. She hasn’t decided if she wants to meet Doug’s parents yet. She had a few questions she wanted to ask me first.”

“You said you liked her, right?”

“I did. A grandchild will excite Doug’s parents.”

“They won’t try to get custody or something stupid like that?” Milly asked.

I halted inside the doorway, considering this. “Perhaps a concern, and maybe Victoria has considered this. No! No, they wouldn’t separate mother and son. Liam is a healthy and happy little boy. It’s clear Victoria dotes on him.”

“But you told me Doug’s parents blamed you for his death. They thought he might’ve survived if you’d been at home.”

Yeah, that was true. I hadn’t had contact with them since, although I’d caught fleeting glances of them when I’d been in

town. “It’s hard to guess their reaction, but I know they’d love that child.” I shrugged. “Enough. I wanna get married.”

“Let’s do this,” Milly said.

On bare feet, I followed her toward the spot we’d picked to say our vows. Following her exit, the chatter from outside decreased, and the strains of a guitar drifted on the air. Satisfaction filled me as my gaze connected with Jarrod’s. This was precisely what I’d wanted and didn’t get when I’d married Doug.

I smiled and let every one of my emotions release. I’m confident they showed in my expression because Jarrod’s face softened, and his lips bloomed with a slow, sexy smile.

When I reached his side, I handed my bouquet to Milly and stood on tiptoes to press a kiss to my man’s lips. A ripple of laughter flowed from our guests, and when I stepped back, I noticed the marriage celebrant’s eyes were full of sparkling humor.

“Can I start now?” he asked in his deep voice.

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I offered him a quick nod.

“Dearly beloved,” he began. “We’re here today to celebrate the joining of Jarrod and Chrissie.”

Jarrood squeezed my hand, and tears of happiness stung the backs of my eyes. I was so certain of this man with his quiet strength and humor. So sure that this was the perfect step toward happiness.



We spoke our vows, and my voice trembled a little, but it was with emotion and deep love that I accepted Jarrod as my wedded husband.

“With the power vested in me, I pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss your bride.”

Cheers rang out as Jarrod’s firm lips pressed against mine. Finally, we thanked the celebrant and grinned at our guests—all friends who’d joined us, plus Jarrod’s parents. My mother couldn’t make it, but we’d catch up later.

“Drinks are on the porch,” Jarrod called.

With a cheer, guests left for drinks while others lingered to chat and enjoy the sunshine. Jarrod pulled away.

“My phone,” he said when I looked askance at him. “I had it on vibrate, but there was no danger of me answering it during the ceremony.” He tapped a button. “Hey man, are you okay?” He listened for long seconds. Frowned. “You’re sure he won’t be dangerous to anyone here?”

I watched with curiosity.

Jarrod heaved out a breath. “Wait for five. I’ll check with the captain.” He strode over to Connor and drew him over to a private spot. They whispered together for several minutes before Jarrod rejoined me. “Yeah, we’ll give him a chance. I have a house. It’s next door to my wife’s property.” He paused a beat and grinned widely.

“Yeah, man. Just got married today. Yep, she’s the one. Yeah, I’m happy. You’ll meet her when you get home.

Connor's wife, too. Back to this guy, Connor and I have started our whisky and gin production business. We can give him a job. It won't be a huge wage, but he'll have free board at my old place as long as he mows the lawns and keeps the house tidy. Tell your cousin this is his one chance. If he screws up, he won't get another."

The other man must've spoken.

"Yeah," Jarrod said. "We all deserve a chance in life. When will he arrive? The plane touches down next week? Right. Give him directions to Clare and my number. Tell him to touch base, and Connor and I will get him set up." Jarrod listened again. "We're still a team, man, even though an ocean separates us. I'll let you know how he gets on. Take care, eh? Avoid bullets and contact Connor or me as soon as you arrive home. We'll buy you a beer." Jarrod's quick grin flashed again. "Thanks. We're off on our honeymoon tomorrow. Sun. Sea. Big bed." Jarrod winked at me. "Yep. Catch ya later." He hung up.

"Another friend coming home?" I asked.

"His cousin. He's a 501, and the Aussie government is deporting him."

I bit back a gasp. "And he's coming here? Is he dangerous?" The 501s were men and women who'd gone through the Australian justice system. Although they lived and, in many cases, had resided in Australia since early childhood, they still held New Zealand passports. When they arrived in New Zealand, they often had no family or support base.

“My friend assures me he’s not dangerous, but since he’s arriving next week, Connor will deal with him.”

I nodded, still frowning. “Should we worry?”

Jarrold met my direct gaze. “He’s our friend’s cousin. Ben saved my life, and I trust him. He’s my brother, even though we lack blood ties. I couldn’t say no to helping Ben’s cousin.”

“Connor agreed?”

“Yeah.”

I looped my hand through Jarrold’s arm and smiled up at him. I trusted him. Connor, too, so we’d see what happened with this new arrival in town. “Let’s worry about that later. It’s time to celebrate.”

Jarrold lifted me and swung me around. He kissed me, and our friends cheered. Effortlessly, Jarrold carried me toward the table, where a bottle of champagne sat chilling. He set me on my feet, holding me close. “I love you, Mrs. Whiting.”

“Right back at you,” I said, accepting a glass of champagne. Our gazes met in a moment of intimacy.

This was the future I’d dreamed of, and I couldn’t wait to stride forward with my sexy husband at my side.



WHO IS THIS EX-CON arriving in Clare, and will he bring trouble with him? To learn more about Niko, read **Badge of Redemption**, the next romance in the **Clare Instalove series**.

[One-click BADGE OF REDEMPTION now](#)



# About India

An incurable romantic and a lover of reading—romance, of course—it was inevitable India Lord turned to writing next. India writes sassy, steamy romances with strong alpha heroes, curvy heroines who are no pushovers, and a happy ending. A must, in India's opinion.

When India isn't writing, she loves to walk and explore the countryside. She's also a dedicated researcher of cheese scones—her favorite treat to eat with a cup of tea.

Keep in touch by joining [India's newsletter](#)

Visit India's [Facebook page](#)

Follow India at [Bookbub](#)

# Also By India

**CLARE INSTALOVE**

Badge of Honor

Badge of Tenacity

*Coming Soon*

Badge of Redemption

Badge of Confidence