



Emma Bennet

The
Green
Hills of
Home



THE GREEN HILLS OF HOME

A heartwarming, feel-good romance to fall in love with

EMMA BENNET



OceanofPDF.com

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Chapter One

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Gwen did a little jump of joy as she exited the doors of Black Horse Publishing's imposing Georgian building. She could have squealed with happiness but had to be content with hugging herself tightly and grinning slightly manically. She just couldn't believe that she, Gwen Jones, had secured herself a three-book deal with one of the best-known publishing houses in the country, and that they'd been so sympathetic about the situation with her mother. She almost didn't trust her own fantastic luck. But then, of course, it wasn't all luck; Gwen had worked incredibly hard to get to this point.

For once in her life Gwen cursed the fact that she didn't own a mobile as she searched for coins to use in a payphone. She simply had to spread the good news. She really wanted to speak to her mother but she was usually napping at this time. She couldn't call her best friend Sarah either, she'd be out picking her children up from nursery, so the next obvious choice was her cousin Sian, whose flat she was staying in while she was in London.

Gwen ended up having to fish through her entire bag before she found some change and the crumpled slip of paper on which she'd scribbled Sian's mobile number as she'd left the flat that morning.

Gwen didn't notice how many appreciative glances her slim figure received as she crouched down. While she could never be described as classically beautiful, Gwen was certainly extremely pretty with a wholesome charm. To the office workers going home after a long day stuck behind their desks she was like a breath of fresh mountain air amongst the city smog.

Gwen's long light brown hair shone as she bent down to search through her belongings. Her dark eyes danced with happiness. The fitted shirt and A-line skirt, bought that morning especially for the meeting, plus her knee-high boots, gave a good idea as to the toned body underneath. The shirt showed just a hint of cleavage as she leaned over.

When Sian didn't answer her phone Gwen felt her feeling of elation come down a notch, but quickly ordered herself to stop being so silly; she'd be seeing Sian at the flat in only half an hour, and she would call her mother to tell her the news before supper.

As Gwen resumed her journey back to the apartment she became worried about losing her way and found herself frequently checking her whereabouts in the ancient, rather battered A to Z Sian had lent her. The London streets were certainly very different from Gwen's home in Wales.

Gwen felt a little nervous walking around the busy city with so many people pushing past, all of them in such a hurry, and she thought back to leaving her home the day before. She'd sighed deeply when locking the door of the farmhouse that had been her family's home for many generations, and allowed herself one quick glance at the beautiful hills surrounding the house, hills which were as familiar and as dear as childhood friends. Gwen had been anxious about travelling to London; she'd never been to the city before and didn't like

leaving her mother with no one to visit her, but when she'd explained that a well-known publisher was interested in her manuscript, her mother had insisted that Gwen go: "I would never forgive myself if you let such a wonderful opportunity slip through your fingers," she'd added.

She began to recognise landmarks and grew more confident that she was going in the right direction. Gwen relaxed a little and took her time strolling back to the flat, revelling in her joy and replaying the meeting over and over in her head. She smiled to herself, remembering the first books she'd 'written' and presented to her mother and father when she was just six or seven. The only blot on her happiness was that her father hadn't lived long enough to see her first novel published. Her mother would be thrilled though, and more important than any prestige that might come from being an author was the help the money would be in dealing with her and her mother's very pressing financial problems.

These money worries were the reason Gwen had been working practically non-stop for the last three months to get her manuscript ready to send out to publishers. It had been the only thing she could think of to raise enough money to buy her precious family home. Gwen had been as devastated as her mother when they discovered their landlord's plan to sell the farmhouse, and all Gwen's efforts had been put into finding a way to save it.

Gwen became so carried away in her thoughts that she almost walked straight into a very harassed-looking woman pushing a pram. She stepped out of the woman's way only to crash into something else — the solid bulk of a perfectly proportioned man. Gwen dropped her bag in the collision, and stooping down to retrieve it, she heard the stranger sigh in exasperation as he did the same.

Gwen looked up and locked eyes with the man. She was so taken aback by the intensity of his gaze that it took her a moment to gather her wits enough to mumble, "So sorry."

“It’s fine,” replied the man as he passed her the purse that had fallen out of her bag.

Gwen took the opportunity to examine him further: he was tall, certainly over six foot, with a strong physical presence projecting an aura of masculinity. He was wearing a suit, but his jacket was open, and Gwen could tell that underneath his shirt was a body honed by exercise. She took in his dark hair and was drawn back down to his chocolate-brown eyes, the sort that Gwen could easily lose herself in, given half a chance.

He, too, seemed to be evaluating her with some appreciation. Returning to the moment with a start, Gwen felt a little embarrassed by her brazen scrutiny of the stranger, but also flattered by his reciprocal appraisal.

Gwen smiled at him shyly but, as suddenly as it had formed, the spell broke. He stood up and straightened his tie self-consciously before moving past her with a nod and taking off at a brisk march.

“They certainly don’t make them like that back home,” murmured Gwen regretfully to herself as she checked that everything was safely back in her bag. She felt a little foolish for being disappointed by his swift exit and for her misreading of his interest.

Gwen was so caught up in her thoughts that she almost missed the entrance to her cousin’s building.

She let herself into Sian’s simple but carefully decorated home and decided to make herself a cup of tea before trying to get some work done. She heaved the battered old laptop onto the coffee table in the sitting room and switched it on while she hunted in the kitchen cupboards for a biscuit or two to go with her tea. She didn’t hurry; she knew the computer would take a while to start up. Her father had bought the laptop for her several years ago; it had been second-hand then and was so heavy that she could never rest it on her lap for long. It also had a tendency to heat up rather suddenly and therefore needed a ten-minute ‘rest’ every hour or so. But Gwen, the

eternal optimist, always claimed the heat kept her hands warm in winter and the break it required gave her a chance to get a cup of tea.

* * *

Sian got back to the flat only a quarter of an hour later, just as Gwen was settling herself down to work. She demanded to know how the meeting had gone before she'd even closed the door. Sian, who could become over-excited at the tiniest thing, was almost beside herself when Gwen told her about the book deal. She bounced around with delight.

“We must go out to celebrate,” she declared. “Go and get changed. I know a brilliant place; a friend of mine is a bouncer there.”

“Oh, I’m not sure,” Gwen replied. “I’ll have to be up early to meet my editor tomorrow, and I really need to call Mam, she’ll be dying to know what happened.”

“Don’t be such a bore! Look, you needn’t worry, I’ve got an audition for a commercial tomorrow morning so we won’t be out late. How you care for Aunty Edith is absolutely amazing and all that, but you really must let your hair down sometimes! You can borrow something of mine to wear and give your mam a quick call before we go.”

Gwen didn’t put up much more resistance; her more frivolous side had in fact been bursting to celebrate since she’d left the publishers, and as a guest she felt obliged to listen to Sian.

She’d put so much pressure on herself to succeed as a writer, not selfishly, but for the house and her mother. It would do her good to relax.

Sian hunted through her wardrobe for something for Gwen to wear. The cousins were the same dress size even though they looked very different: Sian was several inches shorter than Gwen, and her hair was dyed platinum blonde.

“You must recommend me for the lead if your book becomes a huge success and some Hollywood director makes

a film of it! I'd be absolutely perfect," called Sian from the depths of her wardrobe. Gwen smiled wryly. Sian was Sian: her cousin would always have an ulterior motive for any compliment or favour, but Gwen knew she meant well, deep down. Though, in this case, if Sian had even read Gwen's book, her support might have appeared a little more genuine.

Sian finally presented Gwen with a very pretty, if rather short, black dress. As Gwen's feet were larger than her cousin's, she decided to carry on wearing her boots rather than attempt to force her feet into a pair of Sian's high heels.

Gwen hurried to get ready so she'd have time to call her mother before they left. When she was all set to go she gave herself a quick check in the hallway mirror. She decided to put her hair up in a high ponytail and gave the dress yet another tug in an effort to add at least another couple of inches to the bottom of it.

Knowing she had plenty of time before Sian emerged from her room, Gwen picked up the phone and called the hospital where her mother had been for the last two months. She knew the number off by heart and recognised the voice of the nurse when she was transferred to the correct ward. She was told that her mother was comfortable, and the phone was taken over to her bed. Gwen heard her mother thank the nurse and then clear her throat before putting the receiver to her ear.

Gwen was grateful that her mother's speech hadn't been too badly affected by her stroke; even when she was at her worst she'd been able to explain to Gwen and the hospital staff exactly what was wrong and what she needed help with. Gwen tried to remind herself every day that it was a small mercy that only her mother's physical mobility had been severely affected; she was still the same wise, loving person she'd always been.

"Hello, Mam, how are you feeling?" Gwen asked anxiously.

"Hello, darling, don't you worry about me, I'm fine. I'm so glad you called. How did the meeting go? Did they like

your book? Are they interested in publishing it?"

"Oh, Mam, it was fantastic!" Gwen said, her excitement almost bubbling over. "They love the book. They want to give me a deal for it and two more. The advance plus what I've saved will more than pay for the deposit on the house, and the mortgage company will surely be happy to take me on!"

"Sweetheart, that's wonderful," replied her mother, "I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Mam. I've got another meeting with them tomorrow to be introduced to my editor. His name's John Thatcher, he's supposed to be very good. I expect I'll find out the rest of the details then."

"Are you still planning on coming straight home?"

"Yes, I'll probably catch the two o'clock train so I should be back in time for the end of visiting hours."

"Don't be silly, love, you'll be exhausted with all that travelling. Come and visit me the day after."

"I want to see you, Mam. I'll pick the car up from the station and then go home with my stuff afterwards."

"Well, it'll be lovely to see you."

"You too. I'd better go now. Sian's taking me out and I don't want to keep her waiting."

"Okay, love, have fun," her mother said cheerfully.

"Bye, Mam."

"Bye, and thank you, Gwen. You saving our house means the world to me."

"I know, love you."

"Love you, too."

She put down the phone and closed her eyes. She hated being away from her mother while she was in hospital. Gwen was an only child, and she'd felt responsible for her mother since her father had died two years before. Though a naturally

independent person, looking after her mother was such a large part of Gwen's life that it felt peculiar to have a couple of days with only herself to think about.

Taking one last look in the mirror, but finding Sian nowhere near ready, Gwen went into the sitting room and settled herself down in the armchair for what she anticipated would be a long wait.

Sian finally emerged half an hour later wearing a hot-pink halter-neck and tiny black-leather skirt. Her heels brought her up to Gwen's height. She offered no apology for her tardiness but instead posed by the door of the bedroom awaiting Gwen's reaction.

Sian knew that she looked fantastic, and Gwen was certain she wouldn't be able to get her out of the flat until she'd confirmed as much.

"You look gorgeous," she said, wishing she could roll her eyes.

Sian gave her hair a satisfied flick and picked up her bag.

"I didn't keep you waiting, did I?" she asked.

"No more than usual," answered Gwen with tolerant affection.

Gwen would have been happy to walk the short distance to the bar, but Sian insisted they take a taxi to save her feet in the very high heels.

When they arrived there was a queue at the entrance. Sian confidently led Gwen to the front of the line, smiled sweetly, and was let straight in by her bouncer friend.

Gwen looked around. The room was dark and the music loud. She knew immediately that it wasn't going to be her kind of place. The responsibilities of a grateful and well-mannered guest only went so far, and she started to mentally calculate how long she'd have to stay before she could politely make her excuses and leave.

Although she was only twenty-six, the bar made her feel old. Everyone looked so young, and some of them were wearing even less than Sian.

Sian spotted some people she knew and waved frantically to them.

“I’ll get the first round in,” Gwen said, smiling. “You go and join your friends. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Aw, thanks, sweetie. A vodka and orange, please,” Sian called over her shoulder as she skipped off happily.

Gwen glanced over at the barman and immediately regretted her offer. He was very busy and Gwen suspected it would take ages to be served. She got as close to the bar as she could and did her best to attract the barman’s attention.

After ten minutes she was ready to give up. She kept getting jostled and was no closer to being served than when she’s started. Gwen was just about to move to the other side of the bar and try her luck there when she felt a hand on the small of her back and a firm voice whispered in her ear. “Let me help, what are you after?”

Gwen looked up and her heart gave a jolt as she instantly recognised the handsome, slightly imposing man speaking to her as the person she’d bumped into earlier.

“Two vodka-and-oranges, please,” replied Gwen, recovering from her surprise as quickly as she could.

The man straightened up and reached across the bar with a twenty-pound note in his hand.

He called out, “Hey, Chris, some drinks over here when you get a chance?”

The barman came straight over.

“Hi there, sorry to keep you waiting, it’s been a bit crazy tonight.”

A minute later Gwen’s drinks were ready.

“Thanks,” she said. “That’s quite a talent you’ve got there. Let me pay you for these.”

“I come here a lot for work so I know the barman. Don’t worry about the drinks, it’s my pleasure.”

And with the flash of a smile giving sudden warmth to his aloof demeanour, he disappeared into the crowd. Gwen’s heart was still racing as she stared after him. She felt a little unsteady, as if her legs weren’t quite sure how long they’d be able to support her for.

Gwen was certain she’d picked up on the stranger’s interest in her, but now he’d vanished abruptly twice, and she was seriously beginning to doubt her instincts.

It occurred to Gwen that she was a little disappointed that the man apparently hadn’t recognised her, but she shook her head to free it of such silly thoughts and tried to focus on finding Sian. If anything, the bar had become busier since she’d left her cousin, but Gwen finally spotted her. She was sitting at a small table with about six other people. She was talking animatedly using lots of hand gestures and had managed to get hold of a drink from somewhere.

Sian noticed Gwen and waved her over.

“Hey, babe, what took you so long? I’ve been gasping for a drink. Luckily Demetrius here gave me his,” Sian said, indicating a sleazy-looking man who had his arm draped around her. Even though he was sitting down, Gwen could tell that Demetrius was short. He was tanned to the point of being orange, and his hair had so much gel in it, Gwen expected it to start dripping onto the table.

Demetrius smiled and winked at Gwen in what he obviously considered to be a sexy manner. It made her skin crawl. He clearly thought he was God’s gift to women, but he really wasn’t Gwen’s type.

She could feel Demetrius’ lecherous eyes on her as she was introduced to everyone and found a place to perch.

Gwen gathered that the other people at the table were actors of some sort or another, none of them very successful.

Sian didn't make much of an effort to include Gwen in the conversation, and nobody else seemed to feel much inclination to talk to her. Gwen took the chance to scan the room to see if she could spot her handsome stranger. There was no sign of him and when she turned her attention back to the table she discovered Demetrius staring at her, with his arm still around Sian.

His gaze unnerved Gwen, and she hastily turned away and attempted to strike up a conversation with the woman across the table from her. This wasn't exactly easy with the bar as loud as it was, but at least it gave Gwen something to focus on, other than Demetrius' probing eyes.

* * *

After about an hour, Gwen thought she could acceptably signal to Sian that she was going to leave. Sian was clearly having a good time, and Gwen didn't imagine her company would be missed.

The couple sitting between Gwen and Demetrius got up and Gwen shifted along the bench so she'd be nearer to Sian, waiting for a suitable pause in her cousin's monologue.

Gwen was looking at Sian and willing her cousin to turn towards her when she felt something on her leg. She flinched and glanced down to discover Demetrius' hand sliding its way up her thigh. She jumped up immediately and glared at Demetrius, who continued his conversation as if nothing had happened. The offending hand was now holding his drink. His other arm remained draped around Sian. Holding back from pouring her drink straight into Demetrius' lap, Gwen forced herself to move away before her temper caused her to do something that might embarrass her cousin. She would have excused herself, but as no one noticed her getting up, she didn't bother.

Gwen walked quickly to the toilets; the ladies' was busy so she locked herself in the disabled bathroom and was glad to see it had its own washbasin. She splashed her face with cold water to cool her anger and calm the burning red of her cheeks.

"What should I do?" she asked her reflection, which gazed back at her looking confused. "And what should I say to Sian? I can't let her go and make a fool of herself by being with a man like that."

Gwen shuddered at the memory of Demetrius' clammy hand on her thigh. How could he do that when he had his other arm around Sian!

Gwen opened the door of the toilet. She was determined to get Sian away from her friends and tell her what had happened. What she didn't expect was to walk straight into Demetrius.

"Ciao bello, I got away as fast as I could," Demetrius said playfully, putting his hand on Gwen's waist.

"I certainly wasn't waiting for you. And I think you'll find it should be '*bella*,'" Gwen replied icily. She moved out of Demetrius' reach.

"Don't play games with me with your flirty glances and that short little dress, you know you want me," he said.

Demetrius pushed Gwen roughly against the wall. She felt the cold of the tiles through her dress. As she caught Demetrius' eye she saw that the mischievous twinkle had been replaced with a hard, forceful stare. This was a man who was determined to get what he wanted.

"Demetrius, I'm sure you're a really great guy, but I'm not interested in you. I'd like you to let me go, please," said Gwen, trying to remain calm.

Leering at her, Demetrius used his body to keep her pinned to the wall. He then caught both of her hands in his own and began to kiss her forcefully. Gwen smelled alcohol and cigarettes on his stale breath. She fought to keep her

mouth shut and tried to turn her face away, but Demetrius was much stronger than she was. She tried to kick him. He broke away from kissing her.

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you?” he laughed.

Demetrius was about to resume his onslaught when he was yanked away from her.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Demetrius shouted at his attacker.

“She said she wasn’t interested,” her saviour said curtly. Gwen once again recognised the tall, solid form of her alluring stranger, except now his eyes blazed with fury.

Demetrius looked his enemy up and down before letting go of Gwen.

“Alright, mate,” he reluctantly conceded, with his hands in the air. He glared at Gwen and walked off. The stranger’s steely gaze followed Demetrius across the bar to the exit.

As soon as Demetrius was out of sight, Gwen’s body relaxed and she slid down the wall onto the floor and began to weep. She wept big, heavy tears of relief. She was sure she wouldn’t have been able to fight Demetrius off if he’d continued to refuse to take no for an answer.

Aware that she was in a public place, Gwen did her best to stop crying. She wiped her eyes with a tissue from her bag, and looked up to thank her handsome protector. She caught his gaze and gave him a shy smile. He stood awkwardly watching her, his concern was plain but he was clearly unsure of how to deal with the situation now that the confrontation was over and he was left with a sobbing woman on the floor. She endeavoured to pull herself together properly.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, regaining some of her composure.

“No trouble at all, can I get you anything?” he asked, helping her to her feet.

“No, thanks,” she replied. “I think I’d just like to go home.”

“Can I call a taxi for you?”

“I’ll walk,” she said, thinking of the sorry state of her finances, “It’s not far.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist,” he said firmly, “I was leaving anyway.”

Gwen’s token arguments voiced, she willingly agreed: she was grateful she wouldn’t be walking through London alone. Besides, although she didn’t really know him, she felt safe and secure with him around.

“OK, I just need to tidy myself up a bit.”

“I’ll meet you by the entrance in five minutes.”

Gwen’s knight in shining armour strode confidently off across the bar and disappeared amongst the throng of merry drinkers. He explained to his business associates that an emergency had cropped up; they’d have to adjourn their meeting. Preoccupied as he was with scanning the club for Gwen, he didn’t notice the surprised looks that passed over his colleagues’ faces at his backing out of a work commitment, informal though it was.

Gwen reapplied her make-up in the bathroom and then hurried back to Sian, resolved to warn her about Demetrius.

Sian was still at the table, but was now chatting away to a tall, blonde-haired man. She looked up as Gwen approached and beckoned for her to sit down beside her.

“Are you alright?” Sian asked.

“Yes, but I need to speak to you about Demetrius.”

“Oh, he’s left I think, but never mind him, I simply must introduce you to Steven here,” she gestured towards the man at her side, who smiled at Gwen. “Steven is the most amazing

director, his new play is opening next week—” Sian continued.

Gwen gently interrupted her, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to go, I’ve got a bit of a headache.”

“Oh no, will you be alright getting back on your own?” Sian said, looking reluctantly towards Steven and obviously worried she’d be forced to leave him.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll see you back at the flat later.”

Sian didn’t need any more persuading, and Gwen hurried to the entrance where her stranger was waiting for her.

They left the bar and walked out into the chilly night air. Gwen shivered.

“Take my coat,” he offered gallantly.

The coat was around her shoulders before Gwen had a chance to protest. It was warm from his body and smelt of his aftershave.

“Thank you,” Gwen said. She caught his eye and smiled. She was genuinely grateful for the warmth, if a little surprised by his old-fashioned good manners.

They walked along for a few moments without saying anything. Gwen began to feel uncomfortable with the silence and sneaked another look at her companion. He was wearing the same suit as earlier that day, which, coupled with the briefcase, suggested he’d come straight from work. He looked very thoughtful, Gwen was sure he was nowhere near as bothered by the lack of conversation as she was.

“Do you live around here?” was all Gwen could come up with.

“Not far.”

“I’m Gwen, by the way.”

“John,” was his monosyllabic reply.

Silence fell again. Gwen frantically searched for some other talking point. Her thoughts were broken by him clearing his throat and saying: “You don’t sound like you’re from London.”

“No, I’m from Wales. I’m just staying with my cousin for a few days.”

She realised that she could have asked him if he originated from London, but too much time had lapsed by the time it occurred to her, so Gwen was once again stuck with nothing to say.

Gwen was grateful to reach Sian’s building, although a little apprehensive as to what was going to happen next. She wasn’t the sort of woman who invited a man she barely knew in for ‘coffee’, especially as she was still a little shaken after what had happened earlier at the bar. She hoped the gallant stranger would want to see her again, although she knew it was unlikely to be possible, with her heading back to Wales. However, the logical part of her was definitely not in charge at that moment. His looks, combined with his sheer presence, were enough to make her knees go quite wobbly.

“This is where I’m staying,” she said, reaching for her keys and looking up at him expectantly. “Thank you again for earlier and for walking me home.”

“My pleasure.”

With a small, almost sorrowful smile and a nod of his head, the man turned to walk away. Disappointment coursed through Gwen’s veins.

“Oh, your coat!” she remembered suddenly.

She handed it to him. She immediately missed the warmth and masculine scent. Their eyes met and their glances held. This is when he’ll ask to see me again, thought Gwen hopefully.

“Goodbye,” he said with finality. He turned, after just the slightest hesitation, and strode off down the street.

“Goodbye,” Gwen answered softly.

Gwen watched him until he was completely out of sight. Then she told herself to get a grip; she had far too much going on in her life for her to start wasting her thoughts on a man who clearly wasn't the slightest bit interested in her, no matter how good his coat smelt.

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Chapter Two

At 7.30 a.m. precisely, John marched proprietorially through the doors of Black Horse Publishing, Starbucks double espresso in one hand, briefcase in the other. The security guard didn't even glance up from his newspaper. There was no need to. John Thatcher, editor at Black Horse, arrived at exactly the same time every weekday morning wearing the same closed expression. He walked straight across the foyer to the lift (always the one on the right), before disappearing from the guard's view. The only other time the security guard saw him was when he went out for a business lunch. Otherwise he ate a sandwich at his desk and usually left work long after the day guard's shift had finished.

It was essential that John got in before the company really awoke. He had to keep his finger firmly on the pulse of the business if his future was to be secured. Early in the morning he could log into the company intranet, surreptitiously monitoring the financial accounts, general activity and staff itineraries, getting a feel for the employees' plans for the day ahead. Watch, evaluate, and wait, ready for when the time came. He disliked being duplicitous but, for the moment, it was necessary.

This was John's favourite part of the day, and yet today he kept thinking about the woman he'd met the night before. She really was beautiful. And so trusting when she'd looked up at him with her big, tear-filled eyes. He'd actually been a little startled by the strength of his attraction to her and had been impressed by his self-control when he'd walked away from her. In reality all he'd wanted to do was take her in his arms and kiss away the memories of the vile animal he'd dragged off her.

At any other point in his life John would have pursued such a woman, but not now. Now he needed to focus; if he became diverted from his strategy, all his hard work would be for nothing.

* * *

An hour or so later, John was pulled from his reverie by a knock on his office door.

Paul Worthing, John's boss, poked his head into the room before John could say come in. Paul was portly, rounded by three-course expense-account lunches, and his right hand never strayed far from his thinning hair, futilely preening the little he had left. His suit was Savile Row, and the shine from his handmade shoes was blinding.

"Ah, John, glad to find you here, have you got a minute?"

"Yes, of course, come in," John said, turning away from his computer screen. "What can I help you with?"

"I've got some good news for you," Paul said.

"Oh yes?" John said, immediately suspicious. Good news for Paul usually meant more work for everyone else.

"We've just signed a new author, three-book deal, really great, fresh voice, and you're going to be her editor."

Bewildered and frustrated by this latest example of ineptitude, John took a moment to formulate a suitably diplomatic response. Taking advantage of the brief silence, Paul made a swift exit, calling out, "She'll be popping in at ten to have a chat with you," before slamming the door behind him.

John had good reason to be surprised by Paul's news. The whole country was tightening their belts, and this included spending less money on books. This, combined with all the bad decisions made since Joseph Thomas, the founder of Black Horse, had died four years before, meant the company was in real financial trouble. Redundancies had already been made and those who had so far managed to hold on to their jobs had more work than they could handle — John currently had twice the number of authors under his wing than was really manageable. This was completely the wrong time for Black Horse to be taking on a new, unknown author.

* * *

A very grumpy and hung-over Sian had left for work at seven, mumbling a goodbye to Gwen as she grabbed her bag and hurried out of the door. She hadn't got back until after two and had woken Gwen to fill her in on all she'd missed. Gwen had taken the opportunity to warn Sian as gently as she could about Demetrius. Sian had been suitably indignant on Gwen's behalf and had sworn that she would have nothing else to do with 'that disgusting excuse for a man' as she now called him.

Gwen felt far more confident getting ready for her meeting than she had the day before. She didn't take nearly as long preparing and had plenty of time to finish her packing. She still felt some butterflies, but nothing like before her first visit to Black Horse. She hoped she'd come across as more professional now that she wasn't so nervous, less like the country girl turning up in the big city with her little manuscript.

She had her bags all packed as she didn't know how long her meeting would last; this way she could go straight to Paddington Station when it finished and fill any spare time with a bit of retail therapy.

Gwen was extremely curious to meet her editor. She was a member of several online writers' forums and had learnt that the relationship between author and editor could make or break a book. She'd heard a couple of horror stories, but most of the authors she'd chatted to seemed happy with their editors. A lot of them were just so grateful to be published that they'd agree to anything their editor suggested. Gwen was a little worried she'd dig her heels in if hers made suggestions she didn't like. She was well aware that she had a tendency to be obstinate, but with her family home in jeopardy and her mother so reliant on her, Gwen knew that now wasn't the time to be too stubborn.

The only real concern Gwen had was where to put her bags. She actually had quite a lot of stuff considering she'd only been in London for a couple of days. She'd been

apprehensive about the meeting and unsure about what she'd be doing with her cousin, so had packed a ridiculous amount of clothes. Of course, none of them had proved to be right and Gwen had ended up buying or borrowing other outfits. Which meant that she actually had more stuff with her now than on her arrival. She'd had to sit and bounce up and down on her case just to get it to shut. It wouldn't add to her appearance of professionalism if she turned up to the meeting with a bulging suitcase in tow, but she didn't know anywhere she could put it so took it with her.

Gwen had been so anxious walking to the publishers the day before, worried that although she'd left lots of time, she might not be able to find the building and would still end up late. Today she was able to relax and enjoy the sights as she walked, having decided she'd rather go on foot than risk getting lost on the buses or the tube. Gwen found she appreciated London more than she thought she would. Part of her relished the feeling of anonymity. Although Gwen's house was quite isolated, whenever she went down into the town she felt everyone noticed her. They'd all known her since she was a baby: she'd gone to the local school, and though she left briefly for university, was soon back in Tonnadulais and now worked in the town tea rooms. Usually she didn't mind stopping to chat, but there were times when she felt it would be nice to go out for a newspaper without having to discuss the weather, how her mother was doing, and what she was up to at the moment.

Gwen arrived a little early, so she wandered around outside the building until five minutes before her appointment. She gave her name at reception and was immediately directed to her new editor's office. She found the room easily and knocked on the impressive mahogany door carefully to avoid dropping everything she was holding in her arms. Having never had a meeting with an editor before, Gwen hadn't been quite sure what she should take with her. She eventually decided to err on the side of caution and so ended up bringing

practically everything she'd ever written, as well as her rather heavy laptop and straining suitcase.

Gwen entered the office and her eyes immediately locked with those of John Thatcher, her new editor, none other than the man who had helped her the night before. She was shocked and thrilled to see him again, but recovered quickly to smile and was about to comment on the coincidence of his being her editor when he spoke:

“Miss Jones, I presume.”

Gwen thought she saw a flicker of recognition cross John's face before he looked away swiftly, turning back to his computer screen. He kept his eyes resolutely fixed on it.

“Yes, good morning,” replied Gwen feeling confused. Did he really not recognise her?

“I have received a copy of your manuscript. I'll be in touch soon with a list of what needs changing.”

Gwen was taken aback by John's abruptness but was determined to remain business-like.

“I've got some of my other work here if you wanted to take a look?” she replied.

“That won't be necessary.”

“Oh.”

There was silence. Gwen wondered whether to sit down, she felt like an idiot standing mutely with all her luggage around her as John stared at his computer. She was about to ask if she could take a seat when John spoke again:

“Well, if that's all then I must get on. You'll hear from me when I need to arrange our first proper meeting. Of course Paul told you he wants your book on the shelves as soon as possible, so we'll have to work quickly.”

“Um, did Paul explain that I won't be able to travel to London to work on the manuscript? My mam's very sick. He

said we should be able to do everything via telephone and email.”

“Fine,” replied John. “Anything else?”

“No. Thank you for your time,” said Gwen, who was by now so grateful to be leaving that she was opening the door before John had finished speaking.

“Goodbye,” said John firmly, still remaining seated, still facing his monitor.

John waited until the door was securely closed behind Gwen before he stood and began pacing the floor of his office. This was all he needed; she was even more beautiful than he remembered. He’d had to force himself to focus on his screen; he couldn’t let her see the effect she had on him. There was no way he could risk everything by having a relationship with an author. Anyway, she’d made it clear she had no interest in him whatsoever when he’d had to practically coerce her into letting him escort her home the night before. And what on earth was that about her not being able to come to London to work with him? He could more than understand the obligations of filial duty, he really could, but as harsh as he knew he sounded, she had to be realistic. He had his job to do and she would need to do hers. His plans had been meticulously laid, and nothing could be permitted to disrupt the timing. He had his own charge to fulfil and as callous as that made him feel, that had to be his priority.

* * *

Once again Gwen found herself coming out through the imposing doors of her publisher’s offices, but how different she felt now. Yesterday she’d been jubilant; today she was confused and deflated. She’d never imagined that her first meeting with her editor would be like that. He seemed to have no interest in her or her work. He must have recognised her from the night before, so why hadn’t he said anything? Gwen was hurt by the coldness of his reaction; she could only assume she’d somehow offended him, but she had no idea how. During the previous evening there’d been moments she

was sure he was attracted to her, but then he'd left without asking to see her again, and now he was acting like he didn't even know her. She really didn't understand him at all.

Gwen had assumed the meeting would take a little longer than the five minutes it actually entailed. She looked at her watch; it was ages before her train was due to leave from Paddington Station, so she wandered around, looking in some of the shop windows. As she hadn't eaten a proper breakfast that morning, she went into a coffee shop and ordered a latte and a croissant. She scribbled down a few ideas for a new book while she ate. The thought that she was behaving just like a 'real' writer cheered her up a bit.

Gwen was beginning to find having her luggage with her a complete pain as she traipsed around, and still had almost an hour to kill before her train. It started to rain as she walked past a department store; ducking in the door to save getting soaked, she found herself in its perfumery section. She had a brief look through the scents but soon absentmindedly began wandering amongst the aftershaves. Gwen was just debating whether or not to risk the rain again when a distinctive musky smell hit her nostrils. She followed the aroma until she discovered the very striking, square blue bottle it came from, one with an enormous price tag. The masculine, almost familiar, fragrance flooded her senses as she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes to better discover what was attracting her to it. The answer tickled at her memory but eluded her and, giving up, Gwen wandered back out into the rain, lost in her own thoughts and replaying the events of the morning. She felt a hint of sadness as she wondered if there'd been anything she could have done differently to receive a warmer reception from John Thatcher. Eventually she arrived at the station and concentrated on finding the platform for her train home.

* * *

Back in his office, John was still debating the Gwen Jones conundrum: aside from the emotional complexities involved with working alongside her, he was resolved that Black Horse should be concentrating on the talent they had, not bringing in

new authors, especially taking into consideration the sales figures he'd been secretly evaluating only a few hours before. He decided to try reasoning with Paul again, and leaving his desk, strode masterfully off.

John gave Paul's door two short, sharp raps. He heard a call for him to come in, and entered. Paul's office was at least twice the size of John's; its walls were adorned with various framed professional certificates (he suspected that many were of the type you printed off yourself) and photos of Paul with bigwigs from the industry. Paul didn't seem surprised to see him, "What is it John?" he asked.

"It's about this new author you've given me, Gwen Jones. This really isn't the best point for me to be taking on someone new, Paul. How am I going to find the time to forge a relationship with her and do justice to her work?"

"Just read her stuff, John, she's really good, we'd have been fools not to take her on, and you're the best man for the job," replied Paul calmly.

"With the trouble this company's in, we need to be spending our time utilising the writers we have, not taking on more than we can manage," replied John.

"If we don't keep coming up with new voices, people are going to think the company's in an even worse state than it actually is. Look, John, I'll give one of your other authors to Jessica, then you'll have the time to spend with Gwen."

"That's hardly fair on the author that gets fobbed off on Jessica. Why don't you give Gwen to Jessica?"

"They won't be fobbed off, Jessica's a very good editor, but I want someone more established to deal with such a novice," replied Paul. "You know we're looking to lay off more people, John. Make the most of being given someone new to work with. If her book does well it could be that you'll be one of the lucky ones getting to keep their job."

Before John could reply, Paul added, "That's my final word, John. Now please excuse me, I've got an early business

lunch to prepare for.”

John left the office reluctantly, knowing that, for now at least, there was nothing he could say to change the situation; he simply had to make the best of Paul’s decision. But he would not let Gwen derail his schemes: she’d just have to fall in line and work hard and professionally so her manuscript took up as little of his time as possible. John was aware, however, that he would find it very hard to concentrate on work while Gwen was around.

* * *

Gwen had a long journey back but was glad she’d stopped at the hospital to visit her mother. She could tell her mam had missed her: without Gwen visiting, there was little to break up the monotony of the days. However, the stress of the meeting and the tedious train ride, combined with the hospital trip reminding her of her mother’s frailty, took their toll on Gwen, emotionally as well as physically. It was half past eight by the time she arrived home, and Gwen was pleased to see her house. The local farmers had been haymaking, and the sweet smell hung heavy in the air. Gwen greedily filled her lungs with it.

As she walked up to her front door, dragging her suitcase along beside her, she turned and took in the view, revelling in the solid feeling of having the hills around her. From the doorstep everything she could see was beautiful — green and lush. The knolls peppered with sheep and dotted with the occasional farmhouse, often complete with a plume of smoke unfurling from the chimney, were a very welcome sight. She was home.

The sun lay low in the sky and Gwen took a moment to listen to the evening chorus. Her father would have been able to tell her the names of each songbird, but Gwen was happy just to appreciate the pretty symphony they produced.

A feeling of contentment overcame Gwen as she allowed herself to bask in the fact that her writing was going to ensure

that she and her mother could continue living in this beautiful place.

Gwen knew she'd find it hard to settle anywhere else. Her family had leased the old farmhouse and the land around it for generations. Gwen's family were no longer farmers, as they had been when they first took on the property, and so most of the land they'd originally worked had been taken over by others. The last of it had gone when Gwen's grandparents, her mother's parents, had become too frail to farm it. After that, all that Gwen's family rented was the house and its pretty garden. Gwen's parents had hoped to fill the house with the happy laughter of many children, but Gwen turned out to be their only child, finally born when her mother was forty-two and her parents were close to giving up hope of ever having a baby. Despite her lack of siblings, her childhood there had been every bit as wonderful as her mam and dad could have wished.

Now the estate was being sold, and in just a couple of months the home Gwen had lived in all her life was to be auctioned. She'd been determined to find a way to buy it, and now finally it looked like she had.

Gwen fiddled in her bag for the keys; the house looked cold and dark. She opened the front door expectantly before remembering that Oscar, her chocolate Labrador, wouldn't be running out joyfully to meet her, he was being looked after by friends. She hurriedly turned on some lights.

Gwen felt much better once the place was lit up. She was quite happy with her own company and hardly ever felt lonely by herself in the house. It would have been nice to have had Oscar with her, but she'd see him in the morning when she picked him up.

As a wave of tiredness hit her, Gwen groaned at the thought of the busy day that faced her tomorrow. It probably would've been more sensible to have taken another day off from the tea rooms in the town where she worked part-time,

but she needed the money and she'd already had to cancel shifts because of her trip to London.

She checked the fridge hopefully in case some sort of shopping fairy had magically visited the supermarket for her that morning and filled it with yummy goodies. They hadn't. All that remained was a quarter of a pint of rather smelly milk, half a floppy carrot, and a very hard piece of cheddar. Gwen had a bit more luck when she tried the bread bin, which yielded two crusts of (seemingly) unmouldy bread. Gwen made herself a black coffee and some cheese on toast, eating standing up at the sink. She considered giving the kitchen a clean and chucking the Hoover around the house, it was looking rather a state. Housework really hadn't been her first priority since her mother had been admitted to hospital. But then Gwen caught sight of her laptop, glaring at her indignantly from her pile of luggage. A shower first, she decided, to wash off all the London grime, and then she'd get round to doing something productive. However, the effort of the shower proved too much for Gwen to consider anything more than taking a first draft of a short story she was writing to bed with her. She gave up on the second page when she realised she'd read the same sentence through at least six times. Wearily, Gwen switched off the table lamp beside her bed and was asleep within seconds, her dreams, unfortunately, full of John Thatcher.

* * *

John's two-bedroom Kensington flat was visually perfect; his interior designer had made sure of that. It had been kitted out with all that John could possibly need before he'd even moved in. Everything had been chosen by the designer, with nothing truly personal to John — no mementos, no family photos, not even any unwanted presents from relatives kept out on display in case of unexpected visits.

It was gone half nine by the time John got in from work. He'd a lot on at the office and was constantly aware that he needed to stay at the top of his game. As he entered, he could tell from the smell that his housekeeper had been, the aroma of

bathroom cleaner still hung in the air. It was meticulously tidy, but then it had been when he'd left earlier that morning. There really was very little for her to do: John was naturally an orderly person and rarely had guests, as they might question how an editor was able to afford such a lavish home.

John poured himself a large whisky and looked at the clock. He decided not to bother with dinner, it was no fun cooking just for himself, and he wasn't really hungry as he'd had a late lunch with one of his authors. John was about to turn on the television and see if there was anything worth watching, but knew he'd regret it if he didn't get some more work done before heading for bed. He opened his briefcase and took out Gwen's manuscript. Honestly, he was dying to know what it was like. He'd work for an hour and then have a shower before grabbing an early night. John settled himself into his armchair, balancing his glass on the armrest, and began to read.

* * *

John put Gwen's manuscript down and rubbed his eyes. He looked up and realised there was light coming in through the curtains. He'd been reading for hours. The manuscript needed work, but it was good, very good indeed. It was original, entertaining, and well written, a combination that he rarely found in such an inexperienced writer. He felt a sudden urge to call her and let her know how incredibly talented he now realised she was, but pride held him back. After the way he'd acted in their meeting he'd feel foolish calling to praise her work. He'd wait until he went into the office and clear a block in his diary. That way he could phone her and arrange for them to work together for a few days. Her novel had the potential to make a great deal of money for the publishing house; he needed to focus on that, which would mean spending a great deal of time with Gwen and putting any feelings that he had for her firmly aside.

Chapter Three

Not long after John put down Gwen's manuscript in London, the author herself was getting out of bed, eager to get back into her life in Wales. Gwen usually hated early mornings, but she'd woken up determined to put all thoughts of grumpy editors out of her mind. She was back in her lovely home, back where she belonged, and John's behaviour the day before paled into insignificance compared to her book deal. So what if she had to work with him for a while? It would be more than worth it to have her name on the title deeds of her family home.

Today she would make a proper start on the second book and then do a shift at the tea rooms. First though, she had to fetch Oscar from her friend Sarah who'd looked after him while she'd been away. She couldn't wait to give Oscar a big hug and was ready to go by seven, but wasn't sure Sarah and her husband Owen would appreciate such an early wake-up call.

She made herself a cup of tea and, once again, checked the cupboards for food. Unsurprisingly she wasn't in luck and so decided to pick up some provisions on her way back from the tea rooms.

Gwen took her black tea outside, along with the notebook and biro, which were never far from her hands. She watched the sky grow lighter and listened to the birds twittering away as she jotted down a few ideas and sipped her drink. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day.

Gwen checked her watch, finally it was eight! She hunted around for some treats to take for Oscar, made sure his blanket was ready for him on the passenger seat of the car, and set off on the short journey to her friend's house.

Sarah lived with her husband and twin three-year-old girls in a picture-postcard perfect cottage, complete with honeysuckle framed door. It was on the outskirts of

Tonnadulais, the town where Gwen had gone to school, and where she now worked.

Sarah and Gwen had been best friends since childhood. She and her husband, Owen, another local, had moved away from Wales for several years but returned after they'd got married, when Sarah was expecting the twins.

"We want our children to have the joy of growing up surrounded by our families, in one of the most beautiful places on earth," was how Sarah had explained their decision to come back and Gwen could more than understand it.

Sarah was up and dressed when Gwen arrived. She was a small, dark-haired, slightly plump woman, who seemed made to have a baby resting on each hip. She'd blossomed with motherhood and Gwen had nothing but respect for her friend and the way she combined raising her beautiful daughters with her small soft-furnishings business, run from the spare bedroom.

"I had a feeling you'd be here early!" she said with a smile.

"Sorry," Gwen said, grinning back. "I tried to stay away as long as I could."

"Don't worry; I've been up since six with the twins anyway. Ever since their cousins showed them that cartoons are on TV then, it's been impossible to get either of them to stay in bed. It's like they've got some sort of internal alarm clock."

Gwen followed Sarah along the little hallway, past the sitting room and into the kitchen — the real heart of Sarah's home. With its beautiful wooden worktops and the gorgeous curtains and chair cushions which Sarah had, naturally, made herself, it was a haven to relax and chat in, even if occasionally a small jammy finger had got to your seat before you.

A whirlwind consisting of Oscar and the two little blonde girls tore its way into the kitchen. Oscar jumped up at Gwen

(something she'd been attempting to persuade him not to do since he was a puppy, but to no avail) and did his level best to lick as many parts of her as possible. Gwen was pleased that Oscar seemed so happy to see her, and laughed at his delight when he found the treats in her jacket pocket.

Owen, a man who towered over his wife by at least a foot, appeared and offered Gwen a cup of coffee which she gratefully accepted, before allowing herself to be sat down at the table to become the morning's star attraction and fill them both in on her London adventures. The children were handed a packet of custard creams and told they could watch a DVD, so the adults knew they would be undisturbed for at least a little while. Oscar settled down on Gwen's feet but went to join the girls on the sofa when it became clear that Gwen's treat supply had now dried up; he could smell the children's biscuits and was obviously hoping for some crumbs if not a whole one to himself.

Sarah and Owen were thrilled to hear Gwen's news. "Oh Gwen, that's fantastic. I bet your mam's extremely proud of you," said Sarah.

"Yes, she is," answered Gwen. She refrained from explaining why the money from her book deal was so important. Gwen had known both Sarah and Owen since they were at school together, and they were well aware of how much it meant to her to finally be a writer, but Gwen didn't think that her mother would want her to tell people about the family's money problems. Gwen herself was also far too proud to admit to anyone just how close she and her mother were to losing their home. Thankfully, by her calculations, this book deal would change all that and make the mortgage companies willing to take her on.

It took nearly an hour for Sarah and Owen to get all the information out of Gwen, including her dealings with John Thatcher, and to finally come to the end of their congratulations and their worries about how Gwen was going to work with such a difficult man.

“He doesn’t sound much fun,” said Sarah.

“What did you do to make him act like that?” wondered Owen, who liked gossip as much as any woman, once he got going.

“I’m sure she did nothing wrong,” Sarah said, loyally.

“Well, they want to have the book out pretty quickly, so there won’t be too much time for us to work together, I suppose, and maybe I’ll have another editor for the next one,” Gwen said hopefully.

Gwen looked at her watch and knew she ought to be leaving if she was going to fit in a decent walk for Oscar before her shift at the tea rooms. After that, and the shopping, she’d be able to write. She’d been focussing on her writing for so long, and getting the book deal had made her feel even more motivated, she couldn’t wait to get back to her laptop. She worked as few hours at the tea rooms as she could, just to keep things ticking over. With her mother in hospital there were few distractions at home and, as their house was quite isolated, they didn’t get many unexpected visitors. But Gwen tried to meet up with her friends regularly, especially Sarah and Owen, not least because she loved to see the girls, who were her godchildren.

Gwen made her farewells and waited while the children said numerous last goodbyes to Oscar. In the end, Sarah distracted them by saying their daddy had something to show them in the garden, and Gwen finally slipped away.

Gwen’s shift at the tea rooms didn’t start until eleven, so she took her time walking Oscar, pleased to be back home with him. They were very close, especially now it was just the two of them in the house, and she was sure he’d missed her just as much as she’d missed him. She dropped Oscar home and got changed before leaving for work. The dog settled himself down on the sofa for a nice doze until his beloved mistress returned. Occasionally if Gwen had a long shift she’d leave him with Sarah so he wouldn’t be alone for too long, but

he'd be fine by himself for a few hours today, tired out from his long walk.

The tea rooms actually opened at eight, but the owner, Brian, and his wife, Bronwyn, could manage the breakfast crowd by themselves. Gwen came in to help with lunch and sometimes stayed on until the end of the afternoon teas; it got particularly busy during the summer months with hungry walkers and campers taking advantage of the ice creams and hearty meals they served.

Gwen had worked part-time at the tea rooms since she was fourteen and really was part of the family. She was given first pick of the shifts, so she was able to arrange work around her hospital visits and, of course, her writing.

Brian and Bronwyn were good bosses and old family friends, and Gwen knew all their regulars, but she needed to write and would never be content to carry on working there indefinitely.

Gwen had had many years to get used to Bronwyn and Brian's funny little ways, like the fact that no decision could be made without a mug of tea, and the different tiers of cup available to customers depending on what Bronwyn thought of them — ranging from beautiful, dainty China cups and saucers for much loved regulars, to rather sturdy and stained brown mugs for untrustworthy tourists with rowdy children in tow.

Bronwyn glanced up as Gwen came in the door of the tea rooms — Gwen suspected she'd been looking out for her for a while.

“Well hello, love,” said Bronwyn expectantly, “Everything go alright in London?”

Gwen smiled to herself, no matter how long she lived near a little Welsh town, she didn't think she'd ever get used to quite how nosey people could be. Usually Bronwyn would at least attempt to make small talk before getting to the good stuff, but today's news was so important that she let any remaining sense of social decorum slide.

“Fine, thanks, how have things been here?” replied Gwen, trying to hide her grin. She knew she was being a little cruel, but it was funny.

“Oh, same old, you know. Good meetings?” said Bronwyn attempting to steer the conversation back to what she was anxious to hear about.

“Yes, thanks,” said Gwen, putting her apron on and grabbing a cloth so she could start wiping down a table a young couple had just vacated. She left it a moment before looking up at Bronwyn. They caught each other’s eyes and both burst out laughing — Bronwyn was aware of how obvious her nosiness was, but Gwen was practically like a daughter to her and Brian, and she really was desperate to find out what had happened.

“Brian!” Bronwyn yelled towards the kitchen, “Come and take over for a while, would you?”

“I’m a bit busy back here, love,” came the reply.

“Gwen’s in,” called out Bronwyn, and Brian’s head immediately appeared around the door. He cleaned his hands on a tea towel as he went over to give Gwen a hug.

“Hello, my love, how’d it go?” he asked.

Bronwyn shooed him away, “Give the poor girl a break, she’s only just got in. We’ll take over in there.”

Bronwyn practically manhandled Gwen into the kitchen, where she put the kettle on and settled down to hear everything she could possibly squeeze out of Gwen. Half an hour later, Brian was finally relieved of his front-of-house duty. Bronwyn lasted all of five minutes before she snuck back into the kitchen to give Brian a quick rundown of Gwen’s news.

Bronwyn spent the rest of Gwen’s shift trying to determine where to put a plaque proclaiming that Gwen Jones, the great writer, had worked in, and been inspired by, these very tea rooms. It was lucky that the customers were patient

because good service was really not foremost in Bronwyn's mind that day.

Brian just couldn't seem to wipe the smile off his face the whole shift. He was obviously extremely proud of Gwen and what she'd achieved.

Although she was only working for four hours, by the end of them, Gwen was more than happy to take off her apron and head back home. Her feet were aching and she'd almost curled up with embarrassment every time Brian had informed a customer that their waitress was soon to be a bestselling novelist, rivalling J.K. Rowling herself. Poor, quiet Gwen knew he was only doing it because he cared, but she really wished he'd stop — she didn't like a fuss being made. Besides she had some new plot ideas going round and round in her head that she couldn't wait to commit to paper. She always kept a notepad and pen behind the counter for when it was quiet, but the steady stream of customers meant Gwen had had no chance to jot anything down.

Bronwyn had insisted that Gwen eat at the tea rooms, so when she got home Gwen let Oscar out again briefly and then settled down to write in her beloved study with the dog nestled on her feet, keeping them nice and toasty. She knew from experience to set an alarm to remind her when it was time to stop and head off to the hospital to visit her mother. She could get so involved in her writing that she'd be completely unaware of the time.

Gwen had always known she wanted to be an author, and she was lucky having parents who'd supported her in that ambition. It would have been very easy for her to have left school and gone straight to work like so many of her friends, but she went to university and, with her mam and dad's help, paid her way through it by waitressing at the tea rooms in the summers. Gwen's English Literature degree helped hone her writing and the professors encouraged her to pursue her dream.

Gwen spent a few busy days working on a draft of her second book, which Black Horse had commissioned. Not really knowing what John would think of her first manuscript, or what he would want to change, she figured she'd be better off leaving that alone and concentrating on the next one. She'd gone to the shops after completing her shift and picked up a load of provisions so she'd be able to focus on writing whenever she wasn't at the tea rooms or the hospital. Gwen found it impossible to completely shake off her mother's influence: along with the food and drink that she knew she would consume (tea, milk, coffee, biscuits, cheese, baked beans, baking potatoes, apples), were the extras that her mother would always have had in the house (lamb and beef mince, tinned tomatoes, cauliflower, plain and self-rising flour to name but a few). Occasionally Gwen would feel a burst of enthusiasm and use these ingredients to create something barely edible, but more often than not, they rotted away in the fridge, freezer, and cupboards and were thrown out when Gwen was feeling virtuous and doing a cleaning blitz.

* * *

As it happened, John didn't speak to Gwen the day he read her manuscript, nor the day after that. In fact, it was another week before he called her. Despite devoting as much time as he possibly could to editing her draft, he tried his level best not to think about the author herself, hoping his tangled feelings for her would resolve themselves.

Eventually John knew he couldn't put off speaking to Gwen any longer, and he steeled himself to call. He was determined to remain business-like: he was phoning to congratulate Gwen on her writing skills and organise when they would meet next. He was absolutely not looking forward to speaking to her again, but the thought of hearing her voice brought a smile to his face. He dialled the number and waited. The phone seemed to ring forever, and John was just about to give up and put the receiver down, when she answered.

"Hello," she said, obviously out of breath. John wondered what she'd been doing, then he realised Gwen was waiting for

him to speak. He was ready to offer his congratulations on her manuscript, but when he tried to talk he found his mouth had gone dry. He cleared his throat and said gruffly:

“Hello, this is John Thatcher, your editor.”

“Oh, hello. Sorry, I’m a little winded,” replied Gwen, “I thought it might be important, my mother’s hospital calling, so I ran in from the car.”

Well, that puts me in my place, thought John tetchily. Right, back to business.

“I want you to come to London for a few days next week. We need to work on your manuscript.”

“Um, how long for exactly?” replied Gwen anxiously.

John began to feel annoyed with himself as much as with Gwen. This conversation was not going anything like he’d imagined it would.

“Four, maybe five days,” he answered stiffly.

“I’m sorry but I can’t do that, I explained in our meeting that my mother’s been ill and is in hospital. I’m her only relative and I can’t leave her without anyone to visit her.”

John was stumped; he hadn’t anticipated this sort of response from Gwen. He remembered the issues with her mother, but he’d felt certain that she’d see sense after a little thought, and realise how illogical and impractical she was being. Of course, family was important, but surely Gwen must realise how inconsequential missing a few hospital visits was, when she had an opportunity to do so much more. Here she had a chance to make something larger than herself, make something for the future; her mother would want her to reach her potential, she would be proud of Gwen’s achievements. She certainly wouldn’t want to hold Gwen back. John thought how mortified his father would have been if he’d felt he’d ever held John back from succeeding. This was right for Gwen, and right for her mother; she was being given the opportunity to be appreciated for her talent, only she wouldn’t get out of her own way to seize hold of it.

John tried to stay calm as he replied, “It really is imperative that we begin work as soon as possible. Couldn’t you hire someone to look after your mother while you’re away?”

“No! Of course not!” replied Gwen, horrified by his suggestion.

John could tell that Gwen wasn’t going to back down. He sighed deeply. No matter how talented she was, there was no way they’d be able to work together successfully if she was going to be this unprofessional. It really wasn’t fair on his other authors that his time was going to be taken up dealing with someone like this.

But the business had to come first. Before anything. If they didn’t meet Paul’s deadline it would be disastrous for the company. It looked like it was going to be up to him to get this book ready, and ready on time.

“Fine, I’ll come to you, then. I’ll stay in a hotel and we can work in between your hospital visits,” John stated, calculating that it would be easier to deal with the rest of his workload via email and phone than use these methods with Gwen at this early stage of the editing process; she’d need his expertise in person.

“There aren’t any hotels around here. There’s probably a bed and breakfast somewhere, but most of them will be full now the schools are on holiday.”

“I’ll stay in your house then,” snapped John with exasperation, still not believing the direction the conversation had taken. He regretted his suggestion as soon as the words came out of his mouth. He could hardly stop thinking about Gwen when she was two hundred miles away, what on earth would he be like under the same roof? But he couldn’t really see any other option. If they didn’t work together soon, then the book wouldn’t be ready on time, and it would be his neck on the line and his plans down the drain.

“Yes, I suppose so.” Gwen sounded very hesitant.

“Alright, I’ve got your address, I’ll be with you Monday morning; shall we say eleven?”

“That’s fine,” replied Gwen.

“Goodbye, then.”

“Goodbye.”

John didn’t think he’d ever been more pleased to end a telephone conversation.

* * *

“Oh, help,” said Gwen wearily to herself, putting down the phone and looking at the state of the house. She visited her mother every day, other than that and her shifts at the tea rooms, she’d been writing continuously and not thought about doing any housework.

She’d enjoyed the tranquillity, taking the dog for walks and working outside when the weather was fine enough. When it wasn’t possible to write outdoors, she used her study, which had been her father’s office until he died. Gwen and her mother had found clearing out this space far harder than getting rid of his clothes and shoes; it had seemed to contain his whole life. The most obvious change was that his old typewriter no longer sat proudly in the middle of the large leather-topped table. Gwen’s laptop had taken its place. She’d kept all her father’s shelving, and his reference books still surrounded her as she worked.

Two Rayburns heated the house, one at the front and one at the back. The study had its own wood-burning fire (chopping the wood was one of the many jobs which Gwen had taken on when her father died). Gwen kept a kettle next to her desk, along with mugs, teabags, and instant coffee; she didn’t even need to get up to make herself a cuppa, when she was in the middle of writing.

Being an only child had made Gwen quite independent and, living by herself for the last couple of months, working every spare minute on her manuscript, meant she’d had very little time to socialise, let alone have any guests staying in the

house. The bare minimum of housework had been done. The only reason there wasn't more washing-up piled in the sink was that Gwen had been living on baked potatoes and ready meals since getting back from London.

How ironic that her editor's visit meant she'd have to abandon her work to tidy the house for his arrival. Gwen looked around, making a mental note of what would need to be done before John arrived; she considered calling him back and agreeing to go to London to work with him there. It took less than a moment for her to firmly put that idea to rest, her mother needed her here, she couldn't be away from her for the best part of a week, and she'd explained that to both Paul and John. Plus, if she went to London she couldn't work in the tea rooms and so would have no money to live on until the publishers paid her advance, and she wasn't sure when that would be.

What was worse than the physical inconvenience of John coming to stay, was that Gwen had barely calmed down from her last meeting with him, and here she was preparing to have the man living in her house — she'd be a wreck by the end of it!

She called Bronwyn and Brian and asked if they could arrange for someone to cover her shift on Monday. She couldn't very well go to work half an hour before her editor arrived. They were happy for her to do only a couple of shifts while John was staying. She knew he wouldn't be pleased, but she'd just have to work extra hard for the rest of the time, and at least her waitressing would give her a break from John, thought Gwen wryly, before getting stuck into the cleaning.

Chapter Four

John set his satnav with Gwen's address and settled himself in for the long drive. He didn't often need his car in London, and rarely had the time to drive anywhere out of the city, but he'd never have dreamt of giving it up. He liked to be independent at all times and hated to rely on anything as unreliable as trains or buses.

Although it was only just after eight, it was going to be a warm day, and the car was already beginning to heat up. John turned on the air conditioning and loosened his tie a little. He was dressed in a pristine grey suit, one of several identical ones that he wore for anything to do with work — it was important for him to look professional, particularly as the thoughts he'd had about Gwen the night before were extremely unprofessional. He'd woken up annoyed at his lack of self-control, and after a cold shower, had sternly reminded himself of how important it was that he concentrated on business, and business alone.

As he joined the M4, John told himself to just focus and get all the corrections done. The sooner they were finished, the sooner he could be away from Gwen and back to his orderly life in London; a life where everything was under control, and unpolluted by thoughts of pretty Welsh girls.

If they could just get through the bulk of it on this visit, then he could deal with any other small issues by phone, or, even better, by email. Not that receiving an email from Gwen wouldn't be unsettling, but it was infinitely better than having her type away on her computer right next to him.

* * *

Gwen estimated that she had just under an hour before John arrived. Should she spend that time finishing sorting out the house or herself? She decided to go with herself. Gwen had her pride and was at least going to look half-decent when she met John again.

As Gwen shaved her legs in the shower, she once more considered the irony that if it hadn't been for her editor coming she'd be working right now.

Gwen stood in front of her mirror, trying to decide what else needed to be done. Her hair badly needed a trip to the hairdresser, but there was no time to do anything about that now, she'd just have to wear it tied up. She had good skin and didn't need a lot of make-up, but she put on more mascara than usual, feeling slightly silly for doing so but knowing she'd regret it if she didn't.

Next was deciding what to wear. She didn't want to seem like she'd made too much of an effort, but part of her still needed to look nice when he arrived. Finally she settled on jeans and a white shirt, which she just had time to iron and put on, before she heard John's car pulling into the driveway.

Gwen opened her front door. He looked absolutely perfect, and not entirely unlike James Bond she mused, before being rudely pulled back to reality as John looked warily down at her feet and stated: "Oh, you have a dog." He continued to glance downwards and eye Oscar suspiciously, as the animal tried to nuzzle past Gwen and give John a good sniff. Gwen took hold of Oscar's collar, but the dog appeared unperturbed by John's reaction to him and continued in his desperate quest to make friends.

"Yes," said Gwen, attempting to restrain her over-zealous pet. "His name's Oscar."

John raised an eyebrow.

"After my father's favourite writer, Oscar Wilde," continued Gwen defensively.

When no comment followed, Gwen said, "Come on in, I'll just get him out of your way."

Gwen dragged a very put-out Oscar into the utility room, where he had his water bowl and a bed to dry out on when he came home muddy from walks.

“Right, where shall I set up my stuff?” asked John as he strode through the front door.

Taken aback by his brusqueness, Gwen told herself to stop being so silly: he was here as her editor and obviously just wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible.

“Well, I work in here,” said Gwen, opening the door to her study. As she said this, she looked into the room and immediately realised there was no way that there was space for even the tiniest of laptops to fit on her desk. She wasn’t a naturally tidy worker and, in the hurry to get everything ready for John’s arrival, cleaning the shower and dealing with the dog hair on the sitting room sofa had seemed the priority. How could it not have occurred to her that they’d need to spend most of their time in this very room?

“How about on the kitchen table? There should be plenty of space for you there,” replied Gwen as cheerfully as she could manage. Despite his reserved, almost haughty, manner, just being in the same room as him was making her feel quite flushed and light-headed.

“It’s through there,” she said, gesturing towards the door.

“Fine,” replied John, “I’ll set up now. I’ve got some edits to go through with you straight away.”

John didn’t move out of the doorway immediately so Gwen went to walk past him. Unfortunately he started to move at the same time, and so they ended up doing a very awkward sort of dance as they tried to squeeze by each other.

“Would you like a tea or coffee?” asked Gwen, trying to rescue the situation.

“A coffee.”

Making the drinks, Gwen kept one eye on John. His laptop was obviously much newer and far faster than hers. It was ready with the files John needed before Gwen’s laptop had even woken up.

Gwen noticed John fiddling with his phone, looking increasingly frustrated.

“Oh, you won’t be able to get a signal in here, I’m afraid. The valley blocks it. You need to go up the hill a bit, that’s one of the reasons why I don’t bother with a mobile,” said Gwen with her forced cheerfulness.

John didn’t reply, but his look of disbelief was enough to make Gwen giggle to herself.

Gwen put two coffees on the table. John pulled his over and said brusquely, “Right, well, I’ve got a copy of your manuscript with some preliminary corrections. I suggest we start at the beginning and work our way through.”

Expecting him to make some comment about her writing, Gwen readied herself for his critique. John, however, didn’t seem to feel that anything else needed to be said. He signalled to Gwen to sit down next to him and grimaced slightly as he took a sip of his coffee.

At no point did John make any mention of the standard of Gwen’s writing, either positive or negative. They went through the first chapter, each looking at a copy of the manuscript, Gwen scribbling John’s criticisms into her margins before implementing them on her laptop. She agreed with the majority of changes he suggested but wasn’t completely sure she’d dare to say anything if she didn’t; he seemed so confident in everything he was saying. Besides, she didn’t think John was the sort of man who would take kindly to being contradicted.

Gwen discovered she was very productive when she and John were working together: she was so anxious around him that she didn’t dare take her eyes off her laptop for more than a few seconds. John was evidently completely immersed in the work and so she ended up focussing more, not wanting him to think she was slacking. She felt his physical presence constantly, even when she was concentrating on her computer screen.

Gwen was also finding it very useful to have someone go through her writing with her. Sarah had read through her work a few times and said it was fantastic, but Gwen suspected that even if Sarah thought it was complete rubbish she would be far too polite to say anything. Gwen knew John wouldn't hesitate to tell her what he really thought.

She suddenly became aware of her stomach rumbling embarrassingly; she checked her watch and saw that it was already two o'clock, poor Oscar must be desperate for a walk. She should have left the back door open so he could have a wander outside and lie in the sun.

Gwen's stomach let out another enormous growl.

"Sorry," she said, blushing slightly.

She was sure she saw a little smile flickering around the corners of John's mouth.

"Would you like to take a break for lunch?" he asked.

"Yeah, OK, if that's alright with you," replied Gwen.

Getting up self-consciously, Gwen made some sandwiches. She could hear John still typing away on his computer but felt like he was watching her every move.

"I usually eat outside when the weather's fine," she commented.

"OK."

John followed Gwen into the garden and sat down next to her in the shade of an old oak tree.

Gwen couldn't relax as she usually did when she took a break from her work and got some fresh air. She couldn't think of anything to say to John, and she was even more nervous sitting next to him now that they weren't focused on work. It was a beautiful day, the sky was a vibrant blue dotted with wispy little white clouds, but Gwen hardly noticed it, as she tried not to look at John and ate as swiftly as possible. She suspected John didn't usually take much of a lunch break and she didn't want to keep him waiting. John ate his food quickly

and efficiently — the same way he did everything. He sat up straight and looked uncomfortable, vaguely wary of the grass around him.

Beginning to regret coming outdoors, Gwen was grateful when she heard the phone ringing inside the house; it gave her a good excuse to leave the awkward situation. She wasn't so happy when she found out who it was and why they were calling.

It was the mortgage company she'd been waiting to hear back from. After several unsuccessful applications, she'd found a small company who seemed a lot more approachable and dealt with her as a person rather than a number. They'd discussed her situation over the last few weeks, and if a publisher took her on, she'd been led to believe, then the loan approval would be a mere formality; unfortunately this turned out not to be the case. She tried to reason with them, but they just reiterated in a bored fashion that they would not be able to help.

She felt hollow and devastated. She desperately tried to think of a way out of this terrible situation, while striving not to dwell on what the loss of the house would mean to her, and, more importantly, her mother. There wasn't a plan B: she'd exhausted all the other options and had put her faith in this last company. They'd said they'd help if she got a book deal. Well, she had, but yet here she was. What use was her writing now?

With a heavy heart, Gwen looked out of the window. She saw John getting up and brushing himself down before coming inside — the last person she wanted to see. She needed to be by herself to think over what had happened and work out how and when she was going to break the bad news to her mother. She was due to visit the hospital in only a few hours, and she knew the sensible thing to do would be to simply tell her mam and get it over and done with. But it was heart-breaking just imagining how her mother's face would look when she found out. Especially since Gwen had told her that the publishing deal meant everything would be alright.

Gwen was very quiet and a little distracted for the rest of the afternoon; her mind kept wandering to the house situation — trying to work out if there could possibly be another way for her to buy it that she hadn't thought of yet. She checked the clock constantly, unsure whether she wanted it to slow down, and so delay her telling her mother, or speed up so she could get it over and done with.

“I'll need to leave in a while to visit my mam. Will you be OK?”

John looked a little taken aback by the question but replied, “I'll be fine. What time do you need to go?”

“Visiting's from six until eight, I usually leave at five thirty and I'll be back by half eight.”

“Right, well, we should be able to get a bit more work done when you get back.”

Gwen barely heard him; her mind was occupied trying to work out the gentlest way to break the bad news to her mother.

* * *

Gwen returned from the hospital feeling emotionally wrung out. She hadn't brought up the mortgage; she just hadn't been able to find the right words. She felt horribly guilty, and not at all keen to deal with John and his promise of more work.

“How was your mother?” asked John awkwardly.

“Fine, thank you,” replied Gwen.

“Are you ready to get back to it?”

“Sure,” she said, dejectedly sitting back down at the kitchen table. They continued where they'd stopped a few hours earlier.

It wasn't until nearly ten that Gwen realised that they'd forgotten to eat.

“Would you like some supper?” asked Gwen tentatively.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” came the reply, “I suppose now’s as good a time as any to call it a night.”

Gwen heated up some soup she found at the back of a cupboard, while John meticulously tidied up his side of the table.

They ate in silence before retiring to their separate bedrooms.

* * *

Gwen woke the following morning with a jump as her alarm clock beeped into life. She groaned as she looked at the time but forced herself to get up. She rarely got a lie in because of needing to take Oscar out, but she was not at all used to proper early mornings. Gwen looked at her bed longingly but knew she’d regret it if she climbed back in. She was pretty sure that John would be planning to start work early, and as he’d never seen her without make-up, today was not going to break that record.

After showering as quickly as she could, Gwen blow dried her hair, put on her make-up, and spent only the absolute minimum of time dithering about what to wear, yet when she came downstairs John was already sat at the kitchen table, typing away on his laptop, steaming mug in hand.

“I hope you don’t mind me helping myself to coffee,” he asked as she came into the kitchen.

“No, not at all,” replied Gwen, a little embarrassed to be late starting, despite her best efforts. But then again, it was only eight! What time did this man wake up? How was she going to explain that she still needed to walk Oscar before she started work? Gwen thought the best plan would be to act blasé: “I’ll be with you right after I’ve taken Oscar out. Help yourself to anything you want,” she said, sounding far more confident than she felt.

Gwen had to giggle as she caught sight of herself in the hall mirror; she doubted Oscar would recognise her with her make-up, blow-dried hair and properly ironed clothes, and was

a little disappointed when he gave her no more than a quick sniff before pushing her towards the door.

Gwen rushed Oscar's walk and was back after fifteen minutes. She felt pretty guilty for having to hurry him, but promised she'd make it up to him at lunchtime. She gave him an extra treat as she hung up her coat and the lead in the utility room.

John didn't look up from his computer screen when she came back into the kitchen and put on the kettle.

"Would you like another coffee?" she asked.

"No, thank you."

"Toast?"

"No."

Having made tea and toast for herself, Gwen got her laptop and sat down on the chair opposite John and began the long process of starting up the computer.

"Are you ready to start work now?" he asked grumpily.

"Yes," replied Gwen, mirroring his curtness.

"Here are some preliminary changes I want made," said John, passing over a folder. "They're for the second chapter. When they're done email me the file so I can go through it again."

Yes, sir! thought Gwen, but she didn't dare say it. She began working her way through the corrections.

At midday Oscar came over to the table and put his head on Gwen's lap. He looked up at her, gazing into her eyes. She patted him and whispered, "I know, sweetheart."

"Problem?" said John, not looking up from his laptop screen.

"Oscar needs a walk," replied Gwen.

John made no comment for a few moments then asked "Have you got to the changes on page forty-seven?"

“Almost,” said Gwen testily. She gave Oscar a final pat, and he settled down under the table.

By one, Oscar was whining and scratching at the utility-room door.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, can’t that animal wait a while?” said John crossly, “We’re right in the middle of work here.”

Gwen saw red, “That animal’ has a name, it’s Oscar, and no, he can’t wait any longer. He’s already been waiting for an hour.”

Marching out of the room, Gwen whistled to Oscar to follow her. She wanted to get out of John’s sight before he saw the tears that were pricking at her eyes. Why was he so horrible and selfish?

Oscar followed but not before giving John a dark look as if to say, “Just look what you’ve done now.”

* * *

The atmosphere between Gwen and John was tense, to say the least, for the rest of the afternoon. Gwen couldn’t work out whether John just wasn’t sorry for his behaviour or if he genuinely thought it acceptable to act like that. Either way, she certainly wasn’t prepared to make the first move to re-establish cordial relations. But Gwen found maintaining an angry silence, even with someone as laconic as John, exhausting and unpleasant. She was very grateful when the time finally came for her to visit her mam. A couple of hours away from the bad feeling in the house would do her the world of good.

“I’m going now,” she said, closing her laptop and getting up from the table.

John didn’t look up from his screen, “Hang on, just two minutes.”

“No, I’m going now,” said Gwen with finality and went to walk out of the room.

“Gwen!” John stood up and glared at her as she turned to face him.

“What?”

“Don’t walk away from me when I’m talking to you.”

“I thought you’d finished,” said Gwen stubbornly.

“Well, I hadn’t. I’m your editor and if our relationship is going to work then you need to start treating me with some respect. If I say I need you for two more minutes then I really mean I need you for two more minutes. Then you may go.”

“Well, I need to leave now,” said Gwen defiantly.

“I understand your commitment to your mother, but this is our commitment. We have to get this book finished. You could have done the two minutes and been on your way already if you hadn’t argued.”

They stared at each other, trying to work out how serious the other was about holding their ground. But Gwen knew she had the most to lose. She sat down and finished what John wanted before racing to the hospital. She had no idea how amazed John was that she’d given in.

* * *

The visit to the hospital dissipated Gwen’s anger, but she still had to pull herself together before she got home. Leaving her mother at the end of visiting time was never easy, and it usually took her at least an hour of pottering around the house before she began to feel anything like cheerful.

She turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door to be greeted by a very happy Oscar. Gwen bent down to pet him, and as she stood up she tried to place what was different. It came to her like a bolt of lightning — for the first time since her mother had been taken to hospital the house felt like a proper home, welcoming her back in: the lights were on; some gentle piano music, which Gwen recognised as one of her favourite Einaudi CDs, was coming from the stereo, and wonderful smells emanated from the kitchen. As a finishing

touch, a fire burned merrily in the sitting room, taking the chill off the late-summer's evening. Gwen pushed open the kitchen door and just managed to stop herself from giggling at the sight of John wearing one of her mother's aprons. He was slicing some runner beans.

John smiled bashfully. "I hope you don't mind," he said, indicating all the cooking equipment.

"No, of course not, it smells delicious. What is it?"

"There's a fish pie," he replied, as he opened up the oven to show her. "And I was just doing some runner beans and carrots to go with it. Not very glamorous, I'm afraid."

"I'm impressed," said Gwen.

"Well, I'm a man of few talents, but making fish pie is one of them. There's a glass on the table for you, I'm drinking red," he said, indicating the open wine bottle on the table. "But there's white in the fridge. I wasn't sure what you liked."

"Red's fine, thanks," she said, pouring herself a glass. She sat down and attempted to stop thinking how bizarre this whole scenario was.

Neither spoke for a couple of minutes, and Gwen was beginning to find the silence uncomfortable. She asked the first thing which came to mind.

"Do you cook for everyone whose book you edit?"

She thought she saw a flash of hurt in John's eyes.

"Only those who leave me stranded and hungry in the Welsh wilderness."

"Well, thank you," said Gwen gently, appreciating the effort he'd gone to. They both smiled and any awkwardness disappeared.

"How old is he?" asked John as Oscar walked over to him hoping for some attention.

"Oscar?"

“Yes, Oscar.”

“He’s eight. We had a golden retriever before him called Bronte; we got Oscar when she died.”

“I let him out into the garden earlier, he seemed to want to go out.”

“Thanks.”

The meal was delicious. Proper home-cooked food, such as Gwen had been craving ever since her mother had become too ill to cook and Gwen had begun surviving on pasta and baked potatoes.

The wine helped Gwen to feel more relaxed, and the soothing music in the background completed the setting perfectly.

“I’m sorry if I was rude to you earlier, I was upset by a phone call I’d received yesterday, it wasn’t fair of me to take it out on you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said John, a little gruffly.

“I should have warned you what time I needed to go.”

“Yes, you should.”

They lapsed back into silence. Gwen was almost sorry she’d said anything. The evening had been going so well until then.

“Are you alright now?” asked John quietly.

Gwen was too surprised to answer immediately. John was the last person she’d expect to have cared about how she was feeling, especially considering the way she’d left the house that afternoon.

“I’m okay. It was rather unexpected, it was something I thought I’d dealt with, but sadly it’s all fallen apart. I was dreading telling my mother.”

“How did she take it?”

“Really well. I didn’t tell her.”

“Why not?”

“I wimped out, I’m afraid.”

“Ah.”

“I’d rather not talk about it, if it’s alright with you.”

“Of course, let’s get back to work.”

“Sure,” Gwen said with relief, starting her laptop up again.

* * *

Before she climbed into bed that night, Gwen went to set her alarm. She briefly considered setting it even earlier, but swiftly decided she was being daft. She wasn’t going to be made to feel lazy and uncomfortable in her own home. Nine was a perfectly reasonable time to begin work. She, rather defiantly, set her alarm for eight.

Halfway through the night, Gwen woke up and changed the alarm time to seven. She wasn’t going to risk not having time to change her outfit at least twice before taking Oscar for a walk.

* * *

“Is there really any point to me being here?” said John the next morning as he watched Gwen grabbing her keys and purse ready to leave for a four hour shift at the tea room.

“It was your choice to come,” replied Gwen crossly. “I’ll be back by half two at the latest.”

She left before he had a chance to call her back for something.

Gwen spent the car journey contemplating her frankly bizarre home circumstances. She was getting pretty fed up with John’s moods. Despite their bonding the previous evening, he was grouching at her again. He’d been made completely aware of Gwen’s situation before he left London. She’d done her best to be accommodating: she’d put him up in her home and done everything she could to re-organise her

shifts at work so she'd have as much time working with him as possible.

She appreciated that he had a job to do, and that it was her book he was working so hard to edit, but she felt he had to understand that she couldn't be at his beck and call around the clock and forget all her other responsibilities. From a practical point of view her contract still hadn't arrived from the publishers, and until it was all signed, no advance would be arriving in her bank account; if she didn't do at least some shifts at the tearoom then she'd have no money to live on.

Gwen was also beginning to feel that absolutely nothing about her or her life was good enough for John. She'd even felt embarrassed serving him a ham sandwich at lunchtime the day before, worried that the ham and bread wouldn't be up to the standards he was used to in London. She knew it was partly her own insecurity, as John hadn't been directly rude about anything, except possibly Oscar, but it didn't help that he seemed to have a permanent scowl on his face, that appeared to deepen whenever something annoyed him, which was frequently. Any food or beverage Gwen served, particularly coffee, seemed to elicit this reaction, as did everything Oscar did, and the house's plumbing, which was proving to be a source of endless fascination and annoyance in equal measure.

He was so intense all the time, and extremely driven and focused! He wasn't simply a workaholic: it almost felt that he considered what he did had a higher purpose, that publishing wasn't so much a job, but something of a vocation.

She was grateful to be escaping to the tea rooms for a few hours. However, she spent most of her time away from John wondering what he was doing and whether he was thinking about her.

Chapter Five

Once again, John found it very hard to keep his temper with Gwen the following afternoon. She was infuriating and completely unreasonable, and he was angry with himself for noticing how very beautiful she looked when she was being obstinate.

His mood wasn't helped by his feeling that he was completely out of the loop with events in the London office, he felt he didn't have the control he needed. He really shouldn't be in Wales: the only place more remote would be the Outer Hebrides, for goodness' sake. However, despite the farmhouse's many shortcomings, he had to admit that something about the place struck a chord with him.

But that woman! He just didn't know how she managed to get under his skin so much.

The trouble had started when Gwen had interrupted halfway through his explanation of why she should move a particular paragraph to the end of the chapter they were working on. She'd apologised but explained she'd be late to see her mother if she didn't leave soon.

"We have to get this chapter done," he'd insisted.

"I have to see my mother."

"Missing one visiting time wouldn't be the end of the world!"

"It would be to me."

"The Earth does not revolve around you, Gwen."

"I never said it did," she'd replied angrily.

"I'm doing this to help you," he'd said.

"No, you're not!" Gwen had said, full of righteous indignation. "You're doing it to make money for your company."

Before he'd had a chance to reply, Gwen had continued, getting into her swing: "Your company were made aware that I need to visit my mother. I never hid that. I've been working all day, and, if we need to, I will continue working when I get back, but now I'm going." And with that she'd had marched out of the room.

* * *

Upstairs, closing the door to her bedroom, Gwen checked herself in the mirror. She was shaking slightly and her cheeks were flushed. She couldn't believe that she had just spoken to her editor like that. This was a very important man who she was going to have to work with for months, if not years. Had she been too hasty? Too rude? Suddenly she wondered whether she ought to go down and apologise, try to repair some of the damage right away.

She was close to heading back into the kitchen; she got as far as the hallway when she forced herself to stop. What was she doing? She knew, beyond any doubt, that she was in the right. It was John who'd been rude and unreasonable, and she shouldn't be the one saying sorry. With renewed resolution, Gwen checked her hair and make-up, grabbed a jumper, and headed out of the front door, only pausing briefly to say goodbye to Oscar.

* * *

After Gwen left, John crossly began to check, as best he could, the goings-on at Black Horse. As far as he could tell, all was running smoothly, but John knew he'd feel far more on top of things if he were in London. He had so much to plan and deal with and attempting to control a temperamental prima donna was frankly annoying and a waste of his precious time. He really needed to wind matters up in Wales as quickly as possible so he could get back to more important things.

John was still grumpily banging away on his computer half an hour later when he heard a little whine and looked down to see Oscar looking up at him pitifully, lead in his mouth. Even in his aggravated state, John couldn't resist such

a charming entreaty. He shut his laptop and pulled on a pair of Gwen's father's old walking boots — there was no way his Gucci loafers would survive the mud — and headed out, a very grateful Oscar by his side.

* * *

Gwen wasn't sure what to expect when she returned from the hospital, but remembering how pleased her mam had been to see her renewed Gwen's conviction that she'd been right to insist upon visiting that evening.

As she drove home she reiterated to herself that whatever John said she was going to stand by her decision to visit her mother. But what if he declared he'd no longer work with her? Would the publishers drop her completely? Once the thought was in her mind it refused to shift.

She had no idea how to save the house, but if she could find a way, and there simply had to be one, then she was going to need money, and the only viable route she had to make any decent money was through her writing. And despite the odds, she had a contract, or at least had had a contract. Oh god, had she really just messed it all up?

Had she been too hasty in defying her editor? She knew her mother would understand if she missed one visit, and she could have still called to speak to her and check she was all right. A feeling of dread rose in Gwen's stomach as she frantically tried to decide what she could do to make amends and stop John from doing something that could devastate her and her mother's future.

* * *

After parking the car, Gwen hesitated a little as she opened her front door. She tried to steady her resolve and prepare herself for what lay beyond. Despite confirming the presence of John's car, Gwen somehow half expected he'd already left.

Delicious smells hit Gwen's nostrils the second she walked in. Well, at least John was still there. The next test

would be whether he'd cooked for her as well as himself.

Gwen couldn't believe the sight that greeted her on entering the kitchen: the table was laid beautifully with pristine napkins that her mother used at Christmas; a very good bottle of red wine was already open and breathing; and at the place she usually sat there was a beautiful bouquet of yellow roses, wrapped in crisp brown paper and tied with twine.

"Those are for you," John said, indicating the flowers.

"They're beautiful."

"They're part of the apology I owe you."

"Oh?"

"I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did. You were absolutely right: you've always been completely upfront about the times you're able to work. It's not fair to expect you to work the ridiculous hours that I do. I'm just under a lot of stress at the moment, and I took it out on you, I'm sorry."

"Thank you. To be honest, I'm not sure it was only your fault. I over-reacted. It wouldn't have killed me to have missed visiting for one day."

"No, it wouldn't, but one of the things I respect most about you is the way you support your mother, it's ... very commendable," he said.

"You respect me?" repeated a stunned Gwen.

"Yes, I do. You're selfless and you have a real sense of duty. Too many people underestimate the value of family loyalty; few things are more important. Even if not all of us have the easy relationship you seem to have had with your parents."

He looked awkward, then muttered, "Supper's nearly ready. I hope you like roast chicken," as he turned back to the stove.

He really is an expert subject-changer, Gwen mused to herself, wondering about the story behind John's relationship with his parents.

* * *

"I need to go into town this morning to pick up some food," she said, passing him a cup of coffee before they started work the next morning.

"Can't you get some delivered?" he said grumpily, pulling his usual face as he tasted the coffee.

"No one delivers to here."

"Right."

"I'll be as quick as I can."

She was worried John would think she was shirking if she disappeared for too long; he always seemed to be working, or thinking about work — probably because he was so desperate to get back to London and decent coffee. She could understand: she was always glad to get home after she'd been away, and it must be uncomfortable staying in a stranger's house. Despite, or maybe because of, his devilish good looks, she'd be glad when he was gone, she couldn't relax with him in the house and still felt slightly guilty even walking Oscar, in case John thought he was getting in the way of work.

"Mind if I come with you?" he asked unexpectedly, getting up and stretching.

"Uh ..." she said, desperately trying to think of a reason why he couldn't come. She'd been looking forward to a couple of hours without John around and had hoped it would clear her head a little. She wasn't quick enough with her excuse, and before she knew it John was in the hall waiting for her.

Gwen was about to climb in the car when she saw a look of horror cross John's face as he spotted the mess on the front passenger seat. Since her mother had gone into hospital this had become Oscar's place, and there were biscuits, toys, and a large amount of dog hair strewn over the seat and footwell.

She sighed: yet another place she'd missed during her great clean.

"Would you rather we took your car?" she asked.

"Am I that transparent?"

"Yes. Come on, then," said Gwen.

* * *

John drove quickly and confidently; Gwen was in no doubt that he was completely in charge of his vehicle. The day was chilly and grey. The windscreen wipers worked lazily to clear the constant drizzle. As loyal as she felt to her beloved Welsh valleys, this sadly was the typical weather for the region.

It never failed to amaze Gwen how the same landscape could look so dramatically different from day to day. Now, with the dark cloud eclipsing the tips of the tallest hills and blocking out any hint of sun, the land looked fierce, wild, and faintly foreboding, just as she loved it most. Of course, the valleys were also beautiful when the sun shone, particularly in the early morning, when the dew still lay glistening on the grass, but Gwen thought it far more romantic and full of character on these less conventionally perfect days.

They entered Tonnadulais, and Gwen directed John to the tiny car park hidden behind the high street. They were lucky to find a free spot; most of the places were already taken. John positioned the car perfectly in the small space and seemed happy to follow Gwen's lead as she directed him towards the shops. She could see him looking around, taking in the little town. He didn't comment about the area but merely asked: "Where's the supermarket?"

"There's a little Co-op just down the road," said Gwen. "I need to pop into the library and a few smaller shops first. Do you want to go for a coffee or something while I shop? There's a decent café just round the corner." She was careful to steer him away from the tea rooms: she didn't like to take business

away from Bronwyn and Brian, but John in her workplace would be an absolute nightmare.

“No, I think I’d better stick with you. I’ve been working you so hard, you might run off on me.”

Don’t think it hadn’t crossed my mind, thought Gwen, but merely replied, “Come on then.”

They walked into the small, quiet library; there was a young mother reading to her toddler in the children’s corner, and a matronly elderly lady browsing the handicrafts section. Gwen probably had more books in her house than they did here. It was impeccably tidy and all the walls were covered with cheerful posters. There was a large noticeboard by the entrance with details of the library’s opening hours as well as all sorts of local events and classes. John saw that the building was only open four half-days a week and became completely immersed in the board, what on earth was a baby-signing class? And what went on at the Knit ‘n’ Natter’s weekly meetings? Pulling himself away from the notices, he turned round to see Gwen walking towards the issue desk. The smiley middle-aged librarian who served her immediately began quizzing her about him. John saw Gwen blush as the woman gently tried to coax her into admitting that he was considerably more than just her editor. Gwen glanced in his direction, and he turned quickly back to the noticeboard so neither woman would realise he’d been watching.

Gwen was soon finished and came over and tapped John on the shoulder. They walked out together, and he asked, “Why do you bother going there? It doesn’t exactly have a huge selection, does it?”

“Well, they can order in books from the other libraries in the county. It was almost closed a couple of years ago, and I’ve got a lot of good memories of coming here with my mam when I was little, I like to give my support to help it stay open. It’s really nice for the old folks and the children in the town to have a library where they can go.”

John thought about her answer. In London, he insisted that everything be as simple and convenient for him as possible. He never went out of his way to use a particular service just because it needed supporting; if it wasn't the most efficient option, he avoided it.

They went to the post office, the general store, the bakers, and the butchers before finishing with the Co-op. Gwen was welcomed warmly in each shop; the kind enquiries about her mother came first and were closely followed by intense questioning about John. Every time this happened Gwen's face seemed to get pinker, and it took longer for her skin to return to its usual pallor. By Gwen's fourth inquisition, John was finding it highly amusing and was winding her up a little, standing close to her and making it evident he could hear. The butcher was by far the most obvious in his suggestions and went as far as to give John a wink as he was turning to leave.

While Gwen shopped in the Co-op, John took the opportunity to check his messages. He hated not getting decent reception inside Gwen's house. He was so used to using his mobile constantly that the inconvenience drove him mad.

They'd begun the short walk back to the car when John spotted something that made him give a mischievous smile.

"Are you hungry?"

"A little, I suppose," replied an unsuspecting Gwen.

"Great, come on, then!" called John over his shoulder as he marched in the direction of a cheery little tea rooms — the very same tea rooms that Gwen worked in. She tried to call out to him to stop, but he was studiously paying absolutely no attention and continued walking.

Gwen sighed and followed him, there wasn't much else she could do, but the last thing she wanted at the moment was Bronwyn and Brian meeting John — they would tease her mercilessly about him and would never believe the two of them were just colleagues.

“Oh,” John said, feigning surprise as they got closer to the tea rooms, “Isn’t this where you work?”

“Yes,” Gwen said, trying to hide how cross she was.

Bronwyn’s face lit up as John strode in. Gwen was pleased to see that John’s looks had the same effect on other women.

“You must be Bronwyn,” John said, approaching the counter. “I’m delighted to meet you.”

Bronwyn looked momentarily confused until she spotted Gwen looking mortified behind him and put two and two together. She beamed at John as Gwen piped up with, “This is my editor, John Thatcher,” just in case Bronwyn should be in any doubt about their relationship.

“It’s so wonderful you were able to drop in,” gushed Bronwyn, “Take a table and I’ll be over straightaway for your order.”

Gwen knew the only reason Bronwyn was asking them to sit down rather than give their order at the counter was so could run into the kitchen and fill Brian in on what was going on.

True to form, Brian emerged just a few seconds later, and both he and Bronwyn rushed over to take their order.

John had settled himself down quite happily at one of the little tables by the window, indicating to Gwen to take the seat opposite him. He picked up the laminated, wipe-clean menu, making a big show of debating what to choose from all the delicacies on offer. He looked completely at ease under their scrutiny.

“What can I get you two?” asked Bronwyn cheerfully. She almost swooned when John asked if she could recommend something.

Gwen was just about ready to curl up and die. By this point, Brian had given up any hope of being allowed to serve them and so contented himself with informing the other diners of the presence of their ‘celebrity guests’.

After taking their order, Bronwyn didn't appear in any hurry to actually prepare the food; in fact she seemed rather more inclined to stay around for a chat after handing their order over to Brian who marched grumpily back to the kitchen muttering, "I suppose somebody ought to be doing some work around here."

"So, what have you too been up to? Enjoying a nice walk around the town?"

"Yes, actually—" began John.

He was cut off by Gwen, "We were just getting a bit of shopping in," she interjected. "How's business today?" she continued in an attempt to end the conversation and divert attention away from her and her handsome lunchtime companion.

Bronwyn finally left them alone once their food arrived, but only because the lunchtime rush was well and truly underway and Brian was shooting her dirty looks from the kitchen.

John finished his lamb chops, chips, and peas, drained the last of his cup of coffee, and smacked his lips with satisfaction.

"Shall we order a second cup?" he asked mischievously.

"No," said Gwen. He must surely have disliked the coffee and only wanted to stay longer because he could tell she was embarrassed and hating every moment. "Don't you think we ought to be getting back to work?"

"I suppose so," said John with an exaggerated sigh. "I'll pay and give my regards to our delightful hostess," he said, smiling over at Bronwyn.

Gwen felt an unexpected surge of jealousy. Of course she knew he wasn't interested in Bronwyn, but she felt strangely possessive and really didn't like him flirting with her boss. She was in danger of slipping into a sulk, and that would never do; John might guess why and would never let her live it down. She had to be more insouciant.

“Fine, you go and say your goodbyes to Bronwyn, but I’m paying the bill. I don’t need you to buy me lunch.”

“I’m not buying you lunch, the company is, I’ll expense it.”

Gwen felt a little deflated by this but wasn’t sure why. What difference did it make whether a lunch she hadn’t even particularly wanted was paid for by John or his company? What they had was just a work arrangement, as she’d been so eager to clarify to Bronwyn, so she should be glad their lunch was being treated as purely business.

* * *

The weather took a turn for the better the next day; bright blue skies with proper fluffy white cotton-wool clouds floating lazily through it, stretched as far as Gwen could see. She suggested they eat lunch outside, the gorgeous weather was only part of her reasoning — the kitchen table was so covered with laptops and paper that they’d have trouble eating on it, and it would be far easier to just decamp into the garden.

“You’re not wearing a tie!” exclaimed Gwen in surprise halfway through the impromptu picnic.

“So?”

“But you always wear a tie.”

“It’s warm.”

“It’s been warm other days as well,” said Gwen.

“Well I’ll put it back on again if you like,” countered John.

“No, no, that’s quite all right,” said Gwen with mock-seriousness.

John ate his lunch just as quickly as usual and then sat fiddling with his phone. Gwen didn’t think she’d ever seen anyone look more uncomfortable in her life.

“Lie back and close your eyes,” she said bossily.

“How do I know I can trust you?” asked John.

“Don’t be so daft.”

John squinted in the sun and undid another button on his shirt. Gwen raised her eyebrows.

“It’s hot,” he said.

He managed to lie quietly for about forty-five seconds before grumpily asking, “Would you mind telling me why exactly we’re doing this?”

“Because it’s relaxing, and you’re very tense.”

“I’m not tense, I’m just trying—”

“Shh,” she said gently. “Open your eyes. What do you see?”

“Sky. I see sky. Can we get back to work now?”

“Look closer; did you never play the cloud game as a kid? Look, over there, that big one looks like an elephant, and there’s a dragon to your right. See?”

“Yes.” replied John reluctantly.

“What about you?”

John paused for a few seconds and then answered, “Nothing, just cloud shapes.”

“Try harder.”

He thought for longer this time, then finally conceded, “That one could be an iPhone.”

Gwen was silent.

“What?” he asked, sensing she had something to say.

She turned to face him. “You are such a freak. Let’s get back to work, shall we?”

She got up, and he followed her, muttering, “Thank goodness for that,” under his breath.

Chapter Six

The rain drummed against the windows. Gwen checked the clock; she had about ten minutes before she had to get ready to visit her mother.

She saw John had noticed her looking at the time. “I’ll need to make a move soon,” she explained.

“I’d like to come to the hospital with you, if I may?” he replied.

“Really, why?” asked Gwen, too shocked to put her question more politely.

“To meet your mother. Plus I’m sure she’d be grateful to have another visitor, she’s probably sick of you by now.”

“Oh, well ...” Gwen tried frantically to think of a reason why John couldn’t come, ideally one that didn’t hurt his feelings too much, but found she was all out of ideas.

Sensing Gwen’s anxiety, John said, “If she says she’d rather I went, I’ll just go and amuse myself in the gift shop until you’re ready to leave.”

Gwen sighed, and once again felt like he’d outwitted her. She wished she knew how he managed it.

* * *

As John finished up the paragraph he’d been honing, he wondered what had possessed him to ask to accompany Gwen. He didn’t know her mother and certainly had no particular desire to see the inside of a hospital, but he was intrigued to be meeting the person who meant so much to Gwen. Did Gwen take after her mother? Did they sound similar? John had gone with his impulse, and on balance he was glad he had.

“I’ll drive,” he said.

Gwen got up and started gathering her things together.

“Are you sure? The roads can be a little difficult if you’re not used to them,” she said.

“I’ll be fine. How long will it take you to get ready?”

“I’m ready now.” She let her hair down and shook it loose from the messy bun she wore it in while she worked.

“Really? Most women would be at least half an hour before they thought they were presentable enough to open the door and bring in the milk,” commented John with a smile.

“Well I’m not ‘most women.’ I think I look perfectly fine and certainly good enough to visit my mother in hospital where most people are wearing pyjamas! If I’m not smart enough to be seen with you then please stay here!”

“I didn’t mean that you don’t look OK, I was just observing that you’re different to other women I’ve known. I mean ... I like it.”

John’s last remark flummoxed Gwen completely, and she walked silently to his car.

* * *

Gwen was a little nervous as she led John through the maze of corridors that led to her mother’s ward. She knew the way so well by now that she didn’t normally need to stop to check the many signs and maps, but her anxiety meant she double-checked every turning today.

Gwen’s mother, as always, was watching the door to the ward when they arrived. Her face broke into a smile when she saw Gwen, and when she spotted John coming in with her daughter, she sat up and attempted to tidy her hair.

Gwen introduced John. “Please call me Edith,” she said cheerily, bending forward to allow him to kiss her on the cheek. “I take it I have you to thank for these,” she continued, indicating a stunning bouquet of purple gladioli. “They arrived this morning and caused quite a stir, I’m sure everyone thinks I’ve got a fancy man.”

“Guilty as charged,” said John, smiling.

“Well, they’re very beautiful, thank you,” replied Edith, grinning back at John. Gwen was surprised by his

thoughtfulness and could see her mother was already well and truly charmed.

Busying herself tidying around the bed, Gwen refilled her mother's jug of squash and washed the grapes she'd brought with her. She felt slightly superfluous with her mother and John obviously getting along so well and, if she were honest, a little put out. Her mother rarely had any other visitors and, as an only child, Gwen was used to being everything to her, especially since Gwen's father had died. How dare John come in and charm her mam, whom he'd only just met? He could barely manage to be civil to Gwen, despite them working together in such close proximity.

"So, how long are you staying in Wales for?" Edith asked John.

"Just until tomorrow. We should be able to do any further corrections via email."

Gwen's stomach gave an unexpected plummet at the thought of John's departure. She cringed as she heard her mam inquire, "What do you think of our Gwen's book?"

Grabbing the water jug and mumbling something about going to fill it, Gwen fled quickly before she could hear John's reply.

By the time Gwen returned to her mother's bedside, the conversation had returned to the much safer (if more heated) subject of whether Wales would beat England in the rugby match the following weekend.

John left mother and daughter alone for the last half hour of visiting and went to get a coffee, asking them if they wanted anything and kissing Edith on the cheek again before leaving. Gwen had to admit that he was acting the perfect gentleman. Actually, if she was honest with herself, it unnerved her a little; she'd never seen this side of John before. It seemed so far removed from his usual self that she wasn't sure how much to trust it.

As usual, Gwen stayed until the very end of visiting, but she was unusually anxious to leave and had to stop herself from hurrying her goodbye. She came out of the lift to discover John waiting by the main entrance, tapping his foot and furiously typing on his Blackberry. Gwen was relieved; at least she knew where she was with grumpy, irritated John.

He nodded when he saw her and put his Blackberry away. They walked in silence back to the car, both of them preoccupied with their own thoughts.

“The hospital staff seem to be very busy,” he said tactfully, as he drove them home.

“Yes. There used to be a really lovely nurse on my mother’s ward but she’s got a job somewhere else now. None of the others really seem to take the time to get to know the patients. Though I suppose it is hard for them with everything they’ve got to do,” replied Gwen. She paused, then added, “You certainly turned on the charm for my mother.”

“Didn’t you want me to be nice to her?”

“Of course I did.”

“Well, what are you complaining about then?”

Gwen didn’t reply. She was cross because she didn’t understand why John seemed so at ease, so friendly and gracious, with everyone except her. But she wasn’t about to tell him all that.

John sighed deeply, and he muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “women!”

John drove in silence and Gwen let herself drift away in her thoughts, melancholy memories swirling in her mind: her ill mother and dearly missed father — how her life had changed since he’d passed away.

Gwen was a resourceful girl and had never been afraid of hard work, but realised she was tired of always being in charge. Without her father around, all the little chores he’d always done fell to Gwen.

Before he'd died, Gwen had hoped to one day get married and have children of her own. However, Gwen had come to terms with the fact that she now thought it very unlikely she would ever achieve that dream. She loved her mam and she'd always do her best to look after her. She would never even consider shirking what she believed to be her duty as a daughter. But how would she ever be able to meet somebody to share her life with, if she was spending all her time looking after her mother? When her mother's stroke had happened, Gwen knew it really was time to shelve her dreams. There was still hope that Gwen's mother would be able to leave the hospital, and Gwen would willingly step up to her role as her mother's full-time carer. At least she'd be a published author, and, hopefully, writing was something she'd be able to keep up, even if it was only on a part-time basis.

Before the news about the house being sold, Gwen had planned how she could rearrange things for when her mother finally came home. The study could become a bedroom, like it had briefly been for her grandmother, so her mam could be downstairs and be wheeled into the kitchen in her chair for at least some of her meals, then moved into the sitting room for a change of scene if she fancied watching the television. That had been what Gwen had hoped, but what would happen now? She still had no idea what to do about the house, she'd tried calling round mortgage companies again, but without an established regular income, no one was interested. She had nothing to sell, and only a modest amount of savings. Who knew where she and her mam would end up?

* * *

John noticed how far away Gwen seemed during the journey back and considered it best not to disturb her reverie. Besides, he had plenty to think about himself: most pressingly, he really didn't want to go back to London the next day. Meeting Edith seemed to be like discovering the final part of the jigsaw that was Gwen's life. The more he got to know Gwen, the more she drew him in and intrigued him. In fact,

John found that he'd really enjoyed his time in Wales, almost despite himself.

* * *

Back at the farmhouse, they were greeted enthusiastically by Oscar; Gwen took him straight out for a quick walk. When she returned, she found John making dinner for them. He gestured towards the glass of wine he'd poured, ready for her.

"I didn't think I had lamb cutlets in the freezer," said Gwen, noticing what John was cooking.

"You didn't, I went to the shops while you were at the tea rooms. I had a very warm welcome from the butcher, he recommended the cutlets."

"What do I owe you for the food?"

"Oh," said John, surprised. "Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I want to pay." said Gwen firmly.

"It's fine. I chose the food; I'm more than happy to pay for it."

"I can't have my guest buying his own food!"

"Well, firstly I'm hardly a guest, and secondly, why on earth not?"

"My mother would never forgive me, for one," said Gwen a little sheepishly.

"And how would your mother find out?"

Gwen spotted a receipt on the table and quickly grabbed it.

"Hey!" said John, surprised by her underhand tactics.

Gwen scanned the list, a look of horror appeared on her face, "You spent almost four pounds on a packet of ham," she said incredulously.

"Give that back."

“And that bottle of wine was twenty pounds! Is that what I’m drinking now?”

“Gwen, just forget it, it’s fine. You can buy your own stuff from the bargain section, next time, OK?”

“I will,” Gwen said stubbornly. But she had to admit the wine was good.

“How did you learn to cook so well?” she asked as she peered into a saucepan.

“I spent a lot of time perched on a stool in the kitchen when I was growing up.”

“Watching your mam?”

“No, our cook. My mother was either entertaining my father’s business contacts or getting ready to entertain them.”

Gwen steeled herself to enquire more about John’s mother, but before she got the chance, he took a big gulp of wine and, looking straight at Gwen, asked, “So, how come you’re single?”

“Who said I’m single?” she blurted out.

“Well, you haven’t mentioned a partner, and I haven’t noticed any men sneaking up the drain pipe and climbing into your window at night.”

“Well observed,” laughed Gwen. “I am single. There’s not much hope of meeting a man when you spend half your life holed up in a farmhouse writing, and the other half at the hospital or the local tea rooms.”

“There’s always the internet.”

“You’ve tried it have you?” retorted Gwen with a smile, amazed to find how relaxed she was teasing and joking with him.

“No!”

“So, why are you single?”

“I guess I’m just too busy working to meet a girlfriend.”

“What about the women at work?”

“I’ve had some bad experiences of dating women who were only after two things — my wallet and my influence.”

Gwen would have questioned him further, but he took advantage of the brief pause in the conversation to change the subject again.

“Couldn’t you grow salad stuff in the garden?” he said, tearing up some lettuce leaves.

“Before she was ill my mam used to grow most of the vegetables and some of the fruit we ate. It doesn’t really seem worth doing anything with it now.”

“But won’t she be upset when she comes home to find her garden in a state?”

“It’s unlikely she’ll come back here.”

“You mean she’ll need to go into some sort of a home?”

“Goodness, no! I’d do everything I could to make sure that never happened. She won’t be coming back here because it looks like we’re going to lose the house in the next few weeks.”

“Lose the house! Why?” John sat up straighter and looked genuinely dismayed. He’d known that something was wrong after Gwen had been so upset by the telephone call on the day he arrived, but he hadn’t imagined this. Gwen and the house went together, even in the short time he’d been staying there he could tell how much the house meant to Gwen, and he could understand why. John wasn’t usually sentimental about buildings, but he already felt more for this funny little Welsh farmhouse than for his characterless apartment in London or any of the far grander houses which he’d grown up in.

“My mam’s family have farmed here for years and years, but when my gran and grandpa got too old to manage the land and the animals, they gave up all the fields and just kept the house and garden. My parents took over the lease when my

grandparents died. Mam's lived here her whole life, but now the landlord has decided to sell. The auction's next month."

"Is there any way you could buy it yourself?"

"No, I thought the money from the advance on the book would be enough to convince the bank to give me a mortgage, but they're still not interested."

"Is that the news you needed to tell your mother?"

"Yes."

"And you haven't told her yet?"

"She thinks the mortgage company is holding things up, she has no idea how hopeless the situation really is."

"Oh."

"I will tell her, I just keep hoping for a miracle, I guess. I can't bear the thought of not living here."

There was silence. Gwen took a big sip of her wine. Now she'd told John about her money problems, she wasn't sure it'd been the right thing to do. She didn't really know him very well, and she didn't want him to think she was telling him so he'd feel sorry for her. But for some reason, for the moment at least, she found that she liked John and wanted to confide in him. It was nice to have someone she could talk to honestly about what was going on. She felt terrible that she hadn't told her mother how bad the situation was. Gwen knew that her mother would be devastated when she discovered they had no hope of buying the house, and she just kept praying that something would happen to save the day. However, it was becoming increasingly clear that there wasn't going to be a miracle. Even realising her dream of becoming a published author couldn't make up for losing her home and for the hurt her mother would feel when she found out.

* * *

John returned to London the following afternoon, leaving Gwen with some corrections to be getting on with. The parting had been very business-like, no one listening would have had

any idea of the intimacy of their conversation the previous evening. John left after lunch, telling Gwen he'd be in touch, and that he expected the work he'd left her with to be completed and emailed to him by Monday morning. He gave Oscar a quick pat on the head and was gone.

He drove straight home but only stayed long enough to unpack his bags, have a quick shower, and change. In his office at Black Horse, he logged into the company's intranet with his secret account and began working his way through all the files he hadn't been able to remotely access from Wales.

John soon realised that he wasn't able to concentrate. He kept thinking about Gwen, his mind wandering from the lines of figures which usually kept him so enthralled. Frustrated, he surprised himself by calling an old university friend and taking him up on an invitation to a reunion with his rowing team which had been made some time ago.

Unusually, John hadn't wanted to be alone, and an evening out with old friends proved to be an excellent idea, taking his mind off Gwen for a couple of hours. It wasn't a late night by any means — everyone else had wives or girlfriends to be getting back to. John enjoyed catching up and actually found himself agreeing to meet up again in a month's time; he realised afterwards that he was even looking forward to it.

The next day, without anybody to distract him, John was lonely. He couldn't deny the fact that he missed Gwen and even Oscar. His flat was simultaneously too quiet with no one there but himself, and too loud with the traffic noise from outside. The noise had never bothered him before, yet now he found he was jumping every time a car horn beeped or a siren wailed. He'd always relished the quiet that came with living by himself; he hadn't shared a flat since his university days. Worst of all he was bored. John was never bored. He prided himself on always being so busy that he didn't have time for boredom, but here he was, actually considering watching Saturday morning television — the last time he'd done that was roughly sometime in the late-eighties.

What did he usually do at the weekends? Work of course. But John was rapidly coming to realise that there really was more to life than just working. The office could wait till Monday.

He decided to go for a workout. He'd done a fair bit of walking in Wales but that didn't compare to the gym sessions he tried to fit in at least three times a week. If losing his father relatively young to a heart attack had taught him anything, it was the importance of keeping healthy.

John spent as long as he possibly could at the gym. He even used the steam room and swimming pool, neither of which he usually bothered with. He went to the supermarket on the way home, and did his best to revel in the size of the store and the amount of choice: aisles and aisles of produce, almost anything he could think of to eat. Of course, given the choice of just cooking alone and for himself, there wasn't much that John fancied, so he ended up just picking up a few basics like bread and milk and a curry ready meal for that evening. He was tired from the gym and he quickly became frustrated with wandering up and down trying to find what he wanted, with no one around to help. When he finally made it to the checkout, the girl was sullen and unfriendly, and John left the store feeling an unexpected ache for Tonnadulais.

By the time John returned to his flat it was suppertime, and he popped his curry in the oven and opened a bottle of ice-cold beer. He was absolutely determined that he was not going to work on a Saturday night. But his desk did need tidying. That wasn't really work, and it wouldn't take long, if he started now he'd be finished before the curry was ready.

In desperation, John watched some Saturday-night television while he ate, and then the action film that started at nine. After that he went to bed.

On Sunday, he gave in and worked.

* * *

By contrast, Gwen began Saturday trying to convince herself that it was lovely to have the house back to herself. She could wear her pyjamas all day if she wanted and consume vast quantities of tea, toast, and biscuits. She started work without complaint, but then she had a good incentive to: not only would these corrections take her one step closer to being published, but when they were done she'd have to email them to John, giving her an excuse to find out how he was.

Poor Oscar looked miserable, he lay by the door and sighed deeply every now and again wishing that his new friend would return.

* * *

John was in the office at the usual time on Monday and immediately switched on his computer and began scrolling through his emails. He was surprised there was nothing from Gwen; he'd specifically told her that he needed to have the corrections to chapter four returned by this morning.

John stomped, paced, grumped, and generally acted like a bear with a sore head until noon. Finally he heard Big Ben chime twelve, and he picked up the phone and dialled Gwen's number. There was no need for him to look it up; he knew it off by heart, having glanced back and forth at it for the last few hours. The phone rang for some time before it was answered by a female voice. A female voice that John didn't recognise.

"Hello?" said the woman.

"Hello, is Gwen there, please? This is her editor, John Thatcher."

"Oh, I'm sorry but she's not here, I'm her friend Sarah. Gwen's at the hospital, her mam had another stroke."

"Is Edith alright?" asked John anxiously, forgetting to put up his usual shield.

"Yes, she's going to be fine, but it was pretty touch and go for a little while," replied Sarah.

“And how’s Gwen?”

“Tired and worried, but OK.”

“And she’s staying at the hospital?”

“Yes, they’ve got some rooms there for families to sleep in.”

“What about Oscar?” wondered John.

“I’ve been looking after him. I’m just here picking up his bed.”

John talked to Sarah for a little longer, and when the conversation finished he returned to pacing his office, deciding what to do. He knew he wouldn’t be able to relax or concentrate on business until he’d seen for himself that Gwen was alright.

He was in no mood to enter into a long argument with Paul: he needed to get back to Wales as quickly as possible, and all his extra mental energy was being spent trying not to analyse exactly why he was so desperate to help Gwen.

He decided the best way to get what he wanted was to surprise Paul. Then he wouldn’t have a chance to be difficult about John returning to Wales, when he’d only just got back.

He rapped on Paul’s office door and walked straight in, to find Paul in a rather compromising position with his assistant, Julia. The pair pulled apart immediately, Julia’s face was beetroot as she tried to avoid John’s gaze.

“I need to speak to you,” announced John.

Paul managed to compose himself quickly and dismissed Julia before turning to face John and hear what he had to say.

“Something’s come up with Gwen Jones’ manuscript. I need to go and see her for a few days.”

“Not big problems, I trust?” asked Paul suspiciously.

“No, not at all.”

“Can’t it just be dealt with by email?”

John resisted the urge to retort that if it could be dealt with via email, then he would be dealing with it via email. He merely replied, “No, I’m afraid not, I’ll get back as quickly as I can. Was Julia okay, she seemed a little flushed?” asked John, seamlessly changing the subject.

Paul pulled at his shirt collar nervously, “I’m sure she’s fine, just a little warm in here perhaps.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s all it was,” replied John, his eyebrow arching sardonically. “I’ll let you know when I’ll be back. I’ll be leaving straight away.”

“Er, right, fine,” Paul said, hurriedly busying himself at his desk.

* * *

John parked his car and walked swiftly through the automatic doors to the hospital reception. He stopped at the information desk to check where Edith had been moved. It was the first time in hours that he’d paused to consider what he was doing, and it occurred to him that maybe Gwen would find it a little peculiar that he’d rushed all the way back to Wales and might not want to see him at this stressful time. But there was no point in turning back now.

John chose some flowers in the hospital shop and pressed the button for the lift. The doors opened, and he found himself face-to-face with a very teary-eyed, tired-looking Gwen.

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Chapter Seven

Gwen was so absorbed in thoughts of her mother that it took her a moment to realise that John was standing in front of her. She was too stunned to do anything apart from murmur: “What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t send me the corrections so—”

Gwen interrupted John, “You came to find me at a hospital where my mother is critically ill because I didn’t email you on time?” she asked incredulously.

“I called your house and Sarah told me what happened,” explained John.

“Couldn’t you have left an answer phone message for me? I have the corrections done; I just didn’t have a chance to send them to you before the hospital called.”

John looked as if he was about to say something, but Gwen carried on, she had fire in her eyes and was on a roll. There was no way she was going to give John the chance to lay into her about not sending him the work she’d promised.

“My email was a few hours late so you feel justified in travelling all the way here to reprimand me while I’m visiting my mother in the hospital! Is that really how your company do business, because I call it harassment!”

Gwen stormed off before John had a chance to give his version of why he was there or even hand her the flowers he’d got for her mother. He stood open-mouthed and hurt. But despite his rising anger, he couldn’t help thinking that she was fantastic when she was cross.

Gwen drove home quickly. She was absolutely furious. How dare he think he had the right to turn up at the hospital. But it wasn’t just John she was angry with, she was mad with herself — for a brief moment, when she first saw him standing outside the lift, she’d been so pleased to see him, she’d felt her heart rise up in her chest and her load seemed a little lighter.

Until she'd worked out why he'd come, that was. She found it bizarre to think how much she'd have loved for that grumpy, difficult man to be there because he was worried about her. Thank goodness she'd been on her way out of the hospital, and she hadn't had him reprimanding her in front of her mother.

What really hurt was that he obviously had no respect for her or any trust in her work ethic, despite working so closely with her. He should have known there was a good reason why the corrections hadn't been sent to him. He hadn't even waited until the end of the day before coming to chastise her.

By the time Gwen arrived home, her initial anger had subsided, and she just felt sad and numb, weighed down by her worries. She tried to focus on the positive things the doctor had said about her mother's recovery, and not on the fact that it was unlikely that her mother would ever return to live with her. Her mother would need a level of care that Gwen would just be unable to provide on her own.

The house looked very cold and lonely as a heartbroken Gwen climbed out of her car. She missed having someone waiting for her when she got home. She still wasn't used to coming back and finding the place empty since John had returned to London. At least Oscar had been dropped off by Sarah and was obviously pleased to see her.

As soon as the dog had been made a fuss of, Gwen picked up the phone and called Sarah. She answered straight away and wanted to be filled in on everything that had gone on at the hospital. Gwen found it hard to hold back the tears when she described how weak and frail her mother had been and how much she'd needed to sleep while Gwen was there.

"Thanks for looking after Oscar," she said.

"No problem, you know I'm always happy to help. Anyway, taking him out has tuckered the girls out completely; they'll both be begging to be allowed to go to bed at seven."

"Bless them! Give them a kiss from me won't you?"

“Will do, I’ll call tomorrow in case there’s any more news. Let me know if you need a hand with Oscar again.”

“Great, speak to you then.”

Gwen was just about to put down the phone when she heard Sarah say, “Oh, wait!” Gwen put the receiver back to her ear, and Sarah continued, “Did your editor manage to get hold of you? He sounded really concerned.”

“Um, yeah, he turned up at the hospital actually.”

“He didn’t!” exclaimed Sarah. “I mean, I could tell he was worried, but he left work in London and drove all the way to the hospital to check you were alright?”

“Well, to be honest, I think it was more to do with the fact that I hadn’t had a chance to send some corrections he’d been waiting for.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yes, he did.”

“He told you that he came because you hadn’t sent him some corrections? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. I sort of interrupted him as he was explaining,” said Gwen sheepishly.

“He didn’t mention any work when I spoke to him. He wanted to know exactly what had happened to your mam, and who was looking after Oscar. Oh, and whether you’d had to stay at the hospital overnight.”

Gwen was silent, a hollow feeling forming in her stomach.

“What’s the matter?” asked Sarah, obviously concerned.

“I think I may have just done something really stupid. I’d better go.”

Gwen put down the phone. She switched the kettle on while she tried to work out what to do. Should she call John to apologise? Could she really be sure that Sarah was right about his motives?

A few moments later, Gwen's decision whether or not to contact John was made for her as she heard his car pull up outside the house.

Gwen didn't need to check at the window that it was John arriving, the noise made by a clearly delighted Oscar gave the message loud and clear that the dog's new best friend was 'home'. He began barking and scratching at the door as soon as he heard the car, but Gwen managed to force herself to stay in the kitchen until John knocked. She had butterflies madly fluttering around in her tummy but did her best to ignore them. While cross with herself for getting so excited about John coming back, she couldn't help it. Given the choice, she wouldn't be thinking about him at all, that would certainly have made things a lot simpler.

Gwen opened the door. She knew she should say sorry or at least explain her behaviour, but all she found coming out of her mouth was a hoarse, "Hi."

"Hi," replied John, "May I come in?"

"Sure," Gwen left the front door open and self-consciously led the way into the kitchen.

John began to speak, but Gwen knew she ought to apologise first.

"I'm sorry," she said, cutting him off. "Really, I am. I just spoke to Sarah, and I think I was mistaken about your motives for coming to the hospital."

John didn't respond, so Gwen thought she'd better continue.

"She said you came because you were worried about me."

There was still no reaction from John. Gwen was desperately trying to come up with something else to say when finally he spoke.

"Thank you for the apology. I had these to give to Edith."

John handed over the flowers from the hospital, "Could you take them to her when you visit her tomorrow please? I

wasn't sure whether she'd be up to general visitors so thought it best that I didn't try to see her."

"Um, sure," said Gwen, now so embarrassed that she wished she could just disappear on the spot.

"Right, I must go, I've got a long drive ahead of me."

"You're heading back to London, now?" said Gwen in surprise.

"Yes," answered John irritably. "I've wasted enough time today chasing around after you. Send me the corrections as soon as you're able."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay here tonight?"

"No," replied John curtly, "thank you," he added as an afterthought, perhaps realising that he was now being rude.

John gave Oscar a quick pat and then left.

Gwen turned on her laptop, and after its usual leisurely start-up, she emailed him the corrections. Her earlier mortification was now firmly replaced by familiar rage — there was no way she was going to allow him the satisfaction of having to ask for them again.

* * *

Oscar mooched around for the next few days. Gwen was sure he blamed her for John disappearing again so suddenly.

Usually Gwen didn't mind being in an empty house, especially as Oscar was waiting for her and always gave her a warm welcome. But tonight she really felt that the place was missing something. Oscar was as lovely as ever, if a little subdued, but without John there the house just felt too still and silent.

She wanted to chat to someone about her day and smell the yummy smells she'd become used to being greeted by as she came through her front door in the evening.

She reluctantly concluded that the addition of John had turned her house into a home again. As soon as that thought

came to her mind, Gwen pushed it away crossly. She didn't need John to make her house a home; she should be perfectly capable of doing that herself. She quickly turned on as many lights as possible, and even lit some candles for the kitchen table, and put on some music.

Opening the freezer to see what there was to eat, she found some leftover chicken casserole that John had made. She considered chucking it in the bin and making something from scratch, but there wasn't a lot of point, there was no one there to appreciate the statement she'd be making. Plus, there wasn't a lot left in the fridge — at best she'd be serving up marmite toast with olives on the side.

She heated up the casserole while filling Oscar in about her day. He seemed to be listening very intently, but Gwen suspected that he was thinking more about the delicious aromas coming from the stove than her going on about how her mother had managed a little bowl of soup at lunchtime.

* * *

Although it was encouraging that her mother was improving steadily, the days were beginning to drag for Gwen, and she knew she was waiting around hoping that John would come back to Wales. She was constantly restless and trying not to think about how little time she had left before she was forced out of her home.

She'd been quite happy with her busy little life before, but now she felt that something was missing — and she suspected that that something was her handsome editor.

She was moping around almost as much as Oscar and checking her email all the time in the hope of some communication from John.

* * *

John was still debating whether he should go back to Wales or not. Honestly, he knew he could probably do a lot of what was left via email now.

He was once again lost in his thoughts about Gwen when there was a sharp knock on his office door and Paul came in, immediately demanding to know how work on Gwen's book was going.

"Good. I'm just emailing Gwen now," replied John, refraining once again from taking Paul to task about his rude manner.

"You busy this week?" asked Paul, gruffly.

"As always," he answered cautiously.

"Move around a few appointments and get back to Wales as she won't come here. I want that book on the shelves and the next one written as soon as possible. We're not going to make this company any money spinning around on our office chairs all day."

John managed to bite his tongue and stop himself from telling Paul exactly what he thought of him. If there was one thing that John really couldn't stand it was being bossed around. However, he couldn't help but feel pleased as he organised matters so that he would soon be on his way back to Gwen and her home. He'd felt restless since returning to London. It was even harder than normal to relax at home, and John just couldn't seem to settle. His mind frequently wandered to Gwen, wondering what she was doing or thinking, and how Edith was. When he watched the news at night he found himself checking the weather for Wales rather than for London.

At times, he did try to resist these thoughts and push Gwen from his mind, though he more and more accepted that Gwen was what his brain wanted to dwell on and stopped fighting it so much. He no longer played down Gwen's attributes — he accepted that he found her beautiful, intelligent, and captivating: a mixture that he had never before discovered in a woman — but now wasn't the time for a relationship, he must put any attraction for her aside and keep her at a distance. Besides, he'd made a fool of himself the last

time he saw her, and that certainly wasn't going to happen again.

It would still be a little while before he was ready to admit that he, John Thatcher, loved Gwen: loved her in a way he'd never considered possible and with feeling that he'd thought himself incapable of succumbing to.

* * *

It was later that day, at the end of one of the longest weeks of Gwen's life, that she received an email from John stating simply:

I am available from Monday 21st until Friday 25th August, kindly let me know if you are able to come to London for these dates. If not I shall organise accommodation near you.

John Thatcher

Editor, Black Horse Publishing

He's obviously annoyed, then, thought Gwen to herself. She still felt guilty, but she had apologised. Paradoxically, she was both elated to hear from him, and exhausted by their difficult, often tempestuous, relationship. She couldn't leave her mother, but she was tempted to let John stay in a bed and breakfast, at least then he'd leave at the end of each day, and she might be able to distance herself from him a little. But she knew that most places would still be all booked up, and anyway, they tended to work on late into the evening because of her having to fit in her hospital visits and shifts at the tea rooms. John having to get back to a bed and breakfast before they closed the doors for the night would just be inconvenient.

She quickly sent a reply, not giving herself the chance to change her mind: she needed to mend her working relationship with John; getting her book ready to be published was so

important, she couldn't jeopardise that by quarrelling with her boss.

Dear John,

Thank you for your message. I can't travel to London so it would be great if you could come to me. We'll be able to get more done if you stay here, and I know Oscar would love to see you.

Monday's fine.

Gwen

He responded almost immediately:

I'll be with you by about 11 on Monday. Please ensure that you clear as much of your schedule as possible before I arrive.

John Thatcher

Editor, Black Horse Publishing

Gwen had prepared herself for John still being a little grumpy when he arrived but received a much frostier reception than she'd expected. She wasn't really surprised, she'd long since given up attempting to anticipate John's moods. She knew from past experience he'd calm down eventually, and since the argument had been her fault, she was content to wait out the storm.

They quickly settled down to work and fell straight back into their usual routine. The only real difference was that Oscar lay closer to John's feet than ever, as if afraid he'd lose him again. John seemed to relax as he spent more time in the house, and his apparent anger with Gwen dissipated, as she'd known it would.

The person he'd become over their weeks together was in many ways very different from the man she'd met in London. Still driven by some inner need and incredibly focused, nonetheless it almost seemed that the city was being discarded, sloughed off like an unwanted skin. He was happier and more content now, more at ease with himself, country life, and her.

Gwen would take Oscar out in the morning while John got the laptops on and the coffees ready. John also accompanied Gwen a couple of times to visit her mother, who was doing as well as could be hoped, though still blissfully ignorant of the impending fate of the house. Gwen knew that it did her mother good to have some 'fresh blood' to chat with, and the pair got along terrifically, with John being very thoughtful and kind. He never came without a gift for her when he visited, whether it was something practical, like ear plugs to keep out some of the ward noise at night, or just some delicious chocolates. On the evenings when Gwen went to the hospital alone, John would take Oscar on long walks. He was gradually becoming very much a member of the family, and his one week stay was extended to a fortnight.

* * *

John lifted his mug to his mouth, took a sip of coffee, and made his usual grimace. Accustomed as she was to this performance, Gwen didn't pay it any heed, but today this was followed by the thud of John's mug hitting the table with the declaration, "Right, I've had it. I can't take this anymore. We are going out. Where's the nearest decent shopping centre?"

"It's about an hour's drive away."

"Okay, get ready. I'll meet you by my car in five minutes."

And with a quick smile, John got up and marched purposefully upstairs, intentionally leaving Gwen no chance to question him.

Gwen made sure she kept him waiting for a couple of extra minutes. Peeping out the bedroom window, she could see him hanging around by the car impatiently. She diligently brushed her hair for the recommended one hundred strokes and then went down to meet him.

“Good, I was about to leave without you,” he said, unlocking the car.

“And what makes you think you can boss me around and demand I get ready for some mysterious shopping trip?”

“Don’t come, if you don’t want to,” he bantered back.

He opened the driver’s door, climbed in and started the car. Gwen deliberately paused before jumping into the front passenger seat and putting on her seat belt.

John only spoke to ask Gwen the name of the shopping centre, which he entered into the satnav. They sat in silence, both looking out of the corner of their eye at the other, willing the other to crack first. With a rueful grin, Gwen finally broke and asked:

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“You know where we’re going,” was the annoying answer. He wasn’t quite able to hide the smile that threatened to escape from the corners of his mouth.

Gwen rolled her eyes and asked, “And why are we going there?”

“To buy something.”

Though itching with curiosity, Gwen couldn’t quite bring herself to inquire what they were going to buy.

They reached the huge shopping centre, and John parked the car after several minutes of driving round and round the

extremely full car park. They walked, still in silence, to the shops.

“Right, first things first,” declared John, and he steered Gwen towards a very busy Caffè Nero.

“Two macchiatos, please,” he said to the girl behind the counter.

“And a chocolate muffin,” added Gwen.

He took out his wallet to pay, and Gwen didn’t stop him. He’d wanted to go on this magical mystery tour before she’d even had her lunch, so she figured the least he could do was buy her a cake and a coffee. A girl should never pass up the opportunity for cake.

Gwen saw that John also bought a couple of packets of coffee beans. Puzzled, she pointed out to him that they weren’t pre-ground and so, as she didn’t have a grinder, he wouldn’t be able to use them at her house, even if he could manage to locate her mother’s ancient cafetière from wherever it had been hiding for the last decade at least.

“You just focus on your cake,” he replied with another smile.

They drank their coffee and discussed the second chapter of Gwen’s manuscript. Gwen was determined not to ask what they were doing here. But as soon as she’d finished, John got up and set off, obviously resuming his mission. She followed him around the centre, feeling more and more curious with each minute that passed. Finally John stepped into a very fancy kitchenware shop. Gwen paused to look in the window, but John glanced over his shoulder at her and called out, “Come on, then.”

Even when they were inside the shop, John didn’t so much as hint as to what he had come all this way to buy. He walked confidently over to a pretty blond sales assistant, who had the longest legs Gwen had ever seen. He flashed her a particularly charming smile and said, “Excuse me, I wonder if you’d be able to help me?”

She visibly brightened and gave him a warm grin, “I’ll do my best, what are you looking for?”

“I’d like a coffee machine, please.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, they emerged from the shop, closely followed by the store’s assistant pushing a trolley containing a very large box. It contained a coffee machine Gwen thought would rival those in any Starbucks or Caffè Nero.

It had cost almost as much as Gwen’s monthly rent, and certainly a lot more than she’d ever be prepared to pay to have a decent coffee while she worked. Even the beans John had got to use in it cost at least twice as much as she ever spent on instant coffee.

Gwen was unsure how to voice her thoughts; she’d enjoyed their trip and the playfulness between them, it had really distracted her from the ever-present cloud of worry about her mother and the house. She really didn’t want to spoil the atmosphere, but eventually felt she had to admit: “I can’t afford to buy a machine like this.”

“You don’t have to,” he answered curtly.

When they got back to the house, John began to unpack and set up the new, extremely shiny and very complicated-looking machine. It looked completely out of place in Gwen’s traditional farmhouse-style kitchen — a bit like John himself with his suit and perfectly pressed shirt.

“Are you quite ready to start work now?” she asked with a cheeky grin, imitating John’s usual gruff manner.

“Almost, would you like a coffee?”

“No,” she laughed.

“That’s a shame, because you’re getting one.”

In just a couple of minutes Gwen was presented with her coffee and they settled down to business. She had every intention of treating the beverage with disdain, ignoring it

even, but it smelt so good she found she was drinking it without realising. She looked in the mug and saw almost half of it was gone. She glanced at John, and they both laughed.

“I didn’t need you to buy me a coffee machine, you know. Millions of people get by without them.”

“Consider it a gift. You can’t possibly continue to write as well as you do while drinking the dishwasher you currently make.”

Gwen was shocked — had he actually just complimented her writing?

“Thank you,” she managed to murmur.

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you how to use it,” he said, misinterpreting her quietness.

* * *

They soon settled themselves back into work, the silence only punctuated by the busy tapping of keyboards. Then, with a cough, John nonchalantly made his second major announcement of the day: “I’ve sorted out a mortgage for you.”

“Sorry?” said Gwen, looking up from her laptop, sure that she hadn’t heard correctly.

“The mortgage you needed. It’s sorted for you. The details are by the phone in the hallway,” he added, his eyes firmly fixed on the paperwork in front of him.

“I ... I don’t understand; I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I have some contacts who I thought could help,” said John firmly. “Just give them a call before five to confirm you’re taking up their offer.”

“Right, um, I’ll have a look.”

Gwen went out into the hallway with her heart pounding. Picking up a sheet with John’s impeccably neat handwriting on it, she took the phone off the cradle, and went nervously into her study, closing the door behind her.

She silently told herself to stay calm: she must not let herself become carried away before checking all the details very thoroughly.

Tense but focused, she meticulously considered each point of the mortgage offer, trying to weigh things dispassionately. After what seemed both a mere moment and an eternity, she finally allowed herself to welcome the rising joy and accept that the mortgage in front of her would be very worthwhile taking. It wasn't the best interest rate she'd seen, but any mortgage was better than nothing. With building excitement, Gwen reached for the phone and dialled the number John had printed at the bottom of the page.

By the time she joined John back at the kitchen table, Gwen had a firm agreement for a mortgage and a massive grin across her face. It was lucky that there wasn't long until Gwen was due at the hospital, as she couldn't concentrate on work. She couldn't wait to finally get rid of the burden she'd been carrying around and tell her mam everything that had been happening with the house, now that the story had a happy ending.

Only one small worry pricked her euphoria — how on earth was she ever going to be able to thank John adequately for all this?

“John?”

“Yes,” he replied, not looking up from his screen.

“About the mortgage offer ...”

“What about it?”

“I'm really grateful to you for your help.”

“It was nothing.”

“Well, it really meant a lot and ...”

She could see he looked uncomfortable and was fighting not to meet her eyes.

“Look, Gwen, I’m trying to concentrate here. I’m glad you’ve got the mortgage and that I could help a little. We’ve got work to do and moving would have meant you having even less time, now can we get back to it?”

“Sure,” said Gwen quietly, hurt by his coldness. Deflated, she busied herself rearranging some papers.

* * *

John heard the phone ring in the hallway; Gwen was walking Oscar so he got up to answer it. It was only after he’d picked up the receiver that he realised just how comfortable he felt doing things like that in her house. There was something about the place that really made him feel at home. Perhaps it was to do with how obviously loved the house and its contents were; every object seemed to fit so perfectly and have such meaning. When he’d bought his flat, his interior designer had ordered everything he might need from a department store, and he probably hadn’t even used half of it. In Gwen’s house, even the pots and pans had a history: they’d been handed down to Edith when she and Gwen’s father married and had originally belonged to Edith’s grandmother. A lot of the plates and bowls were the ones Gwen’s parents had been given on their wedding day. Gwen always seemed slightly embarrassed to tell him these stories — she’d start off confidently enough, but she’d then begin to get quieter and keep checking his face, presumably for signs of ridicule. But John wasn’t laughing at Gwen at all, he was fascinated and found himself continually comparing his own family and upbringing with Gwen’s — and finding his own lacking by comparison, despite the wealth and privilege that he’d experienced. These feelings were the real reason he’d organised the mortgage for Gwen, not that he’d ever admit that to her.

On that sad note, he returned to the present.

“Good afternoon, is Miss Jones there, please?” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“No, I’m afraid not, can I take a message?”

“Yes, this is Doctor Connolly’s secretary at the Memorial Hospital; would she be able to call regarding her mother as soon as possible please? It’s quite important.”

“I’ll let her know as soon as she gets home,” he replied.

“Thank you, goodbye,” came the answer, but John barely heard. He put down the phone automatically, wondering what could have happened. Was Edith okay? He silently cursed the fact that Gwen didn’t carry a mobile phone and began pacing the hallway impatiently. It was only a couple of minutes later, however, that Gwen came in the front door, laughing at something silly that Oscar had done, her cheeks rosy from rushing home to continue work.

John immediately gave her message from the hospital, and she called them straight back. Thankfully, her mother was fine: he could tell from the way Gwen visibly relaxed after the first few words; it seemed the hospital only wanted to discuss Edith’s long-term care before her consultant left on holiday. Damn clerical staff, he thought, more than a little embarrassed at his overreaction. Gwen agreed to come in earlier than usual, before visiting hours, and speak to her mother’s doctors and physiotherapist.

* * *

Although Gwen had been reassured that the hospital weren’t calling a meeting due to any deterioration in her mother’s health, she was still a little apprehensive as she arrived. She knew all but one of the staff waiting to speak to her. Her mother’s consultant was obviously in a bit of a hurry and immediately took control of proceedings. He explained that her mother was progressing as well as could be expected; she’d responded to the drugs prescribed after her second stroke very well, and they wanted to start working towards discharging her. Essentially they wanted to move her mother to a care home in the very near future.

Most of Gwen’s questions regarding how much physio and occupational therapy her mother would receive were evaded or just ignored, as were her queries about where

exactly her mother would be moved to. They were very clear on one point though — the hospital would not provide the means for Gwen's mother to live back in her own home. If Gwen wanted her mother at home with her, then she would have to pay for everything apart from a very basic wheelchair and a small amount of physical therapy.

Gwen had a little time to kill after the meeting ended and visiting hours began. She'd brought her trusty notepad and pen with her and managed to find herself a quiet corner in the hospital's coffee shop. She gave up trying to write after only a couple of minutes though, her head was in turmoil over what would happen to her mam. Surely there must be a way for her mother to be able to return to her own home. It seemed too cruel that Gwen had finally found a way of buying their house, only to discover that her mother wouldn't be able to live in it.

The medical staff appeared very unsure whether Gwen's mother would even be able to be placed somewhere close to Gwen; if she wasn't, it might mean that Gwen would only be able to visit her at weekends. Gwen could imagine how much that would upset her mother and even jeopardise her recovery.

Gwen wished she'd asked John to come to the meeting — he was so strong-willed and had such a powerful presence. She imagined he had his colleagues quaking in their boots. He would have known exactly what to say and how to take control of the situation so that her questions were answered properly.

She wondered if she could get his advice when she got home. She wanted to, but wasn't sure how happy her mother would be with her care being discussed like that. Or, for that matter, whether John would want to hear about it.

She still couldn't work him out. Although she was attracted to him, she wasn't even certain what she thought of him deep down. Yet, she somehow knew he could be trusted.

* * *

John found himself clockwatching while Gwen was at the hospital that evening. He filled in the time until she got back

by preparing their supper.

“What do you reckon, some basil on these, or some thyme?” he asked Oscar, showing him the tray of tomatoes he was preparing for the oven. “Thyme? Right you are then.”

John turned back to the oven and muttered to himself, “I really am going crazy,” before giving Oscar’s head a little pat and returning to the cooking.

He couldn’t do anymore until Gwen was back, and he felt too restless to work, so he decided to take Oscar out. There was something so calming about walking the hills there.

“Right, I’ve done about everything I can here until your mam comes home.” Did I really just refer to Gwen as the dog’s mam? John thought to himself, horrified. “Shall we go out for a walk?”

At the sound of his favourite word, Oscar rushed to the back door joyfully and then back to John, encouraging him to hurry up. John laughed, grabbed his coat and Oscar’s lead and let the dog drag him out of the house, through the garden, out of the back gate, and onto the beautiful open hillside.

The sky was ominous but the cool air felt refreshing after being indoors working and cooking all afternoon. Oscar was in very high spirits and busily poked his nose into anything he could find in the hope of discovering a good smell or possibly even a rabbit to chase.

John smiled as he reached the top of the hill, and he lay down on the grass. His heart was pumping hard and he was out of breath, but he felt good. He kept himself in shape, going to the gym regularly and playing squash every now and again with some work colleagues, but it was great to be out in the fresh air. Oscar lay down beside him and gave his hand a nudge. John stroked him absentmindedly. He felt strange for a moment and tried to work out why. He concluded it was probably because he found himself in such an unusual situation. John rarely had the chance to spend any time out of doors back in London. He usually had a taxi take him to and

from the office. The weekends were spent working, in the gym or occasionally networking with colleagues, which generally involved being inside a restaurant or a bar. He was rarely around animals, he'd never even had a pet as a child: Mother hated anything hairy, and Father was too busy with the business and didn't think it fair to ask the staff to look after one. And yet, despite their short acquaintance, he was already coming to rely on Oscar's companionship when Gwen was out.

Once John had got his breath back, he got up and wandered down the open hillside to the road, whistling to Oscar to follow him and swinging the dog's lead by his side. He was preoccupied with the state of Edith's care in the hospital. He wanted to do something to help but wasn't quite sure what he could do without being accused of interfering. After all, this woman's treatment wasn't really any of his business. He found it unsettling that he was thinking so much about trying to help her, and was very aware that it was his feelings for Gwen which were driving him to do so. Still, while he wasn't sure that Gwen would react kindly to him sticking his nose into her family's business, he couldn't stop pondering the problem.

He swung Oscar's lead back and forth in his hand as he thought, and Oscar happily gambolled about. He reached the funny little winding road and decided to follow it for a while and see if he could find the pub which Gwen had mentioned was in this direction; a pint would nicely fill in the time before he needed to get back and continue with dinner.

John's thoughts returned once again to Gwen's mother. Well, something had to be done: Gwen clearly wasn't happy with how things were. He hunted for his phone in his coat pocket so he could call the hospital and speak to someone about some changes for Edith — she could at least be moved to a quieter ward so she could get some rest at night. However, he was amazed to find he was so relaxed that for once he'd forgotten to bring his phone with him.

A sudden screech of brakes followed by a thump snatched his attention. The car had come round the corner, crashed into Oscar, and driven off, before John had even noticed the dog had strayed onto the road. Oscar's lead hung redundant in John's hand as the dog lay motionless on the tarmac.

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Chapter Eight

Gwen came in the front door of her house. It was dark outside and she was surprised to see there were no lights on indoors. She barely had time to register that neither Oscar nor John were home, when the phone started ringing. She ran to pick it up.

“Gwen! Thank goodness you’re back.”

“John? Are you alright? Where are you?”

“I’m fine, but Oscar’s had an accident. It’s all my fault. I’m so sorry, he’s been hit by a car; he’s alive, but badly hurt. We’re at the vet’s; how quickly can you get here?”

“I’m leaving now,” said Gwen automatically, and she headed straight out of the door again.

Gwen managed to hold back the tears until she started the car, but then they came steadily until she finally pulled up outside the vet’s, ten minutes later. She raced from the vehicle, only just remembering to lock it in her frantic hurry.

John was waiting for her.

“Is he ...” she asked, not wanting to put her fear into words.

“The vet’s still working on him, but it looks like he’s going to be okay. He’s in shock and is very battered and bruised, but thankfully nothing’s broken. The vet said if the car had been going any faster he would have been killed instantly. I’m so sorry.”

Gwen began to cry even harder.

“Come on,” said John, putting his arm around her. “He’ll be desperate to see you.”

He led her round the side of the building.

“They’re not really open,” he explained, “we need to go in the back entrance.”

* * *

Gwen spoke to the vet once he'd finished, he reassured her that Oscar would be alright. He'd badly sprained one of his back legs, was concussed, and there had been some issues with a small amount of internal bleeding. The dog was now sedated. He'd have to stay there for a few days until he got over the shock. Gwen whispered to Oscar that she loved him, before reluctantly saying goodbye. John had waited in the reception room while she was talking to the vet. He got up as soon as he saw her coming out of the examination room and followed her to her car.

“Would you like me to drive?” he asked.

“I'll be fine,” she said quietly.

They drove in silence. When they got home, Gwen went straight up to her room and to bed.

* * *

John made himself a cup of tea and put away the food he'd been preparing earlier in the kitchen. He went up to his room feeling wretched; he couldn't get the look on poor Oscar's face when he'd wrapped him in his coat out of his mind. He'd carried Oscar to the pub in the end, looking for a phone as there were no houses nearby, and by some miracle found the local vet there. John couldn't believe he'd been so stupid: Gwen had told him to put Oscar on the lead if he went anywhere near a road, it wasn't exactly a complex instruction to follow. It really was just pure luck that Oscar was still alive. He didn't think he'd ever be able to forgive himself.

Gwen lay in bed trying in vain to get to sleep, and began to wonder how she was going to pay for Oscar's treatment. She didn't have pet insurance, and just the stay at the vets was sure to cost a small fortune, let alone any follow-up visits and medication he'd need. She resolved to speak to the vet when she went there again the following day. Oscar must get the treatment he needed, but maybe she and the vet could come to some sort of credit arrangement.

* * *

Gwen was at the vets as soon as they opened the following morning. She went out without speaking to John. This was completely intentional; she had nothing to say to him and no desire to see him. She blamed him completely for Oscar's accident; as far as she was concerned he had acted stupidly and irresponsibly. She should never have trusted him with Oscar; he'd probably been so busy on his mobile that he hadn't been watching her dog at all. She was just so upset and holding onto her rage helped. Most of all, she was disappointed that her faith in John had been mistaken. How could she have been so stupid as to let that arrogant man look after her precious Oscar?

* * *

"You paid for Oscar's treatment," stated Gwen, as she marched into the kitchen on her return.

"Yes," John replied simply.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes I did, his accident was my fault."

"Thank you," said Gwen quietly and turned to leave.

"Gwen."

"Yes?"

"I really am terribly, terribly sorry."

"I know," she gave him a small smile, feeling the first lessening of her anger and hurt.

She turned on her laptop, hoping she'd be able to put her worries to one side and get a few decent hours of work in.

Gwen felt a bit strange having him pay the vet's bill but was determined not to feel guilty about it. As far as she was concerned, the accident had been caused by John's negligence and, despite the fact that they had to finish her novel, she was very tempted to ask John to leave. She would never have demeaned herself by asking John for the money, but she

thought it right that he was paying. It was also a sign of his remorse, which did soften her feelings somewhat.

She came back into the kitchen after calling the vet's to check again on Oscar's progress, the nurse said he was sleeping peacefully and had managed to eat some of the treats she'd left for him. The nurse also spoke about John.

"I've just phoned the vet's, Oscar's improving."

"That's great," John said, closing his laptop with a sigh.

"They told me what you did," she said, as he handed her a cup of coffee.

He didn't reply. He just looked pensively into his mug.

"They said if you hadn't kept Oscar warm and got help so quickly, then he might not have made it," she continued.

"It was the least I could do," said John uncomfortably.

"They also told me about you taking Oscar's blanket there in the middle of the night."

John looked a little embarrassed.

"I needed to do something," he said eventually. "I read on the internet that the smell of something familiar can be reassuring to a sick animal."

"Well, thank you, I'm sure it helped."

"You don't need to thank me," he said, sounding sharper than he'd intended. Gwen looked a bit taken aback.

"Sorry, that came out wrong. This whole mess is completely my fault. My mind wandered, and I forgot to put the lead on Oscar. I'm so sorry."

"I know you are," she said softly. "Come on, let's get something to eat and see if we can get some more work in."

"There's some carrot and coriander soup in the fridge, I made it earlier but wasn't sure if you'd be hungry."

"Great, I'll heat it up. Is there any bread?"

She thought to herself: when did I get to the point where I have to ask him if there's bread in my own home?

"Yes, I picked up some of the poppy seed rolls you like from the bakers."

I could get used to this, she mused, stirring the soup. And as suddenly as it had appeared, it almost passed: while her anger with him hadn't disappeared, it had definitely calmed and she could tell he was doing the best he could to make up for his mistake.

* * *

The sun was out in full force and woke Gwen up far earlier than usual the next morning. Her first thought was how nice it would be to go for a decent walk with Oscar. She felt tears begin to prick at her eyes immediately and resolved to try not to allow worries about poor Oscar to affect her writing. She'd do her best to concentrate until she could go to visit him at the vets. She'd pick up some more of his favourite treats on the way.

As usual, John was busy working in the kitchen when Gwen returned.

As soon as she stepped in the door, he looked up expectantly and asked, "How is he?"

"He's a lot better. The vet says he's coming along really well. He should be able to come home in a few days."

"That's very good news," he said, looking relieved.

"He'll still need to go back there for check-ups, and he won't be able to go for a proper walk for ages."

"I suppose not," said John, immediately looking glum and turning back to his computer screen.

She felt bad: she was ashamed that, despite herself, a small part of her still wanted him to feel guilty about Oscar, while the rest of her knew that what had happened was an accident that he regretted terribly. She wanted to gloss over how ill Oscar was, to spare John's feelings, yet there was an

inner voice almost wanting her to rehash every detail of the pain Oscar had been through because of his carelessness.

“How did he seem?” John asked, out of the blue, a few minutes later.

“Quiet, but comfortable,” she replied, before adding. “He was lying on the blanket you took in for him.”

He didn’t comment, but seemed more relaxed when, an hour later, Gwen suggested they stop for lunch.

* * *

During the next couple of days, John showed no sign of going back to London; Gwen suspected he’d stay until Oscar was home and settled, although he hadn’t said as much. She was becoming much more relaxed in his company. His remorse over Oscar’s accident was genuine, and they both seemed to be making an effort to be kind to each other. When she wasn’t with him, Gwen was constantly thinking of little things that she wanted to tell John or discuss with him. She found him much easier to talk to now, and she particularly missed his conversation on the drive to and from the hospital — he hadn’t come with her since Oscar’s accident, maybe he couldn’t face her mother and thought she’d be angry with him. She wouldn’t — Gwen wasn’t quite sure why, but she’d glossed over Oscar not being on his lead when he was hit. She was happy to go by herself, but she knew that her mother would love John to visit her again, and Gwen had to admit that she’d enjoyed seeing him with her mother, making her laugh and talking to her so naturally.

She opened the front door and her senses were greeted by the now familiar smells of John’s cooking, the delicious warmth of the crackling fire, and the gentle notes of Chopin wafting from the stereo. John was pouring her a glass of ice-cold Chardonnay as she walked into the kitchen.

Gwen didn’t resent having him in her house at all. In fact, she enjoyed having someone to come home to, and not just

any ‘someone’, John in particular. And, although she hated to admit it, she did feel safer having a man in the house at night.

It was then that he made the announcement she’d been dreading.

“Gwen, I was hoping to stay until Oscar was settled at home, but I’ve spoken to work and they need me back. I’ve got to leave the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she replied, her face coming very close to displaying the sadness that she felt at hearing this news.

“We’re pretty much finished here, anyway,” he said sensibly.

“Yes, of course, and Oscar should be back that morning, you’ll be able to see him before you go.”

The phone rang, making her jump. She caught his concerned gaze matching hers as she answered it quickly, worried that it was the vet’s with bad news about Oscar or the hospital calling about her mother.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi, sweetie, it’s me, Sarah.”

“Oh, hi.”

“Are you alright?” asked Sarah.

“Yes, sorry, I was just worried in case it was the vet or the hospital on the phone.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean to give you a fright! How’s Oscar?”

“A lot better, he should be coming home the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s great news. The girls have got some presents for him.”

“That’s sweet of them.”

She could tell John was listening to the conversation; he kept glancing over to check she was alright and wasn’t getting

too upset talking about Oscar.

“I was also calling to see if you’d like to come for dinner tomorrow night? Bring John as well. It would be great to see you, and you might not get the chance to go out for a while once Oscar’s back home.”

“Oh, I don’t know ...”

John gave her a questioning look.

She mouthed “My friend, dinner tomorrow.”

He nodded. She decided to go along with his decision, it seemed easier, and she was discovering that he was very often right.

* * *

Gwen visited her mother the following day, but she left the hospital a little earlier than normal, explaining that she was going to Sarah’s. When she got home, John was ready to go and had even managed to pick up a couple of bottles of wine to take with them. Gwen was grateful he’d thought of it. She’d been so caught up with her worries that she never would have remembered to take anything, and would have been embarrassed when she realised. Her mother had taught her never to turn up to a dinner empty-handed.

Gwen ran up to her room to freshen up and get changed.

“You look lovely,” said John, as she came back downstairs. Her hair hung loose, and she wore a soft wraparound green dress that complemented her eyes beautifully, and displayed her every curve without making it look like she’d tried too hard.

Gwen was momentarily stunned, but quickly regained her wits to retort, “You mean I don’t scrub up too badly when I make an effort?”

“No, I meant that you just looked particularly nice this evening. Learn to take a compliment.”

Gwen was silenced once again. It wasn't until a while later when they were in the car, with John driving, that she piped up with, "I apologise if I was rude to you, earlier."

"Sorry?" he said.

Gwen was fairly sure that he was feigning deafness to get her to repeat what she'd said.

"When you complimented me on how I looked, I should have just said 'thank you'," clarified Gwen.

"Yes, you should have."

"I guess I'm just not used to you complimenting me."

"So, let me get this straight, you're blaming me for your rudeness because I'm not usually nice? That's a good one."

"No, that's not what I meant!"

Why did they always end up bickering like this?

"Look," said Gwen, turning towards him, "I don't want to argue with you, I just wanted to apologise, okay?"

"Fine," he said shortly, but without any malice, and Gwen knew she'd been forgiven.

* * *

Gwen banged the old-fashioned knocker on Sarah and Owen's front door. As they waited, she turned to John, "Are you nervous?" she asked him.

She didn't quite know why she'd said this. She couldn't imagine him being nervous about anything really, but she knew she'd be a little anxious if she were in his situation, meeting people for the first time, so she wanted to make sure he was okay.

"No, should I be?" he answered with a smile.

"Of course not, I was just wondering," she muttered, feeling silly for asking.

Sarah opened the door and ushered them in. She was the perfect hostess, welcoming John into her home as if he were a

dear old friend. The girls came downstairs, looking shyer than Gwen had ever seen them, when they spotted John in the hallway. However, all their hesitancy melted away when John produced two enormous bars of chocolate from behind his back. As they'd already brushed their teeth they dutifully handed them over to their mother in exchange for a fervent promise that they could have them the following day. The twins each took one of John's hands and led him to the sofa, where they sat him down and promptly began a presentation of what seemed like every single one of their toys.

John nodded to Gwen that he was alright, and so she followed Sarah into the kitchen, where Sarah began asking her about her mother and Oscar, and then about how the book was going and John's work.

Gwen had a definite hint of pride in her voice as she explained to her friend what John's job entailed and about the other authors he worked with.

"You two seem to be getting on very well," said Sarah with a cheeky grin. She'd noticed how her friend lit up when she spoke about John.

"We're just work colleagues," said Gwen automatically. She was beginning to think she ought to have that tattooed across her forehead.

"You glance over at him rather a lot for someone who is merely a colleague," teased Sarah.

"He doesn't know anyone here. I'm just checking he's OK."

"Are we really that scary?"

"Don't be silly, you know what I mean."

"Well, he's certainly got a way with children," responded Sarah.

Gwen decided not to comment for fear of incriminating herself further. She didn't know herself what she really felt about him; it was a topic her mind was studiously avoiding.

She was finding it difficult to follow the conversation, as she was trying to hear what was going on in the other room. She heard the twins and John chatting, and then it went quiet. While Sarah was absorbed in the cooking, Gwen took a quick glimpse round the door into the sitting room. She couldn't help smiling at the sight that greeted her: John was flanked on either side by a little girl as he read them *Sleeping Beauty*. They all looked very comfortable.

“Hello, you guys,” said Gwen cheerfully.

“Shush,” said both girls together, desperate for the story not to be interrupted.

John smiled at her and returned to the book. Gwen went back into the kitchen and sat down again to enjoy the glass of wine Sarah had poured for her. This first glass was long finished by the time John came in to join them, Sarah eventually having gone to rescue him from her daughters' clutches. Owen arrived home from work, and making his apologies for being late, began a conversation with John about the wine, which rapidly turned into a chat about rugby once they'd discovered that neither of them was very interested in wine, beyond actually drinking it.

After Sarah had put the girls to bed, Gwen helped her serve up the supper — a seafood risotto with salad and homemade bread.

“I'm sorry the girls were a bit demanding, they obviously took a shine to you,” Sarah said to John.

“Not to worry. I've been meaning to catch up with my favourite fairy tales, and it's been a long time since I've had such an effect on the ladies.”

His smile, as he said this, sent butterflies straight to Gwen's tummy; she knew the last part wasn't true.

“This is really delicious,” said John, as everyone tucked into the food. “What's in the salad dressing? Did I taste garlic?”

“Yes,” answered Sarah, “It’s balsamic vinegar, a drop of mustard, salt, pepper, and garlic olive oil which I make myself.”

“It’s fantastic.”

“Thank you,” replied Sarah. “Do you cook?”

“When I get the time, which isn’t very often.”

Gwen piped in, “John’s been cooking for me when I get back from visiting mam, he’s pretty good.”

“Pretty good?” queried John, raising his eyebrow.

“Okay, very good, is that better?” she said, laughing.

“Yes.”

“You won’t want John to leave,” said Owen.

“The standard of food did go down when you were back in London,” said Gwen, blushing as she caught John’s eye.

“There’s nothing wrong with your cooking,” said Sarah loyally, “No one can bake a potato and stick some tuna on top of it quite like you,” she added with a giggle.

“Oi!” said Gwen, with mock indignation, “I don’t remember you complaining when I cooked for you, after the twins were born.”

“Of course not,” said Sarah, “You were an angel to me.”

“Has Gwen cooked for you?” Owen asked John.

“No, but I’m beginning to think that I should be grateful for that.”

“I’ve made you sandwiches almost every day!” said Gwen, turning to face him.

“And wonderful sandwiches they were too,” he said with a smile.

“Who’d like coffee?” asked Sarah, beginning to clear the table.

Gwen got up to help. "I'll make it," she said, taking some glasses over to the sink.

"That's alright," said Sarah quickly.

She caught Owen's eye and they chuckled. They looked at John, and he joined them as they all burst out laughing.

"I take it you've experienced Gwen's coffee, then," said Owen.

"I've remedied it," said John, and he proceeded to tell them about the new coffee machine. "So now I make the coffee," he concluded.

"He thought my coffee was so bad he'd always pull a weird face as he took the first sip of any cup I made!" said Gwen.

"What sort of weird face?" asked Sarah.

"I did not pull a weird face," said John.

"You did! It was like this," said Gwen, scrunching up her nose in a perfect imitation of John taking his first mouthful of her coffee in the morning.

In the end Gwen was forced to admit that it was probably best that she went nowhere near the coffeepot, and so she washed up while John dried the dishes, Owen put them away, and Sarah made the drinks.

Owen suggested they play Monopoly. It was something of a tradition that they tried to fit in a game with Gwen whenever they could. Gwen glanced anxiously at John to see how he took the idea, doubting Monopoly would be sophisticated enough for him, but he seemed quite happy to go along with it, as long as he could be the racing car.

It was almost two in the morning before Gwen and John were on their way home. Sarah and Owen had insisted that they stay until the end of the game, despite knowing they'd be woken by the girls in just a few hours. John won, of course. Gwen wondered whether he was capable of ever being less than the best at anything.

She appreciated that he'd only had a single glass of wine at the beginning of the evening and so was able to drive them both home. There was something very gentlemanly and old-fashioned about his behaviour.

* * *

The next morning, Gwen woke to the sun streaming through her bedroom window. She was very conscious that John was leaving today, and she knew deep down that she'd find it hard to see him go, particularly after the fun they'd had with Sarah and Owen the night before.

Despite not getting to sleep until just after three, Gwen forced herself out of bed at seven, knowing that poor Oscar would hopefully be allowed home from the vet's today and wanting to get everything ready for him. There was no sign of any movement from John's room as Gwen crept past in her pyjamas. For once, she'd be working before John; the thought filled her with mischievous glee.

She tiptoed down the stairs, still trying very hard not to disturb him. She made it to the bottom, sidestepping the squeaky bit on the second to last step. She smiled to herself, pleased she was the first one down. She walked into the kitchen, turned the kettle on and almost screamed when John said good morning from behind her. She hadn't noticed him already sat working at the kitchen table. He looked as immaculate as always and had clearly been up for quite some time.

"Do you ever sleep?" she asked half-jokingly.

"Only on Sundays and bank holidays," he said with a laugh. "I've a lot of things I need to keep an eye on; a general has to analyse the intelligence and plan his campaign, you know."

"Quite right, sir," she replied, with a salute.

She excused herself after she'd made some tea and scuttled back upstairs for a quick shower and to dress.

John was still typing away on his laptop when she came back down feeling much more human.

Gwen wasn't working at the tea rooms today; she owed Bronwyn and Brian quite a few shifts, and she'd promised to make them up when John left. They'd sworn she wasn't inconveniencing them, but she wasn't entirely convinced. Still, she really couldn't go there today; today was all about Oscar.

The vets opened at nine, and Gwen had found out that Oscar could be picked up any time after ten. By quarter to ten, they were in John's car on the way to fetch him.

Oscar was absolutely thrilled to see his dearest friends. He attempted to jump up at Gwen in his excitement, luckily she managed to grab hold of him before his damaged back leg gave way.

Gwen crouched down, gently drawing Oscar over. They sat quietly. She stroked him softly while he gazed into her eyes adoringly. John watched them, patiently waiting his turn. He was desperate to make a fuss of the invalid, and prayed Oscar bore him no ill will for what had happened.

Eventually Gwen got up, dusting down her clothes to rid herself of the worst of the fur. John caught her eye, and she understood he was asking her permission to go to Oscar. Without hesitating, she nodded and gave him a cheerful grin. John had never seen her so beautifully happy.

John had his time with Oscar, and Gwen filled in forms and was told how to look after the convalescent patient in the ensuing weeks. She was relieved that he wouldn't need any more visits to the vet's unless any of his wounds took a turn for the worse.

If Oscar thought it rather peculiar that John carried him out to the car wrapped in his blanket and laid him tenderly across the back seat, then he was polite enough not to say so. And when Gwen sat down next to him he put his head on her lap and contentedly fell asleep for the short drive.

John left for London a few hours later, leaving Oscar snuggled up on a blanket on the sofa. He drove away, safe in the knowledge that the first of Gwen's books was now pretty much perfect. He'd never felt disappointed to be almost finished the editing on a novel before. But he knew he'd find a way to return to Gwen soon. He had to.

* * *

Gwen sighed and rubbed her temples as she stared at her notes. Her head was beginning to ache. She felt listless and a little fed up. Life carried on as before: she was doing pretty much the same as she'd done when John was staying; the difference now was that she had no one to share it with.

John had been gone for almost two weeks and, though they had emailed about work, she was missing him. It didn't help that she had no idea when she'd see him again. She could have a different editor for her next book and might never work with him again. That was a thought that Gwen tried hard not to dwell on.

Gwen was kept busy doing as many waitressing shifts as she could manage while caring for Oscar. The contract, and therefore her advance, still hadn't arrived from Black Horse, and money was tight. Gwen had called a couple of times to speak to someone in the finance department and had been told they would call her back, but they never did. She'd debated whether to bring the matter up with John but was a little embarrassed to reveal the poor state of her finances to him, and anyway, author payments weren't his responsibility.

Gwen had been too afraid to operate the coffee machine while John was away, but when the wonderful call came saying he'd be coming to stay again in order to start working on her second book, one of the first things she thought of doing was messing it up a little, so it would look well-used.

* * *

Within five minutes of coming in the door, John went over to the dreaded contraption and asked if she fancied a coffee.

“Yes, please,” she replied, inching closer. Gwen tried to surreptitiously watch John as he used the machine, but as far as she could tell he was just pushing buttons completely at random.

He finished fiddling and held out a coffee to her. She reached for it, but John pulled the mug back out of her grasp.

“By the look on your face, you haven’t used this machine once since I’ve been in London, have you?”

“I have so,” she said indignantly.

“I don’t believe you!”

“I don’t care whether you do or not!” she said defiantly, but with a smile. She took the coffee eagerly from his hand.

* * *

It didn’t take long for them to relax back into a comfortable routine. John knew he’d done the right thing in coming back so quickly, even if the decision wasn’t completely determined by the best strategy for his work and future. He’d spent years basing everything around his career; this was totally the wrong time to be deviating from that path, but he couldn’t get Gwen out of his mind. Part of him hoped that spending more time with her might break the spell she’d cast over him, and then maybe he could resume his well-laid plans. But the rest of him just wanted to be with her.

He worked Gwen hard when she was home and used the time she was out to keep up to date with his other authors and his machinations. He remained as determined as ever to achieve his goals. John and Gwen even managed to agree, eventually, to a nine o’clock start in the mornings. John took Oscar for a gentle walk round the garden; made coffee and got Gwen’s laptop started up, while she made breakfast and tidied everything away afterwards.

John also took Oscar for his little saunter round on days Gwen was working at the tea rooms, but they’d take him out together for a little wander last thing; the weather was so fine they took their drinks outside, and when Oscar had finished his

business, he'd come and sit on one of their feet while they chatted. He'd get so comfortable he'd stiffen up and have to be helped back into the house to his basket for the night.

John went with Gwen to visit her mother at the hospital, which Edith obviously enjoyed, it seemed to revitalise her. Gwen had explained how worried she was about her and what would happen. Gwen was torn. She didn't want her mother to stay in the hospital, she'd been there so long now that she was feeling very disheartened and longed for a quiet night's sleep without all the noise of the busy ward. However, the only other option was a care home, which might be even worse. At least at the hospital Gwen was able to visit every day, which mightn't be the case if her mother was moved.

John was certain he could help in some way, but it had to be done discreetly, and the end result must end up being right for Gwen and Edith.

* * *

"I'll take the laptop and come work with you," announced John one morning as Gwen was preparing to leave for a shift at the tea rooms.

"What? You can't do that!" said Gwen in despair.

"I won't get in the way, and at least if it's quiet I can ask you a question if I need to."

"I really don't think it's a good idea ..."

"I do," he said with an air of finality. "We have a lot to get through. We need to make the most of our time together."

* * *

Bronwyn looked straight past Gwen, at John, when they arrived at the tea rooms. She came bustling across to fuss over her new favourite customer.

It was only when she'd got John seated at the tea rooms' best table with a pot of tea and a big slice of homemade banana cake that she smiled at Gwen and asked her how her mother was.

Gwen did her best to ignore John and carry on with her work. He, in turn, was true to his word and didn't actively try to distract her. However, just his presence was enough to make her feel very self-conscious; she was clumsier than usual and kept glancing over at him to check if he was looking at her.

"Pathetic," she scolded herself for her schoolgirl behaviour and resolved to concentrate on work, only to be swiftly distracted when she spotted Bronwyn once again bustling over to John to check if he needed anything. He didn't, but Bronwyn asked Gwen to make him a BLT anyway, while she sat down opposite him for a chat.

Gwen chuckled to herself as it became obvious that Bronwyn had settled down for the long haul. When she took John's sandwich over, Bronwyn asked if Gwen would make her a coffee and went back to quizzing John about himself and his family. John made several attempts to resume work, but didn't get very far. He certainly didn't get the chance to ask Gwen anything.

Gwen recognised a look of hope on John's face as he glanced up at the clock and saw his suffering was almost at an end.

* * *

"So, will you be joining me for my next shift? You and Bronwyn seemed to get along very well," said Gwen, not even attempting to wipe the grin off her face as they walked towards the car park.

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh, that's a shame."

John stayed silent.

* * *

"How's your mother today?" asked John as they cleared up after their supper of homemade beef stew. Gwen contemplated how inexplicable it was that John always

seemed to cook exactly what she most fancied eating, without her asking, and then replied:

“She’s thrilled that the paperwork for the mortgage is all going through, but very nervous about where the hospital is going to move her. After the first stroke she was having all sorts of physiotherapy, but once she was eating and drinking independently that stopped and they moved onto the newer patients. She’s been in there for months now, and, especially since her second stroke, it seems like they’ve given up and aren’t encouraging her to do anything anymore. They just want to pass her on to somewhere else.”

“Isn’t there any way she could come back here?” he asked gently.

“She’d need a lot of professional help which we just can’t afford; the only other option is the care home, which I know Mam would hate, but it seems like it’s rapidly becoming the only choice. The hospital won’t let her stay there much longer.”

“And the hospital won’t pay for her care at home?”

“No, they’ll provide some of the occupational therapy, but hardly any of the nursing care, and not all of the equipment she’d need.”

“What would she need?”

“A wheelchair and a special bed definitely. Ideally, I suppose I’d have a disabled bathroom put in downstairs, possibly with a door going into the study, which she’d have as a bedroom. I’m not sure what else she’d need. There’s just no way that I could get the money together to pay for everything,” said Gwen, getting teary.

She turned away from him so she could dry her eyes, but felt his arm around her. From the way he held her, Gwen could tell he felt a little awkward, but she didn’t care. She just really needed a hug. She relaxed into him as she rested her head on his strong shoulder. Inhaling slowly, she recognised his smell as that aftershave she’d been drawn to, what seemed like a

lifetime ago, in the London department store. It was on him that she'd smelt it before. The reassuring scent must have been on the coat he'd lent her as they walked to Sian's flat the day they'd met.

Gwen pulled away gently; a little startled by how alive all her senses felt. She was blushing furiously, what must John think of her? He puts his arm around her to comfort her, and she goes in for a full body hug and starts sniffing him!

"If you don't mind I'll head up for an early night," she said, trying not to meet his eye.

"No, of course not," he replied, "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine, just tired."

"OK, you go up. I'll finish off down here and lock the doors."

She went upstairs, carrying Oscar in her arms. She was still mortified by her behaviour but enjoying the feeling of having someone that she trusted locking up the house for her. It had been quite a while since anyone had taken even a little bit of responsibility off Gwen's shoulders, and she liked it.

Gwen got into her pyjamas and lay very still in her bed, listening to the sounds of the night around her. Oscar slept, as he often did, by her feet, an arrangement which meant she had to change her bed clothes at least once a week unless she wanted to completely suffocate by dog hair. The wind made the windows creak, but it wasn't unpleasant. This was the room she'd slept in her whole life, and the sound was like an old friend. She could hear something moving outside, maybe a fox. An owl called out and another answered. Many people might be scared by the nocturnal noises but Gwen wasn't. Just as a New Yorker becomes accustomed to the drone of the traffic outside their apartment building every night, she was used to this; she barely noticed it, unless she made an effort to listen properly.

It always took Gwen a while to get to sleep. She usually spent some time worrying about her mother and then thought about whatever writing she'd last been working on. After about an hour, she'd become paranoid that she hadn't put the fires out properly or turned the oven off. She was up at about eight in the morning to take Oscar for a walk. She sometimes wondered what time she'd bother to get up if it weren't for Oscar. Maybe she'd stay in bed, wearing her pyjamas for the best part of the day, with her laptop balanced on her legs. That thought always made her grateful that she had her dog to care for, but also made her ache. She knew she wanted more from life. She wanted to have to get up because she needed to help her husband get ready for work, get their children to school, or take them out for the day if it was the holidays. She didn't want to end up an old maid. This had begun making itself clearer and clearer since her mother went into hospital, and she no longer even had her for company.

She turned over and tried to settle her mind, intentionally avoiding considering the other reason for her awakened desire for domesticity. Despite herself, the other reason, and his smell, refused to entirely go away as she drifted off to sleep, a small smile on her face.

* * *

Oscar wandered around happily, albeit more slowly and stiffly than before. He lay down on the cool grass and sighed contentedly, placing his head in between his front paws and seeming to relax completely. He'd had a check-up at John's request, and the vet said he was coming along brilliantly, another couple of weeks, and he would be back to his old busy self.

John watched him and realised that here was a creature who knew how to enjoy life and make the most of simple things. Good food (well, good by a dog's standards), a comfy bed, and a woman who loved him. He really did have the right idea.

Oscar got up and walked over to join John in the shade of the apple tree. He was panting heavily but settled himself down as close to John as possible, obviously hoping to be stroked. John lay down and dutifully ruffled Oscar's ears and scratched his tummy.

Gwen glanced out of the window as she got herself a glass of water and couldn't help smiling to herself as she caught sight of the contented pair. The image gave her an idea. She hurried to the study and quickly dug out her father's old 35mm camera. It still had a couple of shots left on the film, and Gwen ran to the window to capture the moment.

* * *

Gwen made use of her break at the tea room to take the camera film to be processed. She tried not to think about why she was so keen to have the film developed.

Gladys, who ran the photo shop, was keen to chat and fill Gwen in on all the details of her recent hip replacement. Gladys was so busy gossiping that Gwen had to remind her to give her a receipt. Gladys eventually handed one over and told Gwen that the photos would be ready for her to pick up the following day — Gladys didn't believe in any of this new-fangled one-hour-developing business. Twenty-four hours was quite soon enough for anyone, in her opinion.

* * *

"Do you mind if I leave a little bit early tomorrow, Bron?" asked Gwen tentatively when she got back, "I've got something I need to do. I'll make up the time."

"Something important is it?" asked Bronwyn nosily.

"It's John's birthday. He doesn't really know anybody here, so I thought I ought to do something for him."

"Course not, love, it'll be quiet enough. You get going as soon as the lunch rush is over," replied her boss with a knowing little smile.

* * *

“Thanks again for this,” said Gwen as she got ready to leave early the next afternoon. She hung up her apron and grabbed her bag before she had a chance to think better of what she was planning to do.

“Oh, just a sec, love,” called Bronwyn. “This is for John. He’s got to have a cake on his birthday.”

Bronwyn handed Gwen a little iced cake she’d baked, with “Happy Birthday” written on it, just perfect for two to share.

“Thanks, that’s really nice of you.”

“No problem, you and John have a lovely time,” said Bronwyn with a wink.

“There’s nothing going on between us, you know, he’s just my editor.”

“Whatever you say, love,” replied Bronwyn, nudging Gwen towards the door, “We’ll see you in a couple of days.”

* * *

“Happy birthday,” said Gwen as she shyly handed John a small parcel. John stared at it for a moment. He couldn’t recall the last time anyone had even remembered his birthday, let alone given him a present. Before they died, his parents would send him a cheque each year on his birthday, but not since childhood had he actually received a present from a friend. Occasionally women he was seeing would have something suitably impressive chosen for him from somewhere like Harvey Nichols — a wallet or watch, but nothing like this thoughtfully wrapped gift.

John opened the parcel slowly and carefully, wanting to savour every moment. He looked up and saw Gwen watching him. Embarrassed, he speeded up and ripped the last of the paper off to reveal a beautiful, small wooden frame containing a photo of him and Oscar relaxing together under the big apple tree.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “Thank you very much.”

A moment later John asked, “How did you know it was my birthday?”

“Your driving licence, you left it out on the table a few days ago, and it’s got your date of birth on it.”

“You nosy thing, is nothing sacred?” he said, smiling.

“You’re not cross are you?”

“No, not at all,” he replied gently. “It was really thoughtful.”

“There’s cake as well, Bronwyn made it for you,” said Gwen, pointing to the cake which she’d placed in the middle of the table.

“Gosh,” said John, looking genuinely touched, “I haven’t had a birthday cake for years.”

“Well this one’s sure to taste good, Bronwyn’s baking is incredible.”

John went to pick up the knife lying next to the cake, but found his hand lightly slapped out of the way.

“Not yet!” cried Gwen. She hurried over to a small drawer in the kitchen dresser and began rifling around; finally she found what she was after — a bright pink candle and holder.

“Sorry about the colour,” she said.

“I’ll forgive you as long as you promise not to sing Happy Birthday.”

“Grump,” she said, grinning.

“Do you promise?”

“I promise,” replied Gwen solemnly.

He blew out the pink birthday candle and was finally allowed to have his cake.

“You’re right, Bronwyn does make a very good cake,” he said, taking another enormous bite. Gwen laughed as she pointed at the dollop of icing that was now firmly attached to the end of his nose. John quickly wiped it away with his

napkin, but the tips of his ears turning a very bright red gave away that he was a little embarrassed. Gwen promptly scooped some icing up with her finger and plonked it on her own nose, “What do you think? Could it become the latest craze?”

“You’re so sweet,” he said suddenly.

“Thank you,” she replied decisively, wiping it off. “See, I’m getting better at taking compliments.”

“Maybe, I’ll have to give you more, get you in training.”

“Not sure I could cope with that, once a week, or so, is quite enough.”

* * *

“I’ll clear this lot up,” said Gwen when they’d finished. She began moving the plates and her handbag and post off the kitchen table so they could set up their laptops.

“Who’s this?” asked John, as he picked up a photo that had dropped out of an envelope onto the table. He turned it to face Gwen.

“That’s my dad,” she said with a sad smile. “He died a while ago. No one’s used his camera since before he passed away, but I finished off the film the other day, when I took that picture of you and Oscar.”

John looked at the photo of Gwen’s dad carefully.

“He looks like a nice man,” he said eventually.

“He was,” she said quietly.

“Have you got any more photos of him there?”

“Um, yeah,” Gwen opened the envelope and rifled through the rest of the pictures. “Here’s my mam and dad together in the garden.”

“They look really happy.”

“They were, I don’t think I ever even saw them argue. They were perfect for each other.”

“It must have been good to be brought up by a couple like that.”

“It was, neither of them was ever too busy to spend time with me, and they supported me in everything. Dad would have been thrilled to see me become a real writer.”

“You were pretty lucky.”

“Yep, I guess you never realise at the time just how lucky you are — I spent most of my childhood wishing for a sibling instead of making the most of what I had.”

“Did your mam and dad not want more children?”

“They couldn’t. They tried for years to have me; Mam was forty-two when I was born. What about you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No, I’m an only child, too.”

“That’s a shame,” she said quietly.

“Maybe, but I had plenty of friends at boarding school.”

“Didn’t you miss home and your parents?”

“A little, but you get used to it. I wasn’t very close to my parents, my father was totally focused on his company and my mother spent her time supporting him. But we loved each other in our own way, and I admired them hugely. Dad really was inspiring; he taught me such a lot and achieved so much. I suppose I’ve always tried to emulate him.”

He hesitated a moment before continuing, almost to himself, “Now I don’t know though.”

Before she could respond, John quickly said “Let’s get started with chapter eight, shall we?” signalling the end of the conversation.

“Sure,” she replied, pleased John had opened up a little to her, but knowing not to push him anymore until he was ready.

* * *

Just before going to sleep that night John reached over to the bedside table for some water. His gaze fell onto the photograph that Gwen had given him. He gave a little smile as he remembered the afternoon the picture had been taken. He'd been so content sitting under that tree giving Oscar a scratch. But of course the most important element of his contentment was missing from the scene — Gwen herself.

* * *

“I'll leave after lunch if that's alright with you? Try to beat some of the rush hour traffic,” suggested John the next morning.

“That doesn't give us long to work today, especially as you'll need to get your things together before you go; why don't you stay until Sunday?” suggested Gwen. “If we plough through, we'll be finished with a lot of the revisions by then.”

“I suppose that does make sense,” he replied. “It would be a waste of my time to have to come all the way back here again if we hadn't covered everything.”

Gwen noticed that he hadn't looked at her as he spoke, and the tips of his ears had turned red.

“I'll get the coffee on then, shall I?” he said.

* * *

Gwen was trying to think of something she could do to show John how much she appreciated all the cooking he'd done for her. She loved the feeling of being looked after. She knew she could just tell him, but to speak to him so directly would be excruciatingly awkward.

It was so nice to have John to come home to when she got back from the hospital. She hadn't realised quite how lonely she'd been and how little she'd had in her life before he'd arrived. Again, she couldn't tell him this, but she wanted to do something for him.

Gwen pondered over how her life had changed since John turned up. She'd been so anxious about him coming, worried

about how he would judge her and her home. She was relaxing more and more around him every day. The downside to this was that she found she was also falling more in love with him. What had begun as a purely animal attraction to his looks and arrogance, had developed into something much, much more. She liked chatting to him and asking his opinion on all manner of different topics. From the criticisms and help that he'd given her with her writing, she could see that he really was talented in his work and knew what he was talking about. She had an enormous amount of respect for him. But most of all, she trusted him.

Gwen also loved to see how he'd bonded with Oscar, and part of her felt that if her dog adored him then he must be alright.

She had to force herself to think logically because she was apt to daydream at the most inconvenient times: imagining that John felt the same way about her and wanted a real relationship and even to build a life with her. But deep down Gwen knew that this could never be the case. What on earth would he want with her? A country girl; nothing like all the interesting and well-presented city girls he was used to. John had been privately educated and then gone up to Oxford University, while she'd been to the local comprehensive and a university which, though not at the top of the league tables, had meant she could easily visit her home and beloved parents whenever she chose. He was used to fancy restaurants, clubs, and wine bars, most of which she'd never even heard of. She must seem really dull and boring to him.

Even if he were interested, there was no way he'd give up his job and his life in London so they could be together and she could still be near her mother. There was never any doubt in her mind that she'd look after her mother for as long as she was alive. She'd already lost one cherished parent. She was going to make the most of any time she had left with her mam.

Still, however strict Gwen was with herself, she just couldn't stop herself from dreaming.

She left the hospital early, having asked John not to cook while she was out. Ten minutes after she got back, she had laid the table, opened wine, and lit some candles. She called John into the kitchen, as he appeared in the doorway she shouted out:

“Ta-da!”

“Hey!” he said, taking in the scene. “Not bad.”

“What do you mean ‘not bad’? I ironed napkins for you!”

“Alright, alright. Fabulous then,” he said with a smile, “What’s all this in aid of?”

“I feel awful that you’ve cooked pretty much every night you’ve been here. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so well in my life, but now it’s my turn to show off my cooking skills — tonight I am making lasagne!”

“Wow!” he said, smiling.

“Thank you, I’ll take you through it step by step. Take notes if you like. Right, first I shall pour some wine. Next I shall put the oven on. This will be swiftly followed by me taking the ready-made lasagne out of its wrapping and placing it in the oven for thirty-five to forty minutes. Meanwhile, I shall open a bag of salad.”

“You lazy so-and-so!” he said playfully. “After all the hours that I’ve slaved over that cooker for you!”

“Well, at least this way you’re in less danger of being poisoned.”

“Just make sure you pull off the cardboard cover slowly so I’ve got the chance to really experience your skills,” he said, laughing.

“I’ll do my best,” she grinned. She really couldn’t believe how well they were getting on. He was a different person to the man she’d first met in London.

“I’ll put some music on,” he said, turning on his laptop. Gwen raised her eyebrows.

“What’s wrong with the CD player?” she asked.

“I’ve exhausted your meagre music collection.”

“Control freak,” she murmured.

“I heard that!”

“I meant you to,” replied Gwen giggling.

* * *

John raised his glass to make a toast as they sat down to eat, “To you and your novels.”

“They wouldn’t be becoming novels if it weren’t for all the work you’ve done on them,” she said.

“True, true,” he said jokingly, “I suppose I am something pretty special ...”

Gwen threw her napkin at him. He ducked and it landed on Oscar’s head. The dog shook it off and looked most affronted, setting Gwen and John off laughing again.

“Actually, I’m surprised at how well we work together,” he said, helping himself to another glass of wine. “I’m afraid I thought you rather amateurish when you couldn’t come to London straight away. When you’re an editor I guess you get used to telling authors to jump and then only pausing to ask ‘How high?’”

“Well, I’m certainly not about to do that.”

“No, and I’m glad — I’m enjoying working with you. You’re not only hard-working, but also very professional, despite the awful coffee you used to provide.”

“I do want to be professional, but being a writer will never be as important to me as my mam is.”

“I guess I haven’t been around someone like you, for a long time. Everyone I know is very, very career driven.”

“Just like your father?”

“My father was the most work-obsessed person I’ve ever known. He was far worse than I am. My mother dedicated her

life to helping him achieve what he wanted to. He died of a heart attack when he was sixty, a year after my mother died.”

“I’m sorry,” said Gwen softly, “What did your father do?”

“He was in publishing, too.”

“Was he an editor?”

“He started off as one,” he said cagily. She realised he was beginning to look uncomfortable. He quickly changed the subject by saying: “It’s warm tonight isn’t it?”

She decided not to push him any further.

Gwen decided not to push him anymore and simply replied: “Shall we take our wine outside? It’s such a beautiful evening.”

“Good idea.”

They took their glasses and settled themselves on the soft grass under the old apple tree.

“This tree really is incredibly handy,” said John as he leaned back against the trunk.

“It is, but it’s a bit of a pain when the apples are ready to drop, it’s not worth the risk of sitting under it, you’re very likely to get bopped on the head, and it really hurts,” she said.

It was so much cooler outside that they only lasted about ten minutes before Gwen hurried in and came back laden with blankets. Twenty minutes later, and it was John who made the next run inside to make some hot chocolate. Finally, as they blew on and took tiny sips of the too hot, but irresistible, drinks, they felt settled. Their eyes met, and they both grinned.

What would my colleagues think of me now? thought John, but he realised he didn’t care.

He leaned back and gazed at the sky.

“You live in the city the whole of your life, and you never realise how the night sky actually looks. On a good, clear night

in London you can see maybe five stars at the very most. Not that most people bother to look.”

“My father taught me all about the stars,” replied Gwen. “I can never look up at the night sky without thinking of him.”

“You really are an amazing woman, did you know that?”

Gwen stared at him, surprised and a little embarrassed by his outburst.

“Sorry,” he said, “that wasn’t very professional of me. Tell me, what stars can we see out tonight?”

She thought it probably best to go along with his abrupt change of subject.

“Well, there’s Polaris, and that group of stars just over there is Cassiopeia. They’ll be much clearer in a few hours.”

“Very impressive, Miss Jones, although of course you could have just made that all up ...”

Gwen laughed and looked at John. His face was much nearer than she remembered.

Everything seemed to go into slow motion as he moved towards her and kissed her firmly on the mouth. She was so shocked that it took her a moment to respond. He pulled away and looked into her eyes, “Is this alright?” he asked gently.

Gwen nodded, she didn’t trust her voice enough to speak, she was so overwhelmed with emotion. All she knew was that she wanted this more than she’d ever wanted anything. John’s kisses became more and more insistent and then he stopped and asked, “Shall we go inside?” She replied, “Yes,” hoarsely, and found herself being picked up as if she were weightless and carried into the house and up the stairs.

“Goodnight, Oscar,” said John firmly as the dog got up slowly and made a vain attempt to climb up the stairs after them. Oscar lay down on the bottom step, looking resigned as John carried Gwen into her room and closed the door.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Gwen lay in bed watching John sleep and recalled the night before. It had been so sweet and so tender that she had been close to tears. How was it possible to feel that close to another human being: to feel that they've become one with you? Part of her believed that it must have been a dream. Nothing but a beautiful dream.

John murmured in his sleep and she jumped: she was a little nervous about him waking up. Last night, she'd been certain he felt the same as she did, but now, in the cold light of day, she was beginning to have her doubts. She'd just made up her mind to get up, have a shower, and make herself look busy downstairs, when John stirred again. He reached out for her and drew her close to his warm body before returning to his deep slumber. All Gwen's doubts instantly dissolved.

By the time she woke up again, it was nine, and John was nuzzling her neck. His kisses became more passionate, but Gwen had to pull away when she remembered that poor Oscar must be desperate to be let out.

"I'll come with you," he said, realising why she needed to get up.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he pulled on his jeans. The strong muscles in his arms flexed as he reached for his t-shirt. She gave a little smile that John immediately picked up on.

"What are you smiling about so cheekily?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied, blushing. John pulled her in for another kiss, and it took all of her willpower to remember Oscar and break away after a blissful minute.

They ambled along companionably while Oscar hobbled around the garden, sniffing everywhere and wagging his tail as much as he could. Gwen lifted her face into the sun and thought that she'd never felt so complete. She'd had boyfriends before, although none that could properly be called

a long-term relationship. She'd go on dates with these men, to restaurants, bars, theatres, or the cinema in a nearby town. Each date would take her a decent amount of time to prepare for — a relaxing bath with a glass of wine, followed by hair-styling, make-up and carefully chosen outfit, shoes, and handbag. All this might take at least a couple of hours. Yet here she was, in wellington boots, having not even showered, with a man she cared about far more than all the others put together. This is what she'd been looking for — someone to walk in her wellies with. It got even better when John took her hand in his as though it were most natural thing in the world.

* * *

“He's exhausted isn't he?” said Gwen, stroking Oscar's ears as he slept on the sofa, later that morning.

“Do you think he'll be alright here for a couple of hours if we go out for a proper walk?”

“I should think so, it's such a beautiful day, and it seems a shame to spend it indoors.”

They walked a couple of miles. John was happy to listen as Gwen chatted away, pointing out local landmarks and telling him some of the area's history. John had travelled all over the world for work, and as a child with his parents, but he couldn't remember any landscape having such an effect on him as this. The weather was perfect, warming sunshine and a refreshing breeze. Eventually they spotted a nice-looking pub, and he suggested they go in and get some food.

“Shouldn't we get back and at least attempt to get some work done?” she queried.

“It's the weekend, we can take it easy.”

“What has got into you?” she said, pretending to be shocked.

“Let's just say that now I've got a good reason not to work,” he said, leaning over to kiss her. Her heart raced as their kiss deepened, and she reluctantly pulled away before their actions became too ardent.

John paid when they ordered their food from the bar. Gwen noticed he used cash; she was pleased he hadn't used his company expense account. She didn't want to be just another business contact for him.

"I like that you eat," he said halfway through their meal.

"What on earth does that mean? Of course I eat!"

"I mean you eat properly, you enjoy your food and you eat a full meal. I've dined with so many women who just move their salad leaves round and round their plate, in some kind of complex dance."

"Well, what's the point in ordering it if you're not going to eat it," answered Gwen, and she resumed tucking into her delicious fish and chips.

"I couldn't agree more," he said, kissing her again.

Gwen noticed some of the bar staff watching them and nudging each other, but she just ignored them. She wasn't about to turn down a kiss from John just because it would cause a little gossip.

They did fit a little work in when they returned from their walk, but it was only at Gwen's insistence. She couldn't figure out what had happened to him, but she was enjoying his company so much that she decided not to point out his new relaxed work ethic again.

Oscar had moved from the sofa and now slept contentedly on his cushion in front of the fireplace; he opened a lazy eye every once in a while to check that neither of them had deserted him. He was quite happy to return to his slumber when he saw they were still on the sofa, John with his laptop, Gwen reading a printout of a corrected chapter. Her ancient laptop lay abandoned on the floor where she'd dumped it after it had threatened to burn a hole through her jeans.

She looked over at John when she was certain he'd be absorbed in reading. The whole scenario seemed a little bizarre: they were doing the same tasks they'd done many times before, and yet the feeling that something had

irreconcilably changed in their relationship was palpable, and it wasn't just that their bare feet had never been touching while they worked before.

She guessed that her laptop had probably cooled down enough for her to turn it on again, and thought she could get away with a quick check of her emails without John noticing that she was slacking off. She logged in and the first thing that caught her eye was a message from John sent seconds before, it read simply, "Fancy a cuppa?" She laughed, and he looked up, "I hope you weren't checking your emails when you're supposed to be working."

"Of course not!" she said, mock-indignantly, "Fancy a cuppa?"

"OK, then," he replied, trying hard to keep a straight face.

"I'm going to need to leave soon to visit Mam," said Gwen when she came back in with the drinks. It was one of the very few times she'd ever been reluctant to go to the hospital. She felt a little guilty but sought to quell it straight away, her mother would be thrilled if she knew what a wonderful day she'd had, she wanted her to be happy. Mam would probably tell her not to visit that evening, but Gwen felt that she should. Her mother was still very frail, and Gwen would worry if she didn't see her. But these thoughts didn't make it any easier to leave and get herself ready to go out.

* * *

Despite John offering to come, Gwen chose to go to the hospital by herself that evening. As much as she didn't want to be apart from him, she knew her mother would guess straight away that something had happened if she saw them together, and she wasn't ready to start answering questions yet.

It was as lovely as ever to see her mam, but she was distracted thinking about John. Her mother had to check a couple of times that she was listening. Gwen kept daydreaming about how sweet he had been as she was leaving.

“Will you be wanting anything to eat when you get back?” he’d asked, before she went out of the door.

“Probably not,” she replied. “I’m still pretty full from earlier.”

“Alright, see you later, then,” he said and kissed her goodbye.

The memory of the simple domesticity of the exchange gave her a warm feeling. She guiltily brought herself back to her conversation with her mam.

Gwen had to stop herself from driving far too fast in her efforts to get back to John as quickly as possible, but when she got home only the hall light was on. Everywhere else was in darkness. As usual Oscar was thrilled to have her back, but Gwen was distracted when she greeted him. Where had John gone? His car was still outside. Had he left a message? Why hadn’t he mentioned he was going out? Gwen walked dejectedly into the kitchen and turned on the light.

Then she saw it, a note. A single word:

“Upstairs.”

Gwen grinned and climbed up the stairs, forcing herself not to do it at a full-out run.

* * *

Gwen felt unbelievably happy, and yet the whole situation seemed very unreal. How had she just happened to fall into this “relationship” with John, if that’s even what it was? Did he think it was just a fling? Was she making a huge mistake and risking her career? And yet she knew that she couldn’t just walk away from him. He was the first man she’d met who really valued her for who she was and seemed to fit perfectly with her and her life. She never thought she’d think that, after their decidedly dodgy start. With him in her life and in the house she loved, and would soon own, Gwen felt more content than she had for a long time.

Later that evening, they busied themselves downstairs with the last of the day's chores, very comfortable in each other's company.

"Did you miss me when I was in London?" he asked, tucking a strand of Gwen's hair behind her ear and kissing her neck.

"Yes," she said, blissfully giving in to his attention and grateful not to be having to play games anymore and skirt around her feelings.

"I missed you, too," said John quietly. Then he looked at her intently and asked in a very serious tone: "You didn't really use the coffee machine, did you?"

"No," she said, mimicking his sombre manner.

"Would you like me to show you how to use it again?"

"Maybe later."

"Would you like me to just go and make you a coffee?"

"You make the coffee, I'll find some biscuits."

"Good plan."

She turned to him as he was busy fiddling with the coffee machine.

"I thought you hated me, you always seemed so keen to get away from me," she said.

"Of course I didn't hate you," he replied, stopping what he was doing and giving Gwen his full attention. "I was nervous around you and didn't want to make a fool out of myself or be caught staring at you. I couldn't stop thinking about you from the moment you bumped into me in the street that day, and I was amazed when you turned up later at the bar."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was going to but you kept leaving! The next time I saw you I was pulling that job off you in the corridor. I was so angry with him that I could barely control myself, let alone

carry on a conversation. I don't want to think what would have happened if I hadn't turned up when I did."

"Me, neither," said Gwen in a small voice. "Thank you again, so much."

"There's no need to thank me," he said, a little gruffly.

"Yes, there is. There's every need, you saved me. I'm very grateful." She leaned in to kiss him, but pulled away suddenly, saying, "There's one thing that I still don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Why did you pretend not to recognise me when I came to your office?"

John was silent for a moment, before he answered, "I'm sorry about that, I'm not entirely sure. I was angry with Paul for giving me a new author, one who'd never been published, when I had so much work already on and I didn't think the company had the resources. And I've always prided myself on my ability to keep my private life completely separate from my job. Then you turned up. I was still trying to accept the strength of my attraction to you, and I was thrown by having you appear in my office."

"I think I understand, at least a little, now."

"I hope you do, I had no idea that you also had feelings for me. I never would have acted that way if I'd realised. I'd never want to hurt you. You have to appreciate that my life has revolved around my work for years, and I've never met anyone who affected me as much as you. I was completely thrown."

He was silent for a moment, "I've got some stuff I need to tell you, but not right now. Now, I just want it to be you and me; nothing else matters."

Gwen looked at him questioningly, feeling a flurry of unease in the pit of her stomach, but she forced herself to let it go. If she and John were going to work, then she had to trust him.

“We’ll sort it out, let’s just enjoy this,” he said, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her on the nape of her neck.

“Let’s go up to bed,” she said.

“Are you tired, my darling?” he asked anxiously.

“Oh no,” answered Gwen, with a glint in her eye, and she led him back upstairs and into her bedroom.

* * *

Gwen was woken gently by John the following morning. She looked at her alarm clock, it was barely seven. She was surprised to see he was already showered and dressed.

“I need to go back to London, straight away.”

“Sorry?” she said, sitting up and doing her best to wake up properly.

“I’ve had an email from Paul. He hasn’t got the number here, and he’s been trying to contact me on my mobile, but of course there’s no signal.”

Gwen felt a wave of guilt run through her, but admonished herself straight away: it wasn’t her fault, and why would his work need him so urgently anyway? She had to allow herself a little smile at the thought of John sneaking downstairs so early to go online, she’d wondered when he would break, and she was amazed that he’d managed to go longer than a few hours without checking his email; he hadn’t looked at it since the previous afternoon.

“He needs me back in the office, there’s a problem with the company. I’ve got to leave, but I’ll speak to you later, OK? And I’ll be back again as soon as I can, the weekend at the latest. I’m really sorry,” he said, bending down to kiss her.

“It’s fine,” she said quickly, sensing how worried he was that she’d be upset or angry. “Of course you need to go back if there’s a problem. I’ll get up and have some breakfast with you.”

“No, you go back to sleep. I’ve already let Oscar out, so he’ll be alright for a while. I carried him up the stairs. I think he wanted to see you.”

On cue, Oscar’s nose appeared over the edge of the bed. He looked at John beseechingly, and he lifted him up to join Gwen.

“Thanks, that was thoughtful of you.”

“I’ll go straight to the office and I’ll call you this evening when I get home.”

He gave her one last kiss before going. She heard him close the front door behind him, and then she fell back into a deep sleep, Oscar by her side.

Some time later, Gwen was woken up by the telephone ringing. She staggered groggily out of bed and hurried downstairs to answer it, worrying that it could be bad news from the hospital but hoping it was John calling because he was already missing her. When she answered the phone she didn’t recognise the voice on the other end.

“Good morning, is that Gwen Jones?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“My name is Julia Davis, I’m calling from Black Horse Publishing.”

“Oh, hello, Julia,” said Gwen, in a manner which she hoped was both friendly and business-like. “I think we spoke last week about my contract, is it ready for me?”

“I’m afraid not,” replied Julia. “I was actually calling to inform you that we’ve decided against publishing your novels at the present time. We’ll be happy to reconsider again at a later date, but I’ve been told to tell you that you should feel free to submit it to any other publishers that you think may be interested in it.”

She sounded as if she were reading from a script. There was absolutely no emotion in her voice as she spoke the words that ripped Gwen’s dream to shreds.

Gwen was too shocked to say anything.

“But why?” she eventually managed to murmur.

“I’m afraid I don’t have that information.”

“Right. Well, thanks for letting me know.”

She put down the phone and sank to the floor, wondering in disbelief how John, her John, could have let this happen. He must have known about it, she was his author, why hadn’t he at least warned her, even if there was nothing he could do to stop it. He knew that she’d never received her contract, and without that she imagined she wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. Then it hit her that he hadn’t even tried to save her deal. He hadn’t had emergency meetings to fight for her contract. He’d stayed here, making love to her.

Gwen picked up the phone again, she’d call John, he should be in his office by now. Maybe he could explain. Maybe he’d be as shocked as she was. Her doubts that this was true began to re-enter her head before she’d even finished dialling the number.

“Good morning, Black Horse Publishing. How can I help you?” answered a bored-sounding female voice.

“Could I be put through to Mr Thatcher, please?” asked Gwen.

“Who’s calling?”

“It’s Gwen Jones.”

“I’m afraid that Mr Thatcher isn’t available at the moment, can I take a message?”

“No, thank you,” she said and put down the phone. Why exactly am I bothering to call him, thought Gwen. He obviously knows what has happened; he should have called me by now. What am I expecting him to say if he does? I know how much his job means to him, he’s hardly likely to go against a company decision just to help me.

Who am I kidding? It must have been his decision, that's why he didn't want to work on the manuscript this weekend, he wouldn't waste any more of his precious time on it once he realised that they didn't want it anymore. Instead he decided to take advantage of me, and I stupidly let him.

How could I have believed that he truly cared for me? He can't have any feelings for me — how can he, and do what he's done? Is he even capable of having feelings for anything other than his job?

Am I really so lonely living here by myself that I created a fantasy, and he exploited it?

Ever practical, she began planning an emergency schedule to contain the situation as much as possible. First item was to phone the mortgage company. That call didn't take long: now she had no book deal they were withdrawing their mortgage offer. Gwen and her mother would lose their house when it was auctioned.

Furiously, Gwen turned on her laptop and logged into her email account. She changed the settings to block any mail from John and got rid of his email address and anything he'd ever sent her.

She considered calling the phone company and asking them to bar John's numbers, but he could always just use a different phone, if he did indeed ever want to contact her again. She decided instead to unplug the telephone and the internet connection.

Next, she climbed into her car and drove to the nearest large supermarket. After buying some wine, she went to investigate if there was a phone network that might possibly work at the farmhouse. She left half an hour later clutching her first mobile and a good signal booster, a combination the salesman thought had a small chance of success. She began charging the phone as soon as she got home and was thrilled to find she was able to call the hospital to give them the number and ask that it be added to her contact details. She left the mobile on, safe in the knowledge that John didn't have that

number, but that the hospital did in case there was an emergency.

Her last task for the day was to put John and Black Horse Publishing out of her mind. She knew if she dwelt on losing her book deal and how much it had meant to her, then she would find it impossible to write, and write was what she knew she must do. This was a setback, but she wouldn't let it destroy her dream.

* * *

Gwen didn't think she could possibly feel any worse but discovered that, in fact, she could when the post arrived the next day. Mixed up with the usual junk mail was a letter from Black Horse confirming they would not be publishing her book.

Steeling herself, Gwen picked up her new mobile and called the company, resolving to speak to John one last time, for closure, and get him to admit his wrongdoing. She needed to hear from John himself why he had treated her in such an appalling way, both personally and professionally.

"May I speak to Mr Thatcher, please?" she asked as a female answered the phone.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"It's Gwen Jones."

"I'm afraid he's unavailable at the moment. Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"No, thanks," replied Gwen, before blurting out, "Actually, could I speak to Paul Worthing then, please?"

"I'll put you through," answered the efficient voice at the end of the line.

A moment later, Paul picked up.

"Hello."

"Hi Paul, um ... it's Gwen Jones." It was at this point that Gwen realised she had no idea what exactly she was going to

say to him.

There was silence on the line, before Paul finally responded with artificial cheeriness, “Gwen, sweetheart, how are things?”

“Well, it’s about my books.”

“Yes, I did hear about that, such a shame. I really thought you had great potential.”

“You did?”

“Of course, but as John’s your editor I have to follow his recommendation. I can’t ask him to continue working with an author whom he has no confidence in.”

“Oh,” said Gwen quietly, shocked to hear what she’d suspected said out loud.

“Was there anything else?” He was now quite obviously anxious to get off the line.

“No, thank you,” she said.

She put down the phone and gave in to her tears.

* * *

Gwen couldn’t avoid visiting her mam forever, however painful she expected the experience to be. On the third day of hanging around the house moping, she steeled herself to go, and determinedly got in her car. Gwen was still trying to decide what to tell her mother as she drew up in the hospital car park.

She allowed herself five minutes sitting in the car to compose herself before forcing herself out and into the hospital. She made her way to the ward and to her mother’s cubicle, but when she got there she found the bed was neatly made and empty. Gwen immediately began to panic, what had happened to her mam? Spotting a nurse she recognised, she ran to her. “Where is she?” she asked anxiously.

“Edith was moved this morning, love, did no one call you let you know?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“She’s on the fifth floor, Ward G.”

“Did something happen? Did she have another stroke?”

“No, love, Ward G is a specialist recuperation ward. A space came up for her, and she was moved straight away.”

Relief flooded through Gwen, but she wouldn’t be able to relax completely until she’d seen her mam for herself. She took the stairs two at a time, rather than waiting for the lift, and followed the signs to Ward G.

She introduced herself to the staff at the nurses’ station, who directed her to the room on the left at the end of the ward.

“She’s in a room?” checked Gwen.

“Yes, your mother has one of our private rooms,” answered the nurse, seeming surprised by the question.

As she walked through the ward, Gwen saw her mother searching for her. The door to her room was wide open, and she was sitting in a wheelchair close to it, obviously looking out for her daughter. Her eyes lit up as she spotted Gwen coming towards her.

“Hi, Mam,” said Gwen, bending down to kiss her mother’s cheek.

“Hello, darling. I’ve missed seeing you the last few days,” said Edith kindly. Gwen knew that she wasn’t reproaching her, her mother often told her to take a break from coming to the hospital every day, and they’d spoken very briefly on the phone each evening.

“I’ve had a lot on with the book,” she said, smiling, and then swiftly changed the subject, “How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad, thank you, love. Better with this new bed and chair, and a little peace and quiet. It’s all rather peculiar, but the doctors and nurses seem to think I’m supposed to have all this fuss. I don’t like to ask too many questions, they’re so busy you know.”

Gwen looked around her mother's room. She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed the furniture straight away. Instead of the ordinary hospital bed and plastic chair that had been provided on the other ward, her mother now had what looked like a brand-new, hi-tech bed, with an enormous number of controls on its side. Next to it was a comfortable-looking armchair. The electric wheelchair her mother sat in was obviously state-of-the-art. Just a few minutes later, Edith delighted in showing Gwen she could operate it herself. She could barely keep up with her mam as she whizzed out of the ward and began picking up real speed along the corridor.

They went to the coffee shop and had a coffee and an éclair, which Edith insisted upon paying for. Gwen was filled in on the physiotherapy her mother had received that morning and the occupational therapy she'd endured afterwards, "They tried to teach me how to make a cup of tea!" she said, laughing, "Honestly, as if I don't know how to do that. Then the therapist wouldn't believe me when I said you should add the milk to the cup before the water. Well, I certainly proved her wrong!"

Gwen listened happily to her mam's chatter, thrilled that she was feeling so much more positive.

"How's John?" asked her mother after Gwen had told her how much Oscar had improved since she'd last visited.

Gwen braced herself before she replied simply "He's gone back to London."

"And when will he be coming back here?" asked Gwen's mam with a little smile creeping up at the corners of her mouth.

"He won't be, Mam."

"That's a shame," said her mother looking at Gwen questioningly, trying to work out what her daughter was thinking. "You two seemed to be getting close."

"It was just an editing job for him, Mam."

“Maybe so, but he certainly liked you. And he said you were very talented.”

“Sorry?”

“When he came here, and I asked him what he thought about your writing. He said you were very talented.”

“He was probably just being polite. He’d hardly tell you, of all people, what he really thought.”

She saw that her mother looked surprised, and so she quickly changed the subject, “Have you filled in your meal chart for tomorrow?”

She suspected that her mam knew that something wasn’t quite right, but although she gave Gwen a wry little smile, she’d clearly decided not to push her daughter and cheerfully chatted away about the advantages of hospital chips over hospital mash until it was time for them to return to the ward.

When visiting time drew to a close, Gwen said goodbye to her mother who was contentedly settling down with a couple of magazines she’d bought in the hospital shop.

The time hadn’t seemed right to bring up the house, not with her mam so excited about her new room and equipment. There was no reason to upset her just yet, Gwen reasoned.

Gwen went back over to the nurses’ station — she was determined to discover what had caused the sudden vast improvement in her mother’s care. She was in luck; a consultant, who confirmed he was now in charge of her mother’s case, was just discussing something with one of the nurses, and was happy to fill her in on what had been going on.

“We were instructed by Mr Thatcher to move your mother to a private room. He faxed a list of equipment that should be provided for her and details of the therapy he believed she needed. He’d obviously done his homework. Everything is to be paid for by him.”

“What do you mean he’s paying?”

“There’s a per night fee for the room and—”

“And the equipment and therapy?” Gwen interjected.

“The equipment isn’t what we usually provide in this hospital. We ordered it at Mr Thatcher’s request. The therapists are private. It was suggested that your mother be moved to a private facility, but Mr Thatcher wouldn’t hear of that, he felt the nearest one was too far for your mother’s visitors to get to regularly.”

Gwen was dumbstruck.

“He also requested that I take over as your mother’s consultant,” he added.

Gwen thanked the doctor for his help and made her way to her car, still stunned by what she’d learnt. In a daze, she drove back to the farmhouse, the house which would only be her home for a very short time now, yet hadn’t really felt like one since John had left.

Although he had broken Gwen’s heart, she knew she would always be grateful to him for what he’d done for her mother. Without his interference, Gwen suspected that her mam might never have been able to enjoy something as simple as the cup of coffee they’d had together that day.

His actions towards her mother didn’t fit with the way he’d treated her. There was a part of Gwen that felt a little resentful that it was John who’d managed to make such an impact on her mother’s quality of life. And just why had he done it? She knew she was unlikely to ever uncover the answer to that mystery. She tried not to think about it: if she allowed herself to, then she was just one step away from going back to why he’d left her.

Chapter Ten

Bronwyn and Brian seemed to know not to question Gwen about her unusual mood when she arrived for work, though they did throw each other a quick glance when they saw the scowl on Gwen's face and her red eyes. It was the day of the auction. Gwen had considered calling in sick but knew that wouldn't be fair — her bosses had always been so accommodating to her, and they'd struggle without her during the lunchtime rush.

Gwen seemed to be in a world of her own for most of her shift. She looked like she was close to tears. Bronwyn followed her around, quietly swapping round orders she gave to the wrong customers and picking up things she inadvertently knocked off tables.

As Gwen was hanging up her apron at the end of her shift Bronwyn called out casually, "Thanks for today, love," and came over to her. "I double-booked for tomorrow's shift. You and Mary are both on for lunchtime. Completely my fault. Mary's happy to cover it, so don't you worry about coming in, love."

"Thanks, Bron," replied Gwen, with a small, sad smile, knowing full well that Bronwyn would never double-book a shift, and very grateful that she would now have a few days to pull herself together before she was due back at the tea rooms. Perhaps she could make a start looking for somewhere to live and get her life back on track again. But not as it had been, though. Why had she never realised there was such a huge, gaping hole in her life? A life which she'd been pretty content with before meeting John, but which she knew would not fulfil her now.

One thing was for sure: she wouldn't be stupid enough to fall for someone like John again. The phrase 'once bitten, twice shy' came to mind as Gwen resolved to be far more careful with her heart in future.

* * *

When she got home, Gwen didn't really know what to do with herself. There was no need for her to pack yet; the agents had written to tell her that only after the auction would she be given notice of when she had to move out. It was hours until she could visit her mother. Oh, her mam! How was she going to continue hiding just how much John had hurt her? And how was she going to tell her that any hope they'd had of saving their home was gone? Gwen was ashamed that she still hadn't found the strength to tell her mother the truth about the dire situation. There'd been no point in approaching any other mortgage companies. Without her book deal to show them, she was sure they'd just laugh in her face.

Gwen looked at the clock. It was well past lunchtime but she wasn't hungry, and anyway cooking would only make her remember the happy times she and John had spent together in the kitchen. The whole house was full of him, every inch of it seemed to scream out something that he'd done or said to her.

She thought she'd make herself a coffee to fill in the time, but after jabbing randomly at a few promising-looking buttons on the machine, she gave up, cross and frustrated with herself, and furious with the stupid contraption. It was a daily reminder of John whenever she saw it staring at her, looking completely out of place in her cosy kitchen. She settled for a cup of tea instead. She drank it while glaring at the chrome monstrosity, which beeped indignantly as if daring her to have another go at working it. She would have thrown it out the window if she could have lifted it without breaking her back.

At least the auction would be over by now. She could move on with her life. She should probably call the landlord later to find out how long she had left in her home.

She decided to go for a walk, suddenly feeling desperate to get out of the house. Oscar looked after her longingly as she went, but she promised him she'd be home soon. She hated to leave him alone when he could obviously tell there was something wrong, but she really needed some fresh air and to distance herself from all the memories the house contained.

The sky was grey, thick with heavy rain clouds. The light made the countryside appear even more rugged than normal. Gwen knew better than to stray too far from the house on a day like this, the locals often said that after you'd been caught in a mist on their hills once, you didn't do it again.

Just why had she fallen for John's lies? This one question was all that kept going round and round in Gwen's mind. How could she have been so stupid? Her mam and dad had always taught her to stand on her own two feet, and there she was, with the opportunity of a lifetime, and she had messed it up by getting involved with her editor — why had she let her heart rule her head and not been more practical? Why had she not thought things through?

Even though Gwen had only known John for a short time she'd believed that she'd understood his character. Yes, he could be a little gruff and arrogant, but underneath, she'd been sure that she'd discovered a softer side: someone who was kind and thoughtful, with a great sense of humour. And who was also incredibly handsome.

Above all, she'd thought that she could trust him. How could she have been so wrong?

What had she ever done to him to make him hate her so much that he would treat her this way? She'd been imagining the rest of her life with him. Losing her book deal and the house hurt, but it paled into insignificance compared to losing John. She hated that this was the case.

Gwen was pulled out of her thoughts by a deep voice asking, "May I join you?"

Despite her anger and heartache, Gwen's heart still leapt when she turned and saw John standing beside her.

She managed to compose herself, and only a glimmer of the emotion she actually felt was spotted by John as it flashed across her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked frostily.

"I came to talk to you."

“Well, I don’t want to hear anything you have to say,” she said, turning to leave.

“Wait,” he took hold of her arm firmly. “I need you to listen. If you still want nothing to do with me after I’ve finished, then I’ll leave.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him challengingly.

“Go on, then,” she said, her eyes blazing with rage.

John took a deep breath and began:

“First of all, I want you to know that I had absolutely nothing to do with your deal being dropped.”

“Don’t lie to me, John. I know you didn’t want your company to take me on. I spoke to Paul.”

“Initially that was true. I didn’t think we could afford to support another author. I reasoned that our resources at the company were already overstretched. However, the real explanation was how I felt about you. I think I fell in love with you that moment I saw you again in the bar. I was there to help you with that oaf because I’d been watching you all evening. I didn’t think I was able to commit myself to a relationship because I was giving all my time to the company. I never considered having a one-night stand with you because I knew I’d never be able to leave it at that. I was resolved to be strong and firmly put you out of my mind. That’s why I didn’t ask for your number that night. I couldn’t sleep for thinking about you and then I found that you were the new author being forced upon me! I was so shocked that I could barely speak, let alone hold a serious business meeting. I knew I couldn’t carry on like that and so I asked Paul to drop you, which was incredibly thoughtless and selfish of me. In all fairness, if I had been thinking straight at the time, I never would have gone to Paul.”

He turned Gwen to face him, “I went home and read your manuscript. I was enchanted, and despite all my reservations about working with you, I knew that I had to be part of it, even when that meant trying to control my feelings enough to work alongside you as closely as I did these last weeks.”

“But Paul told me you didn’t want to work with me anymore, that’s why my contract was scrapped.”

“He lied to cover his own back, amongst many other things. When he cancelled your contract he knew I wouldn’t stand for it, and he even ensured that none of your calls got through to me. He gave instructions to the reception staff not to connect you to my office. I won’t be working with Paul anymore.”

“Did they fire you?” she asked, shocked.

“No. He’d find he couldn’t if he wanted to. You see, my father owned the company. The firm will be mine next year.”

“Pardon?”

“Black Horse Publishing was founded and owned by my father. There was a clause in his will that insisted I work as a regular editor at the company for five years before taking over. Dad’s way of making sure I truly knew the business properly. That’s why I’ve been so worried about the company: it’s not just a job; it’s my father’s legacy.

“I changed my surname to my mother’s maiden name before I started. Dad wanted me to be treated like a normal editor, and not be favoured because of my family. Otherwise, how could I do my job properly and fulfil his request?”

“That’s why I work so hard and why I always start work so early. I had to be at the office before everyone else so I had the time and opportunity to keep a check on the company without anyone becoming suspicious. Black Horse was everything to my father, and he left it to me, I had to protect it until I could properly take control,” explained John.

“Hardly anyone knew, only the trustees of the company. Paul certainly didn’t. Technically, while I was an editor, he was my superior. He assumed he could get rid of any of my authors if he felt it was in the company’s best interest. The decision to drop your book had absolutely nothing to do with me. As soon as I suspected something was happening I went back to London.”

“Why didn’t you tell me what was going on?”

“I wasn’t sure of the details myself, and I didn’t want to worry you unnecessarily. I knew how much that book deal meant to you. I tried to call and email after I’d spoken to Paul, but I couldn’t reach you.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Why would I lie? Why would I bother to come all the way here?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Why didn’t you warn me that the company was in trouble?”

“I had no idea that Paul would decide to drop your manuscript, having taken it on so recently. I’d assumed he’d made sure that the money was available for your book, but apparently he hadn’t. Paul was right that our publishing house doesn’t have the funds to publish and promote a new writer at the moment. He’s been clever in very carefully wording the contracts of any authors that we take on, so that the company can get out of agreements quickly and cheaply. Most new authors are so grateful to have a contract that they don’t check the details. In your case, he didn’t even bother with the contract. He knew you’d trust him and you’d carry on working on the manuscript even without contract or payment — if the company had the money when the book was finally ready for publication, he would have sorted out your advance and contract then — although I suspect he’d have attempted to get you to agree to less than previously arranged. He’s really not a very nice man.”

“I can’t believe I’ve been so naïve.”

“It wasn’t just you; there are several other new authors who’ve been similarly duped. Obviously, if I’d had any idea what was going on, I would have stepped in and stopped it immediately. That is not the way my company does business. However, Paul’s plan had the very useful side-effect, for him at least, that with so many new writers being hired, the editors

didn't have a chance to look too closely at the financial situation and follow up on anything unusual that they found."

"What's going to happen to Paul now?" she asked.

"I've spoken to the trustees, and they've fired him, along with his assistant, Julia, who was in on it all. I doubt that either of them will ever be able to work in the business again. I've spent the last few days getting in touch with authors and trying to sort this mess out. The only one I haven't been able to speak to is you."

John looked at Gwen, as if trying to ascertain what she was thinking. "You're an amazing writer, your work deserves to be published. However, I'll admit that I have something of a vested interest in making sure that your books are not published by Black Horse."

"So you do agree with Paul's decision," she said sadly.

"I've organised a better contract for you with another publishing house. I knew they were on the lookout for exactly your sort of manuscript, and they were thrilled to be offered it."

"Why would you do that?"

"It wouldn't be right for me to have a relationship with one of our company's authors."

"A relationship?"

"Yes, a relationship: me and you." He took a breath, "I've got some other news for you which is kind of connected to that."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I know who won the auction for your house."

"How do you know that? It can have only just finished."

"It finished about half an hour ago. I know, because I bought it. For you. Well, for us really."

“You bought the house. For us?” she repeated incredulously.

“Yes.”

“But you can’t do that!” cried Gwen.

“Why not?”

“Because London book editors don’t just go around buying houses in the middle of Wales for their authors!”

“I’m not your editor anymore and believe me, I can more than afford it.”

“What makes you think that I’d accept a house from you?”

“Gwen, I love you, and I love this house. I want to live with you here. With Oscar. And soon, hopefully, your mother as well.”

“My mam? What do you mean?”

“Your mother is coming back here to live.”

“What?” said Gwen astonished. “How?”

“I’ve spoken to Edith and to her consultants. The necessary equipment will be arriving in a couple of weeks. It’s all been taken care of.”

“I can’t let you do this.”

“We’ll be starting interviews tomorrow for carers to come in and help,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her objection.

“Carers?” said Gwen. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed.

“Yes carers, your mother will require a lot of help; we’ll need people regularly at the house.”

“I can’t let you do this.” repeated Gwen.

“Why not?”

Gwen tried to pull away from him. The intensity of his gaze was too much, she couldn’t think clearly.

“Because I don’t need you to rescue me,” she finally answered.

John’s dark eyes stared at her intently for a moment, “This is not about me rescuing you. I’m rescuing myself. I didn’t always realise it, but I’ve been unhappy for a very long time. And then I met you. I love you. I’m being selfish in buying the house because I’m asking for something in return. Something that is far more valuable and more important than money. I’m asking for you. For you to spend your life with me in that house. I’m asking you to marry me.”

“Marry you?”

“Yes, it turns out that I need you. And I need Oscar. I even need this crazy, creaky house.”

“Everything seems to be moving so fast,” she said desperately.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t wait any longer to start my life with you. I want to marry you, have children with you, and raise them here.”

Hearing these words, Gwen began to feel the last of her anger seep away.

“But ...” she began.

And then it was as if her mind cleared, and the many objections she was about to blurt out just melted away. The man she adored was standing in front of her telling her that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. And he was doing it by fitting himself into her life, not taking her away from it. It dawned on her just how lucky she was, and she looked up, locked eyes with her love, and asked him simply, “When can we get married, then?”

“As soon as possible.”

John took hold of Gwen with his strong arms and pulled her to him for a kiss so tender that she was left in no doubt his feelings for her were very real indeed.

The reunion was interrupted by something ringing inside her jacket pocket. She took it out, and John indicated with an amused smile that she ought to answer it.

“Hi, Sarah. Is everything OK? Can I call you back in a while?”

He waited patiently for Gwen to finish her call.

“Great, speak to you later,” she said, turning off her phone and putting it back in her pocket.

“I got a mobile,” she said sheepishly.

“Well, I never,” he said with a grin. “It’ll have to do for the both of us, because I’m fed up with this wretched thing,” and with that, he took his Blackberry out of his pocket and threw it over his shoulder. Then he returned to their kiss.



THE END

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Author's Note

'Mam' is a regional term, synonymous with 'mum' (or 'mom' for my trans-Atlantic friends).

I've been asked whether there's anyone in the world who wouldn't have a mobile phone in today's day and age. Well, in way of answer, I live in rural Wales, much like my heroine Gwen, and in our last house we had only one spot in the house, on the top floor, where we could get a mobile signal — and then not always. Else it was a 2km walk. We didn't have broadband out there, the council didn't collect the rubbish from anywhere near the house, the roads weren't gritted come winter and, in the summer, if it didn't rain for a few weeks, the spring ran dry and we were out of water ...

Believe me, and I say this with deepest affection, life can still be rather different out in the sticks!

Love,

Emma

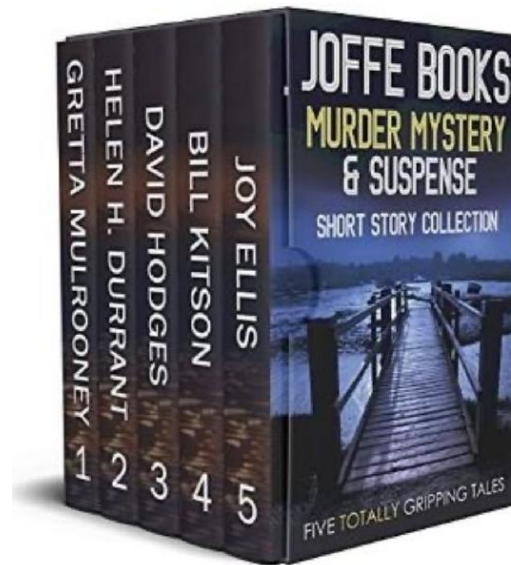
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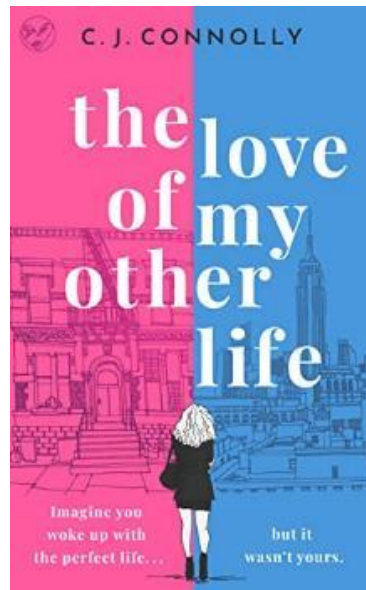


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going to break up with his girlfriend. She hopes.

She's zipping through traffic on her way to meet her friends for dinner at a SoHo restaurant. There's a screech of brakes, Josie crashes her bike and her world goes black.

Then something extraordinary happens.

She wakes up in hospital. The handsome stranger by her side, holding her hand and telling her he loves her, is Rob. Her husband of two years.

Josie has no idea how she got here. This new life is everything she ever wanted. But there's one very important thing missing

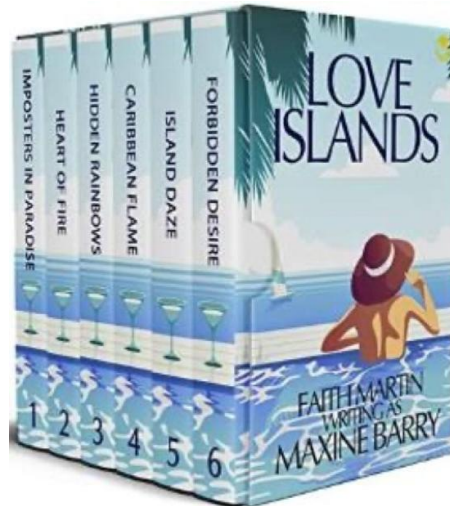
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**1938, Italy. Biff and Rosemary are honeymooning in
Sorrento.**

They meet Konrad and Anna, a charming couple who also
happen to be newlyweds.

They seem to have so much in common — Biff is a pilot in the
RAF and Konrad is in the German Navy. Soon things will be
very different ...

They tour the Amalfi coast, and visit the ruins at Pompeii.
When their holiday comes to an end, they swear to meet again
in a year's time.

But their countries and their allegiances will be torn apart by
war.

Konrad and Anna seem so nice. They can't possibly be the
enemy, can they?

Each of them is drawn further into the chaos of conflict. Who
will survive? And what will fate hold for these couples?

**ONE LAST HOLIDAY BEFORE THE WAR THAT
WILL CHANGE THEIR LIVES FOREVER.**

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GLOSSARY OF ENGLISH USAGE FOR US READERS

A & E: accident and emergency department in a hospital

Aggro: violent behaviour, aggression

Air raid: an attack in which bombs are dropped from aircraft on ground targets

Allotment: a plot of land rented by an individual for growing fruit, vegetable or flowers

Anorak: nerd (it also means a waterproof jacket)

Artex: textured plaster finish for walls and ceilings

A level: exams taken between 16 and 18

Auld Reekie: Edinburgh

Au pair: live-in childcare helper. Often a young woman.

Barm: bread roll

Barney: argument

Beaker: glass or cup for holding liquids

Beemer: BMW car or motorcycle

Benefits: social security

Bent: corrupt

Bin: wastebasket (noun), or throw in rubbish (verb)

Biscuit: cookie

Blackpool Lights: gaudy illuminations in a seaside town

Bloke: guy

Blow: cocaine

Blower: telephone

Blues and twos: emergency vehicles

Bob: money

Bobby: policeman

Broadsheet: quality newspaper (*New York Times* would be a US example)

Brown bread: rhyming slang for dead

Bun: small cake

Bunk: escape, i.e. 'do a bunk'

Burger bar: hamburger fast-food restaurant

Buy-to-let: buying a house/apartment to rent it out for profit

Charity shop: thrift store

Carrier bag: plastic bag from supermarket

Care home: an institution where old people are cared for

Car park: parking lot

CBeebies: kids TV

Chat-up: flirt, trying to pick up someone with witty banter or compliments

Chemist: pharmacy

Chinwag: conversation

Chippie: fast-food place selling chips and other fried food

Chips: French fries but thicker

CID: Criminal Investigation Department

Civvy Street: civilian life (as opposed to army)

Clock: punch

Cock-up: mess up, make a mistake

Cockney: a native of East London

Common: an area of park land or lower class

Comprehensive school (Comp.): high school

Cop hold of: grab

Copper: police officer

Coverall: coveralls, or boiler suit

CPS: Crown Prosecution Service, decide whether police cases go forward

Childminder: someone who looks after children for money

Council: local government

Dan Dare: hero from *Eagle* comic

DC: detective constable

Deck: one of the landings on a floor of a tower block

Deck: hit (verb)

Desperate Dan: very strong comic book character

DI: detective inspector

Digestive biscuit: plain cookie

Digs: student lodgings

Do a runner: disappear

Do one: go away

Doc Martens: heavy boots with an air-cushioned sole

Donkey's years: long time

Drum: house

DS: detective sergeant

ED: emergency department of a hospital

Eagle: boys' comic

Early dart: to leave work early

Eggy soldiers: strips of toast with a boiled egg

Enforcer: police battering ram

Estate: public/social housing estate (similar to housing projects)

Estate agent: realtor (US)

Falklands War: war between Britain and Argentina in 1982

Fag: cigarette

Father Christmas: Santa Claus

Filth: police (insulting)

Forces: army, navy and air force

FMO: force medical officer

Fried slice: fried bread

Fuzz: police

Garda: Irish police

Gendarmerie: French national police force

Geordie: from Newcastle

Garden centre: a business where plants and gardening equipment are sold

Gob: mouth, can also mean phlegm or spit

GP: general practitioner, a doctor based in the community

Graft: hard work

Gran: grandmother

Hancock: Tony Hancock, English comedian popular in 1950s

Hard nut: tough person

HGV: heavy goods vehicle, truck

HOLMES: UK police computer system used during investigation of major incidents

Home: care home for elderly or sick people

Hoover: vacuum cleaner

I'll be blown: expression of surprise

Inne: isn't he

Interpol: international police organisation

Into care: a child taken away from their family by the social services

Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, applied to any strong woman

ITU: intensive therapy unit in hospital

Jane Doe: a person whose identity is unknown/anonymous

JCB: a mechanical excavator

Jerry-built: badly made

Jungle: nickname given to migrant camp near Calais

Lad: young man

Lass: young woman

Lift: elevator

Lord Lucan: famous aristocrat who allegedly killed his children's nanny and disappeared in 1974. Has never been found.

Lorry: truck

Lovely jubbly: said when someone is pleased

Luftwaffe: German air force

M&S: Marks and Spencer, a food and clothes shop

Miss Marple: detective in a series of books by Agatha Christie

MOD: Ministry of Defence

Mobile phone: cell phone

MP: Member of Parliament, politician representing an area

MRSA: A strain of antibiotic-resistant bacteria

Myra Hindley: famous British serial killer

Naff: lame, not good

Naff all: none

National Service: compulsory UK military service, ended in 60s

Net curtains: a type of semi-transparent curtain

NHS: National Health Service, public health service of the UK

Nick: police station (as verb: to arrest)

Nowt: nothing

Nutter: insane person

Nursery: a place which grows plants, shrubs and trees for sale (often wholesale)

O level: exams taken between 14 and 16

Old bag: old woman (insulting)

Old Bill: police

OTT: over the top

Owt: anything

Pants: noun: underwear, adjective: bad/rubbish/terrible

Para: paratrooper

Pay-as-you-go: a cell phone you pay for calls in advance

PC: police constable

Pear-shaped: gone wrong

Petrol: gasoline

Pictures: movie

Pillbox: a concrete building, partly underground, used as an outpost defence

Pillock: fool

Pips: police insignia indicating rank

Piss off: as exclamation, go away (rude), can also mean annoy

Pissing down: raining

Playing field: sports field

Pleb: ordinary person (often insulting)

Portakabin: portable building used as temporary office etc.

Post: mail

Planning Department: the local authority department which issues licences to build and develop property

PNC: police national computer

PSNI: Police Service of Northern Ireland

Prat: idiot

Premier League: top English soccer division

Proms: annual concerts held at the Albert Hall

Public analyst: scientists who perform chemical analysis for public protection purposes

RAF: Royal Air Force

Rag: newspaper

Ram-raiding: robbery where a vehicle is rammed through a shop window

Randy: horny

Recce: reconnaissance

Red Adair: famous oil well firefighter

Resus: resuscitation room

Right state: messy

Ring: telephone (verb)

Roadworks: repairs done to roads

Rozzers: police

RSPB: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

RTC: road traffic collision

RV: rendezvous point

Royal Engineers: British army corps dealing with military engineering etc.

Rugger: rugby (posh American football)

Sarge: sergeant

SCO19: Specialist Crime and Operations Specialist Firearms Command

Scrote: low life

Section: to have someone committed to a mental hospital under UK mental health laws

Semi: semi-detached house, a house with another house joined to it on one side only

Shedload: a large amount

Shop: store

Shout the odds: talk in a loud bossy way

Sickie: day off work pretending to be ill

Sixth-form college: school for high school students in final two years

SIO: senior investigating officer

Skell: tramp or homeless person

Skip: a large open container used for building waste

Slapper: slag

Smackhead: heroin addict

Snout: police informer

SOCO: scene-of-crime officer

Sod: an annoying person

Sort: to do or make

Solicitor: lawyer

Sparky: electrician

Spook: spy

Spuds: potatoes

Squaddie: a soldier of low rank

Stunner: beautiful woman

Super: superintendent (police rank)

Surveyor: someone who examines land and buildings professionally

Sweeting: endearment, like sweetheart

Tabloid: newspaper

Tea: dinner (Northern English)

Tea towel: drying cloth

Till: cash register

Tip: a mess

Tipsy: a bit drunk

Top himself: commit suicide

Torch: flashlight

Tutor: university teacher

Tower block: tall building containing apartments (usually social housing)

Twoc: steal a car, often just for joyriding

Upmarket: affluent or fancy

Wacky baccy: cannabis

Wally: silly person

War Cry: Salvation Army magazine

Wash: the washing machine

Water board: company supplying water to an area

White van man: typical working-class man who drives a small truck

WI: Women's Institute, organisation of women in UK for social/cultural activity

Widow's weeds: black clothes worn by a widow in mourning

Wilco: will comply, i.e. 'yes'

Wrinklies: old people

Yellowbelly: native of Lincolnshire

Yob: a rude or aggressive youth or person

Yorkie bar: type of chocolate bar

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