



Claire Davis
Al Stewart

The Forest
Savage

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE FOREST SAVAGE

By Claire Davis & Al Stewart

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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The Forest Savage

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THE FOREST SAVAGE

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Photo Description

In the photograph, two young men sit closely together. One is smoking, while the other appears to be talking. Their close proximity to one another suggests friendship and intimacy. Behind them, the surroundings look bleak and drab.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I want to know their story. They look like best friends, but is there something more between them? Maybe one of them is head over heels and the other one a bit clueless? They would make such a cute couple :)

Sincerely,

NannyOgg

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gangs, crime, drug use, drink driving, violence, prison, first time, friends to lovers, slow burn, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: dub-con/non-con

Word Count: 29,100

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With thanks to the MM group and all the volunteers who take part.

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Kristan and Layla.

THE FOREST SAVAGE

By Claire Davis & Al Stewart

“I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! How hard a thing is to say, what was this forest savage, rough, and stern, which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more...”

—Dante Alighieri, “The Divine Comedy”

Chapter One

It was raining, cold, and miserable. Flurries of leaves battered his face like the condemning words of those he left behind one dreadful night when the world stopped. Cal had spent over a year in prison, waiting grimly to be released into this grey wasteland of a town.

The bitter northern wind was strong enough to push him forward, away from the prison doors, but not enough to permeate the numb layers of shock that still surrounded him like sweet decay.

His thoughts were thankfully halted by a familiar face—Mary, his probation officer, come to meet him and drive him to his new town. “Hello Cal. Good to see you. Do you want a lift?”

“Hi, Mary. Yeah, that would be great. Thank you,” he greeted her gratefully, glad to avoid the train ride and passengers—staring at his black plastic bag and clothes that were now too large and screamed of braver days. He got into the car, which was warm and comforting after the harsh reality of the outside.

The rest of the journey flew past with calming and welcome talks of curfews and licence restrictions, all bewildering to Cal, reminding him that even after nearly two years, he was still a stranger to this world of punishments and crime.

He left Mary at the Probation building and made his way alone to Stonehenge Probation Hostel, his new abode. Dragging his black bag across the front garden like a gothic and disgruntled Santa Claus, he gingerly picked a path through the old nappies and beer cans. Beyond the security camera, three guys were fighting viciously, moving closer to where Cal stood.

It was nothing different from the hundreds of confrontations he had witnessed in prison, but the close proximity and lack of guards made his heart beat, and beat. Cal was in no physical state to fight after losing two stones and most of his muscles, but Jay taught him long ago how to scrap. He could not afford to get involved in this, but the unfairness of the fight made his fingers curl instinctively into fists.

Not his problem. Walk away.

The youngest of the three men slammed into Cal as the other two attacked, pushing the kid from one to the other, sneering and braying like hyenas after prey. “Fucking faggot. You owe me!”

The younger man looked awful; his face smeared with blood and something black, but even though the odds were against him, he fought back desperately.

The ‘faggot’ reference made Cal step forward, seize the bony shoulders and face the kid. “There you are. Been looking for you. He giving you trouble?” Smiling nastily at the biggest guy, knowing he would fight them if he had to.

“What’s it to you?”

“He owes you?” Cal snapped. They nodded, about to tell him a sordid story no doubt, so he cut them off, stony faced and surly. “Ok. He’ll get it to you by the end of the week.” Show no fear, another trick he learnt the hard way.

They shifted their feet a bit, then grumbled and wandered off. Cal felt vague relief, but an even stronger sense of disappointment. No fight today, then. He turned to the kid, who was shaking with shock. “Are you okay?”

“Get-get away from me,” the young man shouted, unsteadily.

Cal lifted his hands, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Hey, it’s okay. I was trying to help! You owe me a thank you.”

“I was handling it. I can look after myself.” The kid winced, casting baleful looks back at Cal as he limped off.

Cal entered Stonehenge Hostel warily now, tasting the violence and neglect. A worker peered suspiciously through wire mesh, making Cal’s toes curl and his heart sink even further into the depths. “Callum Foster,” he announced apologetically.

“Hello Callum, nice to meet you. I’m Tom, your designated hostel worker. I have some paperwork for you to complete, then I’ll take you to your room. Welcome to The Henge.”

The room was truly awful. He had to breathe deeply and concentrate on maintaining his neutral face, slipping on the invisible mask he had perfected in prison. The worker prattled on, seemingly oblivious to the inhuman state of the hovel in front of them. “Here’s your key. It’s called a bed and breakfast hostel, but you can stay here all day if you want. The TV doesn’t work. Bathroom is at

the end of the corridor and breakfast before nine A.M. There are twelve other men in this hostel. You have Troy on one side, a storeroom on the other.”

Cal couldn't say thank you, because surely it would look like he was taking the piss? Tom managed a pitiful, half smile. “It's a bit of a state, isn't it? This block is waiting to be redecorated. Still, at least you have a roof tonight, eh? Settle in, I'll come back in an hour and go over things. Okay?”

The minute Tom left, Cal threw the black bag at the wall and waited for a welcome spark of anger, or anything: anger at ending up here, sadness at the lonely grey bed, or even bone-chilling grief at the events that led him to this desolate shithole.

But there was only greying wallpaper which was coming off in strips from the damp. It hung there like flaps of pallid skin, giving Cal the acid reflux of retribution. He was getting what he deserved.

For the first time in over a year, panic screamed through his veins: no way out, no control, floors and walls diminishing to black, exploding into hot tyres and white light... his knees struck the floor as the poisonous rush of memories whirled him into a tornado; dangerous reminders he had so successfully blocked out for nearly two years.

But everyone knew it was easy to shut up shop, in prison. Easy, and necessary, if you wanted to survive. Cal had even wondered at his lack of emotion, maybe half convinced himself that he really was the badass his fellow inmates feared. But deep inside, he knew that one day the screaming, hulking monster of reality would have to be faced—this stinking room and not being able to catch his breath. He was on a boat, plunging into the depths with no way out.

He slid into the cloudy waters of misery. It was ages since he cried, but now he could not stop, low, tuneless moans of someone dying alone.

Chapter Two

Looking on the bright side was never going to be easy, but even he could see that a good clean would make the room look a whole lot better. It was funny; he'd spent so long planning the big events, but never really thought of the everyday stuff at all.

He scrubbed the room until his hands were pink and sore. The smell of acrid sharp lemons overtook the fog of old urine and unwashed bodies, motivating him into action. There was no way he could sleep on the damp, stinking mattress, he would get rid of it and buy a new bed.

He was lugging the ancient fold-up bed onto the landing, when the kid from the fight went past him, whippet-thin, all elbows and knees. Maybe he could help? "Hey, can you give me a hand? It's not heavy, just a funny shape."

Guarded bright eyes appraised him. "All right, yeah. Suppose so. What are you gonna do with it?"

"Thanks. It's filthy and I'm getting rid. I'm just going to lower it down the stairs, one at a time. I'll hold it; you just have to direct it. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Can you just lower it your end? It's going to bang into the ceiling." There was a shriek, the bed slid most of the way down the stairs, and Cal struggled to hold it. "Shit," he shouted, "just hold the end. That's it. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm fucking not. I've got a bed rammed into my cock and my hands are on fire. I am very much not okay, thank you very much," a voice protested indignantly.

Cal snorted, as they successfully manoeuvred the bed round the corner and into the foyer. "Thank you. I couldn't do it on my own. You okay?"

He peered at the young man, who glared back. "Yeah, just about."

"Can I give you something for your help?"

Dark eyes gazed back at him, frowning, then slid up and down Cal's body. "What kind of something?"

Cal couldn't help it. He sniggered. "Are you for real?" he asked, almost admiringly. The guy blushed, wrinkled up his nose, and turned to go. "Hey,

wait. Here. I'm just joking with you." Cal held out the money, and the kid took it in silence.

"Yeah," he mumbled, startling grey eyes peering up at Cal under a messy shock of dark hair. "I'm for real," he said, trying to look wounded but not quite managing to hide a sudden, shy smile.

Cal was used to being alone, but soon the emptiness of the hours swallowed him, gnawing away every evening like persistent rats.

One night a soft knock on his door roused him from pointless circles of endless thoughts. It was the kid, leaning on the door frame trying to look cool. "Gonna invite me in?" he mumbled, blushing, honest to God blushing.

Cal made a hand gesture to welcome him in, not sure of the etiquette. "I'm Cal, have a seat. What's your name?"

"Troy?" the kid threw, unconvincingly, raising his eyebrows as he flicked long tendrils away from his face.

"Troy?" Cal repeated, in disbelief. But Troy didn't take offense, or even notice. He placed his lanky frame gingerly on the bed, and started thoughtfully playing with his spiky hair whilst he looked around. "You done this room up nice, it's much better than mine."

"I just cleaned it and replaced a few things. Wasn't fit for a human."

Troy nodded emphatically, pointing at the kettle. "Mm. Know what you mean. You making me tea then? Strong, two sugars. What you doing in this shithole, Cal? You don't look like you belong here, same as I don't. Got no family?" Cal had no idea how to answer any of that, so he just made the tea, giving Troy sidelong looks as he divulged information about the other residents.

"How long have you been here?" Cal asked.

"A year, almost."

"A year? Christ. How old are you? Where are your parents?"

Troy held up his hands in mock protest, eyes rolling. "How old am I? Man, that's personal, isn't it? How old are you?"

"Sorry. Just making conversation. Twenty-six," he answered, weariness sinking over him. Now he couldn't be bothered. How few people were there in the world who you really liked? Even fewer that you loved.

“I’m twenty,” Troy declared, suddenly. “Now we’re being all pally—what did *you* do then?”

“Do?” Cal shook his head, puzzled.

“Pri-son,” Troy explained slowly, as if to a child. Cal stared at him, appalled. There was no way anyone here could know what he had done, surely. It was nearly two years ago and probably only in the papers for a couple of weeks. How could they possibly know?

“Calm down.” Troy laughed, and patted the bed next to him. “Everyone in here has been to prison, you dork, except me. It’s the council convict dumping ground. S’all right. Old news round here. We’re all bad boys, mate.” Then, after a minute of inspecting Cal, “What’s your crime then? Give me a minute, let me guess.” He looked Cal up and down with clever, narrowed eyes and pursed lips. “Hmm. Drugs?”

Cal stood up too fast and almost tripped over in his haste to open the door. “No. Look, I have to go out. See you later, yeah?”

Troy stared, head on one side. “You killed someone then. You’re a murderer,” he announced loudly, then grinned at Cal cheekily, pointing at his shocked face with black nail polished fingers. “Don’t worry, I’m just joking. Thanks for the tea.”

Cal stared at the door as it closed, heart beating, nausea rising up to his throat. He just made it to the sink, before throwing up so violently it struck the wall behind. He gazed at himself in the cracked mirror, seeing desperation in the navy blue eyes, his clammy face framed by sweaty blond hair like a ruined halo.

Chapter Three

It took a couple of weeks to fulfil the probation targets. He reactivated his bank account and saw that his café appeared to be running smoothly and making steady profits. Even without him around, it was doing well. On another day, he looked at flats and visited the job centre, making sure always to dutifully smile and nod politely at everyone. There was a semblance of order and routine; it did not matter if it was pointless and dreary, because the alternative was too awful to contemplate. He kept the monster that was his past at bay, but it lurked at the periphery of his sanity, watching him from the corners.

At the end of his first week at the hostel, he was at Probation, looking through his diary sheet with Mary. She leaned forward and looked right at him, making him wince. “At some point, you’re going to have to talk to me, you know. I’m not talking about lists and targets. I mean Jay.”

The silence in the room was like a warm, malevolent oil slick, clogging up his breathing, and his heart. He wanted to look away so badly, but then it would seem he was evading her, so he carried on, with just a few blinks for protection.

She looked calmly back, vaguely concerned and kind, then took pity on him. “Well. We don’t have to start today, but I want you to think about it—how we can talk. Some people like to go over events, other people prefer me to ask the questions. One man even wrote me a poem once.” She glanced down at her diary, and he was released from the eye lock. He looked away, concentrating on the posters on the walls and the glue that held his face together. “I have to visit you, at home. How about Tuesday, at one?”

He nodded, anything to get away. “Yes, that’s fine. I’m afraid it’s a dump, not that I’m complaining.”

But she just smiled, and handed him the diary sheet. “Oh, don’t worry. It won’t be anything I haven’t seen a million times before. You’re at Stonehenge Hostel, aren’t you?” He nodded, and it was over.

He couldn’t face going back to that room and the lurking memories just yet, so he ambled down to the canal walkway. This city was unfamiliar to him, only fifty miles away from his home town, but far enough that he need not worry about bumping into anyone he knew.

Not having history here was both comforting and lonely. Had Jay ever been here? And there it was, like a smack in the mouth. After nearly two years and a

prison sentence, he still couldn't go more than five minutes without thinking of him, without missing him. "Cal!" The shout interrupted his thoughts, and made him jump with alarm.

It was Troy, running towards Cal, gangly and awkward, arms and legs flying in seemingly random directions. He came to an abrupt halt, only stopping by crashing into Cal's chest. He spluttered and gasped dramatically, smiling up at Cal, black eyeliner making him look even more stunning. "I thought it was you. Saw you coming out of Probation. What you doing down here?"

"I was just having a walk along the canal."

Troy brushed his dark mop away from his face, which was pale and beautiful, probably a girl magnet, not that Cal knew anything about relationships.

"Can I come?" Troy asked hopefully, clutching at Cal's arm and making his chest lurch. When was the last time anyone had touched him?

Small talk was never easy to Cal, so he shrugged, and started walking. "Did you sort out your debts?" he asked, unable to resist glancing sideways at the hand still fastened to his arm, igniting warm, shivery tingles.

"Sort of, yeah. Anyway, where you from then? I've lived here all my life, not for much longer though. I'm so out of here." He looked at Cal expectantly, tutted, and plunged on, "Yeah, thanks for asking. I'm a singer. Good, too. I do the pub circuits, the unis. Maybe you've heard of me? You wanna come and see me?"

Cal murmured a noncommittal assent, too overawed at the pressure on his arm to answer. They walked on for a while, Troy telling him all about his life and his successes, and Cal nodding every so often. There was an awful lot that didn't add up about Troy's story.

"You don't say much, do you?" Troy asked, stopping, grey eyes peering up at him through thick hair.

"You didn't give me much chance." Cal smiled, watching Troy fiddle in his pocket, presumably for bubble gum.

"No, suppose not. Motor mouth, that's what my mum called me." Troy pursed his lips, sniffed, and they turned back.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Cal asked. It was a long time since he had heard anyone chattering, apparently uninhibited by secrets and a past. Jay's twin sister, Anna, talked to him like that, once.

“Girlfriend? Umm, yeah. Been with her two years now. She’s called... Bella, she’s a professional singer,” Troy announced, looking away abruptly.

Cal managed to prevent himself from shaking his head in disbelief, and nodded vaguely instead, murmuring, “That’s nice.”

As they neared the hostel, the two men who beat Troy up were drinking from cans. Cal’s hands curled into fists, but they looked away shiftily. Troy pulled him swiftly through the entrance, talking loudly. “Might as well be friendly. We are neighbours, after all.” He propelled him up the filthy stairs, right into his room. Troy’s room made Cal feel queasy and ill. It was grey, dirty, smelly, and miserable. Piles of clothes were everywhere, and the bedding looked like rags.

The one splash of colour was a T-shirt hanging on the back of the door. It was black, with a red sequin heart in the middle, and the words ‘You Wish’ printed across the middle. Troy seemed to sense Cal’s unease and became quiet himself, crossing his arms and chewing on his hair. “I won’t be here much longer,” he said, seriously.

“How much do you owe those men? They don’t look like they’re giving up,” Cal enquired.

“I’ll pay them back, don’t worry. I can look after myself.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Cal said, kindly, thinking what a shit world it was, as he gulped his tea too quickly, keen to return to the ‘comforts’ of his own room. At least he had a working TV now. At the last minute, he turned back, looking at Troy in that drab room on his own like a speck of sunshine amidst ruins. “Come round, later, if you like. I’m getting in a pizza. We can watch TV. You pick the show.”

Troy pushed hair from his eyes, and sniffed. “Thanks, but you don’t mean that. I get on your nerves. I piss everyone off.”

Cal was appalled. “No, no, you don’t. I enjoy talking to you. Honestly. I’m just not used to being around people much. Come round, please?”

Troy’s face instantly lit up, the grey eyes shining like glistening water. “Okay. I mean, if I’m not too busy.”

“Of course.” Cal winked, and left.

Chapter Four

Troy came round often after that, with tales of his conquests and his singing, sometimes re-enacting his most successful chat-up lines, making them both laugh. Cal understood it was all rubbish. By now, he knew that everyone at the hostel was either on probation, mentally ill, or homeless.

Despite his fantasies and lies, there was still something genuine about Troy that warmed Cal, reminding him of times long gone. He started getting in biscuits and snacks that Troy liked, smiling ruefully as he went on special biscuit trips to the shops.

One night, they were watching TV. Cal held out a plate of biscuits. "Here—your favourites."

Troy shrieked. "Fantastic! I bloody love these." He ate it slowly, savouring every crumb.

"Aren't you having one, Cal?"

"I don't like biscuits. I just got them for you."

Troy wiped his mouth, and stared up at him, almost sorrowfully. "You bought these just for me? But, they're expensive, them. You're on benefits, same as me."

Cal's insides twisted uncomfortably. It was worse than he'd thought then, if a biscuit sent Troy into ecstasy. "Troy, they're just biscuits. You're my friend. Chill out."

It was usually Cal who got embarrassed. Sometimes when Troy told him intimate details of his girlfriends, he made a show of hiding his face in the pillow, or wincing dramatically. But today, it was Troy. He drew his knees up to his waist, and hugged himself, as if he needed protection from Cal's biscuits.

"Look. *Britain's Got Talent* is on." Cal tried hard, but he couldn't quite get Troy back to his exuberant, noisy self. When he left, Cal handed him the biscuits. "Here, you might as well have them."

Troy leaned forward, and brushed a quick kiss on Cal's cheek, snatched the biscuits, and fled. It was a while before Cal stopped smiling, hot from the odd warm rushes on his face and neck.

The next day, Cal woke up and knew it was time for his first task.

The journey was only an hour, and he was saved from having to think too much by the crowds of people in the train corridors. There was no time for deep thinking, or preparation, and when he got off the train, the shaking legs and tunnel vision struck him like a deadly, immobilizing arrow.

But somehow, he walked the short distance there and stepped through the gate, not really aware of the rain trickling down his collar.

The cemetery was a beautiful place, full of trees, flowers, ornate benches, and memories. As a child, he had come here with Jay and messed about, looking for gravestones with their birthdates. He could still remember on which graves they had drunk cider, kissed girls, and had long and meaningful talks. Maybe it was here that Cal had fallen in love, completely, and for life. He wandered about until he found it. Jay's gravestone.

Jay's sister, Anna, had chosen a good place for him. It was at the edge, overlooking the fields and away from the busy grave streets. It was pretty, and quiet, and Jay would have hated it.

It was just stone, in the end.

A grey slab, with some words, and flowers.

'Jay Fischer. Loving son, brother, and uncle.'

That this small patch of concrete could contain Jay was laughable. It was funny, and wrong, and soon Cal was on his knees, heaving and sobbing, the cold horror seizing his limbs. This was not meant to happen. If he could just reach Jay, somehow, but there was only the wind and rain beating against a concrete slab with meaningless words.

The ground was damp and cold against his face as he collapsed, arms around the gravestone. "Jay? Can you hear me?" He stroked the cold stone. "I'm so sorry. You know I'm sorry, Jay. I'm going to make it right. I'm going to see Anna, and your mum, and then I'll be through. I'll find you, like I always found you. I won't let you down again, I promise."

Every day since Jay died, Cal had stored up some tears, which now burst from him in painful gasps and howls. "I miss you, I miss you so much." He lost touch of his surroundings for a while, just let it all go, huddled against the grave, getting wetter and unable to find any reason to leave, or carry on.

It was still the same day, but felt like a million years later when he got back to the hostel. A scuffle made him glance into the alleyway, to see Troy on his

knees, being skull fucked. Fury burst from Cal. "Get off him," he shouted, rushing at the men with a flurry of fists and kicks. At first they fought back, but not for long.

Troy was already on his feet, furious and throwing fists of his own, shouting incoherently as Cal held him tightly to prevent more damage being done to either of them. "Calm down, it's okay. They've gone, it's all right. Ssh, Troy. Stop."

"Let me go!" Troy wriggled like an eel, until Cal released him in confusion. "Get your hands off me. You trying to get me killed, you bloody stupid fucker?"

"It's me, Cal, from next door. I'm not going to hurt you. Shall we call the staff, or the police?"

Troy looked blankly, incomprehension written all over his deathly pale face. "What the fuck are you talking about? Call the police? What's it got to do with the police?"

"Those men were about to rape you."

Troy began to laugh, awful hard, nasty laughter that hurt Cal's ears. "Rape me? They weren't gonna rape me, you stupid idiot. I asked them to fuck me, d'you get it? Asked them to." He stared at Cal challengingly, breathing too fast, his hair all over his face, tears starting to fall.

"Why?" Cal's move to touch him was instinctive, like soothing a hurt kitten, but Troy pulled back, crossed his arms and scowled, as the tears ran down his face.

"What do you mean, why? Because he told me to," he shouted, running away into the hostel.

Cal made his way to his room and sank to the bed, weariness seizing him, turning his limbs into warm water. What kind of shit was Troy involved in? The day's events pulled him almost immediately into an uneasy sleep.

He blearily came back to consciousness a few hours later, hearing banging about next door. He tried to ignore it for a while, then remembered Troy's face as he left, all ashamed and embarrassed. Cal thought for a bit about Troy's supposed 'girlfriend', then went and knocked softly on Troy's door. "Troy? I'm getting in Chinese takeout. You going to come and help me eat it?"

The door opened immediately, as if Troy had been waiting right behind it. His hair was sticking up and he had fresh eyeliner over red eyes, hurt but

defiant. “No thank you. I’m going out.” There was a pause, while they both listened to his stomach rumble. “Are you getting noodles, Cal? Prawn crackers?”

Cal nodded. “Yeah. Noodles, prawn crackers, chicken sate, chips, curry sauce. Shall I get you some?”

“Yes, go on then. If you’re going to get it anyway, I’ll help you out. But I can’t stay for long. I’ve got... friends waiting for me.”

“Okay. I won’t be long, see you in a bit.” Cal smiled all the way to the restaurant.

They shared the takeaway, with Troy doing most of the eating. He kept up his usual chattering, about a singing event he was invited to, in a month’s time, apparently having forgotten the sordid events of earlier, so Cal said nothing either.

“They asked me back, by popular demand, see. This could be my big shot.” His hair fell forward as he spoke, and Cal was struck again by how gorgeous he was. Before he thought better of it, Cal had spoken. “I’m sorry, about earlier. I thought they were trying to hurt you.”

Troy swallowed and froze, pressing his hands together with his head down, dark lashes forming shadows over the inscrutable face. Cal mentally thumped himself. Why couldn’t he leave it alone?

“I know you did. Thank you.” Troy spoke so quietly Cal had to edge forward to listen, wishing he could lean even farther.

“Troy? Why don’t you get a nice boyfriend? Those men were horrible. And what did you mean about someone making you do it?”

Troy’s face broke into a sad smile. “Yeah. Pretty shit, weren’t they? No one made me, I was just talking rubbish.” He shrugged, making his whole body and the ‘You Wish’ T-shirt wobble as if it were crying. “Trouble is, I don’t know any nice boys. Who would wanna date me? And sometimes, I just. I just need someone to touch me. You know?” he finished, voice trembling.

Cal’s stared at the T-shirt so hard his eyes hurt. “Yeah. Well, you’re far too good for them. Rough bastards.”

“Maybe.” Troy shrugged, as Cal ached and yearned.

“Sorry, Cal. For lying about the girlfriend, and the other stuff.”

Chapter Five

Sometimes when Cal first woke up, he had forgotten. Before he really knew where he was, or what day it was, he felt the same truth he had known since he was a little boy: he loved Jay. It was his first thought even before it really became a thought, more a purpose of being. Then, as consciousness filtered through like light under a curtain, he remembered. Every day, he was shocked that Jay was dead. Some mornings he still threw up, and any day that starts with acid and bile is surely doomed.

Today, he turned over in bed and tried to go back to sleep, squeezing his eyes closed against the tears that crept through anyway. A banging at his door prevented this, and eventually he got wearily out of bed and opened the door.

“Morning, Sunshine. Get the kettle on,” Troy said, beaming as he cheekily pecked him on the face.

“Urghf.” Cal blearily let him in and put the kettle on.

“You look like shit.” Troy ran at the bed and jumped on it, then got in and wrapped the covers round himself.

“Mm. That’s because some idiot got me out of bed at six A.M. What the fuck are you doing up so early?” Cal snarled.

Troy sniggered at him. “Oh dear. Not a morning person then? You’ve got a fine pair of legs on you, though. Turn round, let’s see your arse.”

Cal glared at him, but he couldn’t keep it up. He doubted anyone could be mad at Troy for long.

“I always get up early; I’m on an early shift.” Troy pouted, snuggling into Cal’s bed.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot you worked. What is it you do?” Cal handed Troy his tea, then perched on the end of the bed.

“Petrol station. Cal? You really do look like shit. Are you crying?”

The sigh came from nowhere, and everywhere. Jesus. If even a kid like that could see through him, what a state he must be. He looked away self-consciously, running his hands through his hair. “Course not. You just caught me at an off moment, that’s all.” It didn’t even sound convincing to him; his bloody voice wobbled. Why the fuck didn’t this kid just leave him alone?

Troy slid right up next to him and put his head on Cal's shoulder. "Cal? What's up? I know there's something bad, 'cause I can always tell. You have this look sometimes." Thin arms slipped around Cal, and held him.

It was just a kid offering comfort, but who was he to take comfort? He didn't deserve anyone's sympathy ever again, but it was so long since anyone had touched him. He was a murdering bastard who shouldn't be here. But... Troy was warm, and solid. It was just a hug from a bony boy, and for a minute, Cal could not let go. He forced the lump back down his throat and couldn't resist nuzzling the soft hair against his face. "Yeah, it's bad. But, I can't tell you. I'm okay now. See?" He stood up quickly, before he revealed anything else, slipping on jeans briskly.

"Oh, okay. You don't wanna talk. Fine. You know I'm gonna get it out of you, though? You can't say 'Yeah it's bad', and expect me to just leave it there, but I've got social skills. I know when to change a subject—watch this."

Troy arranged his wild hair in the mirror, blew himself a kiss, and ran his tongue over his teeth. "You think I'd look good red? I've never been red."

"Very impressive." Cal laughed.

"Okay, I'm off, cowboy. I'll be back around twelve. You've got Probation then, I'll walk you there. See you," Troy sang, and bounced off. He stopped, just as he was opening the door, and glanced back. "Cal? You know I'm messing? You gonna be okay?"

Cal laughed at that, and nodded, embarrassed. "Yeah, I think I'll get by. See you later."

The room felt cold and empty the minute Troy left, but he fought the temptation to get back into bed.

It was at least four hours until Troy came back and they left for Probation. The time stretched out and something like panic took hold. The last few days, he felt increasingly like a volcano waiting to erupt.

He'd never had time on his hands before. Before it happened, he was always working, either at the café he owned, or doing whatever Jay asked of him, just to be around him, to be needed. Even looking after Alice was an extension of that. Jay had once called Cal an enabler. Then prison, with its rules and routines, left no time to think or panic.

He left the hostel and headed for the local park, wrapping his coat around him for warmth, trying not to think about Jay's mum, Alice, or what he would say to her if he ever saw her again. He needed something to do, to use his hands, until the time came. He thought of Troy, and how he was always starving. Cal had an idea, and headed back to the hostel.

Tom, as always, was lurking behind the mesh window. "Hi Cal, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering about the kitchen. Would I be able to use it? I'm a cook, you see, but a little out of practice. I have all my Health and Safety Certificates."

Tom looked at him, in that kind but distant way he had. "Maybe. We'd have to talk about it. Come through." Cal was ushered into one of the interview rooms. "Cal, we have a house suite free. It's got a kitchen with it. I never thought of it before, but you could move in. It's usually for people coming to the end of their probation, like Troy. Do you want to see it?"

"I'd love to. Is there a room for Troy too?"

"Yes, it's built for two people, but they have to get on. You two seem to be fine together. We can have a look now." Cal followed Tom out the front door and to the few flats next to the main building. "It's much nicer than your current room, which is about to be repainted. Here it is." Tom let them in, and led them through into the lounge area.

It was clean, and fairly new. Still institutional grim, but a million miles better than his dingy room. Cal said, with feeling, "It's fantastic. I'd love to move in. We better ask Troy first though."

Tom grinned. "Yeah, don't want him flinging a diva fit."

Chapter Six

The flat was perfect. Troy jumped on the new sofa, claimed the biggest bedroom, and managed to make a mess almost straight away. “It’s fucking brilliant, Cal. How did you persuade them to give us this?”

“I just asked if there was a kitchen we could use, and Tom said this was free. I’m going to teach you to cook.”

Troy grinned, his face lighting up. “This is awesome, Cal. No one’s ever done nothing for me like this before.” Warmth flooded Cal as he followed Troy around the flat, watching him try out all the doors and turn the shower on and off.

“Cook? What do you mean, cook?” Troy asked incredulously, looking at the ingredients in the kitchen. “I can’t be trusted to cook, Cal. I might poison us both.”

“Rubbish. Help me peel these onions.” Cal laughed, throwing him one.

Troy looked very suspiciously at the onions, and wrinkled his nose. “Yuk. I’m not eating that. Smells like feet.”

“Your feet, maybe.” Cal loved it, being able to look after someone again. He could teach Troy to cook, and look after himself. He could do that.

The cooking of the shepherd’s pie was not without incident. Cal got Troy to chop onions and carrots while he cleaned the kitchen thoroughly. It was warm, the radio was playing, and Cal could almost believe he was still alive. He was cheerfully humming, when Troy let out a shriek. “What? What is it?” Troy had cut a finger. It was only a tiny cut, but he was shaking and trembling. Cal bound it quickly with tape from the first aid kit Tom had insisted upon, talking quickly to calm Troy down. “It’s okay, calm down. Just a little cut, see? Troy?” But Troy was lost, his eyes glazed and dull.

“Come here, you big baby.” Cal didn’t think much, just wrapped Troy in a bear hug, and stroked his hair. Troy clutched at him, and words began to fall out in fits, and starts. Cal could not really make much sense of him. Eventually, he stopped, and Cal pulled back to look at him.

“Whatever is it?” he asked, hoping that Troy wasn’t trying to tell him he was haemophiliac. He offered tissues to Troy, who took them, and blew his nose noisily, and without grace.

“I-I just. Blood. I can’t do blood. Reminds me...” He shook his head, blinked hard, and then smiled weakly. “Cal, no one ever hugs me, only you.” He stopped, and looked away, embarrassed.

“Sorry. I’ll stop, if it makes you uncomfortable. I had a... brother, once. You remind me of him, a bit,” Cal said quietly.

Troy patted his leg. “No, it doesn’t make *me* uncomfortable. Don’t stop, if *you* like it. I mean, not all the time, obviously. Let’s do the cooking, you better chop though.” He pushed his wild hair behind his ears, blushing and flustered. Cal got the cooking ingredients ready, ignoring the confusing puddle of mixed waters that bubbled in his head.

The shepherd’s pie was a great success. Troy ate three times as much as Cal, shovelling it in with serious appreciation. Cal watched his mouth, then dragged his eyes away. “I think that’s the quietest I’ve ever seen you. So that’s what I have to do to shut you up, is it? Cook you proper meals?”

“I’m a growing lad. I need vitamins and things. Thanks, man. Who’d think I could cook that?”

Warm tingles went through Cal at the praise, far too much. He brushed it aside, quickly. “What did Tom mean? About you coming to the end of your order?”

Grey eyes slid away. “Oh. Yeah. I was on a Probation order, same as everyone here. I just... didn’t want you to know that’s why I lied. I lied, all right?”

“Why would it matter what I thought? You didn’t even know me back then,” Cal asked, bewildered.

Troy raised his eyebrows at him incredulously, sighed, and shook his head very slightly. “Dur. Never mind why. Anyway, yeah. My order’s gonna be over ’nother couple of months.”

“Will you have to move out?” It shouldn’t matter to Cal, but it did.

“Nah. I’m on the housing list, but ’cause I’m only twenty, I’m not likely to get anywhere soon, so I can stay here until then. You don’t get rid of me that easily.” Troy grinned, spreading light freckles across his face like splashes of paint. “You gonna ask me what I did, to get on probation?”

Cal imagined Troy had got into trouble with other people, maybe something to do with blood and knives. Jay had kept a knife since he was fifteen. Even

though he was mostly kept away from the shady part of Jay's life, there were several occasions when Jay had turned up in the middle of the night bloody, shaking and furious. Cal swallowed, shaking his head, vigorously. "No. Not my business. Come on, I'll wash, you can dry." He could feel Troy's watchful eyes, but he said nothing else, helping him clear away the plates in silence.

It hung between them, Cal scrubbing the same cup for ages, swirling the scrubber round and round the same spot, aware Troy was staring at him. "Cal? I just asked you something twice. Come back, Cal, follow the light."

"The light shining out your arse, you mean?" Cal scoffed, relieved he would not have to explain his past today, flicking washing bubbles at Troy's hair.

"You're going to pay for that, old man," Troy shouted, grabbed the scrubber, and flinging it at Cal's face in retaliation.

A chase began around the flat, ending in them both laughing in uncontrollable gasps, water everywhere. It was halted by Tom, who looked at them in amazement as they both giggled, embarrassed.

Troy went to work, and Cal cleaned up the flat, making every surface shine and smell of lemons, scrubbing away the grime and drabness before dozing on the sofa.

He woke up some time later, hearing scuffles and grunts from outside. It was either a fuck, or a fight. Remembering the last time, he cautiously peered out the side of a curtain. It was dark and unclear, but two men were certainly fucking. He didn't mean to watch, he really didn't, but the sounds went right through, stirring longings and memories.

Sex with Jay was all about Jay. The first time it happened, they were about fifteen, camping in a field. At first, Cal had thought Jay was messing about fighting, and he joined in enthusiastically, wrestling and pushing back. It was only when Jay pulled his shorts down and forced his cock into Cal's hand that he realised what was happening.

He went along with it, said nothing. He had lain there with his eyes clenched shut, tears leaking out the sides with pain, listening to Jay grunting and moaning. After it was over, Jay kissed him on the lips, told him it was their secret, and it was all worth it. For that second, Cal was important to Jay.

After that, every time was the same. Cal bent over, and Jay had fun. They never once spoke about it, but the fucking carried on, just enough to own him,

and keep him quiet. Very occasionally, Jay would hold him as they fucked, always from behind, and somehow this touch had sustained him.

Cal never came from these encounters, though he was often half-hard, more from the sounds of Jay's arousal than the fucking. After Jay left, he would masturbate, pretending that the fucking was making love.

There had been no one else, ever.

He knew fucking wasn't meant to be like that, of course, but whatever he could get from Jay was so much better than nothing at all. And sometimes, Jay was sweet afterwards, kissing him and patting his arse, winking as he left, making him know he mattered, much more than all the others.

Only, not enough to tell people, or even stay the whole night. Not enough to stop Jay from fucking the men and women he had 'working' for him, marking them like dogs... He stopped himself from going down an old, futile path, closing his eyes and counting to ten.

He pulled away from the curtain, guilty at spying on Troy, realising that he was hard. Something happened to Cal's libido after Jay's death. Once his heart was dead, his cock lost interest. He'd lie there in prison, listening to his cellmate jerking off, and felt nothing at all. He couldn't remember the last time he touched himself. But now, he was hard and tingling, couldn't stop himself from listening to Troy and the other guy as they neared orgasm. Troy was bloody loud, making wild noises that seemed a million miles away from the sex Cal had known. The urge to stroke was strong, but it seemed wrong, dishonest.

Cal went into the kitchen and started banging around. Years of not getting what he wanted had left him a master of control and denial. At least Troy hadn't brought the guy into his bedroom.

Eventually, a door slammed, and Troy appeared, all windswept and breathless, a big toothy grin on his freckled face. "Evening, Cal. Put the kettle on, I'm just having a shower."

Cal made the tea with tight lips, knowing he had no reason to feel jealous but wanting to throw cups at the walls. He fixed his gaze firmly at the TV as Troy launched himself at the sofa naked, a flurry of curves and tight muscle, landing in a leggy heap on his stomach, clumsy and beautiful. Troy being naked was not something Cal could ever get used to, but by now he had more or less trained himself not to stare.

"Evening, Troy. Had a good night at work?" Hot gaze roaming Troy's back and buttocks, compact smooth arse that Cal could easily fit into one hand.

“Yeah, not bad for a boring old petrol station. Anything on telly?”

“I hope you used protection,” Cal spat bitterly, thinking of his own visits to the sex clinic because Jay refused to ever wear condoms.

Troy stared at him, aghast. “Oh. You heard.” He blushed vividly, and swung his head forward so his hair hung over his face. “Do you mind?”

“Mind?” Cal’s innards seized. Had Troy seen him watching?

“Yeah, you know, men. Not girls. Do you mind?”

Cal laughed, relieved. “No, of course I don’t mind. It’s not my business, just be safe, that’s all.”

Troy smirked. “I saw you looking, actually. Spurred me on.”

Now it was Cal’s turn to blush, suddenly and furiously. “I heard you, yes. I was just checking you weren’t being beaten up again.”

“Yeah, yeah. I don’t mind, Cal. Share the joy, that’s what I say. Dirty old man.”

“Fuck off.”

“Fair enough.” Troy slurped tea, spreading his long legs with abandon as Cal tried unsuccessfully not to ogle tight balls. “He was one loud fucker. Did you hear?”

Cal was intrigued. He had no idea how real relationships worked. “Yeah, I heard. Are you seeing him?”

Troy shrugged. “No, shouldn’t think so.”

“What’s he in here for?” A protective urge came over Cal, as he remembered that everyone in this hostel was here for a reason.

“Burglary, I think. Don’t care, he’s *massive*.” Troy shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, and Cal sniggered too, remembering what that felt like.

“Well, just be careful, yeah? Don’t take any chances, Troy.”

“Stop worrying. I can look after myself.”

Cal imagined kneeling between Troy’s legs, his hands stroking slowly up the spread thighs, smoothing, circling, until it was difficult to breathe. “I’m off for a shower,” he managed.

Chapter Seven

Mary was not going to let him off today. She had a timeline of the week before Jay died, just empty white paper and a line, but Cal's heart was starting to beat and he was aware of the creeping horror in his limbs, and sweat on his face.

Mary noticed, as always, and got him some water. "I know it's hard, and we don't have to do it all in one go. How about if we look at one day at a time? Today we do the Monday before it happened. I know you'll remember, because you always seem to have an excellent memory."

It was true, he did. He never had any trouble remembering orders for work, or staff names and codes; Cal remembered it all. And that week before it happened was more than a memory, it was a walking presence next to him. It breathed and pointed at him with every mouthful of food he ate; it mocked him every time he tried to laugh or sleep.

If he could just go back in time, he would do everything different. He would... Mary was looking at him, expectantly, so he gripped the table, and unwillingly began.

The Monday Before It Happened...

It's just a normal day. Cal visits the café to check everything, goes over the food orders, and chats with his newly appointed manager, Graham. The business has done so well over the last year that he has plans to expand. He heads off home early to look at his yearly projections, and Jay's coat is on a chair in the kitchen. This isn't unusual—he has a key, and often lets himself in if he wants. Jay has access to everything. Just lately, Jay has not been himself.

There are noises coming from upstairs—just muffled, indiscriminate sounds. He goes to the foot of the steps to hear more clearly. "Jay? You up there?"

There is a moment of electric silence, followed by Jay's breathless voice. "Cal. Don't come up. We're on our way down. Five minutes."

We?

But as usual, he does as Jay tells him, doesn't even question it.

They both appear, shoving shirts in trousers, and doing up buttons. Jay and the other guy, Tony. It is another guy and he is smiling.

They never smile after Jay fucks them in the garage.

Jealousy shoots through him, white hot and painful, all consuming. There is no doubt what they'd been doing upstairs—in his own bed, with the walls he'd decorated with Jay. He turns away to hide his bitter hurt, unable to even look at the guy, Tony.

He takes what seems a long time messing about with the kettle, drying up some plates. He can hear Jay murmuring behind him, then. "Tony, meet me in the van." A kiss, a bloody fucking kiss.

Cal cannot turn around. He knows Jay is standing right behind him, can hear his breathing as clearly as the bell at the end of school, or the alarm clock every morning. A grip turns him around by the elbow, and he is forced to look.

Jay's expression is difficult to decipher from those icy blue eyes, but he looks the same as when he took money from Alice when they were teenagers—defiant, unrepentant and challenging. He is feral. But he has no idea what he's done, what this will cause. He raises his hand slowly to drag a thumb over Cal's jaw. "Just sex, Cal. That's all. You and me, we're different. You know that."

Jay pulls him closer by the neck, then kisses him, hard, bruising. Cal can taste the other guy, but still he doesn't protest. Strong hands hold him by the head, one gripping his hair, pushing him back against the sink. Lips cover his, lapping, holding his head back, exposing his neck. This is ownership and Cal knows who is boss. His head stings where his hair's been yanked, his mouth is bruised, but still he yearns for more. He hears a small, needy noise.

Jay leans back, grins, pats Cal's cheek softly, and makes to leave. "See you later."

He is gone, the door ringing with the bang, and Cal's head hammering as his world begins to spin.

He sinks into a chair, fear, rage, and confusion boiling through him. He has no right to feel jealous. Jay always had others, for God's sake, Cal knows that. Jay fucks every new gang member just to mark his territory. Cal has no rights. He never did.

But this.

He needs to see. He goes upstairs to the bedroom and inhales the bedding, then tortures himself with thoughts of Jay's beautiful body pressed into the guy,

fucking him here. But Cal is messed up, because he is hard thinking of it, aroused, sickened, and confused. He hates Tony, but he wishes he could have watched. Tears run down his face, but he unzips, and starts stroking his cock, thinking of Jay making love to Tony, slowly and with passion—in all the ways he never did to Cal, caressing, and kissing, stroking and smiling, uttering words of love.

Jay only ever fucks him on all fours, or bent over a chair, but he imagines him fucking Tony on his back, watching his face, getting off on Tony's pleasure. Cal comes, but there is very little pleasure, only tears that hurt, and the taste of blood. He feels all those empty years of bending over without ever being held, and hurts.

The rest of that day, he feels the panic welling up, but he is helpless to deal with it.

Mary was looking right at him, because he had surely said far too much, that wasn't what she wanted to know. Fucked up, he'd fucked up—had to break the eye contact, boiling heat and the walls closing in, surely there had to be a water container? A noise erupted like vomit, painful, raw and out of control. He had to get away. He had to get right away and run, run, run.

She came to his aid quickly, getting him water and moving on to mundane things—signing his sheets, the diary, events he could handle. Cal's heart rate slowed, until eventually he was able to answer her without gasping. She handed him the diary sheet. "Cal, I know that wasn't easy, I could see it wasn't. That's a fantastic start, you did well, really well. All this is in the past now, remember that." Her voice glided over him, calming him. She watched him, and asked, "You were frightened of him?"

Was he? Cal didn't know if it was fear or love, or if there was any difference. He shrugged, and concentrated on keeping his face all in one piece. "If you need to talk later, my number is on the card. What are you going to do now?" Mary asked.

He thought. Blackness and desperation were out there waiting for him and always would be, but all he could smell was frying onions. "I'll probably go home, cook something nice for tea," he managed.

She nodded at that approvingly. "You're sharing the flatlet with Paul, aren't you?"

He shook his head. "Paul? No, Troy lives with me."

Mary smiled, laughing slightly. "That's who I meant. Give him my regards; I haven't seen him for a while."

They shook hands, and he wandered off down the street, feeling oddly exhausted, ashamed of what he had said, but also resigned. What did it matter now?

When Cal got back, everything seemed old and shabby. He was suddenly aware of the peeling paint and the drab colours and thin carpet. His own house was fifty miles away, handled by his solicitors, and being rented out—sorting it out was another job he kept putting off.

The smells of food calmed him, just like always. He started cooking as a boy, first at home, then college, and finally in his own café. It was the only thing he ever really owned that hadn't felt like Jay's. The routines of cooking almost always kept the violence and the fear at bay. Cooking was Cal's home.

The flat quickly warmed up as Cal sat down to wait for Troy. Where the hell was he? He'd been out more than usual lately and seemed quiet and withdrawn before he left this morning.

But he didn't appear all night, and Cal really started to worry at about three A.M. He tried to console himself with thoughts that Troy no longer had probation restrictions and could just be out with friends. It just didn't seem like him.

Eventually, the key in the lock woke him up at six A.M. He rushed out. "Troy? Are you okay?"

He looked white, shattered, but smiled at Cal weakly. "Yeah, sorry about that, I had to... I got... carried away with some mates. I'm bloody knackered."

They made tea and chatted for a while before Troy slipped out again. Cal faced another long day alone, making lists and pacing the kitchen, unable to stop thinking about Jay and Tony.

Later on, he got a visit from Tom. "Hello, Cal. I just popped by to see how you're getting on. Is Troy around?" Cal shook his head, no. Tom sat down and scratched his head. "Cal, I'm worried about him. I keep seeing his brother, Ashley, hanging around again and some of the men have been talking. Has he told you anything?"

“About what?” Cal asked, confused.

“His offending?” Tom stopped and waited.

Cal had no idea what he was talking about. “No. We don’t talk about stuff like that.” And even if they did, Cal wouldn’t reveal anything that Troy told him. Years of being around Jay had taught him never to speak. Jay always had packages and bags in his van, dangerous looking men following him around like puppies. Cal never asked, and Jay even left parcels in Cal’s house. One night someone had written ‘gangster scum’ on Jay’s van.

What you didn’t know could certainly hurt you, but at the time it had seemed worth it. Tom was looking at him as if he didn’t believe he didn’t know anything. But Cal shook his head, determined to ask Troy himself, later.

“Okay, well, ask him to come and have a chat with me when he gets back, will you?”

“Sure.” Cal smiled, then frowned as he shut the door after Tom.

Eventually, the door opened, and Troy stepped in. “Where the fuck have you been? I was worried sick,” Cal groaned, steadying him with one hand as he swayed. Troy clutched him back, and for a minute would not let go. He stank of sex and booze, staring with huge, hollow eyes—grey pits of infinite sadness.

“Cal?” he whispered, collapsing into his arms.

“Come on. I’ll make tea.” Cal half carried him to a chair, noting the wince as Troy sat. He turned the heating up, made tea and toast, and tried to draw Troy back from wherever he was. Troy drank the tea and ate the toast like he was starving, but still he said nothing. “What’s happened, mate?” Cal asked quietly. Troy’s face screwed up like a little kid, but there were no tears, just silent anguish. Troy shook his head, and covered his face with his hands.

Cal took his hand and stroked it, softly, feeling something tear inside him. Troy had nice hands, long fingers and big palms. Sometimes they had arm wrestling matches, which Cal often let Troy win. “I tell you what. How about I pop you in the shower, ’cause you stink, then you get some sleep? When you come round, if you want, you can tell me. If not, it doesn’t matter, not to me,” Cal said, softly. Troy nodded.

They struggled to the bathroom, Cal fumbling with buttons, and stopping at the jeans. “You can do that part. Don’t want you saying I was after your skinny butt.”

Troy smiled at that, and croaked, “Oh go on, everyone else already had it today.”

Cal flinched as he shut the bathroom door. Ten minutes later, Troy emerged clean and more awake. He pecked Cal on the cheek, before falling into bed and going to sleep, his mouth closed in a pout and the covers right up to his neck.

He was in deep shit—that much was obvious. Cal’s guts twisted uncomfortably. He sat there for a while, fighting the urge to climb in bed and hold him, somehow bring some colour into both their lives.

By the time Troy woke up, the flat had cushions, a throw, a fluffy rug, and new bedding for his room, all in bright, vivid, colours. He looked around at Cal’s new purchases blearily, rubbing his eyes and smiling. “Wow. Did you win the lottery? This looks great, Cal. And what’s that smell?”

Cal hadn’t told him about the café, and his income, because what would be the point? He shrugged, embarrassed. “Oh, it’s nothing. I just got sick of seeing brown so I bought a few things. That smell, my fine young friend, is your dinner.”

Troy groaned and rubbed his stomach. “Ooh, man, you’re too good to me. I’m starving.” He pulled up a chair, and they ate together, like normal people did every day all over the world.

All those years, Cal hadn’t missed the ordinary things, because he was always thinking about the next time Jay would be round. Could you miss what you never had? He saw now, that maybe you could.

Troy was chattering again, eating with his mouth full and waving his fork around. “Did you know, Cal, in the future every human being will have a robot to see to their every need?”

Cal smirked and replied. “You’ve already got a servant—me.”

Troy smiled and wrinkled his nose like Paddington Bear. “And I appreciate it. But—” He stopped here and dramatically raised his eyebrows and leaned forward. “—there are some... delicate tasks that you don’t perform for me.”

“You don’t remember last night then? And yet at the time you said it was the best lay of your life,” Cal said with a completely serious face.

“We didn’t? Who went on top?”

“You did. You were shit, actually. You broke the under-five-seconds record.”

“I was not!” They bickered amicably for a while before washing up together.

Cal drew breath. “So, what trouble are you in?”

Troy glanced at him sideways, then scrunched up his nose and washed the same cup twice. “Same old shit. Brother.”

“Your brother? What about him?”

Troy shrugged, then sighed deeply. “Oh, nothing. We got pudding? I’ve got room.”

“You’ve always got room. But, yeah. Brownies.”

“Brownies? Fucking yeah! You are the best, Cal. The friggin’ best.” He grabbed Cal and gave him a bony hug, and Cal felt crazily pleased. All those years of looking after Alice, driving Jay’s mates about, harbouring stolen goods, he’d made do with no acknowledgment except maybe a nod from Jay, and now here he was going red at thanks from a skinny kid.

“It’s nothing, I was bored. No big deal.”

Troy spoke so quietly he had to lean forward to listen. “It is a big deal. You, you’re so great. Buying me nice stuff, cooking.” He shrugged, then knelt, looking miserable. “Cal, I’ve fucked up. They’re gonna find out, and I’ll get another prison sentence, and...” He stopped with a sob, tears running down his lovely face, and Cal couldn’t stand it.

He gathered Troy to him, wishing he could squeeze the hurt out of him and make him happy. “What did you do?” he whispered into his hair.

“Stole a car. He stole a car, I just watched and let him do it, like I always do.”

It was bad, then, enough to get him sent back to prison. Cal sighed, lifting Troy’s head so he was facing him. “Why, Troy? You have choices—you don’t have to go with him. I’ll tell him to fuck off, you don’t need him.”

Troy shook his head wearily. “It’s complicated. I don’t have a choice, Cal. It was the last time, he said it was. No one saw us, I don’t think. Maybe it’ll be okay.”

“But why steal a car? Where is it?”

“Gone. Torched it.”

Cal stared at him. “Jesus, Troy. You could have been killed. He’s a fucking bastard to make you do that. Does he hurt you?”

Troy was fidgeting now, chewing his hair and crossing then uncrossing his arms. “Cal, you can’t tell anyone, they’ll send me back to prison. I can’t go back there, I can’t.”

Cal’s mouth itched with ‘you should have thought of that before’, but then he thought of all the packages he had hidden for Jay, all those van journeys and dodgy mates, leaving him with palpitations and crippling anxiety. He wouldn’t tell. He would never tell. “Calm down. I won’t tell anyone, but next time? Say no. Tell him you’re being watched by the police. Okay?”

Troy nodded fervently, his face worried, frowning. “Yeah, I will, Cal.”

Chapter Eight

But he didn't say no the next time, or the time after that. Cal watched Troy leaving the site with Ashley, and scrubbed the flat until his hands burned. He itched to speak, but after all it wasn't his business.

It was Probation today, and after the fuss with Troy, he had almost forgotten about the timeline. But Mary hadn't forgotten. She greeted him politely, "Cal. I know you won't want to do this, because who would? But we have to. Last session you really surprised me, but in a good way. Take your time. We're on to Tuesday, before it happened." Cal nodded, saw stars, and began.

The Tuesday Before It Happened...

He can't stop thinking about it, and it's horrible, like snakes finding their creepy way into his brain and poking at him every minute of the day: Jay and Tony in his bed, Jay and Tony in his bed. He strips all the bedding, but still he thinks he can smell them, their sex, their passion, and his failures. He knows this is different from Jay fucking them in the garage, like he usually does, and something has shifted. There is a crack in the iceberg, a rift in Cal that splits him up and leaves him broken...

He's nothing to Jay.

Jay doesn't want him any more.

Jay never wanted him.

He can't switch off, he tries, he really does. He goes running, he goes to the gym, he goes round the bend, but still it eats him up inside. He tries to reason with himself, that Jay has never been faithful to him, but never in his own bed with the sounds of passion from both men. Something has changed, and there is no place for him any longer. Up to now, he was the only one—the only man Jay fucked who didn't belong to his gang.

He goes to work as normal, because what else is he going to do? No one asks him what's wrong, so he must look the same as ever. The world cannot see his hurt, even though it is big enough to spin planets.

That night he goes to Alice's, as usual, and waits for her to ask him what's wrong. She always knows when something's wrong. She offers him lukewarm

tea, they watch the TV, and she calls him Jay. She doesn't notice there is anything wrong.

By the time he gets home, he fucking hates Tony. If Tony came round his house now, he'd smash his stupid bloody head in with a baseball bat.

He hurts so badly, but there are no tears.

He can't face food, but he drinks two bottles of wine. He should never, ever drink. He goes online and looks Tony up on a social media site, and leaves him an abusive message, and then he rings Jay.

Cal never rings Jay. He waits for Jay to contact him. It's an unspoken agreement, but one which Cal has never broken before. Jay picks up immediately. "What's up? Is it mum?"

"No, Alice is fine. Do you love him?" He just comes right out and asks him that, because even drunk there is no way he can ask the real question about who Jay loves. Even though he is shitfaced drunk, he knows not to ask that, because he already knows the answer. It has been lodged there in his throat since he was twelve years old.

Jay answers, but his voice is muffled and urgent. "Cal? What the fuck are you on? Anna is right in the next room. I'll come and see you tomorrow. We'll talk." Then he hangs up, because Cal isn't important enough for any more of his valuable time.

He struggles, after that, wanting to see Jay so badly, even if it is to talk about Anna and the kids, he just needs to see him. But in the end, he drinks cough medicine to help him sleep, then falls into bed.

There was a muscle above his lip that twitched, which he systematically rubbed and rubbed. He hoped to God that Mary would rescue him because he was utterly lost.

She did. "So awful for you. All those years Jay didn't give you what you needed, but you never gave up hoping."

He couldn't answer; surely she couldn't expect him to be able to speak after that? He concentrated on breathing, and silently repeated the date, because all this was nearly two years ago now. Mary looked at him sadly, and he managed a smile, because it wasn't her fault and he didn't want her to feel bad.

"You loved him anyway, even though he manipulated and controlled you?"

“No, he didn’t treat me badly, not really. He never promised me anything. I always knew the score.” She frowned at him in silence over the top of her glasses, and he shrugged, helplessly, thinking bizarrely of Troy and Ashley.

“You knew the score, but until you saw him with Tony, you didn’t really understand?” He shrugged, because she was right. “Cal, what do you think about that now?”

There was no hesitation in his answer. “That I was fucking stupid.”

“To let it go on for so long?”

“To stop it. I was stupid to stop it. I should have let it go on forever, because...” Because look what happened. If Cal had said nothing, Jay would still be alive and...

Mary put her pen down carefully. “You never said any of this before your sentence. If you had, it might have prevented you going to prison.”

He leaned forward on the desk, suddenly more tired than he could ever remember. “I know, and that’s why I didn’t.”

“You thought you deserved to go to prison?” The muscle started twitching really badly, and he was aware of the heat in his face and neck, and the frightening pain of truth. If she asked anything else, he would just leave, and screw the consequences. “Okay, we can stop for today. Cal, I can see you’re struggling. It’s okay. Breathe.” And he did, because he was always good at following orders.

Mary just waited. But breathing did seem to work, and after a few minutes, the air lifted, and he was okay. He smiled at her. “Sorry. It’s so hot in here.” She nodded, kindly; of course she knew that the temperature had nothing to do with it.

They arranged the next session, but as he left the building, he knew he could not stop this ball from rolling, gathering pace and knocking over the foundations of his memories and the lives of the people who were left.

Chapter Nine

When Cal got back, Troy was sitting glowering at the TV in the dark. He barely glanced up, but he wasn't watching TV either. Cal turned it off, and still Troy sat there and stared at nothing. His silence broke Cal's heart, but maybe he could fix it. He got both their coats, and switched on the lights. "Come on, I'm taking you out." Troy blinked in the brightness, rubbing at his eyes like a tired kid.

"Taking me out? Where? I don't wanna go out, Cal." But he put his coat on woodenly, as if he too was used to doing what he was told.

Four hours later and they were both drunk, Troy telling him about his singing experiences, and then he did the karaoke. He had a nice voice, and everyone in the pub applauded him. He fell laughing back to his seat, where Cal clapped him on the back and handed him a tequila slammer. "You're all right, Cal. I like you 'cause you're a normal bloke, but—" He paused to down the tequila, coughed and gagged at the taste. "—But. You are also all right. Not everyone is, see."

They had a game of darts, then staggered off to buy fish and chips.

Ashley was waiting for him at the flat. He nodded amicably at Cal. "Awright," then inclined his head, and drew Troy away.

Cal said nothing, clenching his fists and breathing through his nose controlling the urge to throw Ashley out. "Look after him, yeah. He's had a bit to drink," he fired at Ashley curtly.

Ashley laughed, hugging Troy. "You don't say? He's plastered. Don't worry; I'll look out for him. Don't wait up."

Cal went in alone, fuming, and tried to watch TV. The alcohol fog faded, leaving only the timeline fizzing away in his brain. The thing about missing someone was that it got in your bones and infected everything. A missing piece, salt to the pepper, bacon to the eggs. He wasn't whole any more. Him and Jay, that's who he was, before he had to go and ruin it all by wanting too much. He had spoken to Jay in some way every day since he was about four years old. The last few years Jay talked and he listened, but his presence was a constant, all mixed together with fear, aching, and love. Cal knew what vegetables he didn't like, how hot he had his bath, how to make him laugh, and what he sounded like as he came.

He shouldn't be allowed to miss him, because of what he did.

He couldn't sit still now Troy was gone. When he was in prison, he had often felt restless and desperate in a way he could not define. He headed out to walk, to walk anywhere, just away from the hostel, just away from himself.

He walked for a long time in the dark, kicking leaves and concentrating on the wind and the smells—the noises of humanity going on around him whilst he looked out from his cage.

When Cal got back, Troy and Ashley were in the living room, stretched out completely comatose. Cal was no expert, but he knew what the tin foil was used for.

Ashley saw his face, and started to gather everything up. "Sorry mate. I meant to be gone before you came back."

"You let your own brother take that shit?" he suddenly shouted, before he had a chance to think better of it, but Ashley said nothing, just smiled sweetly and let himself out. "Fucker," Cal shouted, as he furiously cleaned up the mess, and opened a window to dispel the smell.

Troy's pulse was there, he was just asleep after all. Relief washed over Cal as he tried to lift him up to bed. "I love you, Cal. You know that, don't you?" Troy mumbled, sliding both arms around Cal's neck, pulling him close.

Cal walked him towards the bed, trying to ignore his warm body pressed so closely to his. "Sure I do. Now come on, let's get you into bed."

He helped Troy undress, trying not to notice the taut stomach and beautiful, milky limbs. He tucked him in and was about to leave. Troy grabbed his hand and kissed it, then threw up spectacularly all over the bed. "Oh, fuck," Cal shouted. "Come on, get out. Let's get you in the shower, you can't sleep in that." He propelled Troy towards the shower, cleaning up as best he could. The quilt was drenched and the room stank of vomit.

He went into his own room and got the bed ready for Troy. When he turned around, he was unprepared for the sight of Troy, naked, standing there. Even off his face and shivering, he was gorgeous, precious, and how the fuck could Cal let Ashley hurt him? "Here you go, get in before you freeze to death," Cal said gently, averting his eyes.

Troy slid past him and climbed in, then held up the quilt for Cal. “Come on, there’s room for us both. Unless you’re scared of being in bed with a gay bloke.”

Cal shook his head, laughing. “Nope. I’ll just snore and keep you awake. The sofa will be fine for me. See you tomorrow.” He left the door open, in case Troy vomited again in the night and choked on it.

There was a spare blanket which fit around him quite nicely. He lay on his back, and was almost asleep when the sound of anguish and pain woke him again.

Troy was sitting up, his knees drawn up with his head tucked in. Great heaves wracked his body. He felt cold in Cal’s arms, as he stroked his back and hair. “Troy, ssh. It’s okay. Ssh. What’s up, mate?”

“I’m such a fuck up. A total mess.”

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing new, that’s the thing. I just do the same old shit, I’m nothing and nobody.”

“That’s not true. You’re not ‘nothing’ to me, and there’s your singing. You’re good—I heard you, remember? When are you singing next? I’ll come and see you, cheer you on.”

“Really? You’ll come and see me?” The hope in Troy’s face was so bright it took Cal’s breath away. Of course, people still hoped and not everything was old and tarnished.

“‘Course I will. Now what’s really up?”

And just like that, Troy’s face went from being young and beautiful to old and weary. He said only one word, “Ashley.”

“Ah. Your brother. Why don’t you just tell him to fuck off?”

Troy started with the hair chewing. “‘Cause, I can’t. He’s family. He’d kill me. I can’t just tell him to fuck off. And sometimes, I like going out with him, we have a good time.” Troy shrugged. “He’s all I’ve got.”

“But he’s bad for you. Drugs, stealing cars, dangerous fucking.”

“Haven’t you ever known someone like that, Cal? Who’s really bad for you, but they make you feel like you’re top of the world? Just, you wish they wanted you around so badly, that you put up with anything?”

“Yeah,” Cal answered painfully, trying not to stare at Troy’s nipples, which were hard from the cold, and perfect. “Sure I have, yeah. But if he’s your brother, he’ll want you around whatever.”

“Would you take that risk?”

Cal knew he wouldn’t. He had never once said no to Jay. He stirred, uncomfortably. “Well, goodnight. Don’t worry about it now.”

Troy shifted, and patted the bed. “Come on, get in. There’s loads of room. Please? I don’t want to be alone.”

Cal wavered, but the crooked smile and freckles were impossible to refuse. It was awkward at first, but soon Troy’s head was snuggled into his arm with his leg thrown over Cal’s, fast asleep. How could anyone hurt him? Christ, but Troy was lovely to hold, his naked body pressed so close that his erection pushed against Cal’s thigh.

Some people had this every night and every morning.

Chapter Ten

Cal became aware of a hand stroking his stomach, making little circles and gliding over his nipples. He began bucking toward the hand, when a chuckle woke him. Soft lips kissed his neck. “Morning, gorgeous. You’ve got a lovely stomach. Can I have a look at the rest?” Troy asked, beginning to lick behind his ear.

Cal grinned, kissed Troy back on the top of his head, and extricated himself cheerfully. “Cheeky bastard. No you cannot. I cost more than you can afford.”

“That wouldn’t be hard. Unlike my cock.” Troy sniggered. Cal hurried off to the bathroom, laughing at Troy. He showered, unable to prevent himself from jerking off, thinking of that slim body. He washed himself off ruefully, muttering that this had to stop. So much shit to deal with for them both, but every day that passed they grew closer, flirting and playing, messing up Cal’s head.

By the time he was ready, Troy had fallen back asleep, his arms flung out and his wild hair like a black cloud around him. He was bare right down to the small patch of hair below his belly button. Cal caught his breath, mentally kissing all the way down that soft, smooth body, before leaving in a rush.

He leant on a wall opposite the care home and breathed deeply. He was going to do it today. Enough wasting time and thinking of things that could never be. He was not going to think about Troy today. He would concentrate only on Alice.

She had been his own mum’s best friend, helping Cal when she died, then sorting out the funeral, and taking him in. During his childhood, he was as much around Alice as his own mum.

He had already written about fifty plans of what to say to her. He knew in theory how he would explain what happened that night, but as the train got nearer the city, he saw how ridiculous that was. He couldn’t tell her he had been in love with Jay since he was a boy and her son was a thug. How could he tell her that?

It looked like a decent place, with flowers in the front and pretty curtains. Alice would like that. Who the fuck was he kidding? Alice would hate being in

a care home, would be miserable and confused. It was his fault. He couldn't do it. He remembered Jay saying to him as teenagers, "Always put yourself first." He resolutely walked towards the home, and rang the bell. "Hello, I called earlier. It's Callum here to see Alice. Her nephew." A lie of course, but they didn't seem bothered by who he was. They let him in, and took him to Alice.

She looked very old and fragile, sitting in a large room full of other people, none of them talking and most of them looking glazed. Alice took no notice of him at all, even when he pulled up a chair and held her hand. "Alice. Hello, love. How are you?" Anna was right. Alice was gone. She looked right through him, as if he was not there. This was not the same woman who had looked after him, listened to him, loved him. He could never explain to her now.

But he had to try. "Alice. Do you know who I am?" For an instant, he thought he saw recognition flash in her eyes, but then it was gone. He stroked the hand, noticing the brown spots, and wondering when they had happened. These hands had done so much for him, Jay and Anna, and now they were useless.

He bit his lip and tried again. "Alice, I'm so sorry. About Jay, about what happened to Jay, what I did to Jay. I..." He had to stop. Of course he had to stop. But she didn't care now because it was too late. Because his actions had already as good as killed her. He would never be able to explain now, and he realised he had been waiting for her to say it was okay, that she understood, because if anyone might have understood, it was Alice. She gave everyone the benefit of the doubt, and forgave everything.

He gave up, kissed her hand and her cheek, and politely left, sat in a nearby park just listening to the birds and the ringing in his head.

On the way home, thoughts of Troy filled his head again, because he was weak, lonely and beaten. He passed a Chinese takeaway, and went in. It was dark by the time he neared the flat, carrying takeaway and with a head like swirling waters.

The music playing in the flat was loud and manic. There were cans everywhere, and the smoke was like a filthy blanket. He sighed, turned down the music, and began to clear away. The moans from Troy's room began the minute he turned off the music. There was no doubt what Troy was doing in there. The other guy was grunting loudly as the bed rattled against the wall.

Just how many men was Troy fucking? He mentally chided himself, but couldn't prevent the hard on, or bullet of jealousy. The man practically screamed as he came, for God's sake, causing Cal to swear uncomfortably, then quietly leave the flat. Cal had never come like that, certainly not from being fucked. Was it even possible?

He didn't want Troy to know he was around. It wasn't fair. It was no business of his what Troy got up to. He wandered around miserably for an hour, before going back. The flat was quiet except for the sound of the shower.

The only evidence was a couple of used condoms in Troy's bin, not that he was checking.

Troy bounded in naked, hair still wet. "Awright, Cal? Where've you been all day? Is this takeaway for us?"

Cal grinned, his spirits lifting from the darkness a little, trying not to ogle the firm body in front of him. "Yes, none of your business, and yes."

"Sorry about the noise. You didn't have to go though, you could have beat off; I wouldn't mind."

Cal snorted, embarrassed but impressed. There was no way him and Jay could have ever talked like that about sex. "Get your skinny butt on this chair and eat." He swatted at Troy's smooth arse as he went past. "Is it your singing thing tonight?" Troy's face lit up.

"You remembered! You're still coming, right?"

Cal nodded as he ate. "Sure am. What are you going to sing?"

"Mostly old stuff, the punters like that. You know, really old songs, from your bygone era."

"Cheeky bastard. I'm only six years older than you. Fuck off."

Troy stuck his tongue out at him, and began to tell Cal about his latest conquest. It made Cal's insides twist, but he was better off keeping away from Troy, because no good could come of it. He knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself from thinking of that scream though, later.

Troy was very secretive about his singing act, saying only that the night would be full of surprises. Cal could hear him in the shower, singing loudly and talking to himself as he washed. He always spent hours in the bathroom. Cal shouted out to him. "Hurry up. What are you doing in there?"

“Bathing in milk. Beauty like mine requires dedication and skill.”

Cal snorted, and scrutinised his own reflection. He was a nice looking guy, blond hair and blue eyes, wiry and slim, six feet tall. Before going to prison, he had taken care of his appearance, but now he rarely looked in the mirror, only for shaving or when he was at the barber's. Whatever he looked like, it had not been enough for Jay.

And there he was again, in Cal's head, as big a part of him as every guilty secret. When they were teenagers, they had often got ready to go out together, swapping jeans and deodorant, naked and easy around each other even after the fucking started.

Once they moved into their first flat together, Jay was busy and had no time for Cal any more.

“Penny for them? You look fuckable.” Troy appeared, whistling, wearing skin tight trousers and a top that said ‘The Forest Savage’. He perched on the edge of the table and looked Cal up and down. “How come you got no girlfriend? You're a lovely bloke, nice looking. What's up with you?”

Cal bared his teeth. “It's my fangs, it puts them off,” he hissed.

Troy leaned back on his hands, looking dangerously good, all shaggy hair and clothes that looked painted on. His nipples stuck out through the tiniest T-shirt Cal had ever seen. “Show me your fangs then, impaler.”

Cal leaned over him, and somehow his lips were kissing wet skin. What was he doing? Flustered, he turned, messing about with the plates. Eventually he risked a quick look back at Troy, who was staring at him, frowning. He had never kissed Jay's neck. The clock ticking was so loud, and surely the fridge didn't usually hum like that? Troy stood up abruptly, grabbing his guitar. “We ready then, Cal?”

“Yeah, let's go.”

They began the walk to the pub, Cal wishing he was better at chat. “You seem quiet. Nervous? Stop chewing your hair, you're messing it up.”

Troy grabbed Cal's arm, looking terrified. “Maybe we shouldn't bother, I haven't practiced enough just lately.”

“Troy, you've been looking forward to this for weeks. You've done pubs before. I thought they loved you?”

“Yeah, but that’s my usual spot. This is much bigger—it’s an open night, so anyone could turn up. There’s gonna be loads of people watching. They’re not gonna like someone like me.”

“I thought you wanted a bigger crowd?” Cal took Troy’s hand and squeezed it, tight.

“Yeah, I do. But what if I’m crap? I’m not very good at anything, Cal.”

Cal felt fierce, and slipped an arm around Troy’s shoulders. “You won’t be crap because you’re good. Remember that. Okay?”

The pub was a heaving mass; too many people, most of them drunken, ruddy-faced men. “Oh fuck, there was a football match earlier,” Troy shouted. “I’m dead meat.”

Pushing past the crowd was difficult, but eventually they got near the stage.

“Cal, I don’t wanna do it.”

“But you’re good, it’ll be okay. Yeah, I’m sure it will,” Cal shouted back half-heartedly, as Troy disappeared into the back, Cal’s gut twisted with anxiety.

A roll of thunder loud drums, head crushingly loud guitars, and the first act began. They were good, and soon the crowd was cheering and the pub vibrated with noise and energy. Cal felt the vibrating of rhythm, the steady beat of the music and the irresistible rush of excitement as his hips joined the sway and his shoulders broke free of inhibition.

The crowd moved like a tidal wave, transporting that drab basement into a buzzing, rolling ride of energy and the thrill of being alive. It was electrifying, like nothing else he had ever experienced, but he was as lost as everyone else.

As the band began to wind down with dizzying vocals and dedications, he became a nervous mess of anticipation to see what Troy could do, joining in as the crowd called for the next act.

“Come on, come on,” they chanted, as Cal jostled for a better position at the front.

The atmosphere changed the instant Troy stepped onto the dimly lit stage, the luminous lettering of ‘The Forest Savage’ like eerie green blood. Bold, black eyeliner and bright red lipstick adorned his face like challenging war paint. He spread his legs and gazed out, looking spiky, wild, and fabulous.

As one, the crowd drew breath and waited. Whispers and mutterings began firing around the room like cruel rumours.

“Is that a bloke or a girl?”

“It’s Boy George!”

“Show us yer tits, darling.”

Cal clenched his fists and felt the sweat drip, drip, on the small of his back. *Start, just start*, he mentally implored, clenching his teeth so tightly that quick bursts of manic fire shot before his eyes.

Troy saw him, stared and froze, huge eyes firing icy darts straight to Cal’s heart, bringing him back to life. He smiled, and Troy began. He was good, his voice unusual and startling. He was likely the best act the pub had ever seen, but so out of place it was painful to witness. The crowd grew restless as sweat from Cal’s hands dripped on the floor.

The first insults started, then a ricochet, and the whole audience was shouting abuse at Troy. A bottle landed and smashed on stage. Troy and his guitar were drenched with beer and shards of glass.

Cal couldn’t watch. Every muscle in his body clenched, as he fervently, silently urged Troy to just go, and forget it. He froze in shock as Troy snarled, hurled the guitar into the crowd, shouting back obscenities, then launched himself straight at them. Troy was swarmed, and even though he was one man against so many, he fought them furiously. For a few moments, Cal was unable to believe the panic that erupted, but adrenaline and outrage kicked in as he saw blood on Troy’s face.

It was not pretty, but he clawed his way in, managing to drag Troy away by the waist. His arms and legs continued kicking and punching until they got outside.

“Fuck off you tossers. You’re all fucking assholes,” Troy shouted, as Cal dragged him down the road, away from the men starting to spill from the pub after them.

“Run, just bloody run, Troy.”

After running flat out for at least ten minutes, they stopped at last, bent double and exhausted. “Fuckers... Should have let me... Ignorant cunts... my guitar. I left my guitar, Cal.”

Cal pulled him onwards, towards the flat. “I’ll buy you a new one. Don’t worry about it. Jesus Troy, we nearly got battered.”

But there was no calming him down. He raved all the way home, and then paced the flat, unable to stop. He had blood on his face, his T-shirt was ripped, but all Cal saw was Troy against the crowd on his own, knowing he was going to lose but fighting anyway. Beautiful, wild, savage, and fragile as forest mist.

Uneasy fragments of memory flickered like a failing light: Jay getting drunk in Cal's house with others and Cal putting up with it—Jay shouting at Alice while Cal stood by—taking it, just taking it all—and suddenly, he knew what he had to do.

He caught Troy gently by the arms, and held him still. "Hey," Cal said softly. "Steady. Let me see the damage." He peered at the face cradled in his hands, at the eyes staring at him so seriously that he had to speak. "I want... I wanted to..." he whispered, as Troy gripped his shoulders back and lunged. Cal tried to hold back, aware of the bruises, but Troy seemed oblivious to his hurts as he plunged his tongue into Cal's mouth, pushing his erection against Cal's. Their bodies pressed together desperately, and there was no way of stopping this force.

Somehow, their clothes came off in a mad rush of arms, hands and laughing as they fell onto the bed, naked at last. "Cal? Cal, what are we doing?"

"*Ssh*. Don't say a word. It's just us. Not a word."

Troy arched under Cal's touch, moaning. He felt so perfect, firm, hard, limbs and huge dark nipples. It was the first time Cal had ever explored a man's body, but why had he waited so long?

His hands ran up and down Troy's ribs, watching Troy push towards him and roll his head back. So much skin to kiss. He was never allowed to kiss Jay, not like this. Sometimes Jay kissed him, hard and possessive, never shivery and arousing like this. But why was he thinking about that, when Troy was here on his bed naked, trying to push Cal's hand to his leaking cock?

Troy's cock... Cal had never been allowed to touch Jay's, certainly never kissed and licked along its silky length like this, but now he could not get enough. He would never have enough. "Cal," Troy gasped, panting. "You're killing me. Fuck me, please."

Cal leaned up on one elbow, slowly stroking Troy's cock with the other hand, watching the hips pumping up towards him. "I don't know how," he whispered. "I've never done it."

Troy rocked faster into his hand, closing his eyes and moaning. "I'll show you. It's a bit different to a woman, but the theory's the same. Different hole, that's all."

The laugh bubbled out of Cal. "You sweet talker, you. I've never fucked a woman either."

Troy stared at him shocked. "You're a fucking virgin?" he moaned, as Cal cupped his balls gently and stroked, watching Troy spread his legs and squirm.

"I never said that either. I've been fucked, many times, I've just never done the fucking."

Troy pushed him back, lay on top of him, lined up their cocks, and starting to rock. "No way. All this time I wanted you, but I thought you were straight."

"Yeah," Cal murmured, kneading Troy's smooth cheeks and thighs. Troy was losing it, flushed all over his chest, his arms straining with every thrust. Cal ran a tentative finger along his crack, then gently rubbed over his hole.

Troy moaned and gasped. "Oh, I like that. Push it in, please, please."

Cal nudged his finger in as Troy went wild, simultaneously fucking himself on Cal's finger and grinding on his cock. They thrashed together wildly as Troy began to come, beautiful noises flooding from him, his face a grimace of pleasure. Cal let go, and pushed back, coming with a yell.

They lay together for ages, Troy snuggled into Cal's shoulder. He reached for some wipes, before kissing Troy lightly. "I should have told you I was gay, sorry."

Troy was watching him intently, granite grey eyes narrowed. "Mm. Why didn't you? There's a lot you should have told me, like how shit I was at singing."

"You're not shit at anything, don't ever say that. You were the best fucking thing I've ever seen in my whole life. They were just drunk assholes looking for a fight."

"Which I gave them," Troy snorted, eyes shining and begging for another kiss. Cal couldn't stop now, running his hands along his side and back. Troy closed his eyes, and purred like a cat. "Mmm, you can keep doing that. Tell me about this never fucking thing. Were you serious?"

Cal run his thumb over Troy's cock, hard again. "Not now," he whispered. "We've got better things to do than talk."

Chapter Eleven

He was really not in the mood, but there was no stopping Mary. Cal and words were never good friends, especially bitter words like these. She wouldn't let him break eye contact, and, as usual, went straight for his jugular vein. "Cal. You don't want to talk about it because it's hard. Of course it's hard, but it's doing you good, you're doing so well. You look happier, you talk more, and you have a glint in your eye that's got nothing to do with the snow."

He blushed at that, and wondered with horror if she knew about him and Troy. "All right, all right. I'll do it." She smiled, a sneaky smile that told him she did indeed know.

The Wednesday Before It Happened...

He can't get it out of his mind. He replays it with various sexual positions, torturing himself with images of Jay on his back being fucked by Tony, perhaps even moaning Tony's name. Sometimes in these visions, he is Tony, running hands up Jay's chest and making him desperate. Afterwards, he always holds Jay close.

He never had such thoughts before. He accepted the sex and never wondered if it could be better because it was all Jay gave him. Where have all these fantasies come from? He is hot, cold, aroused and nauseous. He can't sit still and he can't eat. He doesn't know what he wants. He wants Jay. He wants to be held.

He runs eleven miles after work, but he could easily carry on until he drops. When he gets back to his house, Jay is there waiting for him. Jay greets him with unaccustomed warmth. "Cal, there you are, mate. How you doing?"

He doesn't know how to answer, but when the words come out he sounds no different. "Yeah, I'm fine." He realises that he never has to say much at all around Jay, because Jay talks and he listens.

Jay smiles, but that face holds no warmth. "So, this is what we're gonna do. Have a shower, and then let's head out for a bite to eat. I can't remember the last time we went out, just us."

He showers, changes into jeans and a shirt and dumbly follows Jay into the car, like so many times before.

Jay is attentive to him, asking him questions about the business and discussing Alice. He realises that this is the most they have talked in years, but he is still too numb to believe it or question. He can't look Jay in the eye in case he sees the hurt, or maybe it's the anger.

He is afraid.

Jay insists that he will drive for once, and Cal can have a drink; he insists on champagne. Cal drinks it alone, facing the man he loves with a glass full of empty bubbles and a hand that trembles slightly.

As they walk back to the car, Jay casually rests a possessive hand on Cal's naked arm, making him start, and shiver. Jay talks about Anna and the kids, the new carpet, just everyday events.

He fucks him in the hallway, down on all fours on the wooden panelling they sanded together years ago. It is so hard not to struggle and choke, as the vice-like hands grip his throat, shutting off his air, as if to remind him he only lives by Jay's say so.

Afterwards, Jay dresses quickly and talks about the kids' birthday parties, but in Cal's head it is quiet and ringing at the same time. His throat burns from where Jay throttled him.

He stands there in his own hallway with cum soaking his underwear and feels nothing. But, as Jay prepares to leave, he cannot bear it. "Jay, wait."

Jay stops and turns impatiently, scratching his head, one hand already on the door handle. In the years that follow, Cal will never know where it came from or even if it really happened.

"I love you."

It sounds so cheap and stupid, the words echoing in his hallway, but Jay looks shocked and angry. His hand drops from the handle and he stares, icy and terrifying. "What the fuck's this? Shut the fuck up with that and stop being so daft." Then he shrugs, as if it is all over now, like swatting a fly. He scrutinises Cal, then says carefully, "Cal, find a girlfriend."

Then he is gone, banging the door behind him.

There is a space in front of the door, just a square of carpet and sunshine, where he stands. The emptiness gradually fills and he sinks to the floor and cradles his head in his hands, knees drawn up. Small noises at last escape his years of silence, but there is no resolution to his anguish.

Mary was listening intently, her chin rested on her hand. She sighed, and said, “So you realised. You saw things that day about Jay that you never noticed, or acknowledged, before.”

He thought about this. “I.” Why was this so hard, nearly two years later? He tried again. “I knew. Of course I knew. He wasn’t always like that; he got worse over the years. I should have spoken, I should have stood up for myself. You can’t blame him for that.” She raises her eyebrows and looks down her nose at him.

“Jay was a very dangerous man. He was involved in all kinds of things and even though he kept you at the edge of his criminal activities, he made sure you knew enough to be afraid. He dangled you from a piece of string, Cal. You were afraid of upsetting him, and of losing him. Fear is a strong force. It couldn’t have been enough for you, though, sex in the hallway?”

He shook his head, no. “I don’t think I admitted it wasn’t enough though. It was like being caught in a web. And, I was busy...” he finished lamely, waiting for her eyebrows to shoot up, as indeed they did.

“What made you realise that there can be so much more between two people, that you deserve more?” she asked, and he inwardly cursed her insight. He looked directly at her, raised his own eyebrows, and they shared a smile. She knew why.

Soft, wet, tantalising. He spread his legs farther apart to give Troy better access, and heard himself grunting and groaning. Troy’s hands were on his cock and balls, his talented tongue gliding over his hole. Cal lost his mind with desire and just gave in to the raging fire that was his cock. “Cal, what about this, then?” Oh my God, right up there and he couldn’t help pushing back, trying to get the tongue farther up and his cock rubbing against Troy’s hand. He heard his own pants, and didn’t care.

Troy pulled back with a chuckle, and pushed him over. He smacked his lips and kissed Cal with gusto. “Let me ride you?” Troy asked, straddling him, and rubbing his nipples. Dear God, how did Troy know more about Cal’s body than he did himself?

The desire to fuck Troy was overwhelming, but something always held him back. But even without fucking, they had done far more than with Jay. Like how to laugh, for instance. He was grinning, losing all control as Troy rolled

his nipples, mimicking Cal's moans and breathy pants. Troy was the teacher, him the student, and somehow in a bed all the awkwardness vanished.

"Never spent the whole night with anyone before," Troy murmured. "Walls, yes. I've done plenty of them." He wriggled right next to Cal, and pulled them so they were both on their sides, Cal behind him. "Stick your dick in between my legs, it's nice." Cal did, and reached around to stroke Troy's body, all the way from balls to nipples. Troy loved that, pushing his arse back at him, creating delicious friction on his cock.

Soon they were rocking together, their breaths mingling and Troy making whining, needy, noises that made Cal excited, and frantic. He kissed all down Troy's neck, and held him close as they sought release.

The sex was a diversion that filled his head and confused him, stopping him from going through with his last task. Holding Troy down on the sofa and kissing him until he was breathless seemed to take up whole days; finding his socks that Troy hid in the fridge or his shoes that were dangling from the light consumed him with bubbles of what he supposed were happiness.

He didn't understand the butterflies in his stomach before Troy turned up, or the fierce pressure in his chest when Troy was late back, or with Ashley. He didn't know the names for any of it, just the ripping of his resolve, and the fear.

Chapter Twelve

They were curled up together, Troy's head under his chin, all warm and cosy. The banging on the door exploded through the night, making them both jump. "Cal, what the fuck is that?" Troy clung to him, making all his protective instincts scream. He wrapped Troy in his arms, and kissed him briefly. "Door. Wait here, I'll go." He flung on jeans and strode to the door, unafraid. It was the police.

They took Troy to the waiting police car, wide-eyed and frightened, looking back at him.

The flat was still, empty. The bed was still warm where they had slept. Cal couldn't face getting in it. He curled his hands into fists and didn't know how to cope. He told himself over and over again it didn't matter, Troy would be okay. There was nothing he could do. He was as powerless as all those times Jay had left him after fucking.

He sat there, cold and in the dark, for hours, feeling everything slip through his fingers again, sick that he had let this happen.

The flat door opened, waking him, and it was Troy. He was in Cal's arms within seconds, hiding his face in his neck, gripping his shoulders. The relief that hit Cal was white fire and for a while, all he could do was stroke the hair and fight the tears.

Eventually, Cal managed to whisper, "You okay?"

Troy nodded, pulling back to face Cal. He looked white, and tired. "Yeah. Been charged. Curfewed here."

Cal listened and heard none of it. "What happened?"

"CCTV, of Ashley breaking in a shop. I tried to stop him, Cal, but he wouldn't. He made me stand on watch."

"You should have run away, or called the police. So what happens now?" Cal asked, terrified of the answer.

Troy shrugged. "Have to wait. Do a presentence report, and go to court. I might go back to prison."

"You're going to have to tell Ashley to fuck off."

Troy hung his head, and chewed his hair.

“Let’s make the most of our time until then, Troy. Come here, baby.”

Troy sobbed, crushing their faces together fiercely. “I missed you last night, Cal. I really missed you. I thought they might take me back to prison, and I’d never see you again.” He paused, to kiss again, and again, pulling at Cal’s hair and clothes until they were both naked.

Troy was wild, biting at Cal’s nipples, trying to push him flat on his back, but Cal fought back. They were both red, panting and sweaty, grunting and trying to get the upper hand. Eventually, Cal’s strength won over Troy’s ferocity, and he lay flat on top of him, holding his arms above his head, kissing him savagely. “Fuck me, just fuck me,” Troy begged. “Please, Cal.” Warmth and pressure grew, and Cal wanted to, more than anything.

“Condoms in the drawer. Don’t bother with lube.” But Cal knew too much about dry fucking, so he found the lube, and applied it to his fingers, watching Troy pull his legs back to expose his hole. “Do it,” Troy begged, looking utterly delicious, his hair wild and his lips red from biting.

Cal watched him intently, rimming his hole with a finger, then gently in. Troy started trying to push back at him. “Come on, Cal. Don’t wait, fuck me.”

Nerves hit Cal as he put on the condom and couldn’t get it right. He’d never worn one. There was something wrong with the end. Troy peered up. “You got it on the wrong way. Here, let me.” He whipped another one out, rolling it on within seconds. Troy grinned, and kissed Cal. “See? I was youth champion, two years running. Fastest time.” Cal pushed him back, rocking them together. He forgot his fears.

The sensations and delicious ache in his cock made him push, and push. Troy was gripping his arms, urging him on, and pushing back up at him, oblivious to everything else. They worked together, kissing and thrusting, Troy moving about until he found the right spot. “That’s it. Oh, God.”

“You look so good,” Cal breathed, pushing Troy’s legs right back and pumping him fast. Troy gasped, grabbed his hair, and pulled, working his own cock frantically. It was the sight of this that finished Cal. He gripped Troy’s shoulders, and fucked him with everything he had. He was vaguely aware of Troy’s moans and shouts as he came, matching his own.

They collapsed in a heap, Cal lying on Troy, kissing his neck softly. Their breathing calmed down, and Troy stroked his hair. “I fucking missed you last

night. I can't bear being away from you. Was that really your first time?" Cal nodded, too sated to be embarrassed.

"I've never been anyone's first time, or even fiftieth time. I wanted you to fuck me from the first time I saw you. Being around you made me horny as fuck."

Cal smiled down at him, amazed, as they kissed.

They fucked again later that morning, Troy riding him, keen to show Cal his skills. "Sex is all I'm good at, Cal," he said, as he made a show of throwing his head back, and posing, fucking himself on Cal rigorously.

"Not true," Cal panted, running hands along Troy's stomach and chest. "You can make a lovely lasagne now."

"True," Troy agreed, and they grinned at each other as they fucked.

Afterwards, they cooked together. Troy touched him constantly—a hand on his arm, his foot under the table, even sitting on his lap to feed him toast. It was too much to believe in. But always, at the back of Cal's mind, something stopped him from being able to let go.

The next day, Tom came to talk to Troy about court, and the likelihood of prison. He looked tired, and weary. "Why, Troy? It's been a year. Your probation officer's been on the phone all morning. Everyone's worried about you. Why would you fuck everything up now?"

Troy looked cornered and miserable, hunched inwards and his hair falling over his face. Cal longed to hold him, and make this go away, but Tom had seen it all before, many times. "You've got to learn to say 'no' to Ashley. I know he's your brother, but he's no good for you. If he cared about you, he would stay away."

"He does care about me," Troy mumbled, unconvincingly.

Tom sat down next to him, and sighed deeply. "Troy. I know he's the only family you've got. I understand that. But you've got to start thinking of yourself. You've got loads going for you now, you don't need this. If you go back to prison, you lose the job, your room here with Cal, and for what?"

Troy was fighting tears, and losing. One dripped onto the table, his head in his hands, shoulders shaking. Cal stood it as long as he could, before gathering

the heaving shoulders to him, not caring about Tom watching. Troy uncurled immediately, winding his long arms around Cal's neck. Something caught in Cal's chest, like letting go and grabbing at the same time.

Tom made movements to go. "Right. Well, come and see me later, Troy. We'll talk about how we're going to get you ready for court."

Cal waited for the door to close before gently kissing all around Troy's dark hair. "I'm going to have a go at you about Ashley as well later. And I'm not going to stop until you face up to it. You've been stealing my shampoo again as well," he murmured. "You know what the punishment is for that, don't you?"

Troy half laughed, pulling back to face Cal. His face was red and blotchy, his eyes shiny with sadness. Cal held his breath, and watched while Troy gathered strength and the cheeky smile resurfaced. "Is it giving my arse a good whacking? 'Cause if it is, I'm game. Oh, by the way, I nicked your soap too." And he was off, flying round the flat with Cal chasing him, trying to keep all the shit at bay.

He stared at Mary with such intensity that his eyes would surely explode. The sweat was beginning to pool in his hands, and he could not breathe. He had to get out. He had to get away.

"It's all right, Cal. Take your time." Mary handed him some water and a tissue. "She wrote to me when you were in prison. I told you about it. She wants to see you; she's always wanted to see you." It was just hearing her name that had caused such an extreme reaction from him. Anna. He knew she wanted to see him, because she'd written him letters too, lots of them.

It was the last task. To visit Anna, and explain. How simple it sounded.

"Cal?" Mary knew him well, by now. She gave him time, but wouldn't back down. He nodded, drank the water and breathed in.

The Thursday Before It Happened...

He has to go to Jay's house for a birthday tea for one of the kids. All day he tries to cancel it, but can't make the call. The kids will be waiting for him. Anna will be waiting for him. He can't let them down. He never wanted to let them down. All the way there, he thinks everything will be different, but nothing is different, everything is the same as ever. Anna rushes out to greet him. "Cal! There you are, come on; we're just doing the candles."

She is always lovely to him, making him part of the family, ensuring there's always a seat for him at the table. The kids swarm him, and for a while, it's OK. He plays the games, wears the party hat, and pins tails on donkeys.

He is good with the kids. He loves the kids fiercely, with each birth he cries and adores them. Jay's nieces and nephews. He loosens up a bit, around them. They make him laugh, with their princess games and secrets and the smallest looks just like Jay. He plays castle for a while, and Anna brings him a drink. "How are you, Cal? I haven't seen you this week. Everything OK?" She is beautiful, always smiling and friendly.

"I'm fine, Anna. Busy, with the café, you know."

She looks at him shrewdly. "You work too hard. Life should be about fun too, you know. When are you going to get yourself a nice boyfriend?" Just like that, she says it, then nudges him with her shoulder. "I've always known."

He busies himself with his glass, there are not enough words, and no words at all. How much does she know?

She kisses his cheek. "You deserve to be happy. You're a lovely bloke. You're always welcome here, you know that." Safer ground. He nods.

"Of course I do. I love coming here." It's true. Just being around the place where Jay lives is intoxicating.

"How's business?" Anna knows to move on, she's clever and kind, the perfect sister for Jay, who was best man when she got married, Cal with a lump in his throat the size of Africa.

"The café is doing really fantastic, I'm thinking of opening another next year."

She's always so interested in everything he has to say, but her bombshell is still fizzing away at his stomach lining. He doesn't know if she's said anything to Jay, or even if it matters.

Jay looks gorgeous, as ever. He has the confidence of the loved and the successful, and he deserves it. Cal wants to kiss him so much he accidentally snaps the wine glass stem, and makes a mess everywhere. Jay ushers him to the kitchen, and cleans him up, stealing furtive glances at his face. Cal knows something is about to come out.

It is in the air and Jay's voice. There is something about the way he holds his shoulders, and a slight tightening of his jaw. Cal has watched that face for

so long that he can detect the slightest change in mood. Jay nudges the door shut, and leans on the sink. "Cal. I don't think you should come round here so often. Don't take it the wrong way, mate. It's just, just for a while. Get your head sorted out. Okay? And mate. That was the last time." And he nods, the conversation is over. He doesn't really want an answer, and he certainly doesn't want a conversation with Cal. He never has.

Jay strides back to the living room, oblivious and uncaring, and it is like a light being switched off. It was the last fuck, and he isn't welcome here any more. For an instant, Cal seriously considers shouting and screaming and launching his love after Jay, but only for an instant. Because he is Cal, and does not make a fuss. That is how he kept Jay for so long.

He carries on with the party, with the smile glued on his face and his eyelids tight like Sellotape and grit. Anna keeps looking at him, worried, and he is glad to get out. He drives off with his foot flat on the gas, and his head like a fairground, round and round, up and down.

He slumped as he finished, with the relief both of stopping and of starting. Next time he came here, he'd have to talk about that Friday, that fucking God awful Friday that was stuck in him like an enormous splinter.

He was crushed all over again. Weighed down by all he had done, and the awfulness of no escape or reprieve, because he was a murdering bastard and because of him those children had no uncle, and...

"Cal," she spoke firmly, and so he listened because that was always his trouble. A firm voice and he believed, and bent over, every time.

"Cal. Look at me."

He did. She was kind, like always, handing him tissues to wipe his eyes, but nothing could wipe out the words. He always knew one day he would tell her.

"It's okay. Nothing has changed. You've told me some things right from your heart, but nothing has changed. It's still you and me in this room. You've already been tried, and you went to prison."

He nodded, and some of the pain left his head, because she was right. He tried. "It's just... I blocked it all out, in prison. I had this plan of tasks when I got out, and that's all I thought about." But he didn't mean to tell her, or anybody, about the tasks.

She leaned forward and says, “Tasks?” Of course, she missed nothing.

His head whirled with what he can say and what he cannot say. He managed, “Just, visit the cemetery, and Jay’s mother. Sort it out with Anna.” But now he started, he couldn’t stop. “Sell my café, the house, and give the money to Anna and the kids. Because I ruined their lives, and I can’t make that right, but I can do this. I can make sure they never want for nothing that money can buy.”

“But perhaps Anna wouldn’t want that. You would have nothing left?” Mary said, carefully.

He picks at his fingernails. He hadn’t thought about what to say about the next part of the plan, so he shrugs instead. “I can start again.” Although that wasn’t the plan. It hadn’t been the plan.

“Anna has replied to my letter. She still wants to see you. A letter isn’t going to be enough, Cal, that’s not what she wants.” The telephone rang, and thankfully, Mary ended the appointment. He walked home, knowing the cocoon he and Troy had was about to be smashed.

Chapter Thirteen

Ashley was at the flat. Troy's face lit up when he saw Cal; he bounded over and merrily kissed Cal's cheek. "Hello, old man, how did you get on?"

"I'll give you old man, you cheeky little bastard," he answered, wishing Ashley would disappear.

Cal was increasingly consumed with lust the whole time Troy was around him, his cock seemingly half-erect most of his day. They could not keep their hands off each other, even now; Troy was slightly rocking into him, making the blood rush and his cock swell. Ashley watched with interest, grinning. "Hello Cal."

Cal extricated himself from Troy, and nodded at Ashley, unable to manage more than a nod.

"I hope you're going to stop dragging him into your shit now? I thought they'd have banged you up," he growled at Ashley, who leaned back on the sofa and winked.

"No. Bailed and curfew. Court next month."

Cal banged into the kitchen, pulling the door shut behind him, and tried to jot down a few ideas of what he wanted to say to Anna. He wrote for ages, explanations and dates, details which he thought Anna might like. Then, figures and projections of the café. She would never want for money again. He would keep nothing for himself, but once his Probation licence was up, he could start again. He had a vision of him and Troy, working together, maybe living in a flat somewhere nice. He caught himself, and snapped the book shut swiftly, determined to take one thing at a time.

Troy appeared, in a flurry of hair and long-limbed gorgeousness, wrapping his arms around Cal's neck to breathe warm, minty air down his neck. "Mmm. You smell nice, Cal. Do you mind if I go out with Ashley for a bit?"

"Mind? I'm not your dad. Do what you want, but don't get into any more fucking trouble," Cal barked, regretting it immediately as Troy flinched. "Come here." He pulled Troy onto his lap, kissing his nose, his cheeks, his lips. Troy made a small noise and melted into his embrace, already hard. Their tongues encircled, touched, and probed.

"Sorry," he whispered, licking Troy's ear, "just be careful, yeah?"

Troy nodded. "Have we got time for a quickie?" His hand already deftly releasing Cal's swollen cock from his jeans, running his thumb over the end.

Cal groaned, unable to prevent himself from rocking back. "No," he panted. "Your brother's next door."

"Fuck him."

"I'd rather fuck you." Cal grinned, pulling them both up, slamming the door shut with his foot, and dragging Troy's jeans down, revealing his jutting cock and tight balls. "How am I to resist that?" Cal groaned, falling to his knees, stroking up and down Troy's legs and buttocks, kissing his stomach and cock.

"Come on, let's fuck," Troy gasped, spreading his legs. "What are you waiting for?"

But Cal couldn't, not with Ashley next door. He gently swirled his tongue around Troy's cock, then sucked and sucked.

Ashley must have heard Troy. Knives and forks clattered to the floor as Troy flailed his arms and threw his head back, howling. Cal held him firmly, one hand gently cupping his balls. It didn't take very long before Troy collapsed into Cal's arms, shivering, flushed, and whimpering. Cal kissed him, and pulled his jeans up. "Go if you want. But watch yourself, and make sure you come back."

"Don't wanna go, now. Wanna stay with you."

"I'll still be here when you get back," Cal whispered, wanting him to stay forever. Troy reluctantly pulled away, blew him a kiss, and was gone. He looked back, his face uncertain, biting his lip. Cal smiled at him, and winked. The flat door resounded, and everything was silent, and empty.

He was awakened by a crash and loud laughing, cursing as he recognised Ashley's voice. It was probably best he didn't go out there half-asleep and grumpy, like someone's dad. He stuffed the pillow over his head, but could not shut out the laughing and banging, or the uneasiness that surfaced every time Ashley appeared; waiting, feeling second best.

Eventually, the door banged again, and it went quiet. He listened for a while, the tight band across his forehead creating nauseous peaks in his anxiety. There were voices, urgent and furtive, murmurs of quiet, intent arguing. He shouldn't interfere, but he tiptoed to the door and listened.

Ashley was angry, vicious. “Fuck sake, Paul, it’s just a screw is all he wants. Just to screw you. Cal will never know. If you do this for me, I’m off the hook.”

Rage welled up in Cal, and he almost burst out the door and punched Ashley across the room. But, a tiny part of him wanted to see what Troy (Paul?) would say. He had this sick, dead feeling in the pit of his stomach, confirming what he already knew.

“No, Ashley, don’t ask me any more. I don’t wanna do it, please don’t make me. That last guy hurt me, Ash. I can’t do it no more. I just wanna go legit now, Ash. Please?”

Cal’s blood began to boil. Hurt him? Make him?

“But you’ve done it before, loads of times. You’re a slut for it! It’s just one last time, Paul. It’s not gonna kill you. If you won’t do it, I’m dead, you know that.”

“But I’m with Cal now. I love him,” Troy wailed.

Cal kicked open the door, strode towards Ashley and grabbed him by the jacket. He dragged him unceremoniously, gripping Ashley so hard it must have left bruises. “Now fuck off, and don’t come back here again. He’s not your whore, you scum. Leave Troy alone, got it?”

Ashley held up his hands. “Okay, okay, I’m going. No need to get nasty. And by the way? His name is Paul, not poncey Troy.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and sauntered off.

Cal slammed the door shut, and turned to find Troy sobbing in a huddle. “Has he gone, Cal?”

Cal nodded, kissing his head, and brushing the hair from his streaming face. “I can’t have him bully you like that. I’m sorry, for throwing him out, but he deserved it.”

Troy smiled through the tears. “I kind of liked it,” he whispered.

“He made you fuck people to pay off his debts? All those guys from the hostel?”

“Yeah. In prison too. It’s not like he held a gun over me. Sometimes. Sometimes, I liked it,” Troy whispered, hanging his head as Cal sat, pulling him onto his lap.

“It’s over, baby. Never again. Okay?”

“You still want me. You still want me?” Troy whispered.

“Course I do, Troy. I know how you felt, having to do that. You have nothing to be ashamed of, but Ashley? He’s not coming here again. Ever.”

Chapter Fourteen

He woke up first, and knew that today was the day, and somehow, he was ready.

Troy stirred, and smiled up at him, bleary eyes and beaming, hand around his cock and balls. “Morning, boyfriend,” he mumbled, whirling his tongue around Cal’s earlobe.

Cal froze, a million thoughts refusing to make sense or come together.

All at once, he had to get out. He spoke brightly, extricating himself from Troy, and leaping out of bed. “Oh shit, look at the time. I’ve got to be at Probation in ten minutes,” he gabbled, crazily.

He could not look back at the hurt face, the shock, or the pain, but he felt them all, recognising them like old shoes battered by his shape.

He was out of the flat in five minutes, unshaven and shivering. He hated himself. He could not cope with it, not then. He almost turned back, his hand on the door, poised. But this was the same hand that put the car keys in the ignition, so instead he shouted through the letter box. “See you later. Have some breakfast.” Then he was off, walking briskly, alone and tight jawed.

By the time he got to Probation, he was ready, he was. But as he sat in the reception, the whole awfulness of it all crept back over him like a hood, that day and what he had done. Whilst in prison, he made himself say it to the mirror every single day, “I killed Jay. I am a murderer.” Sometimes it sounded funny, and he had laughed until tears ran down his face, oblivious to the other men staring at him curiously. But sometimes, the words themselves seemed to have life, each one following him and reminding him, every minute of the day and night. Those words made him suffer, and he welcomed this, using it to stay focused.

He had lost that focus now. He accepted that. Life and the world had crept into the space in his head left by Jay, and now there was no gap. Now there was mostly Troy, and his chipped teeth and warm, lovely hands. Troy. His hands were cold on his face as he rested for a moment and felt sick.

“Cal? Come on in,” Mary called, opening the door to the interview rooms to usher him in. Afterwards, and for the rest of his life, he would always remember the smell of the rooms; pine cleaning powder—cloying and nasty.

“How are you today, Cal?”

He smiled at her, feeling a little better. “I’m fine, thank you Mary, are you?” She nodded at him, and they exchanged news of the weather, the bed and breakfast, before she was right in there.

“Cal. Anna has given me a potential date to come and meet you here. She’s seen your letter, with your answers to her questions. She wants you to answer them in person, though. She always has. I’ve gone through the procedure with her, so really there’s nothing stopping us. How do you feel about it all?”

He had thought long and hard about it, of course. What he felt was a terrible crushing force, and panic beyond measure, but he didn’t think that was what Mary wanted to hear. “I feel okay, Mary. Anna deserves a proper explanation.”

“Are you clear what will happen at the interview? Anna wants to ask you the questions we already went over. She’s seen your answers on paper, but she wants to hear them from you. What she really wanted was for you to go round her house, but I explained that you just aren’t ready for that level of contact.” Mary was watching him as she spoke, sensing his unease. “Cal? Whatever’s bothering you, you need to tell me now. I’m not going ahead with the interview until I’m sure you’ve been completely honest with me about how you feel about everything.” She stared at him, and he knew she wouldn’t back down until he at least tried to answer.

“Mary, I really want to do this, for Anna and for Jay. I wish I was brave enough to go round, if that’s what she wants. I’ll tell her anything she wants to know, it’s not that, it’s not.” He had to stop, to breathe, to stop his face from going any redder.

“Let’s have a water break. Cal, look at me? I know this is hard, I really do. You’re being asked to face the person you least want to see in the whole world. No one said it was ever going to be easy. Lots of people never get to this point, you know. You’re doing well. Here.” She handed him the water, which he took gratefully.

“I always really loved Anna. She was kind, and funny. She let me help with the kids. He wouldn’t have thought, but she always did, always. I got to hold them when they were born, have my picture taken with them all, be their uncle. She let me in...” He had to stop, again, knowing he was getting there. Tears began to roll. The room was so still, so far away from it all, but still he could not say the words. More tears, not for Jay, but for Anna.

He felt the walls closing in, and he had to get out. He was up, gabbling, “I’m sorry, I can’t any more, I’m sorry.”

He was off, out through the security doors, and the reception with the nailed down chairs and institution carpet.

It was much colder than the last time he was here. The air of magic had vanished, and now it was just a deserted cemetery, lit up by flowers on the graves. Jay’s was surrounded by pots, and even toys from the kids. A sharp pang went through him as he imagined the kids here on Saturdays, now without either uncles or a granny.

He could not think of what to say to Jay this time, and for a while he just sat at a nearby bench, watching the occasional mourner or dog walker, until it was empty. He tried to pretend otherwise, but all he could really concentrate on was Troy, which seemed somehow wrong.

“He’s got rubbish teeth,” he began, quietly. “They’re crooked from where he fell off his bike as a kid. Makes him look like he has fights all the time, but he doesn’t. He makes me laugh, all the time. He tells lies to make himself more interesting, but he doesn’t have to bother because he’s bloody fantastic.”

The truth of this statement stopped him, and he wondered why he was sitting in a damp cemetery instead of sorting things out with Troy.

Chapter Fifteen

When he got back in the dark, the flat was a mess. Troy had thrown clothes, shoes, everywhere. His new guitar was out, but he was gone. The kitchen was even worse. Cal's notebook with all his targets, left open at one terrible page, where Cal had written Jay's name over and over. Troy had found it, and read everything.

He just sat right where he was, on the cold floor, hugging the paper to him, with his head on his knees.

He slowly ripped the book until he was surrounded by tiny white shreds and odd words. Scattered thoughts, everything mingling together: Jay, Anna, Alice, and Troy. Where they all fit now, he did not know, but thinking of Troy finding that book after this morning made him hurt, and want to moan and sob.

He started to pick up clothes, and tidy up, wanting to make it welcoming for Troy when he got back. He would tell him everything, then it would be up to Troy to decide if he still wanted to see Cal.

He went to sleep, thinking of ways to explain it all to Troy, Mary, and Anna.

Troy didn't return. All night, Cal's head pounded with images of Troy with other men, stealing cars, or lying in a hospital bed.

The next morning, Troy was waiting outside as Cal arrived at Probation, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, chewing his hair. He looked young and miserable, and what the fuck was Cal thinking dragging him into this sorry, crazy mess?

He clutched the cold hand, and led him around the corner. "Where the fuck were you?" He began, but his anger faded as he hugged Troy, hard. There was a gulf the size of a continent between talking about being boyfriends, and talking about that Friday, long ago. He couldn't do both.

"Troy, it's... I'm so sorry about yesterday; I should never have run off like that. I want to tell you about it, but I can't talk now, okay? I'll see you later?"

But Troy just hunched further inside himself, his face hidden by his hair.

"Troy? I have to go. You're okay, yes?"

He might have been mistaken, but it looked like Troy's lovely cheek was glistening, as he turned to leave. He almost missed it, just a quiet whisper that floated up from beneath that thatch of hair.

"It's Paul. My name. It's not really Troy. I just said that 'cause it sounded cool."

But he had to go, because his heart was hammering and if he didn't release it all that day then he would be trapped in that car forever. He squeezed Troy's arm once. "I have to do this, love. Afterwards, we'll talk, I promise. I won't be long." He kissed him briefly, and left him there.

He had expected nerves, but as he sat down with Mary, none of it seemed to matter anymore. It was just words after all, Jay was long dead. There was a fizzing in his ears, or perhaps it was only the flickering light. Mary seemed to be a long way away, her voice distorted, but perhaps it was only the light again. He tried to listen to her, but there was only Troy's face, so he just started, and somehow the words tripped out.

The Friday Before It Happened...

He just can't take it any more. All the things that matter to him are just flies buzzing past his head, annoying, but easy to ignore. He has to see him. Even if they never fuck again, and he doesn't matter to Jay and isn't special at all, he has to see him. If he can just look at Jay, maybe it will be enough to get him through another dreary week.

But anything would be better than this wall, and the insides of his head. If he can just explain to Jay, he knows Jay would understand, and even if he doesn't, he will have gotten his attention for a few minutes. Even Jay's disapproval is better than this... dirty, disgusting, nothing.

He wants Jay so badly that the rest of the world has lurched away from him, and he is disjointed. Even though he never had him, he always had hope, expectation for the next time they met.

He throws up, and cries for a long time, though there is no point because no one can see him. It is not easy driving, but he is careful and does not hit many kerbs. There is not much in his mind now except Jay.

Anna opens the door, takes one look at him, and pulls him in. "Cal? Whatever happened? You look awful," she cries, hugging him tightly. The tears

just erupt from some nasty place with no pride, only it's not just tears. "I have to see him, I'm so sorry but I have to," he sobs, unable to see that she can never understand, not in a million years.

"Calm down, Cal. Come on, tell me what's happened." She leads him by the hand, and it's inconvenient, of course it is because she has kids, and none of this is her fault.

"Is someone hurt? It's not Alice because I just saw her. Cal, you're frightening me now." And he is sorry, he doesn't mean to hurt her, or tell her, he just wants Jay.

"I just, just have to talk to him, explain. I didn't mean it. I can't..." He is uncontrollable, can't even speak coherently. Then a door opens, and here he is.

Jay looks at him like he is nothing. He is drunk. He isn't angry, or concerned, he just wants his tea. He stands there, jingling his car keys. Even through the anguish, Cal can see he just doesn't care, and he wants him out. Anna looks from one to the other, of course she is confused, but maybe she knows better than to ask. She glares at Jay. "I'll make some tea. Jay, sit and talk to him, you can see he's upset."

Jay sighs. "We have to be out in half an hour, Cal. It's John's party, remember?" Of course it is, but Cal doesn't care. At that moment, he just has to do something, anything. Perhaps it is resignation, or the many years with no hugging, but as the words leave him, he is icy clear, and nothing matters except he has to speak. "I love you. I'm going to go, and I won't come back, but I have to tell you."

The silence falls like snow on a dark night, and it is Anna who tries to save them all. She sits back next to him, and takes his hand because she is kind and loves him. "We love you too, Cal. It's ok. I don't know what's happened, but it's OK."

She is lovely, but he can't really hear her, he only has eyes for Jay, who rolls his eyes at him. "Of course we love you, fucking idiot, but we're gonna be late. You're barking mad, mate. I'm calling you a taxi."

He could have stopped it then, but something takes hold. He cannot honestly say why he does it, only that he was born to say this and there is no going back to that empty nothingness. He is up on his feet, and shouting, because Jay doesn't care, and he's really fucked it now. "I love you. Do you hear me? I always fucking loved you. Every time you fucked me I just loved you more. Please, listen to me, please..."

The shock on Jay's face as he punches Cal on his way out, says that Anna heard and understood. Cal is back up, on his feet and chasing Jay, like always.

He had never spoken those words before. Not at court, nor to his solicitor. He never meant to tell anyone, he didn't want anyone feeling sorry for him because there was no excuse. Mary was itching to speak, she could barely contain herself. He smiled, despite himself. "Go on. Ask."

She smiled back at him. "Sometimes, Cal, I really wish I could offer my clients a coffee. So you came clean?"

"More like came dirty. There was nothing clean about what I did." He didn't feel as bad as he had expected, though he hadn't got to the worst part yet.

"Are you sure you want to carry on? We can stop there if you want?" Mary asks, but he wasn't going to stop again until he got to the end.

The Friday Before It Happened: Part Two...

His heart is hammering, but he can't stop Jay from slamming the car door and driving off down the road, drunk and angry. At first he runs after the car, but soon turns back to his own van, struggling with the lock because his hands shake so much.

Despite the lack of food and sleep, his head is fluorescent clear. He sees Anna banging on his window but her words are too loud for him to register. He is cold, icy cold. He has to drive away from her because he cannot look at her face.

He takes no notice of the roads or anyone else, though he stops at red lights and junctions. He doesn't know where Jay will go, but pretty soon he catches sight of his car in the distance ahead of him.

If he can just get to him, he has to reach him, touch him, and look at him.

He needs to tell him he's so sorry. He needs to turn back the clock.

The motorway is fairly empty, so he is able to drive up behind Jay. The cars are so close, but Jay speeds up, trying to get away from him, and soon they are doing more than a hundred miles per hour.

Jay's car can go much faster than his van, and he struggles to keep up. There is only a single thought like the black line of a dead heartbeat: he cannot let Jay get away from him. His foot is flat to the floor as he inches past Jay, and tries to get in front. They're going too fast for him to see Jay's face.

There is white, blinding light, screeching tyres, and that is the end.

It was only when he stopped that he realised he was crying, ugly wrenches drawn from his guilt and shame. For a minute, there was no point living and why hadn't he gone ahead with offing himself.

"Cal, stop for a minute. Just breathe. That's it." Mary sounded so friendly and real. She knew now, but she hadn't sneered at him. A wave of longing for Alice, Anna and the kids, and Jay crippled him, his head hung over the table.

He could see she was talking, and he was even answering her, but everything was silent in his head because he had gotten to the end.

He looked for Troy outside Probation, aching for the warmth, but there was no sign of him, only the icy fingers of guilt and dread around Cal's heart as he remembered that hurt face.

His lungs almost burst as he ran back to the hostel, desperate to find him, and put it right.

Their home was empty, but full of Troy. His special tea bags, gorilla slippers, long hairs in the sink, but he was gone. They really needed phones because he couldn't cope with this not knowing any more every time Troy had a huff.

He wondered what kind of phone would be best, then heard the cars colliding again, and threw up all over the floor. For a while, he blacked out. Cleaning up was sharp smells and raw knees and it brought him back to reality.

He was so tired. It would never be over. The sofa was so warm and inviting as he lay there, clutching a gorilla slipper, and soon his eyelids were shutting.

Chapter Sixteen

He woke up with the taste of blood in his mouth where he had bitten his tongue while asleep, just like all those times in prison. His mouth was dry and surely there wasn't enough air in this room, not even after he opened all the windows and the back door. If only the freezing wind would clear his head of the sickening images of spinning tyres and metallic thuds.

He had to get out. He had to get right away, even though he knew by now that it would follow him for the rest of his life. Panic seized, restricting his breath and making him sweat. The flat door slammed as he ran with no purpose except desperate urgency.

He ran straight past the men hanging around the barrier gate. He was aware of a few of them shouting after him, but the words just hurried past with the wind. He concentrated on his feet as they hit the pavement, pounding up the streets and hills, racing against things he could never beat.

Eventually he found himself amongst shops and bus stops, tram lines and the bustle of life.

Everything was unfamiliar to him—the streets, the shops and faces. He did not belong. But the panic had gone, leaving him weary and cold. He began to look for Troy, knowing it was unlikely he would find him here amongst the shoppers and families.

He somehow found his way back to the hostel, seeing from far away up the road that the lights to the flat were on. Troy was there.

He crashed through the door, and there he was, a towel twisted around his head and wearing Cal's dressing gown.

They kissed urgently, painfully. Troy kept pulling back, trying to speak, but Cal stopped him every time with more kisses until eventually he stopped trying and grabbed Cal just as hard, by the hair. The dressing gown belt slipped undone, Troy groaned and wrapped both arms around his neck, leaving him free access to the pale, long body melting into him.

As his hands roamed Troy's back and butt it felt like it was him being caressed. Warmth spread through his neck as he moaned into Troy's mouth, "I missed you so much."

"Come on, we can talk later," Troy muttered urgently, leading him off by the hand to the bedroom.

Troy rode him fast, hands behind him on Cal's thighs, pushing into Cal's hand, head thrown back, body pumping. They climbed together, hands joining and eyes locked before the orgasm thrust Cal straight out of the events of the day, leaving him shaking and smiling. Troy snuggled into him, kissing his neck and rubbing his nose along his jaw. "Where did you go? I looked everywhere for you?" he asked, circling Cal's nipple with one finger.

"Nowhere. I went nowhere. Just a walk to clear my head. I'm sorry, I should never have left you like that. I just couldn't cope with it all." So much had happened the last few days. An image of his notes and Troy reading them waved like nausea at him. "You read it?" he asked, quietly.

"I read it," Troy whispered, kissing his hand. "But I already knew."

"What did you know?"

"About the car crash. One of the guys recognized you from prison. I didn't know his name, but I do now. Jay. I didn't know you loved him. It wasn't your fault, Cal. He was shitfaced."

Cal could not think of the words that were clogging up his throat, so he just kissed Troy's fingers and shook his head, and somehow it started. "Jay, yeah, he was called Jay. Yeah, I loved him. He was, he made me do things. He was like Ashley. I, I get it, see. The fucking, the men. But the crash. You don't understand," he whispered into Troy's hair. "He only got in the car because of me and what I said."

"I don't care. He was a fucker. Ashley's a fucker, too. You can tell me, see? I'm on your side? Do... do you still love him?"

A giant, ugly pause. Did he?

But Jay was too much to talk about, would always be too much to talk about. "I have to see his sister at Probation," he began, "to explain how it happened. I've practised the questions with Mary, and now I have to see her."

Troy leaned up on his chest on one elbow, frowning darkly. "His sister? You don't have to, Cal. They can't force you to do that. Refuse. See out your Probation order, then walk away. Forget about it. I don't care what you did, it doesn't matter to me. Once I'm done with court, let's start again. We can do it together, Cal."

Cal tried. "I have to, Troy. I can never make it right, but I have to do what I can. He died. He died." The crying came from nowhere, but once begun, the

tide crashed from him in tremendous painful waves, until eventually all was quiet, and he fell asleep, exhausted, in Troy's arms.

The next morning, Cal waited until Troy was in the hostel reception, then marched in and took his hand. Whistles went up around them as he put an arm around Troy's shoulders, and kissed him. "Have you met my boyfriend?" he asked Tom, who was on reception.

Chapter Seventeen

Troy had begged to come to Probation to wait for him until it was over, but he was due in court himself at twelve.

“No, you stay here, I’ll be okay. No need for you to go there when you don’t have to. Good luck in court, and I’ll meet you back at the flat, and we can celebrate, yes?”

Troy understood, like he so often did. “Just get through it, yeah? It’s gonna be hard, but you can do it. Okay, I’ll stay here, but tonight I’m gonna cook for us. After I finish in court, I’m coming back and starting a special dinner, just for us. “

“Okay, it’s a date,” and Cal left, blowing a kiss as he shut the door, then began the walk into town.

All the way there, he heard Jay’s voice and tried to hold it off by concentrating on the trees that were here long before him. He had to look at her and listen and think about what she said. He knew nothing he could say in return would ever be enough.

He had to face her.

The reception looked just the same as ever. A few people waited, some moaning about bus passes and not being able to be seen early, and somehow this normalcy calmed him. He was sweating, nauseous lines dripping down his back, very aware of his breathing, but things went on as ever around him.

He wanted to just get to it—to her shouting and her rage, and this was all he thought about after every one of her twenty letters. She must be angry.

He tried to sit but couldn’t stop his foot from tapping incessantly, so he paced. If he ran away now it would be despicable. Jay never ran away from anything.

“Cal?” Mary appeared at the entrance, beckoning him through, like a starting pistol for his thudding heart. He couldn’t look at her because he had to concentrate on walking.

The hand on his arm surprised him and nearly made him crack. He couldn’t take kindness now.

Nothing in his life would ever matter as much as this.

He didn't think he would be able to look at her, but old habits die hard and there she was, waiting for him and smiling. Even after everything she looked like Anna, whom he loved like a sister. Mary was there, in the middle of the silence, straight to business, reminding them of what they agreed and why they were there.

Anna smelt nice, the same perfume she always wore. Sometimes he had smelt it on Jay when they fucked. Twins, they were twins. Thoughts run into each other, mingling like blood and water.

"When did it start between you and Jay?"

Her voice, he had forgotten. He had practised this answer a million times, but now he can't remember. "I loved him, Anna, from when I was a little boy. I didn't know what it was and I knew I had to keep shut about it and it was wrong. I thought about him all the time, when I cleaned my teeth and at school. I picked subjects I knew he would like, I ate foods he would choose."

"I don't think this is what Anna means, Cal," Mary interjects softly.

He couldn't think, but Anna leans forward and holds his gaze. "It is, Mary, this is just what I want to hear. Please Cal, tell me?"

He could never fit everything he felt about Jay in this little room, or even in a planet, but he tries. "When Mum died. She was all I had. We were very close, but I never told her how I felt about Jay. But maybe she knew because he was all I talked about." He was talking too fast because now there was too much to say.

Mum's Funeral...

Everyone is looking at him in that suit that is too tight and the new squeaky shoes. Alice has hold of one hand but all he wants is for Jay to hold the other. He should be thinking about Mum but he wants Jay to hold him so badly that he leans into him. He can see one of Jay's hands, and before he can stop, he holds it, and all he can do is feel that hand.

The tears start rolling down his face and everyone thinks it's for his poor mum, but it's because he wants Jay so badly it hurts.

“It was after that. A few weeks, maybe? We took a tent to some fields, and that’s when it happened the first time, the sex. But the loving, that started for me the day I was born. I didn’t just want sex, but it was all I could have, so I took it. He came round maybe once a month and we had sex. There was no loving and mostly it didn’t happen in a bed. I don’t know why he did it or what he got out of it, but for me it was everything.”

Stripped bare, his dirty secret and drab reasons for killing a man. He waited for the anger and shouting, but she looked so sad that it was him who cried, pathetic little sobs like the filthy whore he was.

Anna shook her head at Mary. “I know we agreed on three more questions, but he’s already answered them all. Can I sit next to him?”

It was a blur, but somehow she was holding his hand first, then they were hugging and crying together. This would be the hardest thing he ever did, but also the best. She stroked his hair and clutched at him. “Why didn’t you tell me? You let him treat you like that, fucking about with both our lives, treating us all like shit, telling lies and him being unhappy. I wouldn’t have cared what you did together. Why did you think I cared?”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he gasped out. “It was my fault, that day. If I hadn’t...”

“It wasn’t your fault that he drove his car shitfaced, Cal. It was your fault that you drove yours too fast, but no one ever made Jay do anything. You know that. It was terrible, Cal, for all of us, but it’s over now. I want it to end. The kids lost their dad long ago, then two uncles that day, and that can be put right. I want you to come back, Cal. You don’t have to hide away, I told you that.”

And she did, in all those letters, but he couldn’t believe them until now. “I miss you, and the kids. I’d love to still see them.”

As he left the Probation offices, he felt both old and sparkingly brand new. The smile ripped from his face, and he belonged with all these people after all. He was to visit Anna and the kids next week and see how it went. They needed Uncle Cal.

“Troy? I’m back,” he shouted as he entered the flat, but it was empty and cold. Didn’t look like anyone had been here for hours. Sometimes courts took ages, though, there could be long delays and even adjournments so there was no need to worry just yet.

In the kitchen, the ingredients were laid out just as Troy had left them in readiness for the cooking. Cal went to sleep, completely exhausted from the day, hugging Troy's T-shirt.

By the time it got dark, he knew something was wrong, and went to make a cup of tea to help him think.

The note was attached to the kettle:

Dear Cal,

*I know it's prison for me but I didn't want to ruin your meeting.
Did it go all right? Make the dinner for me, and please come
and visit.*

I love you,

Paul

Chapter Eighteen

The kitchen table was just the same. How many times had he sat there with Jay and the kids? There were the knife marks where Jay had cut cards for the kids, and white spots of Tipp-Ex from years ago. Anna had hugged him so hard as she let him in that he saw all his fears were futile—she really did want to see him.

“What do the kids know?” he asked, prepared for the worst.

“The truth, Cal. That Jay and you drove too fast, and he lost control of the car. You were both stupid. He died, and you went to prison.”

“I thought about them all the time. All of you, Alice, too.”

Anna nodded, and took his hand. “I know you did. I knew you’d blame yourself for everything, but the truth is he was always driving pissed, drugs too. I used to hide his keys, but,” she shrugged sadly, “you know what he was like.”

“Yeah,” he managed, then they were both smiling through the tears.

“Cal? Remember when he made that Tardis?” She gasped, and suddenly they were laughing so hard it hurt.

“Yeah, and made us sleep in it for a week.”

“Fucking idiot.”

“I miss him, Anna.” He has to stop.

“Me too,” she sobbed, grabbing him. “He was a cold-hearted bastard though, the things that came to light after he died shocked me.”

They hugged for ages, reliving the many memories, looking at photos of them all from when they were children. “What I don’t get, though, is why? Why he kept you a secret. Mum would have been shocked, but she’d have got over it.” She shook her head at him, and there was the question he would never know the answer to.

He tried to explain it as he had seen it back then. “I just knew that it wasn’t important to him. It was more about him owning me, than ever really wanting me.”

“But that’s horrible, Cal. How did you live like that?”

He thought for a moment, images of Jay fucking in that hallway flushing his cheeks. “I shut it all out,” he whispered. “It hurt me. It took over. I would

wonder—what would it be like to hold his hand, or to wake up with him? It broke me, but he was part of me.”

She nodded. “You were always together as kids, and then you moved in with us. He bullied you right from being little children. He always had to be the boss with everything. But what about all those girlfriends he had?”

He shook his head wearily, thinking of Tony and all the people Jay owned—fucking them in the garage for their initiation. “I don’t know what he wanted, Anna, but it wasn’t me.”

It had never been him.

“I tried to see you, when you were in hospital, but they wouldn’t let me. I was angry about it all, but mostly I just wanted to know what happened. How he was—at the end—I knew something was eating away at him, but I didn’t know what it was. I guess we’ll never know now.” She shrugged, and he nodded.

“There’s a lot we’ll never know.”

“All those people he had working for him. I didn’t let him bring them here at the end because he was always so angry it frightened the kids. He wouldn’t talk to me,” Anna finished sadly.

“Or me.”

“So who’s this guy? Troy, wasn’t it?” She smiled at him, and he told her about him—the goofy grin, how he left clothes everywhere and wrote Cal misspelt messages in toothpaste on the bathroom mirror.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as it poured out. “Troy, yeah, but it’s Paul really. He told me his name was Troy to be cool, but he’s perfect just as he is. He wants to train as a chef, and I’m going to see he does it. It’s going to be a different world for him, Anna. No more courts and dingy hostels. No more having to fuck men to keep his brother happy. I’m going to help him, and love him, when he gets out.”

“He sounds wonderful, Cal. Just what you need. Don’t you let him go because of some half-baked idea of owing Jay. We miss you and we want you back here in your own house, where you belong. We want you back in the café and back in your life, Cal. Don’t give me that rubbish about handing the café to me because there is no way on this earth that’s ever going to happen. Troy wants to be a cook? This is your chance, Cal. I’m sure he’d like it here—a new

town away from whatever happened to him. I bet the kids will love him too, just like you obviously do.”

He could do nothing to fill the silence that her missile left, feeling the ugliness descend once more, as he hid his head in the shaking hands.

“Cal,” she whispered. “We have to live, now. We can’t change what happened and we can’t live for him, you have to live for yourself now. For you. That’s the best we can do for him. What happened, it’s enough, Cal. Enough.”

He couldn’t quite manage a nod, but he heard and felt every word. Some of the weight in his heart lifted, and perhaps it would be enough.

He took a last look around the house, even though it was immaculate, and tried to calm down. Anna had helped him redecorate—choosing colours, laying carpets, creating the smells and colours of life and a new start. The kids had dug the garden, planting bulbs and hanging baskets, choosing a swing and making themselves at home.

His kitchen smelt of fresh baking and he just could not wait to get started on the cooking training. He had a feeling his table was about to be used for more than just chopping, and that this would be the last time his old house was ever tidy or silent.

It had taken him three long, lonely months to finish, and now there was only one last, but very vital, thing missing. Paul.

He did not know how he would get through the journey to the prison, or if the smile might crack his face, but somehow he arrived, parked, and tried to keep breathing.

The sun was over the stone prison as Cal waited with the other families, trying to stand still, but too excited to contain it. Every week for the last three months, Cal had stood in queues, been searched, turned up at these same doors to visit, but this would be the last time.

It was a beautiful warm day, the birds were singing and if he had to wait much longer he was sure he would burst. In the distance, the doors opened, and men carrying black bags began to appear.

Every muscle of Cal’s neck strained. His fists hurt where he clenched them so tightly with the ache and the wanting. All around him, people were running and hugging, but still he could not see him.

Cold sweat began dripping down his back as he wracked his brain, going over every detail—had he got the right day?

Then, the last man stepped through the doors, and Cal could wait no longer. He ran right through the families and the children, pushed past the visitors, and towards Paul, who was jumping up and down, waving and beaming. They crashed together, the black bag was flung aside, and all that mattered was this.

“Let’s go home,” Cal managed.

The End

Author Bio

Claire Davis and Al Stewart are best friends and writing partners.

They like to challenge themselves by exploring the darker side of life and by finding compassion and beauty even in the most desolate of places.

Al sometimes describes himself as a mixture of Darth Vader and the tooth fairy, while Claire is less grounded.

Al has led an unconventional life and experienced many of the events he writes about. Above all, they believe in the power of magic and good manners.

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