

A man in a tan jacket and light green pants is walking away from the viewer down a gravel path. The path is lined with trees and greenery, leading towards a small wooden structure in the distance. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

THE
THINGS IT TAKES

Make it a Lifetime

By
Leisha Caine

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE THINGS IT TAKES... (MAKE IT A LIFETIME)

By Leisha Caine

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 THINGS IT TAKES... (MAKE IT A LIFETIME)

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Photo Description

Three pictures: the first is a couple holding hands during a spa treatment. Adorable, but not the one I wish to focus on. The second is where the story gets interesting—it displays a man kneeling on a bed naked, in deep contemplation. Look at his body—he is tense, conflicted, out of sorts... It's a fascinating state of mind. The third is a GIF displaying self-resentment, pain and determination—three pictures, one perfect story arc.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been best friends since elementary school. We were each other's first everything; friends, kiss, lovers, boyfriends and almost husbands. We were happy once, the kind of happy that makes others sick, envious, jealous, I could go on and on... but things changed. I thought it was what we needed, this thing I did, and I didn't think it through. He's not with me anymore, he's gone. Now, I have to make it right. I have to fix this. I can't lose him. I'll do whatever it takes.

Sincerely,

Sara

P.S. Please no shifters, aliens, sci-fi, fantasy or paranormal.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: academics/knowledge workers (lecturer and surgeon), established couple, poetry, second chances, tearjerker, travelling

Content Warnings: An act of physical cheating occurs just before the story starts and is then disclosed (story contains flashbacks). There are elements of emotional cheating throughout. Mild swearing.

Word Count: 20,761

Dedication

First and foremost this is for Sara, thank you for this beautiful inspiration for something I didn't even know I needed to write.

Secondly, the concepts of 'love of my life' and 'home' have always been difficult ones for me to comprehend. I've loved and lost, more often than not without fully grasping what was happening. Sometimes I curse the heavens for being such a free and eager spirit, for not being able to settle down completely, for being incapable of loving to the degree that I think I should.

But here is the thing I learned. You do not need one 'love of your life'. You do not need one 'home' and nothing has to last a lifetime. The things that are worth it, worth all the struggle and the pain, the things that still stand strong long after the fact, are the ones that will be defining at the end of the day.

And I do have many 'loves of my life' right now, supporting me through all the things that are happening. Sometimes I wish I could have more with them but I am eternally grateful to have them in any way I can.

So this is for...

- My husband, who never complains about my late-night work sessions, who holds me together when I go out of my mind. Who holds me like no one else can
- Sanet and Francú – we all know this would have never happened without your help and words of encouragement—I owe you a fancy dinner and lots of good wine. Most importantly, I owe a huge part of my current happiness to the both of you
- Davide, the man on the cover, a constant in my life, despite all the craziness we both have going on. Thank you for always being here, no matter what

- Kim, Aya and Lisa – you will never know how much it meant to me that you shared this experience with me and helped me be better

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

THE THINGS IT TAKES... (MAKE IT A LIFETIME)

By Leisha Caine

Prologue

The Orchard, Grantchester

October 2014

*You are wonder,
You are marvel,
My love for you runs so deep,
I once feared that I might drown in it,
And then I realised why you are my everything,
The very reason I breathe.*

*You are the sun and the moon,
My world rises and falls with you,
You say that I am your everything,
But for you I can merely hope to be a reflection,
Of what you are to me.*

*With these words I promise to be yours,
with these words I thee wed.*

*With these words I promise to be yours,
with these words I thee wed.*

I quietly observed the teardrops that had landed on our once neatly written lines, watching the mixture of dark blue ink and salty water soak the paper in my hands slightly. I let out a deep, happy sigh before carefully folding the piece of paper in my hands and returning it to my coat pocket.

His words from this morning echoed in my mind.

“We don’t need vows, we don’t need promises, what we need are letters to remind ourselves of who we are to one another, words that we will remember even when times are tough.”

We wrote love letters to each other we planned on reading out loud in front of his parents and our closest friends tonight at a place of true beauty, barely touched nature, away from the city. I scanned the parking lot—it was empty, the tea garden guests long gone by the time the sun was beginning to set, shading the garden of The Orchard in a magically glowing light. I briefly

wondered why people didn't come here in the evenings when this place seemed to pull out most of its tricks.

My phone vibrated on the seat next to me.

Dude, get your gorgeous butt over here pronto, I want to start calling you my husband already.

And, like an afterthought, another message followed within seconds.

And... um... I've kinda been hard all day and wanna fuck you 'til dawn ;). Let's move this show along, my love. xx

Though insanely direct and maybe not quite as romantic as I'd expected in this moment, his words made me smile.

It had been nine long months in which we learned that life happened while you made plans for it. Life wasn't picture perfect, that the best moments, the ones you'll remember when you're old, are the ones that just happen.

No scripts. No costumes. And one sure as hell doesn't need makeup.

This was our very best moment, the one that counted, our wedding night. Tomorrow, City Hall and all that fuss, could wait.

I took a deep breath and exited my car, slowly walking towards my soon-to-be husband, my everything, my family. I silently vowed never to forget what it took for us to get here, the lessons of tears and pain.

I had long realised that I wasn't sorry for any of it, not anymore—looking at our future I knew that it had become so much stronger...

...because of our past.

Hitting Home

London Heathrow Airport & Cambridge

31st January 2014

What the fuck was I still doing here? Heathrow Airport, Friday afternoon, my plane had come and gone three hours ago and here I was, sitting next to my luggage on a lonely bench, losing it.

I've got to run, call me.

What the hell was wrong with me? Who in their right mind listened to something like that coming from an almost-stranger, feeling all kinds of twisted commotion in their stomach? I was supposed to be dying to get home to my fiancé, who was eagerly awaiting my return judging from last night's texts. Texts that had been left unanswered. I had just returned from a week-long conference in New York, and I was beat, mentally and physically exhausted. But that wasn't the issue here.

A hug that lasted longer than it should have.

A kiss.

Urgent touching in the dark hallway of a hotel in a strange city.

I shook my head in frustration—what had I been thinking? Had I been thinking at all? I sat there watching Heathrow be its busy, vibrant self, trying to quiet my head that was spinning with feelings of doubt, confusion and guilt. I had to acknowledge that there must be a reason for my current state of mind. I just wasn't sure I wanted to explore this thought and its potential consequences any further right now. I just wanted to get home.

Since my pre-booked coach had left over two hours ago, without me, I decided to take the train. I navigated through the vast airport space, dragging my luggage behind like a heavy sack filled with stones. I kept my face down and focused on my slowly moving feet, avoiding travellers welcoming one another, or being in the midst of their farewell, others who were too lost in their phone conversations to really care about what was going on around them. I felt a strange, unknown sense of longing unfurl deep in my chest, and I wondered if it would slowly consume me, if I would ever feel normal again... instead of being so overtaken with guilt and a deep sense of longing.

It had been a long sleepless night and it would be an even longer day because this didn't feel like coming home. It felt like hitting home, hard, and not in a good way.

When I opened the front door to our house, an air of quiet met me. Early evening had hit and darkness made its way through the streets outside, throwing shadows through the windows and giving this place a very deserted feel. I had worked myself up into a state on the journey back here yet still didn't have any answers or perspective on what was to come.

I left my luggage in the hallway and stepped into the living room, deciding to light a candle on the coffee table instead of turning on the light. I didn't need or want bright fluorescent light; what I needed was focus, time, thought. I sat down on the broad cream-coloured sofa and scanned the room. Over the course of thirty years, companionship had left its fingerprints in all corners of our home. The pictures from our graduations on the mantelpiece, the collection of memorabilia from the countries we'd visited together, the beautiful leather-bound classics Patrick had gotten me for my thirtieth birthday. All of these things told a story, the story of our love.

Was it enough?

We had met in primary school, two boys hitting it off immediately, best friends from day one in the way that only five-year-olds could accomplish. We were always there for one another, always had each other's backs, almost like brothers but not quite. When we hit our teens, things started to change. It didn't take long to figure out why we boycotted just about every harmless flirtation either of us ever attempted with girls in our class. From the age of about fifteen, things had shifted from friends to boyfriends. Things just happened, they weren't always easily understood. The day we registered at the same university and signed a rental agreement for our first place seemed to seal the deal. We, and everyone in our lives, just assumed that that was that, a lifetime together in the making.

He had always been there, during the good, the bad and the very ugly. All-nighters cramming for exams, summers trying to get as much work experience as possible, the day of my PhD viva when I felt like I was drowning and the day I got the phone call that changed everything. My parents' death. From one moment to the next they were gone, hit by a drunk driver on a motorway on their way to celebrate my accomplishment of receiving my doctorate.

Gone, lost... forever.

For over two years he had been my only hope of survival. Despite the demands of his surgical training, he had held me from dusk to dawn, comforted me, promised me that I would get through this, that we would. He had gradually pushed me back into the life of the living, standing by my side as my rock. About a year after I had gotten better, he proposed to me on a warm summer night. That night had been the happiest night in a very long time. What he proposed hadn't simply been marriage; it had meant far more than that.

And here I was, sitting in our beautiful home, drowning in a sea of doubt and guilt in equal parts.

The tears started flowing. It was too much, this did not make sense at all. How could I do this to him, to us? I blew out the candle with a weak huff and curled up on the sofa, covering myself in a blanket that smelled of him, of us, of home... the smell wasn't a comforting one right now, it was the smell of me, punishing myself.

"Ouch, what the...? Matt, you're home?"

I opened my eyes, not quite certain where I was. Oh right, home, Cambridge, sofa. "In here," I called, my voice thick with sleep.

I heard him move about in the hallway and then the kitchen. A cork was pulled from a bottle and the neck of it was hitting the rim of what I assumed was a wine glass. I took a deep breath as his footsteps neared the living room, squeezing my eyes shut and pinching the bridge of my nose, trying to drown out the images that were hitting my head again.

The sound of two zippers opening, one after another.

A large warm hand covering two erections, trapping them within.

A harsh grunt.

I shook my head. This wasn't going to be easy.

Patrick entered the room, green eyes focused only on me, smiling, then frowning a bit as he saw my face. He walked over to me and sat down next to me, quietly studied my face. I was lying on my left side facing him, feeling impossibly drained. He took a sip from the wine glass in his hand before placing it on the nearby coffee table and leaned down to give me a slow, deep kiss, letting me taste the Bordeaux on his tongue.

He lifted his head a little, smiling at me, kind eyes meeting mine. “Welcome home, babes. I didn’t expect to find you sleeping. I was hoping to make the most of any potential jet lag tonight.”

He winked, lazy, warm fingers finding their way under my jumper, tracing the lines of my tattoo that covered most of my right side. So knowing, so familiar, a touch so different from the one that had been in that very place barely twenty-four hours ago.

I pushed his hand from me gently and sat up, fixing my gaze on his in an effort to convey all of what was inside me.

I fucked up.

I have doubts about us.

I have strange feelings that I’ve never experienced and they do not centre around you.

I am so sorry.

Instead, I took the coward’s way out and whispered, “I’m tired, need to sleep, let’s talk in the morning.”

And that is exactly how I felt—tired, empty, cowardly and completely, utterly lost.

Drifting Apart

Cambridge & Grantchester

The two weeks that followed

Sleep didn't last, morning hadn't come. I was sitting in our broad, king-sized bed, running my hands over my shaven head in frustration. Occasionally I looked at Patrick's gorgeous face, peacefully snoring beside me, long dark-brown hair covering his pillow.

Things hadn't been easy for a while now. He didn't know that I knew. He didn't know that Davide had called me in the fall, worry in his voice, stepping outside of his usual professional demeanour because he felt I needed to know.

We lost Maya last night. I think he is questioning everything right now. I know he won't say anything because he's beating himself up for becoming too attached but I thought you should know.

Davide and I had never really been friends. Actually, his close friendship to Patrick made me uncomfortable at times because, well, I had eyes and the man saw my fiancé way more than I did, being on the same surgical team.

Poor sweet Maya. They'd been fighting to save her life for two years. The baby girl had come in with a brain tumour that was gradually growing, destroying a life that had barely even begun. They were there with her for five long surgeries, months and months of research and finally had to watch her die—they were helpless, defeated. No medicine in the world could have saved the child, no amount of effort or hope. Patrick had done everything he could, helping Maya's far-too-young mother, Isabella, who had been left alone by her no-good husband along the way. He had tried, with everything in him, to help her make peace with this impossible situation.

Patrick didn't know that I knew why he had been moody, distracted and drowning himself in work. He also didn't know that I found a letter on his desk a month later.

Dear Dr. Brenner,

We are pleased to inform you that the funding for project 51168, "The autistic brain – a comprehensive investigation" has been approved. We would like you to join our team in

February 2014 for an initial designation of tasks. Please inform us at your earliest convenience when it would be possible for you to do so.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,

Prof. Dr. med Johanna Kleber,

Arbeitsbereich Pädiatrische Neurochirurgie

Charité

Berlin

Berlin, Germany. I had felt confusion laced with happiness. He had told me about this project and all his hopes and dreams for it, but I hadn't known that it would be in another country. What had seemed to be an impossible suggestion to me then suddenly seemed like an opportunity.

Would it be so bad, if we parted?

I had no idea. All I knew was that I felt this strong need to break out of my skin.

I sighed, and with a final look at my fiancé, I got out of the bed and left the room. I headed downstairs to the kitchen to make myself a cup of camomile tea. Maybe it would help me relax—although at that point I highly doubted it.

Pacing back and forth through our small, modern kitchen space, the images from the previous night, that forbidden moment, came back into my mind, and so did our words.

"I've been wanting you all week. God, you're so sexy."

"Fuck yes..."

The hand between our bodies moving faster and faster.

Arching backs, bringing us even closer together.

A quiet curse, closely followed by another.

Cum spilling over two pairs of expensive trousers.

I tapped my fingers on the kitchen counter, trying to ignore the growing erection in my pyjama bottoms. The entire week I had felt like I was in a trance-like state, listening to the young PhD student from London speak so passionately about World War II literature, watching him carry himself with a

grace that was unusual for someone his age. I was thirty-five years old and had never felt this “butterfly feeling” that is commonly associated with being in love—but it came. Over the course of the week, it had made its way deep into my gut. It came, it stayed and I acted on it, not caring about the consequences for even a second while it lasted. I never realised that there was a difference between loving and being in love but right then the difference seemed to be of gigantic proportions.

Footsteps sounded from the floor above me, apprehension crawled its way up my spine.

Shit.

Here is the thing about situations of doubt in love. When you hear the person you’ve always thought of as the love of your life approaching you and the only reaction that comes to mind is ‘shit’, then it’s safe to say you are, in fact, in deep shit.

I took a deep breath, listening to Patrick moving closer, watching the kitchen door open, finding his eyes and trying to convey everything I needed to say.

He smiled at me.

And froze in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered as if not to wake sleeping ghosts or monsters.

But the words were already coming out of my mouth, I couldn’t stop them and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. “I cannot do this anymore. I... I think...” I closed my eyes in an effort to calm myself. “Fuck! Patrick, I think I may be falling for someone else.”

I looked straight at him, his eyes clouded with hurt, spiked with confusion and shards of anger. I couldn’t bring myself to feel sorry for what I had done the night before. Maybe I just wasn’t a good-enough person? But what I did feel so unbelievably sorry about right then was the way I so unceremoniously put that look on his face. He was my best friend and maybe that was the problem—I couldn’t keep secrets from him, it just wasn’t possible.

I finally couldn’t take it any longer; I turned around and reached for my tea. It was cold, not quite as cold as the air in the room, but it felt as heavy in my hands.

“Who? What? When? How? Dammit, Matt, say something!” he finally said.

“Do you really want to know?” I turned around to face him again. “You know I will tell you, I will tell you everything even if it kills me but let me say this—you cannot possibly imagine how fucking confused I am right now...” I trailed off, not sure what my point was anymore but trying like hell not to make this situation any worse than it had to be, for both of us.

He took a step towards me and whispered, “Can we get through this? Please tell me we can. I know things haven’t been quite right and there’s stuff I need to tell you about, feelings that I’ve been bottling up... but... Matt, please, I love you.”

“I love you too, with all my heart, and I don’t think I will ever *not* love you but right now I need time and space.”

I didn’t say I was sorry.

I wasn’t sorry.

I was a fucking mess inside and out, there were no words for it.

Patrick shook his head and left whilst I sank to my knees on the kitchen floor. About ten minutes later I heard the front door open and close. I finally got up, went to the bedroom, grabbed some essentials and put them into the guest room.

Thirty years of companionship was over. Yet it felt like it only took a second to question all of it. I knew better than that of course, knew that these things didn’t just happen, but they had undoubtedly happened to us.

He tried, he really did. For the most part of the following week there were texts asking me whether we could go to dinner. There was coffee sitting on my bedside table when I woke up in the morning. There had also been fights and pleading in the hallway when he did manage to corner me and a list of couples counsellors pinned to the fridge.

He tried. I didn’t.

During one of our fights he had demanded to know what had happened, *who* had happened to me. I told him about it. All of it—about the day I met Michael at a contemporary fiction symposium and the week we’d spent bumping into one another on a variety of occasions. I also worked up the nerve and energy to

tell him about the night of the conference dinner, with the flirting and suggestive comments that had ended in the hallway just outside my hotel room. I told him what happened outside that room and how totally gone I was, even too far gone to care whether someone saw me with him.

It was difficult not to let the memories flood my system again right then and there. I stood in front of Patrick, my thoughts drifting to another once again.

Laughing at the vast dinner table.

A little, electric touch, happening whilst we reached for the bottle of wine at the same time.

A breath on my ear, a whisper.

"I need to get out of here."

A hand, taking mine under the table and pressing it against a very large bulge.

Yes, I was in deep shit. I felt a wave of shame overcoming me, as I remembered the first moments of my betrayal right in front of my pleading fiancé. I felt like a fucking lunatic.

And of course my betrayal of our love hadn't stopped there. I told him that I was texting with Michael and that the resolve to get to know this person better hadn't weakened but grown impossibly strong.

I told him everything, with tears in my eyes—the confusion hurt me so fucking much.

But I couldn't stop myself. I never lied to him or hid anything from him, and I wasn't about to start that kind of shit now. He left then, saying that he didn't want to say anything he'd regret later. When he returned two hours later, he said that it sucked, that it was an impossibly difficult situation but that he refused to believe that this was it.

I stopped him as he began to rattle off the many ways you could have justified my actions and how we could get through this. He was in deep denial about one fact—at that moment in time, I could not possibly fathom letting this feeling of deep yearning go. I couldn't stand to let go of the unresolved question in my mind of whether or not this path I had been on for my entire life was the right one for me.

I just couldn't, as much as it wrecked me inside and out. That was the moment I decided to leave to prevent myself from causing him any more hurt.

I loved Patrick, I would always love him. He was so much more than just my lover, but none of this seemed to matter right now. I knew that this made me a bad person—honest to a fault but still bad.

After that, I pretty much buried myself in work, left the house at 6 a.m. and returned at 10 p.m. I just couldn't face him. The confusing and frustrating thing about it all was that he didn't hate me for what I had done and by God, I wish he did, it would have made it so much easier. But of course nothing about this was easy or ever would be—emotions don't work like that.

No, he didn't hate me. He kept trying, he kept pleading, he kept fighting for us but I was in no state to fight—my heart wasn't in it. I hated myself for it. Did that make any difference? No such luck.

The next Sunday came far too quickly. Usually we would go to family dinner on the first Sunday of every month, but since I had just gotten back from New York and was in no state to face company, we had managed to convince Patrick's parents to push it back a week. It was always a joyful evening in Grantchester—we would eat, drink fine wine and play a game of cards or two or just sit and talk about what was going on in our lives. More often than not, if Patrick wasn't on call, we crashed in their guest room, even if that meant having to get up at an ungodly hour on Monday morning so we could get back home, changed and to work.

I didn't want to go but for all intents and purposes, Patrick's family was my family. After my parents died I had no one left. I was an only child and my grandparents were long gone—this was it for me and I was still entertaining the very real possibility of turning my back on all of it. But for now, I had family obligations to uphold. Even though pretending everything was fine in front of the Brenners would make me feel even more like a deceitful bastard, that was one lie I wouldn't be able to resist making. There was no point in involving them in this, at least not yet.

I spent my morning in the English Faculty Library, drowning myself in work like I had been since the day after I returned from the States, hiding. My head was still a mess, but thankfully I had managed to actually achieve something despite all these crazy personal things bearing down on me. For the first time since shit had hit the fan, I was focusing on work. I was currently in the middle of my sabbatical for the purpose of writing a book. My time off from teaching and marking would finish with the start of the Michaelmas term later this year, and whether I wanted to or not, I had to show something for it by

the end of it... At least that's what I told myself to excuse my week-long work craze. Today I had at least identified a few gaps in the literature that I could tackle.

When the clock hit 3 p.m., I packed up my things with a deep sigh, left the library and made my way through the crowded streets of the city centre to get home. It was a cold February day but people still went about their crazy business, like every Sunday in the city of Cambridge.

I was Dr Matthew Saunders, lecturing English literature at one of the best universities in the world, making a living out of discussing the loves and lives of great writers and their characters. Like Patrick, I was at the top of my field. We had pushed each other to get to where we were now. That was one of the advantages of dating someone who was as ambitious as you for your whole life; they do not find it strange if you suggest studying together on a Friday night rather than going out. So, we had both worked like there was no tomorrow throughout our years in education, working together towards a better future for the both of us. Learning, researching, teaching, thinking—it was like Cambridge and all it stood for was our whole being, our identity. Right now I did not feel like a successful academic. I felt like a confused little boy, faced with challenges that seemed so much bigger than me.

I arrived at our house fifteen minutes later. Patrick was already carrying the things we needed to the car. Like he did for every family dinner, he had prepared a dessert.

As he passed me, the sweet, heady scent of freshly baked Nutella-banana bread hit my senses. I couldn't help but linger in place for a while, taking in the warm smell of familiarity. Dammit, Patrick was still trying, putting all his cards on the table, pulling out all of his tricks. He knew this was my favourite, knew this was the one dish he made that I couldn't ever resist. It was as if he tried to silently convince me not to resist him any longer. After standing there for a few seconds, I regained my bearings and quietly carried my messenger bag into the house, after which I proceeded to wait for him in the passenger side of the car, never saying a word.

By four o'clock he made a turn into his parents' driveway and turned off the engine. He said in a solemn voice as he turned to me, "I need us to get through this, I need us to be okay. You are too important to me to let you go, but I also love you enough to give you time and space." He sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose and continued, "Just... Let's get through tonight. You know how Ma can be, so let's keep this thing between us on the down low."

I nodded, still not saying anything.

As we exited the car we were met by the small, delicate woman who was Patrick's mother. "Ah there are my boys." With a smile on her face, Lizzie hugged and kissed both of us. "Let's go inside, it's cold out here."

She ushered us into their spacious country house. Lizzie and Wolfgang Brenner had worked their whole lives to build a comfortable life. They were both fairly traditional people, their house the picture-perfect family home. It was warm and usually filled with smells of dinner or biscuits baking in the oven. The house was always clean but never in a sterile, hospital-ward kind of way; it just had a really nice warm feeling about it with its wooden furniture and beautiful carpets from all over the world. The only thing they had never really been traditional about was their children. Lisa, Patrick's sister, was an artist living a hippie lifestyle down in London. Patrick—well, we came out to our parents when we were sixteen and Wolfgang had laughed saying, "We've all known for years. Why do you think we said no more sleepovers until you're done with Sixth Form?" Through the years, Lizzie and Wolfgang had always provided a safe harbour for their *three* children—after my parents left Cambridge to retire in Cornwall, when we started our undergraduate degrees at Cambridge, Lizzie and Wolfgang more or less became my parents too.

"Sit down, sit down. Dinner's almost ready. Wolfgang is just finishing up something for some staff meeting tomorrow morning, he'll be right down," Lizzie said as she opened up a bottle of Pinot Grigio.

Patrick swallowed a groan beside me. His father was the head of the neurosciences department at Addenbrooke's Hospital and having him as a boss wasn't always easy.

When Wolfgang finally entered the dining room, he greeted us briefly, obviously distracted by something.

As he sat down he said in a firm voice, "Patrick, I just had another email from Johanna in Berlin, she's asking who we're sending next week. What's going on?"

"Papa..." Patrick groaned, no longer trying to stifle his annoyance with having to face conversations about work during family dinner.

"Don't *Papa* me," Wolfgang said in a frustrated voice. "*Dieses Projekt war deine Idee...*" He carried on ranting to his son in German.

I understood enough of it to gather that Wolfgang demanded Patrick to take the position in Berlin. I found myself silently agreeing.

“Can we not talk about this now, please?” Patrick responded.

After a heavy sigh Wolfgang said, “Staff meeting tomorrow morning at six thirty. This will be the first order of business.”

Lizzie and I just stared at each other as our men once again got worked up over the one thing they loved the most, the brain. In an effort to lighten the mood I asked her, “So, how are Lisa and the baby doing?”

Lisa had a baby boy just over a month ago so that was that. Ask a new grandmother about the newest addition to her family and you’ve got a safe discussion topic for at least two hours. Patrick smiled at me, looking unsure yet grateful.

We left shortly after dessert—given both Wolfgang and Patrick had a very early day the next day, it was for the best. Besides, I had something to say that wouldn’t be pretty and certainly had to be said in private.

When we were in the car Patrick made no move to start it up, instead turning to me to say, “Listen, I can explain...”

I put my finger against his mouth, the first intimate touch in what felt like an eternity, effectively silencing him. “I know. I’ve known for months. Please go. Please, please, please. I’m begging you. I have no idea what’s going to happen but I know for certain that you being here will only make matters worse. Go to Berlin, do the things you’ve been dreaming about. Right now this is all I’ve got left in me, begging you to go.”

After a long while he whispered, “How?”

“Davide, and tidying up the office, I saw the letter.”

He shook his head and started the car.

On Friday he took the 4:55 train to Stansted Airport. I found a note on our bed later during that day.

I love you. I miss you. Come find me when you are ready.

I’m begging you, one last time, I’m begging with everything I have. You are my everything.

The Things It Takes – Part I

Cambridge & London

14th February 2014

Happy freaking Valentine's Day to me! I sat on the bed and read Patrick's note to me over and over again.

...you are my everything.

He knew how to push all my buttons of course. He had been my everything for the most part of my life too. This is what made this whole mess so confusing. I loved him with all my heart, but I just wasn't sure if love was enough anymore.

How could I be sure there wasn't more out there for me? That this path we had been on for so long, the one we had taken for granted, was the right one for me?

It is a strange thing, those, 'butterflies in your stomach'—film and literature lead us to believe that it's a good thing, a magical feeling. Why does no one ever talk about the mess they leave behind?

I took a deep breath and returned to the guest room where my phone lay charging. As if acting on autopilot, I grabbed it, found what I was looking for and pressed call.

"Hello", a gruff voice laced with sleep answered on the other end.

"Shit. Michael, it's Matt. Did I wake you?"

"It's okay," I heard a rustling in the background, "I just haven't had any coffee yet. What's up?"

"I can't focus, I need to get out of town. How would you feel about me coming down to London this afternoon?"

"Um, sure... I'm teaching early afternoon. You can pick me up at around four in front of King's College, Thames campus?"

"Yes, I'll be there. Looking forward to it."

He laughed softly, "Me too, man, me too."

I spent the morning doing all the things that I should've been doing, since I came back from the States, but didn't. I made sure all the bills were paid, proofread some work for one of my PhD students and responded to all kinds of emails. Anything to avoid any further contemplation of my situation, anything to avoid the weird feeling of emptiness that was creeping its way through the house.

Around one in the afternoon, I made my way to the station and to London. It was easy to lose myself on the busy train, in the packed underground and the crazy streets of the city. I made it to King's College with plenty of time to spare, so I decided to walk down to Victoria Embankment. As I watched the Thames flowing through the city, I couldn't help but compare the water to my current state of mind.

Cold, dark and in a state of unrest.

That pretty much summed me up. I was both nervous and excited to see Michael again. I let my mind wander back to the night in New York.

"Wanna come back to my room?" Michael asked in a breathless voice.

"I... I am not sure whether..."

"No worries, man."

A soft kiss on the lips.

A hand tucking away my flaccid cock.

"I guess I should go grab my bags anyway, flight's in three hours."

I had wondered for the past two weeks what would've happened if I'd gone to his room, if our encounter hadn't been mere hours before our flight back to London. Now I wondered whether today we would pick up where we had left off and how that would make me feel.

I had no answers, but a glance at my watch told me that I'd probably get them soon as it was time to pick him up. I walked up to the college campus and spotted him almost immediately, standing tall in a smart-casual outfit, talking to what I assumed was a student.

As I approached them, I once again heard Michael speak so passionately about his field of expertise. "What you have to remember here is that there are several things going on—the war, the prosecution, the creative mind, the past, present and future..." He looked up as he saw me approaching and pulled

something out of his back pocket. "Listen, I've got to go but email me if you've got further questions. It's a complicated essay but you seem to be on the right track." He handed the girl his card and turned to me.

There was a slight moment of awkwardness, the moment where it was clear that neither of us knew how to greet the other. Thankfully, he resolved this for us by giving me a casual yet firm hug.

"How are you doing, man? It's good to see you."

I smiled. "Good, you?"

"Yeah, well, better now that that's over—I don't like teaching first years, especially War Studies students who don't seem to know their arm from their leg when it comes to literature." He pointed at the girl who was walking away from us. "That one will probably soon realise she's more interested in literature than history and politics. It was quite refreshing to have someone actually give a damn about Brecht." He let out a heavy breath and found a cigarette in his coat pocket, lighting it and letting the first drag visibly relax his features. "Anyway, it's Friday! May the good man rest in peace, but I'd rather not think about him for a while." He took another drag and winked. "Wanna come over to mine? I live a few tube stations from here."

I looked around me. It was cold and snow had started to fall, gentle white flakes enveloping the world in a cloak of calm. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I was sure I didn't want too much too fast. "I saw a Starbucks on Strand, let's grab a cup of coffee before we go anywhere else."

He nodded and we made our way through the busy late-afternoon streets. When we made it to the coffee shop and found a table, I emptied my pockets, hanging my jacket over the chair, placed my phone onto the table then made my way to the counter to get our drinks. When I returned with my chai latte and his filter coffee, he was frowning.

"What's up?" I asked hesitantly.

"Your phone has been ringing off the hook, some guy called Patrick and um... sorry, man, but there was an incoming text and, well..." He pointed at the phone.

I sat down and read the message.

Got here okay, miss you so fucking much. Please call me. I love you Matt. Please, just...

Well, shit.

Dammit. Bloody-freaking-fucking hell!

It was like being in a really bad movie but dammit, I had developed the habit of leaving my phone out in the open ever since the phone call about my parents came in. As much as it had hurt, ever since that day I'd felt the need to be available at all times. By leaving my phone out, others might realise that someone had tried to reach me whilst I was occupied. It almost felt as if that could somehow prevent a catastrophe from happening. It was weird, I know, but not everything we do is necessarily sane.

I coughed, placing my phone in my lap and out of sight. "About that... I am," shit, what was it that I wanted to say? "I am engaged, have been for a good few years. Patrick is, was... fuck, I don't know..." I trailed off and whispered, "It's complicated."

"Matt, it's Valentine's Day."

"I noticed."

"Not necessarily when I expected to see you next."

I didn't know what to say to that.

He fished out his phone and tapped on it for a while, then handed it to me without a word. It was his Grindr inbox, pretty full with messages that didn't seem to be ones initiating conversation. As I sat there glancing at a multitude of messages from more people than I cared to count, something started to dawn on me.

Hey, had fun last night, let's do that again soon ;).

*There is a play party at Henry's tomorrow night, you cuming?
Btw, pun intended.*

*Hey ya, am in town for a couple of days, staying at Dolphin
House, wanna go for a swim? x*

I had read enough to start facing my delusions, but there was still this sense of yearning deep inside of me. I cautiously handed him back his phone, waiting.

He sighed, "Matt listen, I'm a twenty-six-year-old gay man living in London. I don't do romance, I don't do commitments and I certainly don't do love triangles." He let his thumb and forefinger glide over his freshly shaven face. "I like you, I really, really do and God knows I want to take you home

and..." He looked around the busy space and lowered his voice. "I would really like to fuck you through my mattress but I'm not a man worthy of ending a lasting relationship for. This wouldn't ever be anything more than casual. I'm sorry, dude."

I was speechless and tried to get together a coherent line of thought. "I, I thought that we had..." I groaned at myself, feeling stupid and out of sorts.

He helped me a bit by saying, "We did have a connection—it was one of the hottest nights I've experienced in a very long time but it wasn't more than that to me, it never is. I'm sorry, man."

I still tried to speak, tried to plead, get angry, brush it off as if it had been nothing. Fuck if I knew what I wanted to say! Once again, he helped me out. "Matt, you really don't need to fight so hard for words. And besides, there is nothing to fight for here—just two friends having a cup of coffee. Don't let it mess with your head, we are still good. All I'm saying is that there might be a misunderstanding here and I gather from your face that I'm right about that."

I shook my head. Happy freaking Valentine's Day to me indeed. What had I been thinking? That a week of flirtation and a hot encounter in a hotel hallway would lead to something magical? But this was the problem, wasn't it? I hadn't been thinking—I was a foolish man, driven by my wacky emotions rather than my brain. And honestly, I deserved every bit of hurt and confusion making its way through my veins.

He spoke again, hesitantly, "The way I see it we can do one of two things—I can take you home and we can have a fantastic night, the aftermath of which would be for you to deal with. Or... we can go down to the pub, grab some dinner, have a couple of drinks and go our separate ways." After a pause he added, "Or, you could grab your things and go back to Cambridge now. Truly, these are the only options here."

Tears filled my eyes and I buried my face in my hands to hide it.

Fuck, fuck, fuck ten times over!

After a good few minutes I finally said, "I think dinner would be nice."

It was eight in the evening when we said goodbye at King's Cross station. The last few hours had been the best and the worst of my life. I was still very much fascinated by Michael—we had so much in common and yet... the more

we talked about anything and everything under the sun, I realised that he was living a life I'd never known. This slightly younger generation was much freer, more willing to experience sexuality to the fullest. Michael told me about the various things he'd experienced over the years—an endless amount of casual hook-ups, threesomes and even various experimentations within the leather community.

I could see how this would be an attractive lifestyle, but it wasn't anything that I'd ever considered for myself. I had always been very content with the idea of a monogamous, lifetime commitment. The question now was why I had questioned it. I still didn't have any answers to that other than the obvious, 'the grass is always greener' explanation.

When we said goodbye, he was solemn. He said he hadn't wanted for things to happen this way, that he wasn't, and didn't want to be, a homewrecker. He also gave me some food for thought; he told me that to him, I seemed completely lost. In order to find myself again, he suggested that it may be worth returning to a point where I'd been sure of myself, where I'd been certain, and working my way back from there.

How the hell did he get to be this wise?

We embraced each other for a long time, and he said that if I ever was in a good place and wanted casual, he'd be my man. Then he turned and took long strides towards the exit, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I opted to go on the slower train to buy myself some extra time before getting home. It was pretty packed, but I managed to find a four-seater where a young mother and child were sitting. It was a beautiful picture—the mother couldn't have been much older than late twenties and her small, almost angelic-looking daughter was cuddled up in her lap, listening to a story.

The mother glanced at me, smiling. "Sorry, trains make her a little nervous."

I looked at the book in her hand and returned her smile. "No worries, I myself find Alice's adventures very soothing."

I settled in my seat and listened to the woman's quiet voice as she read to her daughter. At some point, I lost myself in my thoughts, pondering over what Michael had said, remembering that point he had spoken of...

It was a warm spring afternoon almost a year ago. I was sitting in the garden grading papers when a glass of white wine appeared in front of my nose.

Pinot Grigio. The man sure knew how to grab my attention. I looked up at Patrick to see him smiling.

He sat down beside me and handed me a children's book, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl.

I looked at him curiously.

"Maya is starting to ask questions about why her head hurts so much. She's been obsessed with Willy Wonka, I thought you might be able to help me work out an analogy I could use to explain what's happening to her, at least a little..."

I took the book from him and kissed his sad face gently. I knew just how much this was killing him, knew just how hard he tried to make this go away.

We worked until late in the night on project "Willy Wonka and the head factory". It was one of the most exhausting things I had ever done but I was rather proud of what we accomplished. With this little five-page storybook we had assembled, Patrick had been able to explain Maya's condition without scaring her too much.

It was scary, of course, but it had worked and satisfied her curiosity.

That night I fell in love with Patrick all over again, a million times deeper than ever before. He was a brilliant scientist, a gifted surgeon and a fierce human being. I knew of course that in his line of work, that level of caring was pretty much asking for trouble but I couldn't help it. Having just started his career and being unlike his father, Patrick still preserved a sense of innocence. I knew this would go away with the years, knew that he would toughen up with each difficult case, but I had a profound appreciation for his approach to his work.

The day after, we finally pulled our heads out of the sand called 'work' long enough to nail down a wedding date for October this year.

After remembering that night so vividly, the tears were really falling now.

They lost Maya, and he fell as hard as I knew he would, swallowing it down as much as someone like him could. I had failed him. I had failed us. I hadn't done enough to encourage him to work through this loss. In fact, I had done nothing at all. And a loss it was for certain—the medical profession can talk as much as they want about how doctors should guard their emotions, but seeing a little girl die a slow, painful death is not something you just move on from.

I hadn't fought for him to get better but had allowed a culture of noncommunication to settle on our relationship. Then Michael came into my life—young, handsome and so full of life. He was the essence of everything that had slowly been lost in my relationship. It hadn't occurred to me until just now that the key to regaining my happiness wasn't to find it in someone else.

Fuck! I sure am a monumental idiot and hypocrite.

Of course a part of me had also always wondered what it would feel like to be with someone else, but as I sat there, staring into the night as the train made its way through the countryside, it became clear that this was pretty darn simple.

I was weak.

And I sure as hell needed a kick in the arse.

By the time I arrived in Cambridge, I had gone through a thousand emotions all at once. It was the second time that day that I grabbed my phone, operating on autopilot.

Davide answered at the second ring. "Hi, Matt?"

"Hey, you at work?"

"Yeah, kinda slow. Gotta be honest—I miss that man of yours, could do with a study buddy."

"Oh, never mind, don't let me keep you if you're studying."

"No, no, it's cool. I'm not really getting anywhere on this case right now anyway. I'm gonna need a consult and the one I want is off for the night so I'm pretty much free right now."

"Can I come over? Um... I kinda need help with something."

"Yes, sure. I'm in the Emergency Department, I'll be on shift for another two hours or so. I can meet you outside Rosie."

"Great, thanks, D. I'm at the station but I've got my bike here so I'll be there in ten."

I met him ten minutes later, standing outside Rosie Hospital, a branch of Addenbrooke's, smoking a roll-up.

"Thanks for an excuse to get away from the computer, my eyes are starting to hurt. What's going on?" he asked casually, not aware of how awkward this was about to become.

I nodded at his cigarette. "Can I have a bit of that?"

He looked at me with amusement and handed over what was left of the glowing roll-up. I took a drag and coughed lightly. I'd never been a smoker, but I'd had my moments over the years, and since I wasn't going to get a shot anywhere near here, this was the next best thing.

I looked up at him and just blurted out the words I never thought I'd utter, hammer-to-head style. "I need you to run an STI screen on me."

He looked at me quietly as understanding settled in his eyes. Then he pulled out his phone, not saying anything, and fiddled around with it. A few seconds later, which had seemed like hours, his phone made a noise and he spoke, "There is an exam room available on the second floor, come on."

After we entered the exam room and settled into a couple of chairs he finally spoke again, "I've been wondering what was going on with you and Patrick. Spill it."

I took a deep breath and started talking, telling him everything that had happened. It was humiliating, but right then I was out of options. Patrick was well loved all around the hospital, and Davide was the only person I could think of who could do this and not talk about it afterwards. Plus, I was hoping he'd yell or do something else to help set my head straight.

After I finished my monologue, leaving me feeling incredibly small and vulnerable, he said quietly, "You're a fucking idiot."

I just nodded.

"And you know, the chances of you having caught something are very slim and me doing this won't be a pleasant experience?"

I nodded again; I had no energy left to talk.

"All right then."

He sighed and pulled up the computer in front of him and went to the cupboard to get what he needed. Then he turned and said, "I have a huge problem with cheating but I am in no place to judge. I know how much Patrick means to you and how much you mean to him so you fucking better make this right and bring him back to where he belongs. Now drop your pants and let's get this over with."

The Things It Takes – Part II

Cambridge, London Stansted Airport & Berlin

Two weeks after

It had been two weeks since Valentine's Day and a lot had happened. Pending the results of a second test, which I would have to arrange in a few months' time, I was healthy. The results weren't a big surprise—I called Michael again the day after, thanked him and told him what had happened after I left London. Following a big rant from his side telling me I could've just asked him and he would have told me that he got tested regularly, we talked for about an hour before we hung up, wishing each other good luck and deciding it was best to lay this connection to rest.

The thing is, I don't think I went to Davide because I honestly thought something was wrong with me. It was a form of closure with what had happened, it was me putting some of the drama that had gone on in my head to rest. When I went to pick up my test results, Davide gave me another lecture on how to solve problems without adding any more into the mix. At the end we hugged and promised to get to know each other better.

I was so thankful to him for setting my head straight, for being a great friend to Patrick and thus to me.

I also rang Patrick a couple of days after I'd been to London. I kept it brief because I wasn't done working through my emotions yet, but I told him that I was sorry, that I needed some time and that I loved him.

He told me that he loved me too and that he would wait for as long as it took.

Since then I've been a man on a mission. I dug up all sorts of memories that I had shared with Patrick over the years—pictures, videos, messages and receipts. I sat down with all of these elements of our relationship and thought about who I was, who we were as a couple and what I wanted for our future.

The resulting mental list made me smile

- We were the guys who fought when I came home with a tattoo—the argument ending with Patrick being completely fascinated with the art on the right side of my rib cage.

- We were the guys who loved to travel—who had saved every penny to see the places we'd always dreamed of.
- We were the responsible kind. The moment we had enough money, we bought this house and developed a firm plan to pay off our mortgage.
- We were the silly kind, going to spa weekends only to fuck in a treatment room the moment the beauty therapists left us to 'relax'.
- We were the kind of people who enjoyed living life to the fullest with good wine, good food and good company.
- We were both the marrying kind, the kind who would be able to overcome just about anything together.
- We were meant for one another, made for one another, we were one.

Realisation hit me then and there, this was the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, including the good, the bad, and the ugly. It would take work and commitment, but I was certain that we could return to a good place.

I had also decided on a subject for my book, did some research, and had some meetings and set things in motion for when I would get back in March. Now, two weeks later I found myself yet again at the Cambridge train station boarding a train to Stansted Airport.

When I arrived in Stansted a short while later I went straight through security and into one of the many restaurants that lay beyond. I sat there thinking about journeys and destinations. I had travelled a long way, encountered many obstacles and still needed to find my way back home.

I was still eating on the road yet yearning to come home to set the table and rediscover the comforts and warmth a safe haven could bring at the end of a long day at work.

I needed to make this right the only way I knew how to—diving deep into the waters and hoping like hell that I'd learn how to swim.

I finished my pasta and water then made my way to the gate, embarking on a journey back to myself, back to my love.

When I arrived in Berlin, the weather was a lot colder than I had expected.

I need arms around me, embracing me, warming me.

The anticipation of seeing Patrick again after months of being so disconnected was of monumental proportions. Something had changed. I was actually nervous to see him again. And excited. And...

Yes.

There they were.

For the very first time.

Butterflies. The good kind.

I made my way to the train station near the airport, passing an old guy playing “Moon River” on an accordion. No, I wasn’t sappy enough to absolutely adore this classic, but it was one of those songs that gave me comfort. It was something familiar in this nerve-wracking situation.

I left him a couple of Euros as a way of thanks and made my way down to the station. I approached what I assumed to be a railway employee and uttered my practiced line. “*Entschuldigen Sie bitte, ich möchte zum Hauptbahnhof.*”

The elderly man smiled at me, obviously realising that I was attempting to play A-star-student in German class. “Platform four, the *Regional Express* departs in twenty minutes. Do you need help with tickets?”

I nodded and followed him to one of the ticket machines.

Once I made it onto the train, I fell into a doze. I hadn’t slept all night being so nervous about what was to come, going over everything in my head time and time again.

Would he forgive me?

Would he let me make things right?

Was there even the slightest possibility to get back to what I had almost destroyed?

Was it too late?

I wasn’t in my twenties anymore so I was realistic enough to know that nothing about this would be easy. Life didn’t work that way—you couldn’t mend something broken and expect it to be precisely the way it was in the first place. I just had to hope with everything in me that we could walk out of this stronger, better, together...

By the time the train stopped at Berlin Central station, I was too tired to even second-guess my actions. They say that drunks and children speak the

truth and I may as well have been intoxicated, or a child, at this point. There was no point in holding anything close to my chest any longer, it would do neither of us any good.

I took the short walk to the hotel I had booked, checked in and stashed my luggage away. The room was spacious with a large bed and a massive heart indented in the headboard. It was stunning and practically inviting me to just lie down, to deal with the world some other day. As tempting as it was, the need to go to Patrick and speak the words I'd been dying to say was bigger. So, I made my way back out of the hotel and towards the nearby Charité hospital where I was certain he would still be working.

When I made my way through the front entrance of the hospital, it was like an overwhelming wave of memories hit me. As long as I've known him, I've associated Patrick—with medicine—even when we were children, as we would sometimes go to the hospital after school to do our homework in his father's office. His parents, as well as mine, believed in inspiring us to develop a profound love for what we did, putting us into situations where we would be surrounded by people who loved what they did. So, unlike most people, I did not associate hospitals with pain and trouble or even medicine. I associated hospitals with my love and how he went there day in and day out to help people, to make them better, to be a better doctor than he was the day before. The hospital was, more often than not, a happy place for me—a place where I knew I'd find my love and everything I adored about him. Despite my intense nervousness, entering this place, knowing he was near, was the best feeling I'd experienced in a long time.

I made it to the reception and asked for directions. The lady smiled at me and said in a heavy German accent, "I get him for you, the hospital is big, easy to be lost."

"There's no need for that, I think I'll be able to follow these instructions," I said, pointing at the map she'd given me.

The closer I got to the office where she had told me the research team was based, the more confident I got. As I neared my destination on the second floor of the paediatric wing, my step faltered and I stood, stuck in place.

There he was, hand on the shoulder of a young man, listening intently, smiling, so beautiful. The moment seemed intimate.

Shit, it is too late, all too late and I cannot even blame him.

And then yet another new feeling crept up on me—possession. White, hot, passionate possession.

Get the fuck away from him. He. Is. Mine.

I had never felt this way, but it felt good. I started walking towards them with heavy steps. As Patrick turned and saw me approaching, he squeezed the man's shoulder one last time and said something in German that sounded like, 'think about it some more'. I realised that Patrick used the German 'Sie' which was a formal way of saying 'you' and relaxed a bit.

Get a grip man, he's at work, probably talking to a patient. Calm this crazy train the fuck down.

Then he walked towards me, and as we reached one another, he drew me into a long, firm hug. Exactly the kind I'd been craving.

Placing his forehead against mine, he whispered, "You came, thank God, you're here."

I couldn't speak for a minute, my emotions overwhelming me—possession, fear, love—all mixed into a dangerous cocktail of slightly crazy.

With regret in his voice he finally added, "Babe, I have to work for at least two more hours, I've got several parents here who are considering entering their kids into the project. They are scared, tired and frustrated..." he trailed off and then he grabbed my hand, pulling me into one of the conference rooms that were nearby. Once he closed and locked the door, he pushed me against the wall, devouring my mouth, touching me all over. Adrenaline rushed through both of our bodies, but it had to stop, there was something I needed to say.

I reluctantly ended the kiss, staring into his beautiful eyes, and whispered, "I've come a long way to make things right between us." I placed a finger on his lips as he tried to speak. "I know that a lot of things have gone wrong, I fucked up way before New York, I fucked up in too many ways to count." I took a deep breath. "I have realised that we have become too comfortable, that we would rather swallow trouble than face it, that it will take more than grand gestures to fix us, but I am willing to do whatever it takes because you are my everything too. I never want to be without you ever again, not a single moment—whether we are in the same room or apart, I need to always have you with me in here." I removed my hand from his mouth and placed it between both of our chests, connecting the places where our hearts were beating.

"I will do everything it takes, Matt, I feel the same," he said, moving his hand up to find mine, to find a connection.

“I’m beat, so, I think I’m gonna get back to my hotel room and hit the sack for a bit. I’ve made reservations at a restaurant tonight. I think I know how to get us there, we can meet out front when you get off work. I mean, only if you want to of course...” I took a deep breath, collecting my thoughts before I lost myself in nonsensical ramblings. “I want to try something new, something we’ve never done before. Patrick Brenner, would you please go on a date with me tonight?”

He smiled and kissed my lips lightly. “I’d be honoured, Matthew Saunders.”

I kissed him one last time, and before turning back to the door, I said, “I’ll pick you up in two hours. Lose the scrubs.”

Then I unlocked the door, walking through the hospital and out into this strange but wonderful city. I didn’t turn back because I knew he would be there, I knew we would be okay—maybe not completely okay today or tomorrow but things would be okay.

Two hours later and a hell of a lot more alert, I met him standing outside the hospital wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a gorgeous black coat.

I walked up to him and kissed him briefly on the lips, lingering just a few seconds, enjoying the privilege of physical affection, not taking it for granted. “You look stunning for a guy who’s just got off work.”

“The perks of being a principal investigator is having a personal assistant who is hopelessly in love with you and doesn’t second-guess you when you ask them to pick up a few things from your place.”

I frowned, growled and kissed him once more—harder, possessive.

He giggled, looking younger than I’d seen him in months. “I’m messing with you. *She* is a twenty-five-year-old med student with a husband and a two-year-old, not exactly my type. I appreciate the jealousy though.” He winked at me, looking like a kid that was up to causing some serious mischief.

I shook my head and took his hand, leading him to the nearby station to get to the restaurant.

When we finally arrived, he let his eyes wander over the sign spelling out ‘Unsicht-Bar’, the German term for, ‘invisible’ with a play on words implying it was an invisible bar. He looked at me questioningly.

I laughed, “Relax, they know you can’t stand peppers. Come on, it will be fun.”

This place was a unique type of restaurant I had found online whilst browsing possible date options in and around Berlin before I got here. Eating would happen completely in the dark and there was no way of telling what we'd get. The servers were vision impaired and the idea was to heighten your senses—the perfect place for a first date if you ask me.

The evening was magical. We ate a five-course dinner of tomato soup, Caesar salad, a fish I couldn't quite place and a lovely chocolate mousse followed by a cheese platter and coffee. The experience was sensual indeed. We mostly talked about his project and my plans for the book, staying away from heavy topics for the time being, just being in the moment. He told me that he already missed being a surgeon and helping children get better. He loved research and enjoyed this break but had all intentions of going back to work at Addenbrooke's by the end of the year. Thank heavens, I thought.

He will come back home.

There was also a lot of flirting—feet finding one another under the table, fingers brushing above and our own forks cautiously making their way into the other's mouth, sharing each other's food. It was fun but more than that, I started to regret my choice of tight pants, which were becoming increasingly uncomfortable to wear... they make for a nice ass yet also make raging erections rather painful to endure.

When he asked me whether I wanted another drink, I finally worked up the nerve to say something. I wasn't sure why I was being shy but this felt new to me, wonderful but new. "Um... I'd rather not. I am getting rather uncomfortable here, these pants are getting awfully tight," I added the last sentence in a quiet, husky whisper.

When our server came over, I heard Patrick motion her down to him, whispering something in her ear that I couldn't make out. He took my hand a couple of minutes later and motioned me to get out of my seat. When we exited the restaurant, it took me a minute to readjust my eyes to the bright streetlights. Before I knew it, I was sitting in a taxi, Patrick on me, kissing me urgently, touching me all over.

By the time the taxi driver dropped us off at wherever Patrick asked him to take us, I am sure the poor man was glad to get us out of his car. Our behaviour seriously bordered on indecent, but I didn't care—all I felt was passion and need for my man.

He made quick work of the front door of the old city house and pushed me into the building, hurrying me past a gorgeous hallway and to the second floor where he opened what I assumed was the front door to his apartment.

Once we'd made it into the flat, it was my turn to be all over him, having finally had time to catch up on what was happening. I helped him out of his coat, dropped mine somewhere behind me and pushed him against the wall. I couldn't wait. I didn't want to think. I was an animal eager to restake my turf. I gave him another long, hot kiss and pushed my hard-on against his own in order to prove to us both that our feelings were mutual. After a couple of minutes, I finally dropped to my knees and freed his gorgeous, long, hard cock and swallowed it down to the hilt in one swift move.

"Fuuuuuck, Matt! If you... fuck... babe. I won't be able to... argh... no gentleman." He mumbled several incoherent words before moving his hands to my head and pushing forwards into my mouth, fucking me in urgent need.

Thank goodness I'd had a lot of experience accommodating his size, otherwise I would have had serious problems right about now. I pushed his trousers down to the floor and let go of his cock for a moment, catching my breath and sucking on my forefinger. I looked at him briefly, standing tall above me, eyes closed, all mine. I loved that I was able to make him feel like this. I returned to what I was doing, allowing him to fuck my mouth in fast, long, needy strokes while my hands found their way to his firm ass. My finger knew what to do and finally pushed into him, finding his prostate and pressing down on it. He shouted above me as ropes of semen started to hit the back of my throat. I pushed back a bit in order to taste him, to reacquaint myself with my lover's passion.

After a little while his knees gave away and he joined me on the floor, kissing me a little less urgently now, tasting himself in my mouth.

He caught his breath and said, "Wow, um, wanna move this to my bed? It's way more comfortable."

I wanted to, God I wanted to go to bed with him and bury myself in him, reliving the unbelievable pressure that was still settled in my groin. Instead I grasped the last straw of my sanity and said, "I've never dated but I hear sex on the first date isn't a good idea... I better get back to the hotel."

"Matt..."

"No," I stopped him, "this was for you. I am here for you, don't make this too easy for me."

He sighed and stood up, drawing his trousers up with him and went to look for something in the room just behind us. He came back out with a mobile phone and charger. "They gave me a work and a personal phone, both of which I can use for whatever purpose. Take this, it's on a contract so no need to worry about topping up."

"Thanks, babe." I smiled and somewhat reluctantly picked my coat off the floor. I knew we weren't ready for the next step yet although we had been there a thousand times before. I needed to work on the emotional side of our relationship before returning to the physical bits. I knew we didn't have to work on that, it would just complicate matters.

"I'm pretty busy right now but I get off every night at seven. I like this dating thing, let's do it some more." He grinned, masking his disappointment about me leaving. "When do you need to go back?"

"My return flight is on the fourteenth. Friday in two weeks."

"Okay, I'll see whether I can get a few days off before then."

He kissed me and looked at me with pleading eyes. "Are you sure you can't stay? The bakery across the road makes a kick-arse breakfast."

"No, it's better this way." I hugged him firmly, whispering words of love that were met by his own and left his apartment.

When I got back to my hotel room I noticed a text on the phone Patrick had given me. It was late and I was tired but it caught my attention immediately.

Call me the moment you get back to the hotel, I've gotta talk to you.

No 'x', no 'I love you', anxiety crept up inside me. I sat down in one of the lounge chairs in the empty hotel room and hit dial.

"You said you were here for me."

"Yes..." I said hesitantly.

"Well dammit, Matt. You're a selfish bastard."

I said nothing. I didn't expect to hear something like this after the evening we had just shared. Had I fucked up? What had gone wrong? Did he have doubts? I sighed and whispered, "I'm sorry..."

"Damn right you should be! You know exactly how much I love to hear you come yet you just took it away from me."

Now I heard it, the smile in his voice, the teasing. I relaxed in my seat and let out the breath I didn't realise I had been holding.

"Do you have lube?"

"Um... yes..." I said, my cheeks heating slightly.

"Good, get the lube, take off your pants, lie on the bed and put the phone on speaker. I'll wait."

This was surreal. We didn't do commanding yet his firm tone awakened my erection that had calmed down on the walk back to the hotel. I did as ordered and made myself comfortable on the bed.

"Okay, I'm ready."

"Are you hard?"

"Very..." I panted in a soft voice.

I heard some rustling and knew that he was too. I imagined him sitting only a few blocks away from me in his own bed, his cock in one hand, stroking it lazily. "Put some lube on your hand and massage your balls for me. Do *not* touch that gorgeous dick of yours or you'll blame me for making it too easy for you," he said, playfully mocking my earlier words.

I put a dollop of lube in my palms, warmed them and reached down to where he wanted my hands, massaging my testicles lightly. I closed my eyes and let my mind wander. I saw him clearly in front of me—deep-green eyes darkening with feral lust while also clouding with so much warmth and love. Lips curling—not into a smile, not into a grin—but something in between. So unbelievably sexy. His neck straining slightly as his voice deepened by an octave, becoming husky and breathless. In front of my mind's eye he was bigger than life as he took charge and made me squirm under his perusal.

His voice came once again from the other end of the phone lying beside me, cutting my mind's wandering short. "Tell me about your cock, describe it to me." I opened my eyes and looked down at myself, my cock jerking impatiently, my mind slowly turning to mush...

"It is... um... very hard, slightly red, lying just above my stomach... Fuck, Patrick."

"It's about to get harder and blossom. Reach down, touch yourself, there where I make the sparks flash before your eyes, go as far as you can. Feel yourself, babe. Twist your nipples with the other hand—good and hard—like I would if I was there."

This was torture, possibly the most erotic moment of my life, I wanted it to last forever. The only thing that could have possibly made it better would be him being here with me, but hearing his voice was enough to trigger some memories.

“Push a finger up inside you, feel it burn, because, babe...” his tone went dark and deep, making me swallow the pool of saliva that had gathered in my mouth, “next time it’s going to be me pushing up inside you, stretching what belongs to me.”

We had always been good at this, sex. It just came naturally to us. When our relationship had started to become physical, we explored our likes and dislikes together and knew exactly how to push each other’s buttons. He knew my body as well as, possibly better than, his own. This demanding side was something new, thrilling and I definitely wanted it again soon. Behind closed lids he stood over me, controlling every single one of my thoughts and actions, making me lose my mind in an impossibly arousing manner.

I took in a shaky breath, hand reaching for my entrance, running a finger over my hole, whimpering as the touch registered in my brain. I heard him groan. “Do it, Matt. Tell me how it feels.”

My finger slipped in surprisingly easy. “It... feels good...” I breathed, babbled, or moaned—I wasn’t sure anymore. My cock jerked at the assault to my senses, the memory of what his girth felt like, compared to my finger. “Warm inside... empty... need more... need you.”

“Clench your hole, babe, do you feel that, that tight grasp... do you know what it makes me feel, the way it turns me on when your arse sucks at me like that?”

I couldn’t respond except for the lone, dragged-out groan that spilled from my lips. My finger was now joined by a second, slipping in, pulling out as I rocked my hips, fucking my hand. My skin radiated heat, my nipples stood like sharp peaks, rubbing against the fabric of my shirt, so much more sensitive from my earlier ministrations.

I wished it could last forever, but forever only went on for a couple of quiet minutes, the sounds of heavy breaths filling the space. “Fuck. Patrick, I need to come. Please.” I was practically begging now.

He obviously had trouble speaking now and simply said, “Stroke hard and fast, finger yourself and come for me.”

And I did, only a few seconds later, loud moans and grunts filling the room—his and mine—as hot cum spilled over my hand in viscous white strands. His name a whisper from my lips.

I was boneless and happy. I grabbed a couple of tissues off the bedside table to wipe my hand. His voice stopped me. “Take your cum, babe, run your fingers through it and press it up inside of you.”

My hand shook as I did what he demanded from me, his ever-serious tone that had softened by an almost imperceptible amount. Imperceptible to anyone but me—I knew how to detect every single change in his voice, every tiny shift in his persona. I knew him that well, I held every piece of him deep inside of me.

The words fell from my lips as I breached myself. “I love you, need to see you tomorrow.”

“I love you too, with all my heart.”

And like an afterthought, he amped up the heat once again by saying, “Oh, and before you fall asleep, send me a picture.”

At the sound of the line disconnecting, I mourned the loss of this moment but once again I did as I was told and took a picture of myself and hit send.

The response was instantaneous.

Mmmm, I'd love to have a piece of that. Sleep well, my love.

xxx

I gave myself one final, lingering stroke, but, being on my own now, it didn't feel quite the same. I decided to ignore my once-again hardening cock and turned off the lights in the room, letting myself relax into the sheets below me. Darkness laced with city lights coming from the windows surrounded me and I let out a content sigh.

I fell asleep within minutes, making a mess and not giving a damn.

The next two weeks were the best of my life and also the most emotionally demanding of our relationship. We met every night at seven and went to a different restaurant each time, talking, fighting, mending and always ending the night with a warm, loving goodnight kiss. I stayed away from his place. As much as it killed both of us, we weren't ready yet, we still had so much left to

say. On the Monday before my flight back to the UK, I sat in a rental car waiting for Patrick to join me. We hadn't seen each other in two days. He had caught up on enough work to take most of this week off, and I had wandered around museums and just enjoyed being in a city where entertainment was cheap and food from every corner of the world could be found in just about every neighbourhood. I had also managed to get a fair amount of work done in what seemed to be an endless supply of libraries all over the city.

I saw him coming from the other side of the road. He opened the trunk of the car, placing his overnight bag within, and then settled into the passenger seat next to me. "Are you planning to tell me where we are going any time soon?"

"To the door of heaven." I grinned.

"What?"

"It's a little village two hours north of Berlin called *Himmelpfort*. It's some sort of half island where Santa Claus lives. I read about it online and thought it would be nice to get out of town."

"If you say so," he said and then looked at me apologetically, "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, four hours to be exact. Mind if I snooze for a bit?"

I kissed him, lingering for a while. "No worries, hun. In the meantime, I'll try not to kill us driving on the *wrong* side of the road."

He rolled his eyes and settled into his seat, drifting away almost instantly.

I loved this easy mode we had entered over the past few days; it was comfortable. But tonight and the next few days I had my mind set on something else. Romance, good old-fashioned, cheesy romance. Not light, not heavy, just us, loving one another.

We made it in good time, and I let him snooze a bit longer in the car whilst I went into the guesthouse I had rented for us and prepared the living room. The landlady had been thrilled to have customers at a time when no one really came here so she had been kind enough to give us her biggest space at a very low price.

I set up the things I'd brought—flowers, candles and various antipasti that I had found in a gorgeous food store in the basement of a notable Berlin shopping centre. I opened the bottle of Barolo, a rare indulgence for us, lit a fire in the fireplace and finished my preparations by turning on the television,

which was now playing soft music in the background. If I hadn't been living this moment myself, I would've laughed at how cliché all of this was. Standing there, letting the memories of the last few days wash over me was another matter—it made me realise that this was only the beginning of what I owed us.

I heard footsteps coming from the front of the house. "You know, it's great you let me sleep and all but cars have the tendency to get cold when you..." he stopped mid-sentence and took in the picture before him.

"Matt," he whispered, "this is beautiful."

I approached him and put my hands on his chest, looking at him with all the love I had in me, all the hope and all the happiness, all the fear surrounding this second chance he'd granted me. "I want to be naked for four days straight. I only want to wear clothes if we decide to take a long walk or something. I want to reconnect, eat, drink and laugh. No more talking for now if that's okay with you? I believe now is the time in the dating process where I make you fall hopelessly in love with me."

And reconnect we did. Over the next four days we relaxed, read books, took long walks around the village, cooked and shared a seemingly endless amount of lingering, soft kisses. Oh, and, naturally, leaving two men alone in the woods also eventually led to a lot of fantastic sex. It was him and me, taking baby steps back to us, to who we were. It was the lightest I'd felt in a very long time.

Friday came way too fast and sadly, Patrick had to work. After spending a final night at his place, we said goodbye at the station in the early hours of the morning.

"Can't you stay here? My place is big enough for a family of five."

"I need to go back to work. I know I'm supposed to be on sabbatical but if I leave the PhD students to their own devices, all my students will have transferred to philosophy by the time I get back." Smiling, I added, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Let's work on those lines of communication some more, it's only a few months."

"I have a better idea," he declared and grinned. "Let's work on those lines of communication *and* the various ways to have phone sex."

I laughed, kissed him deeply and boarded the train.

“If you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you, it’s yours forever. If it doesn’t, then it was never meant to be.” (Unknown)

Make it a Lifetime

Cambridge & Grantchester

23rd & 24th October 2014

Almost done, almost done. Come on, five more minutes.

The clock read quarter past two in the early hours of the morning, and there I was, staring at the final version of the book shimmering in front of me on my computer screen.

The Things it Takes... A Comprehensive Evaluation Of The Concept Of 'Happily Ever After' In Classic And Contemporary Literature

By Professor Matthew Saunders

I had spent the past seven months researching, analysing and writing about the fictitious love of Romeo and Juliet, Dante and Beatrice, as well as Maxim de Winter and the unnamed female in *Rebecca*. It was almost like I had been in a trance state—drinking lots of coffee, sleeping very little and working on this book with an immense amount of energy.

The book had granted me the highest achievement of my career as I was named professor only a few days before. But this achievement meant very little in the grand scheme of things. It was great to have a higher income and to have more time for research, but I had long realised that what I needed to be happy in life was more than work.

I only needed and wanted him.

During this period I also had a lot of time to reflect on my love. I missed Patrick to the point of hurt, I so desperately wanted him to be back here with me. The two weeks we had spent in Berlin and that final few days in Himmelpfort seemed a lifetime ago.

We had of course made good use of the methods of online communication available to us, sometimes simply catching up, other times being more intimate. It was by no means the same, but I had come to appreciate the availability of video chats and how they can considerably enhance the sex life of a temporarily long-distance relationship.

We stuck to our promise; there had been no more visits since the day I left Berlin. We had been tempted of course, but the time apart had done us some

serious good. He had made immense progress on the autism project, and I was just about to finish my book and submit it to the publisher. I also spent a lot of time meeting old friends and making new ones. Surprisingly, Davide and I got on really well. He was the complete opposite of me; a young, slightly crazy scientist who had some fascinating stories to tell about the dating scenes in Cambridge and London. Over the months we had grown close—it was nice to have a good relationship with one of Patrick’s best friends.

Life was good, yet I couldn’t wait to have my man back which would hopefully be in a couple of days, depending on how his meetings went this week.

I stared at the last chapter of my book where I spoke about the poem “Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep” by Mary Elizabeth Fryer. I had talked about her story, presented the historical elements of the time and analysed the concepts of love and loss, but something was missing. I scanned back over the beautiful poem that had made my heart stop several times. Reading the last two lines for what felt like the hundredth time.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

I thought back on the year that had passed. The lessons I’d learned about love, lust, lifetime commitments and myself in relation to all of those things, and it suddenly occurred to me... I scrolled down to the bottom of the chapter and added a final paragraph.

So why is it that we believe that the relationships featured in this book lasted, or would have lasted, a lifetime? One experience that all of them had in common is that they experienced struggle, that their love was tested by the world around them in one way or another. It can thus be argued that love does not simply ‘die’ when challenged. Unlike a living organism that can be wounded and killed as a consequence, never to be seen again; Love can be viewed as an almost spiritual being. We have no proof of its existence, there is no physical manifestation of love, yet we believe in it. Faith, when challenged, can be deeply hurt and one can turn away from it in that instance. However, if one’s faith is strong enough, it may occur to us that it is indeed worth fighting for. In her poem, Fryer talks about the many places in which the deceased can be found, their grave not being one of them. I believe that I have demonstrated love to be much the same—if we have faith in it, we will be able to find it in the most unlikely elements of our environment, ignoring the most obvious

conclusion that love is dead. This can in turn lead us back to our love. Much like faith, fighting for love solidifies our belief in it. In turn, the fights for love that these relationships have gone through and overcome make us trust the sincerity of it, ultimately strengthening our faith that these loves are everlasting. The things it took for them to make it a lifetime, make us believe that they in fact made it a lifetime.

Save, close, attach and send—my work here was done.

The lines had flowed out of me so naturally that I must have missed the sound of the front door opening and closing. I did not hear him walking up the steps and entering the office, but now that everything was said and done, I *felt* him standing close behind me.

A moment later he traced a single digit along the side of my neck before slowly moving his hand down my chest. I felt his warm breath where his finger had just touched me before he settled a soft kiss on my neck. I tried to speak but I couldn't—the beauty of this moment, the intimacy, the joy of having the love of my life back home completely overwhelmed me.

He spent a little while tracing my upper body with lazy fingers and finally whispered in my ear, "I am home, my love. My flight was delayed, otherwise I would have been here sooner."

He grabbed my hand and sucked on it lightly, making me stand up and look into his gorgeous face. He took my face into both of his hands and placed a soft kiss on my lips. Staying close, he added, "I am so deeply in love with you, Matt. I have missed you so much. Please tell me you're done with work?"

I nodded slightly and he led me over to the sofa that was in the office. He gently pulled my T-shirt off me, pushed me into a sitting position and kissed the places where his hand had been just moments ago. Whilst doing this he pulled down my sweat pants and moved his lips lower. I stared at him in wonder and pure joy as I touched his face and any place on his body I could reach. He teased me mercilessly, kissing my thighs and hip but ignoring my hard and wanting cock for what seemed like forever. Finally he moved closer, kneeling on the floor in front of me, and kissed up my length before swallowing me down in one quick movement.

As much as I loved the feeling of his hot mouth around me, I knew I wouldn't last, and a blow job wasn't what I needed right then. I reluctantly tapped my finger to his chin, motioning him to sit up, and said in a soft yet shaky voice with happy tears burning in my eyes, "Take me to bed. Please, make love to me."

He took my hand in his, turned off the desk lamp and closed my computer. We quietly walked hand-in-hand to our bedroom where he sat me down on the edge of the bed and proceeded to make quick work of removing his clothes.

He joined me on the bed and we fell on the warm covers, kissing softly, touching each other all over as if to explore an unknown, foreign land. He kissed up the side of my tattoo and all around it, gently nibbling the skin as he went, letting his tongue glide over the tiny bites, electrifying my senses. Then he went lower and put my legs on his shoulders, parting the cheeks of my arse with intent. As his hot tongue found the entrance to my body, I couldn't help but squirm and turn into an incoherent, blubbering mess. He stayed there for a little while, loving me, making me feel impossibly good, loved and cherished.

He finally sat up, and I may have whined a bit, but I shut up quickly when I saw him reach for the bedside table to get the lube. That is when I saw it, a thin line of text covering his shoulders. I moved closer to examine it.

If you love something, let it go...

I recognised the intricate handwriting to be his and kissed every single letter of it from left to right. When I finally met his shoulder I whispered into his ear, "So much for 'I'll never ever get a tattoo'."

He turned and kissed my forehead, lingering for a minute, breathing me in. "Do you want to hear about the day I inked the memory of us under my skin, or do you want me to make love to you?"

I chuckled. "I'll take the latter for now."

I moved back to the centre of the bed, lying on my back. Whilst he put a fair amount of lube onto his straining cock, he continued to stroke my skin, never losing contact.

When he was done, he moved back onto the bed and hovered over me, looking deep into my eyes. "I love you," he whispered.

He knelt between my legs and put them on his thighs, slightly lifting me from the mattress. Then, with a patience he took from God-knows-where, he slowly entered me until he was firmly seated inside me. He lowered himself onto me, kissing me with a fierce passion as we slowly started moving against one another.

This wasn't urgent, it wasn't just sex. It was passionate, slow lovemaking, homecoming. It was promises, it was everything.

He finally reached down to cover my cock in his large hand and moved firmly yet slowly up and down my length.

As I was about to come, he covered my mouth with his, swallowing my passion and mixing it with his.

Afterwards, we lay in our bed for the longest of times, just touching each other, gently reminding one another of our presence.

As the first rays of morning light made their way across the horizon, things heated up again, and I decided to get us some water before we went any further.

When I made it down to the kitchen, I heard the soft sound of rain just outside the door leading to our small garden. I stepped towards the door, opened it, inhaled the smell of wet earth and thought back to the poem I had spent analysing the previous day.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

Patrick was my gentle autumn rain. He was the smell of it, the taste of it, the soft feeling of it on my skin—he was all of it and so much more.

Our relationship hadn't died but was very much alive and strengthening with every word and every kiss we exchanged.

Do not stand on my grave and weep,

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I looked towards the morning light and whispered, "Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for not trusting that we were done."

I had no idea whether I'd ever have the courage to work through this with him but saying it out loud felt good.

I woke a few hours later to the smell of coffee and warm bread making its way through the house. I never thought I could be so ridiculously happy, so foolishly in love, but I couldn't wipe the massive grin off my face. As I got up and found a pair of boxers and my bathrobe to wear, I became deliciously aware of where Patrick had been last night, multiple times.

I made my way to the kitchen and met him with a long, slow, lazy kiss as he handed me a steaming cup of coffee. He was grinning just as much as I was... but there was a hint of something different too, shimmering in his eyes.

"Morning, gorgeous. What's up?"

For a split second I remembered that night nine months ago, when we stood in the very same place. I remembered how terrifying it had felt, how utterly confusing and messed up. Now in the light of day, after everything that had happened, home finally felt like home again.

For the very first time in what had felt like forever, things were good.

“We are getting married tomorrow,” he said, his grin widening even further.

I blinked at him, not sure I understood. “What?”

He pointed towards the small calendar on the wall next to the door leading out to the garden. He must have turned it since I was sure it was still showing January only last night. In big red letters, next to the ‘25’ on the list of dates, there it was: We are getting married today :).

“Well, unless you cancelled the appointment at City Hall,” he said, taking a step closer to me, and placing his hands firmly on my hips as if to stop me from moving away, “we are getting married tomorrow at noon.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, what to feel, so I honestly let the first words that came to mind spill out of my mouth. “It’s too fast. You’ve barely been back for twelve hours. Nothing has been prepared, no vows have been written. We cannot do this right now and besides, how can you still want to marry me after...” My ramblings were cut short by another long kiss.

When our lips parted, he said, “I’ve never not wanted to marry you. In fact, I’ve been wanting to marry you for the larger part of the last twenty years. That never changed. But here is the thing that has changed—we don’t need vows. We don’t need promises. I think we both know all of that is worth about as much as the paper it’s written on. There is no lifetime guarantee for anything. What we need are letters to remind ourselves of who we are to one another, words that we will remember even when times are tough.” He leaned in to my ear and whispered, “Come with me to The Orchard tonight. Let’s make a moment for each other and forget about all this pretentious circus. I cannot wait, I came back yesterday to be with the person who is my whole world. I don’t need any more time. I just need you. I need us to make a commitment to our love, despite the things that might happen and because of the things that did.”

I looked at him in wonder and marvel, peering deep into his eyes that held so much hope and love. In this moment I knew without a doubt that we would be perfectly fine. I loosened his grip on my body and left the room, returning

with a fountain pen and a piece of paper. I took a few minutes to write down what I wanted to say—not because I was uncertain but because I wanted the words to come from a very deep place inside me and not merely be a collection of thoughts. After I handed him the paper, he also stood there in quiet and deep contemplation, choosing his words carefully.

When all was said and done, I carefully placed the piece of paper into the pocket of my coat hanging in the hallway. We stood there in our home, in the midst of all those memories, surrounded by the smells of this beautiful autumn morning, and we kissed. Slow at first but soon urgent, touching each other all over, grinding our erections into each other.

This was the hallway I wanted to be in for the rest of my life. This was the person I wanted to be with. It had always been him—a lifetime of happiness would not have been enough to realise this.

Pain and tears is what it took for us to get here.

After a few moments all I wanted to do is to return back to our bed and bury myself deep inside him, or have him inside me—in either case I wanted to lose myself in this moment of love and lust. But I wasn't so lucky. As we came up for air, he put his forehead to mine and said in a lust-filled voice, "You have students to teach and supervise, I have a paper to write about the study we just completed. We..." he caught his breath, "need to continue this tonight."

And this is how the morning ended... and a very, very long day started.

At some point during the day my Facebook messenger made itself known, which was the perfect excuse to terminate the grinning-into-empty-space thing I had been doing all day. I hadn't gotten much done today, and my PhD students were starting to ask who had killed Matt and replaced him with this happy person. At home I was kind, always smiling and happy—at work I believed in being hard on my students, teaching them the old-school way. For me it had always worked and they were usually thankful about being pushed hard in the end when they succeeded.

Patrick: Hey, love. Mum & Dad are coming and Davide is also gonna be there with his new guy. Does six work for you?

Me: Yes, sure :). How is your day going?

Patrick: Slow, thinking about a hot professor can be distracting ;).

Me: *Same here, only I've got my eye on a hot doctor :D. Can you do me a favour?*

Patrick: *Sure, what's up?*

Me: *I noticed yesterday that the bank hasn't taken the mortgage payment for this month yet. Can you check what's going on with that?*

Patrick: *Have we maybe paid it off?*

Me: *In your dreams. Even with my raise it's five more years. And didn't you wanna go on a honeymoon? That might add another year to it.*

Patrick: *Actually I do and I will. On Monday - you free? Would love the company... ;)*

Me: *To Australia? Are you nuts? I've got teaching to do!*

Patrick: *LOL, you better go talk to Mary. Gotta go work on the paper, TTYL, love you xx*

Me: *Love you too, even if you're a weirdo :**

I logged off Facebook and left to find one of my oldest PhD students. Mary was a sixty-something woman who loved to learn and had come to join our department after a lifetime of being an English teacher at a local secondary school. She was talented and creative, and I absolutely loved having her in my department.

I found her in the little kitchen just by my office, making a cup of tea.

"I hear my husband-to-be and you have been chatting."

She turned to me and smiled. "Matthew, I think it's wonderful that you get to go on an adventure. Plus, you know the students like me better than you. Or should I say how you usually are around them when you're not walking around work like you're on cloud nine?"

"You know you shouldn't, you've got your own stuff to worry about."

She took a step towards me and put a hand on my shoulder, not being my student at this moment but someone infinitely wiser than me. "You've gone through a lot this year from what I can tell. A change of scenery and time away from work is just what the doctor ordered."

I could have kissed her, but in an effort not to spook anyone out anymore with my happiness today, I just settled for a hug and a ‘Thank you’ before I went back to trying to get some work done (*trying* being the operative word!).

I didn’t walk for long before I started *running* towards my love. Embracing him and kissing him like we hadn’t just seen each other this morning.

After a minute I heard someone clear their throat. Wolfgang said in a firm yet amused voice, “That part is supposed to come *after*, not before.”

I looked up at my father-in-law just in time to see Lizzie lightly push her elbow into his ribcage.

“Ouch! You know I’m right.” He hugged me. “Good evening, son.”

We stood in front of one another looking lovingly into each other’s eyes. Finally I spoke, “You are wonder, you are marvel. My love for you runs so deep, I once feared that I might drown in it. And then I realised why you are my everything, the very reason I breathe.”

We both had tears in our eyes, but he responded with the words I had repeated a thousand times in my head throughout the day. “You are the sun and the moon. My world rises and falls with you. You say that I am your everything, but for you I can merely hope to be a reflection, of what you are to me.”

“With these words I promise to be yours, with these words I thee wed,” I whispered.

“With these words I promise to be yours, with these words I thee wed,” he responded.

And then everything else around us fell away as we fell into a deep kiss, saying all the ‘I love yous’ we could possibly get out in-between.

When we came up for air, I noticed that there was a lovely picnic laid out for us on one of the tables nearby—simple, no pretension, just us.

As we enjoyed the hummus and other antipasti from the small delicatessen on Mill Road I loved so much, Lizzie handed us a letter. “We weren’t going to give this to you until tomorrow but this one,” she pointed at her husband, frowning slightly, “has some sort of hot-shot surgery tomorrow so I’ll be single for your other wedding.”

Patrick laughed. “Mum, you know surgery comes first, always. It’s fine, besides you’re both here now and that is what matters to us.”

He took my hand as I opened the letter with my other. It was from our bank, a confirmation of a payment and one with way too many zeroes behind it.

I didn’t call Wolfgang ‘Dad’ very often. It still felt somewhat strange yet for all intents and purposes, he was my Dad too, even if he wasn’t my father. “Dad, you shouldn’t have.”

He smiled and put an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “You shouldn’t have to worry about the mortgage any longer and we had the money. Congratulations, sons.”

We hugged and toasted with the champagne they had brought. A little while later Patrick complained of a headache that could only be cured by going home and getting into bed with me right now. I blushed and we left The Orchard together as husbands, walking towards our lifetime together.

Epilogue

Cambridge

Sometime in 2018

So I bet you've had just about enough from Matt's point of view so I wanted to add my own. I'd call this a non-epilogue-epilogue because it really is just me blabbering on about stuff. We characters have the tendency to do random shit like that and Leisha says she hates us for it—I don't buy it, I think she freaking loves it.

Anyway, you may wonder why I went back to Matt, why I welcomed him with open arms in Berlin and why I didn't ever get really mad about what happened with *whatshisface*. Here is the thing—people cheat, it happens. In fact, men are thought to be more likely to cheat compared to women as they crave sexual diversity. So, imagine what happens when two men are in a relationship with one another for their entire lives—it's bound to happen.

Men are also more likely to be jealous, and you may think that I wasn't but fact is, I was. Boy was I! However, for me, sex is something that's overrated. In essence, sex is simply a physical and pleasurable act that in itself carries little meaning. It's the kisses, the looks, the gentle touches, the emotions that make sex meaningful. For me, the mutual jerk-off that Matt experienced in New York wasn't the issue, it was his deep desire for another man.

It hurt and I am not going to lie, there were days when I thought that our whole world would crumble and that we'd be left with nothing by the end of it. I spent entire days hiding in my apartment in Berlin, curled up into a ball, feeling as though my heart had been ripped from my chest, barely being able to breathe. I never craved to know how it would be with another person, man or woman for that matter; Matt was always it for me. For him it was another story, and I slowly learned to accept this, to let him go and to hope with everything in me that he'd return.

And he did.

And I will spend the rest of my life being grateful for that.

But this story is entitled 'The things it takes...' and fact is, we are still happy for a reason. Relationships take a lot of work and face many roadblocks, it's just the nature of the beast.

We sorted our shit out in counselling after I returned home. About a year after we got married things had become difficult again yet we weren't talking about *why* we were miserable. I knew full well what the reason was—for many gay couples kids might not be a big deal but Matt, he teaches young people day in and day out and I treat kids for a living... So yeah, it was pretty obvious that we both had developed a strong desire to be a family of more than two. One day I came home with all the required paperwork to realise that dream.

It's been a long, hard and frustrating three years.

But yesterday she came.

Our baby girl, our beautiful daughter.

Maya.

The End

Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep

(attributed to Mary Elizabeth Frye)

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

Author Bio

Who am I? I'm a twenty-something-year-old woman, trying to make sense of the world—you'll find me running around Cambridge in the middle of the night looking for answers to impossible questions. I never thought I'd be a writer and I certainly never thought I would write M/M Romance. It just happened, I was in the right place, at the right time, receiving support from the people that truly matter to me.

I've been in love with the written word ever since I was a little girl—I love what it can do, how it can convey both beauty and knowledge—I've made the written word and its powers my profession and my whole being. Even more so, I am incredibly lucky to live in two worlds, to have access to two languages. My first story The Things It Takes (Make it a Lifetime) will be published in the summer of this year (2015). I am also working on a series, which is currently a work in progress (The Submission Series).

My characters and stories go deep, they are inherently touching upon my other passion (besides the written word)—the human mind and all its challenges. For me writing is cathartic, escape, reflection—my journey starts now, I'm excited to see where it will take me.

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