



SEARCH THE SKIES ON CHRISTMAS EVE

A TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS SHORT



BRIAN LANCASTER

"May you never be too old to search the skies on Christmas Eve"

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FOREWORD

BY BRIAN LANCASTER

In this short story, Rudy and Trevor return to Loch Arkaig in Scotland for Christmas with a group of new friends; a CEO whose life changed when he advertised for a travel companion; a celebrity chef who found love with his late best friend's husband; a former baker and his tree-hugging partner; two older men who have been together since college; and finally, a doctor working for an international charity and his lawyer husband.

All of them are about to meet together on Christmas Eve, many for the first time.

As time moves ever onwards, their lives may have changed since their stories were first told, but the characters remain essentially the same.

So here is a chance, dear reader, to return to beautiful Scotland and catch up on the lives of old and much loved friends.

CHAPTER 1



RUDY MORTIMER

On the bright, crisp morning of Christmas Eve, Loch Arkaig sparkled and glittered like a mirror covered in diamonds in the early morning sun. Ben Nevis rose beyond like a sleeping giant, like a monster out of Celtic mythology. Rudy Mortimer swayed on the snowy shoreline, hands clasped behind his neck, breathing deeply, savouring the familiar biting air in his lungs and cold numbness of his cheeks. Nothing felt more like Christmas than being back home.

Without question, he loved much about his life in the south, especially returning every night into the embrace of the love of his life; Trevor. Love of his life. How easy and natural the expression popped into his head now. Hard to believe they had met four years ago almost to the day. But coming back north, to the tranquillity and sheer ruggedness of this part of Scotland always filled Rudy with a sense of relief and rightness and calm, away from the bustling metropolis.

"Where are they? Don't tell me you've lost them?"

Trevor approached from his left along the shore, his

tone more good-humoured than irritated. Over one shoulder hung a handmade hessian bag, bought from a local tourist craft store, and patterned in purple thistles. Trevor recruited Rudy to help find smooth, interesting pebbles or small but attractive pieces of flotsam and jetsam along the lakeside, to decorate the kitchen table.

"I let them wander off on their own. Enjoy the scenery together."

"And you? Are you going to help, or what?"

"Och, Trev, the lodge looks great, like the set for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Native firs, pine-scented kernels, tartan and red ribbons. Maybe the same as last year, but in my opinion, it's the only choice. Complements the lodge perfectly, better than any of those other fairytales or hair-brained Christmas themes you told me about. And anyway, Mr Masterchef will be here soon to claim every kitchen surface with all the goodies he's bringing, so I reckon we head back, knock up a quick breakfast for the four of us, then clear the decks. Need to make sure you get your money's worth."

Trevor clamped his arms tightly around Rudy from behind, something Rudy loved despite Trevor being smaller in stature. Rudy allowed himself to be unbalanced backwards and dragged into Trevor's warm body. They stood awhile glued together, letting the embrace linger, rocking gently from side to side. Rudy decided the more difficult conversation he needed to have with Trevor, one he had deferred twice already, could wait until later when more people were around.

"Marcus insisted on cooking." Trevor's hot breath tickled his ear. "No money changed hands. So don't talk to me about bribing a maestro chef to come all the way up here,

because you and I could just have done the job ourselves, without Brenda and Cheryl's help."

None of Trevor's usual pals would be making an appearance this year. Cheryl and Jenna had persuaded Cheryl's mother—the usual chef of the season—to spend Christmas in the sunshine. And although other friends dropped out for one reason or another, they still found themselves with new additions to continue the tradition started by Trevor and Cheryl many years ago.

"Where is it they're heading? New Zealand?"

"I told you. Perth."

"Perth? That's barely three hours' drive—" joked Rudy.

"Perth, *Australia*, smartass. Could hardly have a sun and sand holiday in Perth in Scotland."

"Aye, well you could. Along the banks of the Tay. But in December, you'd freeze your nadders off. So is it going to be really fancy fare this year?"

"I told you. Marcus is a traditionalist when it comes to seasonal food. No idea what he's rustling up tonight for Christmas Eve, but tomorrow it'll be turkey with all the trimmings, and Christmas pud. And knowing Marcus, it'll be amazing."

"And you told him we've got an Aga?"

"Of course I did. And he's pretty stoked about using one."

"Aye, well. Let's see if he's still as stoked by tomorrow evening when he's had to stoke the bugga a hundred times."

Last year, Brenda had done nothing but complain about the old oven. Rudy hoped Marcus had at least some experience using one; otherwise, they would need to cook everything up at the big house, and ferry food down in cars.

"Do you have final numbers? All the rooms are ready,

but do we have a final count? Marcus will want to know. I told him to plan for twelve."

Trevor let go of Rudy, pulled out his phone and checked. One couple, a pair they had not met, had been hesitant because the doctor working for Médecins Sans Frontières didn't know if he might be needed to attend a seasonal festive function. Still behind him, Rudy heard Trevor heave out a loud sigh and guessed he had no satellite signal.

"Why can I get a full connection on the footpath on the way down here, and not around the lake? This place is bizarre. I'll know for sure when we get back to the lodge and the WiFi kicks in. But so far? Ten confirmed, including us. Possibly the full twelve. All new people to the lodge this year, apart from you and me, and all gay. Tom and Marcus, of course. Kieran and Kennedy, if they haven't got lost somewhere out on the glen."

Rudy laughed. Kieran and Kennedy had arrived the day before because they needed to fly back on Christmas morning to be with Kennedy's parents and their twins for Christmas Lunch.

"They'll no get lost. On higher ground, they'll spy the lodge and then it's just a case of finding the right path down. All paths eventually lead down to the loch. Shame they couldn't have brought their wee ones."

Rudy had grown really fond of Kieran and Kennedy with their twin baby boys, cemented after they'd all met up in Singapore with the stopover at the house owned by Kennedy Grey's parents. When they had first met, Kennedy came across as formal and cold—even Trevor agreed—a little like Rudy's own father when he held court in the boardroom. But when Kennedy had sat down with them, in a casual flannel shirt, cradling one of his baby boys and

expertly feeding him a bottle, Rudy had revised his impression.

"Did you ask Kennedy why not?"

After settling in at lunchtime and being directed by Trevor where to pin decorations, they had all enjoyed dinner together at Mortimer House with Rudy's folks, mainly so Kennedy could once again thank Rudy's mother for the use of their house for their wedding. Rudy enjoyed watching Kennedy hold his own against his father, the two disagreeing amiably about politics and business. But his father's later 'quiet word' with Rudy had been somewhat less enjoyable.

"With my dad monopolising him, nobody got a chance to ask Kennedy anything. But Kieran told me he was the one who persuaded Kennedy the boys' grandparents should have quality time alone with their grandkids. And in case you hadn't noticed, Kieran always gets what he wants. So they have a couple of days of quiet—and a bit of catching up in the bedroom department if you know what I mean—and then they'll fly back after an early breakfast tomorrow."

"In the private jet."

"I know. How the other half lives. But it means they land back in time for Christmas lunch with their kids and the rest of the family."

"Fair enough. Long way to come for two nights, though."

"What is it you always tell me? It's the quality, not the quantity that counts. Kieran reckons it's best to keep out of his mother-in-law's hair when she's preparing Christmas lunch. I'm happy they came if only for Christmas Eve. So with them, there'll be six of us. And I know it's a bit last minute, but I've invited Nathan from the gym and his partner, Jaymes."

"Are they okay?" Trevor had only ever heard Rudy talk

about Nathan but had never met him or his partner. "I mean, I know you work with Nathan from time to time, but do you think they'll get along with everyone?"

"Och, Trev. Nathan's pure dead brilliant. I've no met his partner yet. He's some hotshot college professor who teaches life sciences or ecology or something like that. But if he's anything like Nathan, I'm sure he'll be great. Told me they're coming up with their friends Martin and—um—Galahad, I think his name is. And the last two of their friends, who may or may not turn up, are a doctor called Stephen and his husband, Anton."

"All men, then?"

"For a change, aye."

"And all married?"

"Not all. Nathan and Jaymes only just met."

Although he said nothing, Rudy worried whether there might be something else behind the question. When Rudy first met him, Trevor had recently split from a guy called Karl who decided he preferred sex with women. Poor Trevor had been devastated and suffered horribly during the dreadful divorce pantomime. The whole ordeal had left him scarred for life.

Rudy had talked to Trevor about them getting married—once in front of Kieran and Kennedy while they were in Singapore—but ever since then, Trevor shut down both times Rudy had made any mention of the idea.

"Who knows whether we'll all get along. But it's only a couple of nights, and there's enough of us that we don't need to be in each other's faces all the time."

"At least my ex-husband and his new wife and baby won't be here."

Rudy made a point of never mentioning Trevor's ex-

husband. But every now and again, Trevor felt the need to revisit his past.

"Surprised they didn't invite themselves again."

"She's pregnant."

"Again?" Rudy spun around in Trevor's arms, to witness a smirking Trevor. "It hasn't even been a year since she had the second."

"Got a call from Karl just before we set off. The doctor confirmed last week."

Rudy knew Karl kept in touch with Trevor, and never challenged the fact, but initially felt a pang of jealousy, even though he knew Trevor always told him everything, and would never keep secrets or go behind his back. At one time he thought about phoning Karl and telling him to stop calling. Until he realised big-hearted Trevor had no special feelings left for Karl—except perhaps pity—because he lavished all his good feelings on Rudy. Even if he didn't want to get married, Rudy had the best, most generous-hearted man in the world, right by his side.

"But you told me Karl's not coping as it is—"

"Not my problem, is it? They'll survive. In the meantime, we've got a lodge full of friends and strangers we need to look after. Let's get going."

Side by side, they started walking away from the lakeside, back on the familiar path leading to the back of the lodge. Although snow had fallen throughout the week, most of the trail remained navigable, and today the sky shone a cloudless blue.

"Oh shoot," said Rudy, stopping abruptly. "Did you remember our Secret Santa gifts?"

Trevor turned back, smiled patiently, and folded his arms. Rudy knew the gesture well. Trevor had much better, far

more creative ideas for things like presents than Rudy. Which is why Rudy simply followed his instructions when decorating the lodge for Christmas, or redecorating any of the rooms in their small apartment. But for Christmas Eve, Trevor instigated the idea that each couple be assigned another couple to buy gifts for, up to a certain amount of money, to prevent people from feeling obliged to bring everyone a gift.

"Of course I remembered. But I had a call or two, asking to shift a few of them around. Not sure exactly what's going on, but a couple of our guests are planning surprises for their other halves."

About to speak, Rudy was suddenly interrupted as a bundle of curly-haired red dynamite came hurtling down the path and began circling Rudy and Trevor's feet, yapping happily.

"Ed! Where the hell are you now?" came a familiar voice, the owner out of view.

Instantly, the dog bolted back up the path just as the lean figure of Kieran West appeared, laughing at his bundle of joy, and kneeling to pet him. Kieran and Kennedy might have left the kids at home, but they brought their Cock-erpoo pup with them. Kieran had phoned and asked permission to bring him. Although Rudy said yes, he worried some of the guests might not be so comfortable. But Kieran, he found, was difficult to say no to. Unlike Kennedy, everyone seemed to take to Kieran with his big brown eyes, shaggy brown mop and scruffy nine o'clock shadow. Currently sporting rosy red cheeks, his good-natured smile was warm and generous enough to melt the snows on Ben Nevis. Rudy half suspected Kieran called the shots in their relationship.

"Hey, you guys."

"Where's Kennedy?" asked Rudy as they caught up with Trevor.

"Making calls." Kieran stood and rolled his eyes for effect. "Checking in with his mother to make sure the boys are fine, and now dealing with supposed work problems. After the fifth time he stopped to check and answer text messages, I sent him back to the lodge."

Trevor and Rudy walked either side of Trevor along the path.

"What do you mean, supposed work problems?" asked Trevor.

"Because they're probably petty issues they can easily deal with on their own, without Kennedy getting involved. But when he answers their text messages, they know he's online, so they expect him to help with any tiny, stupid thing. It's almost like an addiction. On the day my company closed down for the holidays, my boss, Leonard Day, announced at the staff drinks party that if any single one of us sent or answered any emails or text messages about work over the holiday season, he would personally drive round to their houses and confiscate their work phones. He's a big believer in work-life balance."

"I've never met him," said Rudy. "But I like him already."

"You have no idea. The man is an inspiration. And he bats for our team."

"Married, too?" asked Trevor. Rudy looked sidelong at Trevor.

"Ought to be, but no. Kennedy had a thing for him once. But lucky for me, I got there first. And anyway, he likes his men even older than Kennedy."

"So what's he doing for Christmas?" Rudy managed to sidestep Ed who weaved in and out of the three men's legs. "Should we have invited him?"

"He wouldn't have come. As sociable as he is at work, he's a bit of a loner outside. Prefers his own company, according to Kennedy. Takes all sorts to make a world."

"Ain't that the truth," muttered Trevor.

"Aye, but, you know. Nobody ought to be all alone on Christmas."

"Oh, heavens. Tell me you're not about to burst into song?" Kieran grimaced at Rudy before bursting into laughter. "No, we'll get him over to ours on Christmas night. He won't be alone."

"So are you ready for some breakfast? Big Scottish fry-up to start the day off right? Smoke salmon and scrambled eggs on toast," asked Rudy. "Before the rest of the congregation starts arriving?"

"As long as there's a fried sausage in it for Ed, then lead the way."

CHAPTER 2



KENNEDY GREY

Kennedy Grey stood on the small hillock astonished at the beauty of the lodge and loch, the perfect coming together of man and nature. Finding this incredible viewpoint had been a bonus because up here he could finally get a strong satellite signal, and now waited for one of his work colleagues to answer his damned phone.

To say he had been impressed with the structure would be the understatement of the century. In the email invitation, Rudy had mentioned nothing about where they would be staying, and Kennedy assumed they would be housed in the grandiose chambers of Mortimer House again. So when Rudy's father's driver had picked them up from the rural Oban airport near North Connel and pulled up outside the lodge, at first Kennedy had been puzzled, before being pleasantly surprised.

During dinner at the big house later that night, Rudy's father mentioned the name of the architect, one Kennedy had neither known nor remembered. But standing there now, he could understand what Mortimer senior meant, how the original building had been enlarged and extended

skilfully into the shape of a Celtic Cross. On an outcrop overseeing the loch, a circular communal living area sat slightly raised above ground level with huge floor to ceiling windows. Three bedrooms on the floor above had balconies overlooking the panorama. The rest of the building comprising bedrooms and bathrooms had a more traditional look and feel, but had clearly been modernised faithful to the original design, culminating at the far end in a large kitchen.

Against his ear, a familiar voice sounded from the phone.

"Sloan Will— Oh, hi Kennedy. What's up?"

Kennedy could almost see Sloan, the way he held his Smartphone flat, talking into the microphone end, as though taking a bite from a bar of chocolate.

"Nothing's up. Just checking in. Has the office party started yet?"

"Not sure what time zone you think you're in, but it's ten-past-nine in the morning down here."

"And your point being?"

"We'll wait until more people arrive before popping the first cork. How's it up there in Alba, land of Rob Roy and the Celts?"

"Cold as all hell, but savagely beautiful."

"Sounds like my first wife."

Kennedy chuckled steam into the air. They would never have joked together in the past. Sloan was Kennedy's COO and a couple of times had tried—unsuccessfully—to outsmart Kennedy. But they eventually settled their differences with Sloan working out of Los Angeles with his own father-in-law, Kennedy's opposite number and silent partner of the new merged company. Thrice married Sloan had flown back to the UK this year with his new wife, to

visit his kids who lived with his second wife. Good looking Sloan had once quipped to Kennedy that if only he had been gay, life would be so much easier. Of course, there was no way Kennedy was letting him get away with such a throwaway and frankly inaccurate remark.

“Are you still okay with what we discussed?”

“*Why wouldn't I be? The questions is, in the cold-as-all-hell light of day, are you?*”

Kennedy snorted. One thing about Sloan. He had always kept Kennedy on his toes. No beating around the bush with Sloan around, which was why Kennedy hired him.

Five years ago, Kennedy Grey would have been proud to accept an award as the meanest bastard on the planet. Hard work and staying ahead of the game came first. Full stop. Everything else came second. Even his boyfriend at the time. And if anyone decided to mess with that earlier version of himself—like Sloan had tried and failed—then they needed to bring something better than their very best game. But Kennedy's priorities had altered, his life transformed when he fell heavily and uncharacteristically for Kieran West. Since then, after marrying, and with the arrival of their twin boys by surrogacy, everything had changed. And Kennedy finally felt alive.

“Needed some time to digest, but yes, I am more than fine. And the timing's perfect, as ever. So let's start the ball rolling. Can you give Karl the head's up, so him and the US team can begin talking strategies for the new year?”

“*If I must.*”

Sloan and Karl McDonagh did not get along. Karl had been Kennedy's hire and nothing got past the man. Above all, Karl remained fiercely loyal to Kennedy and took no crap from Sloan.

"I'll let you go, then. Have a relaxing Christmas. My guess is you're going to need it. And send your better half, Mary-Anne, my love."

"Will do. Same to you. Going to be an interesting year next year."

"It most certainly is."

Thumbing off the call, Kennedy made out the distinctive bark of Ed echoing around the hills, and grinned to see Kieran and their hosts ambling back of the lodge. Over the past few years, they had made some unlikely but firm friends. Chatting amiably, none of them had spotted him, so he stood watching them.

Flying up to Loch Arkaig bordered on madness. But so many things felt right about the decision. Which is why he and Kieran arrived a day earlier, to spend time with Rudy and Trevor. Ever since their wedding arranged by Rudy's family in Scotland and catered by Marcus Vine's team, they had both had wanted to return to Scotland to thank the Mortimers again and, more importantly, to really take in the beauty of the surrounds without the stress of a wedding. So when Kieran told him Marcus would be coming, too, Kennedy moved heaven and earth to get them there.

Okay, yes, so hiring a private jet had been indulgent—Sloan's suggestion—but once sorted everything else had fallen into place. One small problem had been Ed, their dog. Coming over from Singapore, his mother and father had been happy to look after the boys at their London house for a couple of nights, but his mother drew the line at Ed. She suggested putting him into a local kennel. Ed had been a rescue and Kieran knew he would be miserable, so insisted he come with them. And who was Kennedy to argue? He had learnt that lesson a long time ago. Fortunately, in the private jet, this had not been an issue. More importantly,

with Oban airport only a ninety minutes' drive away, they would all be home for Christmas Day lunch. A win-win all round.

After checking his phone again for messages and finding none, he began to weave his way down to the lodge. Something about the pure air made him feel energised and clear-headed and, yes, hungry. They had decided on the stroll after only a morning cup of coffee. Kieran wanted to walk Ed and the boys wanted time to scavenge for more natural decoration.

At some point, Kennedy knew he needed to have a conversation with Kieran about what he had just agreed with Sloan, which would affect them both. But for now, he would let them enjoy the simple coming together of Christmas.

After removing his boots in the ante room, Kennedy entered the kitchen to find the others sat quietly at the table. Rudy talked loudly holding his Smartphone to his ear with one hand, the other covering his free ear, as though having difficulty hearing the caller.

"No, I said that's brilliant, Nathan. Absolutely. We have an extra room next door with a wee single bed. Or if necessary, we can move the bed into their bedroom, keep them all together. Plenty of room. No, of course it's not a problem."

Like in a silent movie, Trevor held up the coffee pot, and Kennedy nodded. Sitting next to Kieran, who had his hands clamped around a mug, Kennedy peered quizzically but Kieran simply shrugged, none the wiser. Eventually, Rudy ended the call.

"That's Nathan calling from the road. Apparently the doctor, Stephen, and his partner Anton are already on their way. Coming up from Stephen's sister's house in Beaconsfield. So they'll be here between six and seven tonight."

"They're driving?" said Kieran. "That's a hell of a long way."

"Around ten to eleven hours. Which is why they set off really early. But they wanted Nathan to ask us if it's okay to bring their newly adopted son with them. From what I could tell, they'd planned to leave him with the sister while they came to visit—nothing had been agreed, they just thought the arrangement might work—but for one reason or another that wasn't possible. So they have a youngster in tow. Good job we cleaned out the single room."

Kennedy wondered briefly what might be wrong with the kid, to not be parted from his parents for a couple of nights. But quickly reassessed, remembering how hard he had found leaving their own boys, Link and Clint, behind.

"Aren't Jaymes and Nathan driving, too?" asked Kieran, oblivious to Kennedy's thoughts.

"Yes, but they set off yesterday with their friends from Oxford. Broke the trip up by spending last night in a hotel in Alston, which I think is in Cumbria. They'll be here around two."

"And Marcus and Tom are already up here in Glencoe," interrupted Rudy, checking his watch. "In fact, they should be here by now. Hope nothing's happened. Marcus is bringing all the food. Hell's bells, I'd better give them a ring after breakfast."

Kieran finished off chatting to Trevor while Rudy set about preparing breakfast. Kennedy felt in the way, so decided to take his mug of coffee and retire to the living space, to stand alone at the semi-circular floor-to-ceiling windows. Yesterday, he had marvelled at the room, with the open fireplace in the centre covered by an aluminium hood, surrounded by a crescent of comfortable sofas. In all honesty, the interior with its tired wooden panelling and

scratched and scarred oak floors needed a makeover. But the whole setting with the view beyond was amazing, and felt incredibly therapeutic. As he stood there, staring out at the view, he heard soft footfalls combined with the telltale clip-clip-clip of Ed's paws on the wooden floorboards.

"We've been banished from the kitchen while they knock up breakfast."

Kieran stepped next to Kennedy, kissed him on the neck, and wrapped an arm around his waist, following his lover's gaze out the window. Ed came and stood between them, staring outside, too.

"Look out there. Incredible, isn't it? I wish we could have brought the boys to see this place. I'm sure they'd have loved it."

"Maybe. But honestly, they're probably too young to appreciate or remember this kind of thing right now. Ed's enjoying himself, though. Almost caught a rabbit this morning. Maybe we'll return when the boys are older. I've a feeling Rudy and Trevor are going to be in our lives for a long time."

"Except his father's selling this place."

Kieran turned to look quizzically at Kennedy.

"Is he?"

"That's what he told me last night at dinner. Something to do with him offloading their property holdings and retiring from the whisky business. He's seventy-one, can you believe? He wants to take his wife travelling while they've still got their health. Offered the lodge to Rudy, but only if he planned to return to live back up here. And we all know Rudy and Trevor are happy with their life together in London. So they'll sell the properties and the money will be put into trust for the Mortimer sons."

"What a shame. Who'll take over the whisky business?"

"Ivan. The older son. Makes perfect sense. He's been working alongside his father all these years. Rudy helps out every now and then, but it's not his passion."

"Maybe whoever buys this place will advertise on Airbnb. And then we can still bring the boys back here one day."

Even if wasn't something they shared, Kennedy loved Kieran's blind optimism. Most likely, a corporate hotel chain would jump in and turn the place into a small exclusive hotel, maybe even knock the whole thing down or extend with no care or consideration for the sympathetic redesign.

"Something I need to tell you too, babe. Grey Steel Global is going public next year. Finally. And I'm going to be stepping down as CEO. Sloan Williamson will take over. I'll be a silent partner, there in an advisory capacity."

Kieran stared blankly at Kennedy.

"When was all this decided?"

"Just now. By me. We've been talking about the idea of floating the company for years, and the subject came up again recently, but I didn't want to say anything until I was absolutely certain in my own head. We still hold the lion's share of the market and, honestly, Sloan has already become the new face of the organisation. So the timing is right. But it means I'll have more free time on my hands. Is that going to be okay with you?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, we have a pretty good routine going right now. And I didn't want you to feel as though you're the only one working. I'll still have shares in the new outfit, be called on every now and again for advice and meetings. And obviously I'll be getting a decent payout."

"How decent?"

Kennedy didn't like talking figures with Kieran, just wanted him to feel their family's needs would always be cared for.

"Exceptionally decent."

In typical Kieran confrontational fashion, he thrust his hands into his pockets.

"And what exactly are you going to do with all this free time? You know how fidgety you get even when you're at home for the whole weekend. We'd barely arrived here and you're already scowling at your phone."

Kennedy laughed and leant over to kiss Kieran's cheek. Nobody knew him better than Kieran. Even Kennedy had hesitated in making the decision, wondering if he could realistically drop down a couple of gears.

"Yes, I'm going to need to work on winding down. But for a start, I'll spend more time with the boys. And I'll probably need to find a hobby or two. Maybe you can help me with that."

Kieran fell quiet for a moment, and Kennedy knew by his expression he was thinking hard.

"You don't want me to give up work, do you?"

"What? No, of course not. I know you love what you do. Why would you think that?"

"Because you mentioned the senior Mortimers spending time travelling, and I wondered if you wanted us to do the same? As a family."

"No. Absolutely not. I think Len would put a hit out on me if I ever suggested you quit. I'm just going to have to figure out how to fill my free time."

"Poor you."

Kennedy chuckled and placed his arm around Kieran's shoulder, before kissing him on the side of the head. He

returned his gaze to the view, noticing a couple of large birds flying together.

“Do Rudy and Trevor seem okay to you?” he asked.

“They seem closer than ever. Why do you ask?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

Kieran turned his head from the view to study Kennedy, before bumping their hips together.

“Come on, love. You’re asking for a reason. Spit it out.”

“Remember when we met them in Singapore? I was under the impression they’d decided to tie the knot. I even offered them the use of our villa in Bali. But we’ve heard nothing since.”

Kieran stared back out the window, but sighed gently.

“Yes, I’d thought about that, too. But it’s not something I’d want to bring up with them. That’s between Trevor and Rudy. But maybe they changed their minds. Marriage isn’t as important for some couples. Ours was a top priority partly because I was ready for kids, but mainly because I didn’t want anyone else ever laying claim to you.”

Kennedy hauled Kieran around into a fierce kiss, before pulling his head away.

“Is that so, Mr Grey-West?”

“It is indeed. Do you think we’ll have some time alone this afternoon in our room? It’s nice to have you all to myself for a change, without constantly worrying about the boys crying.”

“I hope so. Although it might be difficult to keep a certain someone quiet.”

Both men looked down at the cheeky, innocent face looking up at them. Right then, from behind them, someone cleared their throat and they turned to see Trevor standing in the doorway, leaning against the door jamb.

"If you two have stopped making out, maybe you would like to come and join us for some food."

"Excellent. I'm starving," said Kennedy, as Trevor turned and headed out of the room.

Just as Kennedy began to follow, Kieran caught him by the arm.

"How long had he been standing there?"

"No idea."

"Do you think he heard—"

"No idea. But let's assume not."

In the kitchen, the table had been laid out with various preserves, marmalade and butter, and a plate filled with wholewheat toast. Rudy placed plates of smoked salmon, scrambled eggs and fried tomatoes on the four place settings. Trevor bent down to put a bowl on the ground for Ed.

"Doggie breakfast," said Trevor. "Chunks of apple and a boiled chicken sausage. According to Rudy's mum, it's perfectly healthy for dogs. None of this fried human food."

Once Rudy had topped up their coffee mugs, they sat together in companionable silence, eating together. Kennedy smiled across the table at Kieran sitting next to Rudy. At the end of the meal, despite Kennedy offering twice, Trevor insisted on clearing away used plates and cutlery, and began washing them up along with dirty pans at the sink. Rudy and Trevor clearly had their own domestic routine sorted out.

"So we're bringing the exchange Secret Santa gifts forward to tonight," said Trevor, his back to them all, "because you two won't be here tomorrow. It's another tradition we've introduced. Shame you can't stay for Christmas lunch—which I am assured will be spectacular. But maybe next year. And then you can come up with the

boys and Ed, and stay longer. As you can tell, we've got plenty of rooms in this place."

Kennedy looked puzzled and almost said something before realising Trevor had no idea about the lodge being sold off. Across the table from him, Rudy's eyes widened at Kennedy and his face fell slightly—his father clearly hadn't told him he'd mentioned the fact to Kennedy. Almost unnoticeably, Rudy shook his head.

"That sounds wonderful," said Kieran, who had been observing them both.

Once finished, Trevor turned and leant back against the sink.

"We were thinking about taking a drive into Fort William, get any last minute bits and bobs. One of the fridges is already full to bursting with soft drinks, beers, wines and champers, and the large one is empty ready for Marcus to use. But we can't go until they arrive. To be honest, I thought they'd be here by now."

"I'll call Marcus now."

"Hope you'd say that. I'm going upstairs quickly to shower. And to wrap our Secret Santas. Rudy, stay and keep our guests company."

As soon as Trevor bounced off, Rudy turned to Kennedy, before putting his face in his hands.

"I've not told him yet. I'm worried it'll break his heart. The lodge is where we first met and even though my dad rents it out throughout the year, it's always nice knowing we'll come back here."

"And you don't want to move back, take the place over?" asked Kieran.

"Our lives are in the south, as are most of our friends. And both of our jobs are going well. But I understand what father means. Even without somebody managing the rentals

—my mother took care of that—this place is due for an interior makeover. So best sell now before he invests any more money in the place. Sometimes the choice is simple when there are only two.”

“Have you considered a third option?” asked Kennedy, cryptically.

CHAPTER 3



TOM BRADFORD

Tom Bradford had forgotten how much he loved driving.

Yesterday, for most of the journey on the open motorways of Britain, he could put his foot down, lean back and let the Land Cruiser take over with its cruise control. Today, along often deserted country roads, narrow and meandering, still packed with ice and snow, he had to be awake and alert adopting skills worthy of a rally driver, the car's four-wheel-drive a godsend. Thank goodness also for the inbuilt satellite navigation system on the dashboard, so they could listen for directions provided by the posh female voice—even if some instructions were bizarrely convoluted or road names woefully mispronounced. How anyone could figure out where they were heading down these tiny Scottish lanes without satnav was anyone's guess.

Marcus had volunteered to share the long drive yesterday, had even reminded him of the offer each time they pulled into a service station for a comfort break. But when Tom said he was happy to keep going, Marcus didn't argue. This morning, as they left the hotel in Glencoe for the

ninety-minute journey to Loch Arkaig, Marcus headed straight for the passenger door without a word. They worked well together. Always had done. Even though they hadn't always agreed on everything.

In all honesty, Tom had grumbled to Marcus about coming all the way up to Scotland, said he had no desire to spend Christmas away from his daughters and parents. Some celebrations should be about family, and Christmas meant home, not time spent with occasional friends and strangers. But, as always, Marcus and the rest of the family managed to sway him. As his daughter, Katie, quite rightly stated, being so far from London meant Marcus could not possibly be called in to help in one of his restaurants at a moment's notice. Even Tom's parents, Moira and John, had encouraged them to take the trip, Moira telling him she would take care of the girls and, more importantly, insisting they both needed grown-up time alone together.

Charlotte and Katie, Tom's daughters by his marriage to his late wife, had grown up all too quickly, and both started to blossom in their own ways. Of the two, Charlie had inherited her mother's attractiveness, and was not only popular but knew it. While Katie studied hard, Charlie needed parental guidance, monitoring—oh, what the hell, policing. Random boys turning up on the doorstep he could handle—easy enough to shut the door in their faces—but what went on between school and home he had no idea. And Marcus didn't help. He told Tom to chill that she may have her mother's looks, but she also had her common sense and could take care of herself. But Marcus often spent weeks away from home and didn't see things through Tom's eyes. Bright as she was, her school grades had dipped recently, and he wanted to take time in the holidays to sit her down and have a serious talk, no

matter how much she resorted to her classic pouting and huffing.

As they turned into the lane for the lodge, Marcus' phone number rang on the dash app. Rather than mess with the road map on the satnav screen, he pulled his phone from his pocket and put the device on speaker.

"You are coming, aren't you?" came a now-familiar, slightly worried, Scots voice.

"Yes, Rudy." Marcus sniggered and then spoke while Tom concentrated on the road. "We're almost there. The satnav screen says we're about seven minutes away."

"Only, we were thinking about heading out to the shops in the nearest town, in case there were any last-minute things you might—"

"Rudy," Marcus rolled his eyes for the benefit of Tom. "I've got absolutely everything covered. A car boot and back seat stuffed to the brim with hampers and cooler boxes full of every kind of food than you can imagine, enough grub to feed a small army well into the new year. So as long as you've got plenty of drinks, as we agreed, then we're all set. Please don't buy any more food. It'll just end up going to waste."

"Okay, point taken. Anything you need me to do before you arrive?"

"Yes. Make sure I have a clear path to the loo—I should have gone before we left the hotel and now I'm busting. And put the kettle on, too. A couple of mugs of hot tea would be most welcome. Tom takes his with milk and one sugar. I just have milk. Full fat, none of that low-fat poison."

"Consider it done. See you soon."

Almost as soon as the call ended, the car crested a hill, and suddenly the loch came spectacularly into view. The last time Tom had been there, for the wedding of Kennedy

Grey and his partner Kieran, they—or rather, Marcus—had been given the star treatment. After landing at Glasgow Airport, they had been whisked away, celebrity-style, in a seaplane to Loch Arkaig, bringing them right to the landing platform at Mortimer House. Seeing the lodge in daylight now, Tom hiked in a breath. Marcus must have heard because he commented almost immediately.

“I could never get tired of that view.”

Tom snorted.

“Surprised you got to take it in last time. You spent the whole time working in the kitchen. Hope you’re not going to be doing the same again the whole time.”

“You know I love doing what I do. And this time is for friends, and friends of friends, who are not going to complain about the size of the portions, or the bill—because there isn’t going to be one—or put bad or lukewarm restaurant reviews on TripAdvisor. This is for the sheer enjoyment of cooking, the whole reason I got into this business in the first place. Take the left fork up ahead.”

A few minutes later, Tom parked up the grey silver Toyota SUV at the back of the building, where a door to the lodge opened and out stepped Rudy and Trevor with two other men. Tom recognised them straight away. Kieran and Kennedy. Tom had really warmed to both men, Kieran’s down to earth nature and especially Kennedy’s no-nonsense business sense. Of all friends they had met, Kennedy would easily be able to hold his own in Tom’s rough and tumble building trade world.

Strange though, Rudy’s partner, Trevor—who they knew much better, and who worked as a freelance accountant for Marcus’ restaurant chain, and Tom’s building business—always appeared more distant and formal around Tom. Marcus heard from one of his managers that Trevor

admitted to having trouble understanding Tom, someone who had done the same kind of thing as his ex-husband Karl—except in reverse—switching from being with a woman, to bedding and wedding a man. Lucky for Tom, Marcus had no such reservations. As for Tom, once he had woken up and accepted the idea of loving another man, being with Marcus had not only been the most natural thing in the world but had given him a new lease of life.

“Thank the heavens,” said Rudy, coming over and giving them each a hug in turn. “I had visions of thawing a stack of frozen pizzas for dinner if you hadn’t turned up.”

“Once committed, my husband would never let you down, Rudy.”

Marcus apologised, but squeezed past them, said a brief hello to Kieran and Kennedy, then grabbed Trevor by the arm and disappeared with him into the building.

“Don’t worry about him,” said Tom, joining the others, and shaking hands. “He’s been bursting for the past twenty minutes. Cold weather does that, I’m afraid. I offered to pull over down one of the lanes, but he’s worried a random passer-by might catch him on their phone camera having a pee in public. And he’d end up front line news on The Scottish Sun.”

“Och, nobody would have recognised him up here. But I know what it’s like in this weather. When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go.”

“Anyway, can we carry on this conversation later? Let’s unpack your car and then head into the warmth. It’s bloody perishing out here,” said Kieran, who only wore a thin hoodie.

Just as they had unloaded the cardboard and cooler boxes either onto kitchen surfaces or stacked on the floor, and dropped bags in the bedroom allocated to Marcus and

Tom, Marcus reappeared. In the toasty warm kitchen, they settled around the long table. A pot of tea sat pride of place at one end, and Rudy led Tom to their seats and drinks—as pre-ordered. But Marcus didn't want to sit. While the others settled and chatted, and with the help of Rudy, Marcus began his foray into the kitchen cupboards and drawers and vault-sized fridge, and especially the Aga. Which left Tom to chat with Kieran, Kennedy and a quiet Trevor. From the occasional positive noises echoing around the room, Tom assumed everything met his husband's very high culinary standards.

"Rudy said you were in Glencoe," said Kennedy, in a chair opposite Tom. "Was that for work or pleasure?"

"Marcus wanted to meet a chef at a resort near there, a potential hire."

"I did," said Marcus, stopping and interrupting. "Nice bloke, and I think he might be a good fit for my Swiss Cottage restaurant if only people can understand a word he says."

"Careful there," said Trevor. "Not all of Rudy's people speak the Queen's English, you know."

"He meant no offence, Trevor," said Tom, feeling the need to defend his partner, as Marcus disappeared with Rudy to survey the living room. "The chef in question is a born and bred Glaswegian, and gets excited about what he does for a living, so naturally he rattles on at light speed. We both had difficulty keeping up. But Marcus loved his enthusiasm. And at the end of the day, isn't that the most important thing?"

Finally satisfied, Marcus and Rudy returned to the kitchen, and while Rudy joined them at the table, Marcus began unpacking food and putting things away. Tom felt obliged to get up and help, but Marcus simply waved him

down. Tom smirked, knowing Marcus the control freak liked to store things away himself. After some idle chatter, a natural pause descended on the table.

"Marcus." Rudy put his mug down and appeared a touch nervous, watching Marcus kneel to the bottom of the open fridge. "I know you told us not to buy anything, so we didn't—as instructed. But one of our guests, Nathan Fresher, used to own and run a local bakery, so he insisted on bringing a selection of his former shop's baked goods, as well as a Christmas cake. Nothing fancy; an assortment of fresh croissants, muffins, sourdough loaves—that kind of thing. The intention was not to steal your thunder but to contribute. Hope you don't mind."

"Local baker, you say?" Marcus peered around the fridge door. "Baking their own produce? Of course I don't mind. It's everything I stand for. I brought an Old Country special for you all, a cross between a Dundee cake and a brownie, something we call a Dunbrownie. Maybe we can have that tonight with a glass of port and some of the assorted cheeses."

"What is on the menu tonight?" Kennedy Grey had always come across as a no-nonsense kind of man. Tom wondered if his question was loaded.

"Why?" Marcus seemed alarmed. "Don't tell me you've suddenly developed allergies? We catered your wedding, and you never mentioned any—"

"No, no," said Kennedy, breaking into a smile and holding both palms up in defence. "Sorry, Marcus. No, allergies. I'm just curious, and, frankly, very much looking forward to sampling your culinary creations again. You see, we won't be here tomorrow for your *pièce de résistance*. Need to get back to our family—the babies and my parents—for Christmas Day. So I'm just intrigued."

"In which case, Mr Grey, I promise you won't be disappointed, but you'll have to wait along with everyone else to find out what I'm serving up tonight. But we'll begin by having cocktails and canapés in the living room overlooking the loch at six-thirty. Is the floor table device working?"

Marcus had told Tom about the automatic table which formed a section of the floorboards. A feature of the original design housed in a raised part of the floor by the large bay windows, at the push of a button the floorboards rose to form a twelve-seater table.

"I'm afraid not," said Rudy, with a sigh. "It broke down during the year, and we haven't had the chance to get it fixed. But we can put a trestle table and tablecloth there to house your canapés."

"Perfect. Now, it's almost two. From three onwards, unless there's a dire emergency, the kitchen will be off-limits to everyone except me and my little helpers; Rudy and Trevor. And especially to that adorable ginger loo brush, you call a dog."

"Sorry guys," said Tom, reaching down and scratching Ed's head. "He's not a fan of animals."

"Hey, I happen to love animals. Just not in the kitchen, and definitely not under my feet while I'm cooking."

"Fair point, and, frankly, a good call," said Kennedy, grinning and peering sidelong at Kieran. "Ed's not particularly good at taking instructions. No idea where he gets that particular trait from. Oh, and by the way, Tom. You're in the building trade, aren't you?"

"I most certainly am. Have been for the past twenty years."

"In which case, can we have a private chat later on? I've got this little project in mind, and I'd like to pick your brains. Maybe even pass a bit of business your way."

"With great pleasure. But I can see Marcus rapping his fingers on the kitchen sink, so maybe we'd better make ourselves scarce."

"In which case," said Kieran, standing up from his seat. "After we've placed our Secret Santa presents under the tree in the living room, me, my husband, and our *ginger loo brush* will take our leave and join you back in the living room at six-thirty. Kennedy, I think an afternoon nap is in order."

"It's okay," Tom called out after them, once they had disappeared from the room. "Rudy tells me the rooms are well sound-proofed."

Kieran's laughter echoed back down the corridor which set Rudy laughing aloud, too. Grinning too, Marcus peered admonishingly at him frozen in the midst unpacking an ice-box, and even Trevor managed to snicker at Tom's remark. Above the sound of their mirth, though, Tom made out a low rumble outside in the distance.

"Is that someone coming down the lane?" asked Tom, standing and going to peer out of the kitchen window, as the sound of a car engine drew louder.

"Wow, you've got amazing hearing. At a guess," said Rudy, checking his watch "I'd say it's Nathan, with his partner and friends. They've made pretty good time. Trevor, come on. Let's go out and greet our guests properly."

Left alone, Tom went over to the countertop where Marcus stood arranging groceries, grabbed him from behind, pulled him into himself and kissed the back of his neck. He loved the smell of Marcus' shampoo, a gentle mix of ginger and lemon.

"Is there anything you need me to do?" asked Tom, nuzzling behind Marcus' ear.

“I need you to stop that. Otherwise, I’m never going to get anything done. And I definitely don’t want to meet our new arrivals sporting a hard-on.”

Tom chuckled into his neck and let go.

“Doesn’t seem fair. You doing all the work.”

“You drove all the way here. You’ve done your fair share already. And there always tonight, love, when the lights go out, and when I get you all to myself. But for now, as soon as we’ve greeted the other guests, I just need you to do me one little favour?”

“Anything.”

“Go and FaceTime Moira, Katie and that errant daughter of yours. So you stop worrying tonight, and just relax and enjoy yourself.”

CHAPTER 4



JAYMES FISCHER

Still in his padded winter jacket, Jaymes leaned back in a plastic chair on their lodge balcony with a mug of steaming coffee enjoying the chilly weather and the incredible view, his jeans-clad legs up on a small table. A couple of cormorants flew across the loch, mirrored briefly in the still surface, and Jaymes followed them as they headed towards a threadbare silver birch on the seashore, disappearing among the leafless branches.

What a year it had been. He loved how quickly life had coalesced with Nathan. Both now in academia, Jaymes a lecturer, and Nathan finally a college student, they enjoyed similar vacation periods, although Nathan spent much of his free time working alongside other personal trainers and nutritionists in the gym in Shipworth. Rudy Mortimer had made good on his promise and given Nathan an entry-level role—weekend work experience building to a summer internship—to start getting him to understand the business from the ground upwards. Jaymes felt both happy and relieved to witness the change in Nathan, how animated he became when he talked about his work and studies.

Despite that, he kept in touch with the old family bakery, getting calls every so often from the new manager, usually about costs, or equipment, or the reliability of particular suppliers. Everything else appeared to run like clockwork.

As for himself, now installed at the Imperial College, he had struggled. Not from the perspective of the subject matter nor the students, who filled the lecture halls with their incredible enthusiasm and a hunger to hear about his practical experience in the field. Maybe the female—and, yes, a few male—students flirting with him had bolstered his confidence, but with Nate now securely absorbed into his life, nobody interested him even remotely in that way. But where students became one positive thing, being confined indoors was the opposite. Add to that the frostiness of other educators and professors in the college, with their petty politics and posturing, and Jaymes had questioned his career change more than once.

Fortunately, the head of the college took him under her wing and focused him on the job at hand, telling him to keep his head down and keep doing what he did so well. Feedback from students had been positive, and his appointment had increased new student applications almost three-fold. Many of the older academics, she told him, had already made up their minds that the selection of someone clearly too young and good-looking must have been a publicity stunt, that Jaymes could not possibly be experienced enough to hold such a prominent and well respected position. Given time and patience, he would prove them wrong.

Behind him, the patio door from their bedroom shushed open.

"Shit. It's freezing out here. How can you sit there?"

"Look at this place. Harsh, I grant you, but sheer, natural beauty. Those clusters of Scots firs lining the loch, braving anything the weather throws at them. No wonder the Scots people are so hardy. We get nothing like this down south. This is why I do what I do, Nate. To witness places like this."

Nathan chuckled and came to sit next to his man, took the coffee from him and had a sip.

"Glad you came now?"

Jaymes tilted his head back and grinned serenely. On one particularly annoying day, a week before the end of term, Jaymes left college feeling just about ready for their Christmas break. So when Nathan came home and told Jaymes about Rudy's invitation to join them in Scotland for Christmas, he had openly grumbled. Their first Christmas together, Jaymes had wanted to curl up alone with Nathan and not let him out of the bedroom.

But when Nathan seduced him not only with pictures of the lodge nestling against the side of Loch Arkaig, and delicious food cooked by a celebrity chef but also with the main ulterior motive, he caved in. A road trip with Gallagher and Martin in Gallagher's brand new BMW X5. Gallagher hoped Jaymes might be enticed to take a turn behind the wheel if he so desired. Martin had been recovering from a shoulder operation, and Gallagher wanted time in the back taking care of his partner.

"Hey," said Nathan, leaning into Jaymes' shoulder and whispering. "I think our neighbours to the left are having a threesome."

"What?" said Jaymes, his head swivelling around to take in the empty balcony, the curtains securely closed.

"Well, I had to stop and listen carefully—which admittedly is a bit pervy of me—but there was definitely the tell-

tale squeaking of bedsprings. And then every now and then, between grunts and groans of pleasure, one of the gruff voices would say something like; get off the bed, Ted. I'm guessing poor Ted isn't getting in on the action."

"Trevor never mentioned anyone called Ted. I guess we'll get to meet him later, poor sod. What did Marcus say about your box of baked goodies?"

"Actually he had no idea I used to run a bakery. Rudy gave him the head's up and I got the distinct impression Marcus appreciated the gesture, especially the Christmas cake."

"And wait until Trevor gets his Secret Santa. Twelve local footballers in the buff, including a picture of my gorgeous ex-baker boyfriend. Actually, come to think of it, I'm not really sure how I feel about that."

"Should have thought about that before you pushed me into posing naked."

"As if you needed any encouragement." Jaymes grabbed his coffee back from Nathan and wrapped his cold hands around the mug. "Where are Martin and Gallagher?"

"Gone to their room. We've all been banished from the kitchen until Mr Old Country is ready to serve cocktails followed by dinner." Nathan fell silent for a moment, and Jaymes could see him thinking, in the way his eyebrows furrowed slightly. "Martin looked tired, poor guy. They kept that very quiet, didn't they? The operation? When Gallagher called and said they couldn't make the fête because Martin was under the weather, I thought they meant he had a cold. But looks as though the surgery really took the wind out of Martin's sails."

"I pulled a muscle in my shoulder once, wrenched the thing climbing down a tree. Agony. Every time I tried to turn over at night, the pain woke me. One of the only times

I agreed to take painkillers. He's probably had the same thing, lot of sleepless nights. Has a habit of catching up with you."

"They should have let us know. Maybe we could have helped out."

"Martin comes across to me as a no-fuss kind of guy. Probably why I like him so much."

"Point taken. And I suppose Gallagher's always there for him."

Nathan relaxed back in his chair and folded his arms, while Jaymes sipped the coffee before handing the mug back to Nathan.

"Tonight's not going to be fancy, is it, Nate? Because if it's all show-off nouveau cuisine portion sizes, I might have to raid the fridge and cupboards once everyone's in bed. Tuck into that box of pastries and baked goods you brought."

Nathan tilted his head back and laughed steamy breaths into the air. Jaymes smiled at him. He always warmed inside when he said something to make Nathan laugh.

"You've got nothing to worry about. Not according to what Rudy told me. It's going to be good old fashioned British nosh and plentiful. Christmas Day lunch will be turkey with all the trimmings."

"Excellent. Because I doubt PizzaMania deliver this far away from civilisation. What time is it, by the way? I left my watch on the bedside cabinet."

Jaymes watched Nathan check his Fit Band and smiled at how he wore the face on the inside of his wrist. Idiosyncrasies, small quirks, about his partner always made him smile.

"Heavens. It's five-thirty already. I suppose we'd better

go shower and change. Get ready to meet the rest of the gang."

"Do we have time for a bath? The tub's big enough for two."

"You're incorrigible, Mr Fischer. But you're right, that's tub's huge. More than big enough for two."

"What are you saying? Want me to go next door and see if Ted wants to join us?"

Once again, Jaymes watched Nathan laugh aloud before clamping a hand over his own mouth when he noticed the curtains being drawn in the room next door. Like naughty schoolboys, Jaymes crouched down and followed Nathan, hurrying back into their toasty warm bedroom, and closed the patio door and their curtains behind them. Nathan went straight to the bathroom and seconds later Jaymes heard water running. Sat on the side of the bed, he kicked off his shoes and socks and began pulling his shirt over his head.

"Ooh, they've got orange-vanilla bubble bath in here. Do you think they'll mind?"

"Course not, it's there to be used."

His shirt removed, Jaymes stood, dropped his jeans and underpants, and stepped out of them, before sitting back naked on the bed. Although the running water had stopped, he could hear Nathan repeatedly drawing his hand through the water, probably creating more bubbles. Jaymes started to get hard at the thought of being in a bath together with his lover. They often showered together in the apartment they shared, but their bathtub was too small to fit more than one.

"Where did Polly and Grant end up going for Christmas?" came Nathan's voice. "You never said. Did they decide to stay at home in the end?"

Jaymes' arousal faltered. Knowing what he knew, he wondered if now would be the right time to tell Nathan. One thing he knew only too well about his partner was that he hated surprises. But he did admit to liking good ones. So Jaymes just hoped he had done the right thing.

"Okay, Nate. I was going to tell you during the Secret Santa present giving tonight, but maybe I should tell you now. You know how the academic winter holiday has fallen this year, and we're not expected back until the fifth of January?"

Nathan came and stood in the bathroom doorway in his underpants, undoing his shirt one button at a time, and casting a curious glance at Jaymes.

"Fifth of Jan for you. My first class is not until the eighth. What of it?"

"Well, you know how you've always wanted to spend Christmas somewhere sunny."

Nathan tilted his head and looked puzzled.

"It's certainly beautiful up here, Jaymes, and I think we might have been lucking to have seen only a couple of clouds since we arrived, but Scotland wasn't exactly what I had in—"

Jaymes rolled his eyes and huffed out a sigh.

"New Year, then, smartass. Stop interrupting."

"Go on."

"Polly and Grant are in South Africa. They flew out yesterday. They've also booked a three-day safari in Kruger Park for next week. Part of your Christmas present this year is us both flying out in the evening of the day after Boxing Day and joining them at the game lodge. Afterwards, we'll all fly to Cape Town and spend New Year together there. Then we'll return to the UK on the fourth."

Nathan said nothing. Jaymes always hated when

Nathan became quiet because he never wanted to disappoint him. But Nathan had experienced some terrible things in his life, people making decisions to keep things from him. Jaymes openly promised he would never do the same thing.

"Say something, Nate."

"Safari?"

"Yes."

"Africa?"

"Uh-huh."

"Whose idea was this?"

"Mine. All mine. But if you don't want to go—"

"Of course I want to go. You know that. I just thought one day we'd plan a trip together."

"I know. But it all happened last minute. And I wanted to give you a nice surprise. Did I fuck up?"

Nathan came over and stood between Jaymes' legs. Placing both hands on Jaymes' shoulders, he leant in and kissed him deeply, before pulling his mouth away.

"No, Jay. You didn't. Seems you've become the master of nice surprises. And thanks to my recent health check, all my vaccination shots are current, which I'm guessing you already knew. But I thought we were meant to be here until New Year's Day. Spend New Year's Eve with Rudy's family."

"Change of plan. I spoke to Rudy, and he's fine. Apparently, their house gets packed with people from all over, so we won't be missed. We've got a flight back from Inverness on Boxing Day. Gallagher's going to drop us off at the airport."

"But what about Gallagher and Martin? Is Gallagher going to drive all the way back on his own?"

"Rudy and Trevor are going to share the driving with

them. They flew up here, and were planning on coming back with us anyway. Better still, even though it's a comfortable six-seater, the car won't be so cramped now."

"I've packed a week's worth of warm clothing, Mr Fischer. And now you tell me we're heading for the sun to stare at zebras, giraffes and elephants?"

Jaymes could tell Nathan wasn't really complaining. In fact, his eyes shone with excitement.

"If we're lucky, we might get to see the big five: lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, and buffalo. But don't worry, you'll still need underwear. Well, for the daytime, anyway. But repacking won't be a big deal. Swap the jeans for shorts and the woolly jumpers for tee shirts. Then it's just suntan lotion and speedos."

"On safari?"

"Good point. Bring mosquito spray, too."

"Seriously? I'm now having all kinds of fantasies about seeing you out in the bush dressed in boots, tight-fitting khaki shorts and a short-sleeved flannel shirt open to the waist," said Nathan, leaning in to kiss him before reaching down to grab a handful of Jaymes' cock, which had happily decided to spring to life again.

Jaymes growled and stood, lifting a giggling Nathan off the floor, hauling him into a fireman's carry and heading for the bathroom. Inside the room, they stood together kissing, while Jaymes slowly released the last of Nathan's buttons. For all his experience, Jaymes had never had sex in a bathtub before, so wordlessly stepped into the bubbles, settled himself at the far end before waiting for Nathan to climb in and then guiding him onto his lap. After spending time getting Nathan prepped, gently probing and stretching him, each were as ignited as the other. Jaymes pulled Nathan's ass cheeks apart to guide the head of his cock into

him. With Nathan's hands braced on Jaymes' shoulders and his eyes squeezed shut, he lowered himself onto Jaymes. Already so close, Jaymes guided Nathan as he slowly lifted and lowered his body, his face a mask of ecstasy, his straining cock slapping on Jaymes' stomach. Jaymes watched mesmerised, finally raising his wet, hot hands from the water to Nathan's erect nipples, squeezing simultaneously and causing Nathan to hike in a breath and his eyes to open. Waves created by their movement splashed onto the bathroom floor, but neither could care less, their actions getting faster, the waters roiling like an Atlantic storm. Jaymes could feel the beautiful beginnings of his orgasm, the spark of electricity igniting from his balls, but Nathan beat him to the finishing line.

"Jaymes, I'm—I'm—"

Stream after stream of semen shot onto Jaymes' chest, which spurred on his final erratic thrusts. Seconds later, he unloaded himself into Nathan, his heart thumping out a tribal rhythm in his chest. As the water and their bodies calmed, Nathan's head on Jaymes' shoulder, each allowed their breaths to normalise. Finally Jaymes lifted Nathan from him, helped turn him around, and then pulled him into his chest. Once comfortably in place, Jaymes kissed the back of Nathan's neck and wrapped his arms around his chest, feeling such a sense of peace and satisfaction, he almost decided they would stay in the bath all evening.

"Jaymes. That was hot. We need to get a bigger tub at home. I wish we could stay in here all evening."

Jaymes chuckled. So many times of late, Nathan voiced what Jaymes had been thinking. Polly often reminded him of how lucky he was to have Nathan in his life. And he often told her that he already knew. After a few minutes, Jaymes began to wet Nathan's hair and then massaged

shampoo into his scalp. Nathan sighed deeply, clearly enjoying the attention. Once he had finished, he told Nathan to hold his breath and then gently pushed him down beneath the water. Nathan rose, wiped the water from his face, and then, turning, did the same for Jaymes.

"For the record, Nate, in case I've never said it before, I love getting naked with you."

"And just so you know, I was only kidding about having a threesome. You are more than enough for me—and then some. And I am not a sharing person when it comes to my man or what goes on in our bedroom."

"Or our bathroom. I'm with you all the way."

Later, thoroughly clean and after helping each other dry off, they stood in bathrobes and surveyed the mess they had made. Fortunately, the lodge provided them with an abundant supply of towels.

"Go and get dressed," said Jaymes, "while I clean up in here. Then we can head downstairs for cocktails. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a plan as long as—" Nathan stopped, hearing something from outside. "Is that someone knocking on our door?"

Both listened carefully, but nothing sounded.

"You're decent enough, Nate. Go and have a check while I clean up in here."

Without another word, Nathan disappeared, and Jaymes got onto his knees and starting swabbing the floor with the already damp towels. Having finished with the first towel, he was on the floor cleaning the last of the mess beneath the bathtub, when he heard Nathan exclaim something loudly from the bedroom.

Still on his knees, Jaymes looked up quickly from the floor and lightly bumped his head on the tub edge, when he

came face to face with an odd, bemused looking dog with a terrible ginger perm. Stood in the bathroom doorway, the dog stared at Jaymes as though having met its match, before tilting its head quizzically to one side.

"Nathan? Do you want to tell me who the hell this is?"

CHAPTER 5



GALLAGHER SCOTT

Gallagher came out of the bathroom and noticed Martin had neither moved nor made any attempt to dress for dinner. Still sat on the side of the bed with a towel wrapped around his waist, he leant forward with his head in his hands, elbows on his knees, staring out the window. Fading light accentuated the serenity of the loch, the smooth surface as still as a mirror. In contrast, the ribs of Martin's back stood out as sharp ridges in the snowy white flesh as did the severe curved scar of the operation which ran beneath his shoulder, purple and livid. According to Stephen, their doctor friend, the operation had gone well, and the scarring would heal given time and care and patience.

But all too often wounds under such circumstances went far deeper than the flesh.

Rubbing his hair with a towel, Gallagher had a fair idea of what was going through his partner's mind and made a point of steering clear.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

On the first floor of the lodge, their spacious semi-

circular bedroom patio windows overlooked the sprawling water with Ben Nevis rising beyond, a backdrop of majesty and magnificence. Gallagher had a feeling they had been gifted the best bedroom in the lodge.

"We take so much for granted, don't we?" said Martin. "I'm glad we finally made it to Scotland."

"Even if only for a couple of nights."

Still without turning, Martin sighed deeply.

"We never did get to see New York in Winter. Or visit Saint Lucia or Barbados in the Caribbean. There's so much I wish we could have—"

"Don't do that, Martin."

Gallagher instantly regretted the harshness of his voice. Martin began to turn but winced at the movement. Eight months since the operation to remove cancer from his lung, and Martin still considered the original diagnosis, a death sentence. Gallagher half suspected Martin felt no real pain when moving—maybe a tightness—but had become so accustomed to being over-cautious he avoided any action which might cause him to aggravate the scar.

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are. You promised to stay positive. I know we should have had the full report by now, but I'm sure we'll get it soon enough. Stephen said there's every reason to be optimistic—"

"Stephen is a doctor, not God. Look at Sebastian."

Sebastian had been Stephen's former lover, who died of oesophagal cancer.

"Not the same, love. Sebastian's cancer was diagnosed in the late stages when it had already spread. Yours has been caught early. You have every reason—we have every reason—to be optimistic. You know this already, Marty. I realise this has been tough on you, but I need you—"

Gallagher's voice broke, a sudden wave of emotion overcoming him, and through the threat of tears saw Martin finally rise, to come over and place his thin arms around him.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Gal. I know this has been tough on you, too. But you know why I'm worried. My father died of exactly the same thing in his early fifties. And, like me, he never smoked a day in his life. What with the op and then that hideous course of chemo, I'm shattered and exhausted and running on empty. So if I'm being a pathetic old sod, having moments of doubt and self-pity, please just humour me."

Gallagher clung to his lover and squeezed his eyes shut when he felt them begin to sting. Every step of the way he had been there for Martin, had smiled encouragement through the diagnosis, held tight to his hand while he lay on the gurney in the soulless hospital corridor waiting to be taken in for the operation, had helped him through the worst of the appalling chemotherapy side effects. Stephen had warned them about the body's potential reactions—and poor Martin appeared to have suffered the very worst.

Gallagher had never complained, always there to clean up after him, to try and keep him positive. Truth is, as selfish as it sounded, the thought of losing the partner he had known and loved for more than half his life terrified him.

And the kicker? He had managed to hold everything stoically together, remained stalwart, made up adequate excuses why they couldn't attend functions such as Jaymes and Nathan's summer fête in June—that Martin had been feeling poorly—had even managed to keep both shops running while Martin recuperated at home.

But when Stephen and Anton brought the child they

were in the process of adopting, Rauf, to visit, the shy six-year-old Ghanaian boy who had immediately taken to Martin and squeezed in beside him on the settee, a few bricks in the wall of Gallagher's fortress crumbled.

All together in the living room, a Winnie-the-Pooh movie on in the background, Stephen standing by the window on the phone talking to a patient, Martin not quite alert on his medication but trying hard to keep up with Anton chatting about something innocuous, a few simple lines between Pooh and Piglet on the television had blind-sided Gallagher.

'We'll be friends forever, won't we, Pooh?' asked Piglet.

'Even longer,' Pooh answered. 'If ever there is tomorrow when we're not together...there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart... I'll always be with you.'

Rauf had turned to look at Gallagher with such a piercing yet innocent stare, smiling his brilliant smile, clearly enjoying the scene. The sudden rush of emotions had overwhelmed Gallagher, and he quickly excused himself to use the bathroom.

Inside the small room, he had sat down on the lavatory seat, put his head into a hand towel and wept silently.

"Gal," said Martin quietly, not letting go their embrace. "If the report comes back and it's bad, I want you to know now that I am not going through another course of chemo. I simply won't. We'll just let nature take its course. And if that is the case, please don't do what Stephen did with Sebastian and set up a hospital bed for me at home. I'd rather be in a hospice, with carers on call. Please do this one thing for me. I love our house, the happiness and wonderful

times we've shared there, and I don't want the memory tainted with disease and suffering."

"Oh, God, Marty. Stop now. You're killing me here—"

"Promise me. Because you know what Stephen's like. He'll push me to keep going. I need you on my side for this."

Gallagher pulled away from Martin so he could look him in the eye, but they still kept their hands locked. Gallagher had to dig deep to hold everything together.

"I promise."

"And when we get back home, let's sit down properly and discuss you."

"Me?"

"Yes, and what you're going to do. I can't leave this world thinking you're going to be all alone for the rest of your life."

When Gallagher began to object, Martin pulled his hand up and placed his fingers gently over Gallagher's mouth.

"But not tonight. Tonight we're both going to get dolled up, go downstairs, and enjoy the evening as if nothing happened. Only you, Stephen, and by default, Anton, know the truth about me and I'd like to leave things that way. So please be natural around me, like our old selves. Don't smother me with concern, or constantly ask how I'm feeling. I know you mean well, but sometimes it can get too much. More importantly, even though I best not touch alcohol yet, I think my appetite's coming back. So let's have this one normal night and pretend nothing's wrong."

With longtime familiarity, they moved around each other, picking clothes out they had hung earlier and dressing without getting in each other's way. Gallagher stopped at one point as Martin pulled on his shirt, but held back his automatic response to help Martin with the sleeve. Even if he moved slower and more carefully than usual,

Martin managed just fine. As Gallagher pulled on his sweater and checked himself in the mirror—and secretly peered over his shoulder at Martin sitting on the side of the bed tying a shoelace—a soft knock sounded on their bedroom door.

"Come in, whoever you are. We're both decent."

As the door opened, the face of little Rauf peered in.

"Uncle Martin, Uncle Gallagher. We've just arrived."

"Rauffy," said Gallagher. "How are you?"

"May I come in?"

Gallagher always delighted at the child's perfect politeness.

"Of course you can," said Martin, finishing tying his lace and sitting upright. "Come over here and give your Uncle Martin a hug."

Gallagher noticed Martin's face brighten for the first time since they had left home. If only he could bottle Rauf and keep him with them, to cheer Martin during his darker days. Rauf pushed the door open, rushed over and hugged Martin around the stomach. Gallagher looked around to see Anton standing in the doorway.

"Sorry about that, chaps," said Anton. "But when the hosts told us you were already here, he insisted on coming up."

"Nothing to apologise for," said Gallagher. "Always a pleasure to see your little man. And you and Stephen, of course."

"Doctor Stephen said I should come and fetch you. Told me to tell you—" Rauf stopped for a moment with a finger across his lips, appearing to check what he had been told to say. "Everybody's about to gather by the big windows in the living room to have cocktails and a can of peas."

Can of—?" Martin began, puzzled, and both he and

Gallagher looked over at Anton who had already started chuckling.

"I think that's canapés, Rauffy," said Anton. "It's a French word and means small bite-sized finger food, like crackers with smoked salmon, cream cheese and capers; or pieces of bread with spicy ham and sun-dried tomatoes."

"Well, we're almost ready. But as you've been so nice as to come and fetch us, I think you deserve to have an early Christmas present. What do you think, Gallagher?"

"Who am I to disagree? I'll fetch it."

Gallagher knew exactly what Martin meant, and went to his case to bring out the box.

"Careful chaps," said Anton, leaning against the door-frame. "Stephen tells me off all the time for buying him things. Says I'm spoiling him."

"And while I agree with your husband, it is Christmas. And if you can't reward good behaviour at Christmas time, when can you?"

Gallagher brought the parcel wrapped in a red and green Christmas motif over to Martin, who in turn handed the box to Rauf. But Rauf did not open the packaging, holding the box reverently, and looking earnestly at Anton.

"May I?"

"Of course."

Without another word, Rauf pulled apart the packaging and lifted the box, to find a pair of white Nike basketball shoes, the same ones he had seen on television watching a basketball game and pointed out to Martin. His eyes went wide, and he drew in a breath. Everyone waited for him to say something.

"What do you say, Rauffy?" said Anton.

Rauf peered up at Anton before his head swung around

to Martin, and he hugged him tightly once again, crushing the box of shoes between them.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Uncle Martin. And you Uncle Gallagher. I love them. Can I wear them now? Please?"

"Of course you can. We need to see if they fit okay, don't we?" said Martin.

Rauf sat next to Martin, while Gallagher helped take off Rauf's shoes and squeeze his small feet into his new ones. Dressed in his jeans, he hopped off the bed and stood admiring them, even went over to the full-length wardrobe mirror and checked himself out. Gallagher smiled over at Martin and Anton. Martin always did know how to pick out presents.

"Can I go and show Doctor Stephen, Anton?"

"Of course you can. And tell him we're one our way down."

Without another word, Rauf ran out the door and thundered down the stairs. Left alone, the three men chuckled together, before Anton spoke.

"This place is amazing, isn't it? I reckon your room's twice the size of ours."

"We can swap if you want," said Gallagher. "If you need the extra space?"

"Sorry, that's not what I was angling at. Ours is absolutely perfect. On the ground floor, near the kitchen, and more importantly has a single adjoining bedroom for Rauf. No, I'm just impressed with this whole building. Anyway, I haven't asked yet. How are you doing, Martin? You're looking good."

"He's much better—" began Gallagher, before looking apologetically at Martin.

"I am. Along with my hair, my appetite's returned, and

I'm even dressing without Gallagher's help. So we're going to have a nice normal evening without anyone fussing over me. And I mean anyone, so I trust you'll tell Stephen. Now, how's Rauffy settling in at home and, more importantly, at school?"

Martin's diversion seemed to do the trick. Anton's smile slipped slightly, and he let out a world-weary sigh. Rauffy's adoption had finally been confirmed in October, so Stephen and Anton had managed to get him into a local school, while also taking turns to be with him as much as they could. But he'd initially had issues being left without them—abandonment issues, Stephen had called them, inherited from his mistreatment back in Accra in Ghana. Teachers often telephoned during the day to say he had become tearful, inconsolable, isolating himself from the other children. Anton had told Gallagher how Rauf often went into a panic whenever Anton dropped him off, which broke Anton's heart. Stephen knew Rauf would eventually settle and, fortunately, with him working full time for the medical aid charity back in England, he could spend more time with their son.

"His school grades are great. He's just not good at socialising with other kids. But things are getting slightly better. We think he's made a friend now, which is bound to help. Whenever one of us picks him up, he still runs over and clings on to us, shaking like a leaf, poor little guy. Still thinks one day we'll drop him off to school and never come back."

Gallagher had asked Stephen about his background. Stephen told him the little he had learned from the nurses in Kumasi, but only Rauf himself knew the true extent of the harshness he had suffered before coming to the International Relief Centre. When he was first brought in, Stephen still worked there and had noted how he spoke

rarely. Found living on the streets, the nurses managed to learn snippets about his life before. His mother and father, apparently considerably wealthy from the sound of his living environment, had hired servants to teach and care for him and his sister.

Until one night, a fire had consumed their home. Everyone except Rauf perished. Police and relief workers suspected arson, expected that Rauf's father had been involved with a drugs gang and the fire had been a reprisal execution. Fortunately, Rauf slept at the back of the house and had been awoken by smoke when the fire took hold. From his bedroom window, he managed to climb into an overhanging tree and drop onto a pathway. From the cover of trees, he watched their house burn to the ground before running away into the night. With little choice and knowing of no relatives, he had spent several weeks on the street, begging for food, which is how he had been picked up by relief centre staff. Stephen noticed him early on, rarely talking, but smart and articulate whenever he did. An outsider—no match for the more street-smart kids at the centre—he could usually be found hidden away, sitting alone, while others played football or other games or simply chatted together.

"At the cottage, he's fine. Eats well, reads everything we give him, does his homework religiously—the perfect child. Unfortunately, nighttime is another matter. Not sure if we told you, but for the first couple of nights when we brought him home, we'd wake to find him sleeping on the carpet in our bedroom. He has his own room right next door to ours. Once or twice, when I checked on him in the evening after putting him to bed, and while Stephen and I watched television, I'd find him wide awake, staring terrified at the ceiling."

"Insomnia?"

"I thought so, but Stephen had a chat with one of his professional counsellor friends who said he might just be afraid of being alone at night, bearing in mind everything he's been through. Anyway, Stephen asked him if he wanted to move his single bed in with us—just for a short while until he's settled. Well, you'd have thought Christmas had come early. He jumped at the idea. Yes, it's not ideal for us, but he does sleep all through the night now. In the New Year, we'll try to start getting him used to sleeping in his own room again."

"You don't regret it, though, adopting him?" asked Martin.

"Good lord, no. He's a little diamond. I know he's only been with us since October, but I can't imagine life without him now. I just feel as though we're missing a trick with him if you know what I mean? Something simple that I just can't put my finger on. But no, to your question. I don't regret a single day."

"Good to hear. Sometimes I wish we'd adopted a kid when we had the chance—"

Martin stopped short and glanced apologetically at Gallagher.

"What I mean is, when we were both a little younger."

Gallagher knew Martin only clarified for his sake.

Well," began Anton, and Gallagher felt sure he had heard the innuendo in Martin's statement. "Think of yourselves as being the next best thing. Rauffy's favourite uncles. Which means you get to spoil him whenever you feel the need. And on that note, I need to ask you a favour. Stephen is due to speak at an international conference in Prague in April—a weekend thing. We told Rauf about it, and I could tell he wasn't enthused—it'll just be one boring talk after

another for two days, but I'm still going to be there to support Stephen, to be by his side. Anyway, Rauf listened patiently, as he always does, and then asked if he could go and stay with his two favourite uncles instead. Not sure how you would feel about that, given everything."

Gallagher stilled a moment, unsure how to reply. If Martin refused further treatment—

"We would love to have him," said Martin, grinning broadly. "I could think of nothing nicer. Now come on, chaps, let's not stay in here nattering all night. We've got people to meet and food to eat."

When Martin walked out chatting with Anton, Gallagher stayed behind, standing alone, and took a moment to centre himself. Making promises to look after Rauf when his whole world felt about to collapse felt dishonest. And yet, he knew what Martin was doing, trying to provide an air of normality.

As he began to shut the bedroom door, he glanced out of the bedroom patio windows, at lights already twinkling in the darkened sky, just in time to witness a shooting star.

CHAPTER 6



DR STEPHEN MILLER

Second only to his career as a medical professional, Stephen considered himself an accomplished epicurean and loved all things involving fine dining and the culinary arts, especially when it came to cooking with less mainstream cookbooks or programmes on the television where he could follow intricate recipes to create lavish meals for his guests. Arriving just after six, being met at the door not only by amazing smells of meat, spices, herbs and other sumptuous elements cooking but also by the man in the ridiculous Rudolph Christmas apron—Marcus Vine, the celebrated chef—and Stephen's Christmas had just gotten a whole lot better. Rauf stood between Stephen and Anton, as they said hello to the kitchen trio—Marcus, a handsome guy called Rudy stood over a chopping board helping with food preparation, and a slighter figure called Trevor, currently laying the table.

"Have my uncles arrived?" asked Rauf as soon as they had been introduced.

"Martin and Gallagher," clarified Anton.

"They most certainly have." Rudy halted his task of

chopping chunks of carrot and waved his knife out towards the corridor. "A few hours ago. In the middle bedroom at the top of the stairs, the big one. Yours, by the way, is down here, next to the kitchen. There's a bedroom next door for Rauf. And the next room along is a bathroom."

"Can I go up and say hello, Doctor Stephen?" said Rauf, excitedly, pulling on Stephen's sleeve. Even Rudy and Trevor turned to listen to Rauffy's request. "Please!"

"They might be changing, Rauf. Don't you think we should give them some private time?"

"Please."

Whenever Rauf asked so quietly, Stephen's heart tugged, and he always caved. Maybe his son had begun to know how to play him, but he knew if he said no, Rauf would accept Stephen's decision without a further word.

"I'll take him," said Anton, grinning, knowing Stephen well enough to realise he was about to agree. "Can you drop our bags off into our rooms? And pull out the Secret Santa presents."

"Put them under the tree in the living room," added Trevor. "And tell your friends to come down for drinks and canapés in the main room when they're ready. Everyone should be joining shortly."

"Did you hear that, Rauf," said Stephen. "Tell Uncle Martin and Uncle Gallagher everybody's about to gather by the big windows in the living room. To have cocktails and canapés."

As soon as Anton took Rauf away, Stephen remained there for a moment, watching the men work, feeling the need to explain.

"Sorry, but he hasn't seen his uncles since the beginning of December. They get along really well. So, do you need a hand in here? I'm considered a dab hand in the kitchen."

"Not necessary," said Marcus, smiling quickly and back at the pots on the stove. "Too many cooks, and all that. We've got just the right number of helpers, so we don't get in each other's way, and everything's just about covered. So unless you want to go and freshen up, why don't you head into the big room and keep my husband, Tom, company. He's playing bartender tonight."

Stephen stepped into the living room and stood there, admiring the space for a good few minutes, before walking around the room and assessing the decor and decorations. Apart from the grand, beautifully decorated tree to the right of the windows, carefully placed strings of lights and decorations around the walls, together with lamps strategically placed in corners, made the place feel homely and individual. Coming around the massive central fireplace, Stephen noticed a table laid out with an assortment of finger foods and a man behind the small bar checking a bottle up against an overhead light.

"Tom?"

The man, broad-shouldered and rugged, turned startled in the direction of the voice.

"Uh, yes," said Tom, confused. "Sorry, should I know you?"

Stephen laughed, then stepped forward and leant in to shake hands across the bar counter.

"Not yet. I'm Stephen. Friends of friends. I've been sent to keep you company while Marcus and his helpers prepare dinner, and while my husband and son go meet our other friends."

"You have your son with you?"

"Adopted. Six-year-old. His name's Rauf. You'll meet him soon enough. We had to bring him with us. He's a little clingy at the moment, so we had no choice."

"I have two daughters. Thirteen and sixteen. Not in the slightest bit clingy."

"Your own?"

"Yes. I used to be married. Their mother died when they were young."

"I'm so sorry. That must have been hard. Are they here?"

"No. I wanted to bring them but, apart from the fact they didn't want to come, I got outvoted. Probably for the best. The oldest is a treasure, but the younger one is—uh—getting to be a handful. So my parents are looking after them for Christmas and New Year so that Marcus and I get some personal time."

"With you behind the bar, and him stuck cooking in the kitchen?"

Tom chuckled while finishing cleaning a champagne glass, placing the flute along with a row of others. He had a nice laugh, Stephen decided.

"So what'll you have?"

"Do you have bottled beer?"

"I do. Heineken. And I think I'll join you."

"Champagne for me," came a voice behind them. "And look who I found in the kitchen, looking for you and causing havoc getting under Marcus' feet."

Anton strolled up with a broadly grinning Rauf in front, Anton's hands resting on Rauf's shoulders. The youngster, who had also changed into a festive red jumper, stopped in front of Stephen and hiked up his jeans to show his new shoes.

"Doctor Stephen. Look what Uncle Martin and Uncle Gallagher gave me."

Following behind them, Martin came into view. Without conscious volition, Stephen's medical eye gave him a quick assessment. Still a little underweight, he shone with

more colour, much less pallor to his skin than a few weeks ago, and more importantly, had a smile on his face.

"Did they now?" said Stephen, raising an eyebrow at Martin.

"An early Christmas present," Martin replied. "For being such a nice, polite young man."

After introductions were made, and drinks handed out—Gallagher opting for champagne, while Martin and Rauf had a tumbler each of mixed fruit juice—they made their way to the sofas. Rauf squeezed himself in between Stephen and Anton.

"When can we build a snowman, Doctor Stephen?"

On the drive north to Scotland, as soon as they had hit the snow-covered fields past Birmingham, Rauf's eyes had been glued wide open, his head swinging from side to side to look out the passenger windows. Unlike other six-year-olds, however, he asked no questions. Next to Stephen, Anton, ever sensitive to Rauf's inquisitiveness, filled in the gaps. Explaining how the weather often got colder the further north they drove, he also told him how, most years, snow rarely fell in the south until after the New Year, if at all. When he added that snow had already fallen where they were heading and asked if Rauf was ready to help build a snowman, the expression on Rauf's face had been priceless.

"It's a bit dark outside now, Rauf. Maybe tomorrow morning. Before breakfast. How does that sound?"

Rauf clearly liked the answer because he grinned broadly and took a sip of his drink.

"And," added Tom, with a wink. "I think you may have some volunteers to help if you want?"

Still unsure of strangers, Rauf looked up at Stephen who smiled and nodded.

"What do you say, Rauf?"

Rauf turned and grinned at Tom.

"Yes, please. Thank you, Mr Tom—"

Just as Rauf finished, a small bundle of curly fur came hurtling into the room, stopping at each pair of legs to sniff. Stephen had an immediate concern, had never seen Rauf around animals, and worried he might be scared. Once again, Anton second-guessed him, because he knelt to the floor and called the dog over. Rauf watched mesmerised as the dog came over and sat down in front of Anton, its tail thumping excitedly on the wooden floor. Anton scratched the dog's head and offered his hand to sniff.

"Sorry, guys," came a breathless voice from behind the couch. "The little rascal invited himself into Jaymes and Nathan's bedroom, finished causing mayhem, then came hurtling past me down the stairs. I'm afraid he gets a little excitable when there's a lot of people around. I'm Kieran, by the way."

"And I'm Kennedy," came another voice from behind him, significantly older than the other man. "And I take no responsibility whatsoever for the mutt. My husband was the one who insisted we bring him."

"His name's Ed. He's a rescue. Kennedy and his mother wanted to put him in a kennel for a couple of days, but I wasn't having that. So we brought him with us. Hope nobody's allergic to dogs. If he gets in your way, let us know, and we'll shut him on our room."

By now, however, Ed had charmed Anton and soon moved past him to Rauf. While the men around them welcomed and introduced themselves, Stephen kept a careful eye on the dog, ready to pull Rauf out of the way if he appeared spooked. Fortunately, although Rauf looked as wary and curious as Ed, and would not touch the dog, he

did not seem scared. Eventually, the dog—Ed—moved on to others in the room, and Stephen relaxed, and silently hoped one day he might stop worrying so much about his child.

Once Kieran and Kennedy had settled with a glass of champagne each, conversations bubbled around Stephen. Ed settled himself at Kieran's feet but kept looking up at Rauf. Rauf, too, seemed to notice, because he kept his eye trained on the dog, observing warily.

Tom's phone ringing took them all by surprise. At almost the same time, two new men joined the company. Stephen assumed them to be Jaymes and Nathan, the men Kieran had mentioned.

"Sorry, everyone," said Tom. "We promised we wouldn't bring our phones out tonight, but I wanted to say a quick hello to my daughters."

"Checking up on them?" asked Kennedy with a smirk. "Take the call, Tom. I'll get Jaymes and Nathan a drink."

"Oh yes, I forgot you've got kids of your own, Kennedy. Yes, a bit of checking up, too. Oh, and in case any of you need it," said Tom, thumbing to accept the call. "The WiFi password's on the chalkboard behind the bar. Hope you don't mind if I put this call on speaker."

Everyone fell quiet to give Tom the chance to chat. In doing so, Stephen and everyone else in the room could hear every word of the conversation.

"Hello, Katie. How are things there?"

"It's all good, Dad. Gran's doing her signature roast beef and roast potatoes for dinner. Not as good as Marcus', but I wouldn't dare tell her that. And I'm helping grandpa mix the Yorkshire pudding batter."

"And where's your sister?"

"In the front room, of course, watching that stupid dancing competition. No help at all."

"No, I'm not, I'm right here." Stephen noted the annoyance in the slightly younger, higher-pitched sounding voice. *"Katie's hogging the phone, as usual, Daddy."*

"Where's Marcus?" came the first voice.

"In the kitchen cooking up a storm. So everyone else has been banned from entering."

"Nothing new, then. Charlie's been watching television all day."

"I have not! Daddy, I think Katie's suffering from dementia or amnesia. I went to the mall with her and gran this morning to help with the Christmas food shop."

"And you were such a saint. She disappeared off for an hour, Dad. Supposedly to do Christmas present shopping. Then returned with a manicure."

"Play nicely, you two. Otherwise, I'll send Marcus back to keep an eye on you."

"Oh yes, because that has always been such a threat." This time, the voice of the other daughter, Charlie, came down the line. *"I've already got gran hovering over me every five minutes. She asked me to peel carrots and potatoes. Can you believe? I only just got my nails done and she wants me to peel vegetables. Gran is a born torturer. How did you ever survive living with her?"*

"Charlie, do not annoy your grandmother. You know you'll live to regret the day."

"Okay, and I'll help with the vegetables, but I am not washing up. Just telling you now, in case you get a call from she-who-must-not-be-named. These nails cost over twenty pounds. And I'm not ruining them before the New Year's party."

"What New Year's party?"

"It's okay, Dad." The time the calm voice of the other

daughter came down the line. *"We're all going, including Gran and Grandad. It's at Mr and Mrs Porter's house."*

"Fine. Just don't stay out too late."

"Duh, it's New Year's Eve. We have to stay out until at least after midnight. To see in the New Year."

"Okay then, but make sure you get an Uber or a taxi home."

"For goodness' sake, Dad. The Porters live three doors down. Do you even live here?"

Although pretending not to listen in, everyone in the room found difficulty in trying to stifle their laughter. Eventually, Tom signed off sending his love, wishing them both a great evening and promising to call in the morning. Somewhat dramatically, he accentuated the ending of the call by adding a deep sigh.

"Kieran. Kennedy. Welcome to a taste of what's to come."

"And let me guess," said Kennedy. "You're the bad cop, and Marcus plays good cop?"

"How did you guess?"

Kennedy peered over at Tom. "We may need to swap notes."

Everyone laughed aloud and raised a toast to raising kids. Just as Stephen lowered his arm holding the bottle of beer, he felt someone tug at his sleeve.

"Doctor Stephen."

"Yes, Rauf."

"I'm properly adopted now, aren't I?"

"Yes, we told you. You're officially ours now, Anton and I. We're your legal guardians."

"So when can I start calling you Daddy?"

In his profession, Stephen had learned to control his emotions, seeing them so often and openly displayed on his

patients' faces or those of relatives. Very little touched him these days. When he looked up into the smiling eyes of Anton, he felt tears sting his eyes.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes, please."

"But what are you going to call Anton?"

"Kennedy's boys call him Daddy, and Kieran Papa? How does that sound for us?" asked Anton.

"Papa Anton?" asked Rauf, appearing to try to tie the words on for size. "Yes, I like that. Daddy and Papa Anton."

Stephen bent down and pecked a kiss on Rauf's head, before raising his face to Anton and kissing him on the lips. As he brought his mouth away, he saw Anton had also teared up a little.

When Stephen looked around, he noticed Martin grinning over at him and nodding. Although out of earshot, he seemed to get the gist of their conversation with Rauf. As Stephen returned the smile, something clicked in his brain. By now, he should have heard back from the oncologist about Martin's health status. Seeing his friend looking healthier, he hoped Martin wouldn't have to go through another round of the chemo, especially after the way the treatment had affected him. While sitting there, he fired off a quick text message to his colleague, just as Trevor came into the room, and summoned everyone into the kitchen for dinner.

As he walked into the kitchen, Stephen marvelled at the transformation that had taken place. Bottles of red and white wines sat neatly on one countertop, while various bowls covered in foil sat on another. The table had been decorated with intermittent clusters of pine cones, fresh clumps of fir and sprigs of holly, each with a fat, cream coloured candle lit in the centre—simple, yet perfectly

fitting the occasion. Trevor stood at one end of the table, while Marcus and Rudy busied themselves arranging food onto platters on the kitchen counter.

"Welcome everyone to our Christmas tradition in Scotland," announced Trevor after everyone had entered, letting Rudy and Marcus continue without being disturbed. "As you can see, there are named place settings, so please take your seats. Nathan and Kieran have kindly offered to help me serve wine and other drinks in a moment. Water is already on the table, so help yourselves to that." Trevor waited until every sat down before continuing on. "Now I know some of you don't know everyone here, but I promise that by the end of this visit—or more likely by the end of this meal—you'll all be good friends. Funny really, and I might be wrong here, but I've always believed when we make special friends, their friends easily become our own, because we all value the same things. We're also fortunate to have Marcus Vine cooking for us." Without prompting a small cheer and a round of applause went up around the table. "Now I just want to make something clear here. This was not the reason for inviting him—he openly volunteered to cook—but for the rest of us, this is an added bonus."

"My pleasure, gentlemen," said Marcus, turning from the task at hand. "And just so we get this out in the open now, you'll all be doing the washing up later. Now serve these poor buggers some wine, for goodness' sake."

As the laughter died down, the three younger men stood and began filling people's wine glasses around the table. Only Martin, and, of course, Rauf opted for water. Rauf sat between Martin and Anton and chatted happily with Martin, the two of them like old friends. Stephen relaxed even more and raised his glass across the table to Anton.

Before long, with everyone seated, Marcus came to the table, removed his apron, and called for quiet.

"To start with, I've prepared a small bowl of winter soup, my take on something called Cullen Skink. I know it sounds like a Gaelic insult, but it's originally from Cullen—hence the name—a town in the North East of Scotland. In my version, I've used lightly smoked haddock with added shellfish, and I've thickened the soup with potato and cream. Even Tom's difficult-to-please daughters will happily enjoy a bowl. It's a great meal for a cold night. They're not big portions tonight, because there's a lot more food to come. So please tuck in and enjoy."

Stephen savoured every mouthful and could have happily eaten another serving. Even in restaurants, he had a habit of trying to guess ingredients, but a couple he could not even fathom. At some point, he needed to have a chat with Marcus. After collecting up the empty bowls, when Marcus and Rudy started to arrange the main course on the table, Stephen could see why they had started frugally.

Arranged the length of the table, the men laid plates of roast crispy pork loin rolled with apple stuffing, served with thick cider cream sauce. Piles of Hasselback potatoes sat like hedgehogs on a white platter, golden and crispy on the outside. Other vegetables included steaming white asparagus, minted leek and fresh pea mix, and chunks of roasted root vegetables including carrots, parsnips and swede.

After everyone had been served, barely anyone spoke around the table. Stephen smiled to himself. He knew the reaction well when diners quietly enjoyed the eating experience. After a sizeable pause at the end of the meal, dessert came in the form of steaming hot sticky toffee pudding with brandy cream, served with rhubarb or raspberry ice cream—or in Rauf's case, a little of both.

Over fresh coffee, platters of cheese and biscuits, and chocolate mints, Rudy quietened everyone, first to thank Marcus for his creation, but also to endorse Trevor's welcome.

"So we have another tradition at the lodge," said Rudy, standing at one end of the table. "As each of us receives our Secret Santa present, we say a few words this time of year about what we're grateful for, either during the year or for life in general. I suppose it's our version of a cross between Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"In which case," said Marcus, "to show us how it's done, I think we should begin with the hosts, Rudy and Trevor. This is, after all, their very own tradition. And if not for them, none of us would be here right now. Can someone pass down presents either ends of the table for Rudy and Trevor?"

After dessert, Stephen had helped Tom and Kieran bring all the Secret Santa presents from beneath the tree and pile them into the middle of the table. Rauf's eyes had been like saucers seeing the gifts in colourful wrapping paper piled high.

"Rudy, do you mind if I go first," said Trevor, sitting at the far end of the table and waving his flat-packed gift. Stephen had no idea what the present could be but guessed Rudy's to be a scented candle, the box precisely the right shape. "I'm dying to find out what this is."

"Go ahead," said Rudy.

Trevor carefully unwrapped the gold wrapping to reveal what appeared to be a calendar. Mystified, he showed the cover to those gathered, which displayed an empty changing room on the front with the word Crumbington across the top.

"Might be a good idea to have a look inside," said the man called Jaymes.

When Trevor did precisely that, his eyes opened wide, and he gasped aloud. This time when he turned the page around to show them, a strapping man, artfully naked, hung from a thick gym rope.

"And I bet you can't guess June's model?"

"Jaymes!" came his partner, Nathan's, voice

"No!" said Trevor, aghast, having done what Jaymes said. "Is that really—? Is that really you, Nathan?"

Of course, after that, everyone wanted to ogle the calendar, so Trevor had no choice but to pass the album around. Looking over Gallagher's shoulder, Stephen had to admit, the photographer had done an astonishing job, every model beautifully captured, and the one of Nathan absolutely stunning.

"So, while you're all perving at the men in the calendar," said Trevor. "I'd like to give thanks for being back here again. Rudy knows I'm a big fan of traditions—they provide stability even during difficult times. So I'm really pleased to see new faces as well as familiar ones. And, as I am sure Rudy will announce later on, you are all welcome to come back next year—"

"Actually," interrupted Rudy, leaving his seat and going down the table to stand next to Trevor. "I had some interesting news on this trip down. My father is planning on retiring next year, which means selling his freehold properties, including the lodge."

Trevor appeared crestfallen, and Rudy put his arm around his shoulders.

"You never said anything," he said, quietly, but Rudy simply kissed him on the cheek and continued.

"And it appears my father already has a buyer."

From the other end of the table, Kennedy Grey stood up.

"Yes, I've put a bid in already to buy the lodge. Which, if all goes well, means you are all invited back next year. I'm about to step down from my role as CEO, so need a project to keep me busy. This is the perfect solution. Kieran even works with a friend of ours who spends most of his time renovating older buildings. So I'm going to drag him in to help. I am not one for sentimentality, but there is a singular magic to this building, and I would hate to see just anybody getting their hands on her."

"Hear, hear," said Rudy, starting a round of applause. "Thank you, Kennedy Grey."

"And now it's your turn, Rudy," said Trevor, once the noise had died down and not letting Rudy go back to his seat.

Rudy ripped the paper from his gift to reveal a small box. However, inside the box, was an even smaller container. When Rudy eventually opened the last one, inside sat two shiny rings, side by side.

"What's this?" asked Rudy, his cheeks reddened.

Trevor immediately went down on one knee, his head barely visible above the tabletop.

"Will you, Rudolph Andrew Mortimer, consider marrying me?"

Rudy stared at the box, and then at Trevor, and then back at the contents before the message finally sank in.

"Of course, Trev. Yes! Yes, I'll marry you," said Rudy, pulling Trevor up from the floor and into his arms. Around the table, a cheer went up followed by a round of applause.

"Sorry it's taken so long," said Trevor, hugging Rudy tightly. "But I wanted to make sure you wouldn't get bored of me."

"Oh, Trev. Why would I—? Never in a million years."

After Rudy and Trevor, they went around the table, each couple, in turn, opening their gifts and saying a few words of thanks.

Kieran got a thick woollen hat which he promised to wear when helping Rauf to build a snowman; Kennedy received a large frame containing the front cover of *Business Weekly* and a photograph of him and Kieran at an official function with the heading 'Businessman of the Year.'

Marcus received a table game called Food and Drink, a type of trivial pursuits game which focussed primarily on food and drinks from around the world. Tom, for some reason, received a pair of red speedo trunks. Stephen had no idea why, but the gift seemed to amuse both him and Marcus.

Just as Jaymes opened his present, to reveal a porcelain apple-shaped pen holder and a set of whiteboard marker pens, and Nathan opened his to reveal a beautiful silver-framed photograph in monochrome, a family group shot, Stephen's phone buzzed in his pocket. When he looked down, he saw the caller and instantly stood from his chair.

"Sorry, everyone. Duty calls, and this wouldn't happen if it wasn't urgent. Please excuse me. I'm sure this will only take a few minutes."

Stephen stepped away from the table and walked into the empty living room, which felt strange now without the guests sitting around. As soon as the name had appeared on the display, Stephen knew the reason for the call. Martin's oncologist, and Stephen's good friend, someone he respected. Although he had heard hundreds of reports back in the past on any number of illnesses and had listened dispassionately, assessing the factual information, this time, he took a deep breath before answering.

"Merry Christmas, Param. Go ahead."

Throughout the call, he said nothing, letting the information flow and watching his own unsmiling reflection nodding in the large windows. As the call ended, he squeezed his eyes shut and put his phone back into his pocket.

Coming back into the kitchen, seeing the merriment all around, Stephen called out from the doorway to the living space.

"Martin?"

Martin, who had been listening attentively to Anton, with Rauffy on his lap, looked around to locate the direction of the voice. When he noticed Stephen, he smiled.

"Can I have a private word with you a moment? In the living room. Gallagher, perhaps you should come join us, too. Anton, can you keep an eye on Rauf?"

Immediately, Martin's face became calm, resigned, relieved almost, as he handed the young boy over to Anton. Gallagher appeared to freeze, the blood draining from his cheeks. Anton seemed to understand, nodded to Stephen and pulled Rauffy onto his lap. Some others around the table appeared mildly curious, but Nathan had secured many of the guests' attention showing the photograph he had received to those around him, tears in his eyes.

Without waiting for the two men to join him, Stephen turned and went to the living area. Sitting on one end of a sofa, he waited for them both to participate. Martin sat, but Gallagher vouched to stand.

"That call I just took was Doctor Goswami, your oncologist," Stephen explained. "Calling with your test results."

Once again, Martin smiled and nodded slightly. One of Gallagher's hands cupped across his mouth, his eyes closing. He appeared to be holding his breath.

"Look I'm not going to beat around the bush or go into details, Martin. You are in complete remission. The full set of lab tests came back and they found no further traces of the cancer. She's emailed me the full set of test results so we can go through those with you when you get back home, but essentially you are now cancer-free. Of course, you'll still need to go for three-monthly check-ups—"

"Oh, my God," came a whispered sob, not from Martin, but Gallagher. Abruptly, he leant forward and pulled Martin's head into his stomach, cradling him there. When Martin finally pulled his head away and turned to Stephen, his grin looked like the old Martin, happy and genuine.

"No more chemo?" said Martin.

"No more chemo," echoed Stephen.

"In which case," said Martin, rising and taking Gallagher's hand. "I'm thinking about having a glass of champers. But I'll need to check with my doctor to see if he approves."

"He approves," said Stephen, smiling back.

Back in the kitchen, oblivious to what had just transpired, everyone appeared to be getting more and more tipsy with Jaymes making a noisy fuss. When he looked up and saw them entering, he focused his attention on Martin and Gallagher. Stephen returned to the table and whispered what had happened in Anton's ear. Anton breathed out a sigh of relief, as Stephen returned to his seat.

"Come on, Gallagher," Jaymes was saying, with mock irritation. "We're sitting here waiting for you two to open your presents."

"Yes, please come and save us," said Trevor, rolling his eyes. "Jaymes' speech about being grateful this past year for strawberry favoured lube is hardly inspiring and certainly not very festive."

"Okay, okay," said Martin, laughing and taking his seat. "Let's open ours together, Gal, and can someone please pour me a large glass of champagne."

"That's more like it," said Jaymes, clapping his hands together and reaching for the bottle, while he watched a little too carefully as the two men opened their presents.

Stephen realised Jaymes and Nathan had probably chosen presents for Martin and Gallagher, and when they both pulled out and held up gaudy Christmas sweaters; one with a Christmas pudding face on the front, the other with a red-nosed reindeer, the whole table erupted into laughter.

"Speech!" shouted Jaymes.

Stephen had forgotten Martin and Gallagher already knew Jaymes and Nathan. He could see why Gallagher got on so well with Jaymes, the less inhibited of the two. After the all-clear news, Stephen wondered if Martin would opt up to speak, but instead, Gallagher rose from his seat.

"Thank you, whichever of you bought these—um—delightful woollen jumpers. You must know us both so well. We promise to wear them all day tomorrow," began Gallagher, then became quiet and pensive. "And as for giving thanks. Well, both Martin and I have much to be thankful for this year. It hasn't been the easiest of years, but we've been blessed to have such wonderful friends to see us through the worst times. As for next year? After the New Year has passed—and by the way, he doesn't know about this yet—I'm taking my husband on a long-overdue vacation starting in New York, and then on a cruise around the Bahamas."

Martin's gaze centred in on Gallagher, his hand reaching for his partner. What seemed like a generous gesture to those gathered, meant so much more to those in

the know. Martin had often talked to Stephen about the two of them taking a trip to the Caribbean.

"If this past year has taught me anything," continued Gallagher. "It's that we should never take anything or anyone for granted, that we should seize the opportunity to do what we want, whenever we feasibly can. So please raise your glasses—you too, Martin—and join us both in a toast to good health, good friends, and happiness. Oh, and shooting stars."

"To good health, good friends, and happiness," came the rousing response. "And shooting stars."

"So who's left?" said Jaymes, slurring a little. Ruddy cheeked, he'd most certainly had his fair share to drink, his voice rising above everyone else's. "There are still three presents in the middle of the table."

"Rauffy," said Martin. "How about you?"

"But I already have my new shoes."

"They're from your uncles," said Anton. "This one's your Secret Santa present."

"Why are Santa's presents a secret?" asked Rauf in all innocence.

"That's a very pertinent question, Rauf," said Jaymes. "And they're a secret, little man, because if we knew what we were getting, they wouldn't be a surprise, would they? So let's pass down presents for Rauf, Stephen and Anton."

Next to him, Anton opened his present to find a Doctors Without Borders tee shirt and card confirming a donation to the charity. Stephen shrugged at him. Although he wholeheartedly approved of the gift, he had no hand in choosing the item. Rauf opened his present to find a notebook-sized pack inside, which contained a mini tablet computer.

"Um, guys," said Stephen, while Rauf excitedly checked

out the back of the box. "I think this goes way beyond the price limit we set. It's very generous, but really—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Stephen," said Gallagher, grinning playfully. "Let an uncle spoil his nephew once in a while, won't you? And don't worry, parental controls have already been set."

Stephen shook his head. How could he possibly be annoyed with either of his friends? Instead, he sighed and began to unwrap the bulky package, which felt like a volume of an encyclopaedia. As anticipated, he pulled out a large book and turned to the front cover.

"Marcus Vine's Complete British Cookery. Third Edition."

"Signed by the author himself," said Marcus, from the end of the table. "I heard you fancy yourself as a bit of a chef, Stephen. And my telephone number's on the inside cover, in case you need to check any ingredients or cooking techniques with me. So how about a few words?"

"Let me do this, Stephen," said Anton, placing a hand on Stephen's shoulder and rising from his seat. "We'd like to thank Rudy and Trevor for inviting us here. To be honest, we were a little hesitant because of many things happening right now. But Trevor was right. We've only just met some of you this afternoon for the first time, but you already feel like friends, if not family. Stephen and I already have so much to be thankful for, but I know he agrees with me when I say that the best thing this year is having Rauf enter our lives. To me, it feels like our own little angel has descended from heaven to be with us. And I feel thankful for every day I wake to see his smiling face. Merry Christmas, everyone."

"Merry Christmas."

As the evening wore on, as laughter and conversation

continued around the sofas in the living room, Stephen looked down and noticed Rauf yawning once or twice, his eyes blinking, heavy with sleep. Anton saw too, because he looked across at Stephen, smiled and winked.

"Why don't we take you to your room for a rest, Rauf. Get you to lie down for a little while. You must be very tired. We'll just be down the corridor if you need us."

Rauf became alert then, his eyes sad and pleading.

"But can I still sleep in your room tonight, Daddy?"

Stephen's heart always broke when he heard the little lost voice when Rauf asked so politely for permission to do something, as though asking for the wrong thing might get him into trouble.

"Of course you can, little man. Our bed is huge, and there's tons of space between us. But we're going to stay up a little bit longer with the grown-ups. We'll come and get you when it's time for us to sleep if you're still awake. Is that okay?"

And there it was. The bright white smile to melt a thousand hearts. Without another word, Rauf jumped up from the sofa, gave a huge yawn, before holding his hand out to Stephen.

As the night gradually wore on, with Christmas songs playing from a speaker, everyone relaxed and enjoyed each other's company. When Anton disappeared to use the restroom, he returned five minutes later and stood in front of his partner.

"Stephen," he said, his face beaming. "You need to come and see this."

Anton led the way along to corridor to the small bedroom set aside for Rauf. Stephen noticed the door slightly ajar, as Anton stepped up quietly, put a finger over his own lips, and then moved aside to allow Stephen to look

inside. In the small room, Rauf lay curled up on his side, fast asleep. Behind his knees, also asleep, Ed had curled into a ball. They fit together perfectly like yin and yang.

"Problem solved, love," said Anton, leaning into Stephen. "Looks like we're going to have to visit the animal rescue centre in the New Year. Find our son the perfect New Year's gift."

Stephen put his arm around Anton and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Glad you came now?" asked Stephen.

"Best Christmas ever."

>>>> The End <<<<

>>>> Merry Christmas, One and All <<<<

AFTERWORD

All the characters in this short story appear in other full length works by Brian Lancaster:

Rudy & Trevor in *The Twelve Gays of Christmas* available on www.gayauthors.org

Kieran & Kennedy in *Companion Required* published by Pride Publishing

Jaymes & Nathan in *Naked Calendar* available on www.gayauthors.org

Tom & Marcus in *The Missing Ingredient* published by Dreamspinner Press

Gallagher & Martin in *Uninvited Guest* published by Dreamspinner Press

Stephen & Anton also in *Uninvited Guest* published by Dreamspinner Press

