

The book cover features a composite image. The upper portion shows two men: on the left, the back and shoulder of a shirtless man with a thin necklace; on the right, the face and upper torso of a man in a dark coat. The lower portion is a photograph of a dense cityscape at dusk or dawn, with buildings and a few lights visible. The author's name is centered in the middle, and the title is written in a large, elegant script below it. The publisher's name is at the bottom.

G.S. WILEY

The Nest

ASPEN MOUNTAIN PRESS

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Nineteen-year-old Jay McIntyre's main goal in life is to keep his younger siblings together and away from the Social Services, who he's certain will separate them if they know his mother left two years ago. Juggling two jobs and the responsibility of caring for three children, Jay's problems are compounded when Jess, his fifteen-year-old sister, begins to rebel and when an old enemy is released from prison and returns to his housing estate.

Overwhelmed and at the end of his rope, Jay is finally forced to seek for help from an unexpected source: Police Constable Brendan Cuddy.

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Chapter One

Jay saw the cop as soon as he came around the corner.

If it had been one of the regulars, Stiles or Bankhead or Kassam, Jay would have pushed Nico through the gate to play with Nancy's dogs until he'd moved on. If there was going to be a new guy hanging about he was going to have to get used to seeing Jay with Nico. Nico, for his part, was going to have to learn this guy was just as dangerous as the rest of the cops who came around here.

This policeman was tall, with dark hair and broad shoulders. He looked young, probably only a few years older than Jay, and he smiled when he saw them. Automatically, Nico reached for Jay's hand and squeezed hard.

"Hiya," the policeman said. He stopped in front of their house and waited for them to join him.

"Yeah, hi." Jay took the keys out of his pocket as they went up the path to the front door.

"Have you got a second?" The policeman didn't wait for an answer. "PC Cuddy. I'm new on the beat. I was wondering if you might have seen a bloke by the name of Aidan Beecher."

Bloody Aidan.

"Not lately." He didn't ask what Aidan had done this time or where PC Cuddy had come from or anything that might make the conversation longer than it had to be.

Cuddy looked down at Nico and smiled.

"Hi. I like your teddy."

Nico clutched his battered, one-eyed bear closer to his chest, burying its face in his burgundy school jumper. Nico was five years old and Jay had tried to get him to leave the bear at home now he was in school. Nico refused and Jay didn't have the heart to insist. If he was still carrying it when he went to college, that's when he'd put his foot down.

Nico said nothing and Cuddy turned back to Jay. "Is he your son?"

It was the first conclusion people jumped to when they saw them together. On this estate, it was usually the right one. "No. He's my little brother."

"Oh?" That put a spark of interest in the cop's eyes. "Are your parents in?"

"No."

"Any idea when they might be? I could come back."

"I wouldn't waste your time. Nico's dad hasn't been home in four years." Jay's dad had been away a lot longer than that.

"What about your mum?" Cuddy persisted.

Jay's heart beat a little faster but he kept his voice cool. He squeezed Nico's hand, warning him of the upcoming lie, and Nico squeezed back. "She's at bingo. Probably won't be in till midnight if she hits a lucky streak."

"Ah, well." Cuddy glanced around the street. "You'll let us know if you happen to see our friend Aidan, right?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"I'll be seeing you, then."

Hopefully not. He climbed the steps and let go of Nico's hand to unlock the front door. Nico watched Cuddy walking away until Jay said: "Let's go, mate," and let him inside.

The house was dark and cramped, a poky nineteen sixties semi-detached the council had assigned their mother when Jay was a baby. Jay did his best to keep it in halfway decent shape. He hung Nico's jacket up on a peg by the front door as Nico bounded into the house and onto the sofa. "Jay," he said, turning on the television. "Is that man a bad policeman, too?"

Jay hated saying it but he had to. When Nico was old enough to understand, they would straighten things out. For now, it was better to keep things simple. "Yeah, Nico. He is."

Nico nodded wisely. "Can I have fish fingers for tea?"

"Fish fingers? What about fish toes?" It was an old joke, but Nico giggled. "Fish ankles? Fish arms? Fish feet?" Jay sat on the sofa beside him, lifting up the giggling Nico and tickling his ribs until the teddy dropped to the floor and Nico stopped the game to pick it up.

* * * *

Brendan Cuddy had been on the police force for less than a year and he'd been working the beat around the council estate known as "The Nest" for less than two weeks. It was enough time for him to know how these things worked. He was completely unsurprised when no one seemed to have seen, met or even heard of Aidan Beecher.

It wasn't a serious case; Beecher was wanted for questioning with regards to some vandalism in the public toilets on the green. Brendan knew it wasn't worth getting frustrated over. He still ground his teeth as he pulled the police

car into the station car park. When he went inside, PC Penny Stiles immediately got up from her desk and prescribed, "Tea. Straight away."

She also found a packet of Penguin biscuits. They sat in the break room with their mugs and snacks beneath a large poster telling them "Video Piracy is a Crime." In case, Brendan thought, he'd been thinking of breaking into it as a sideline or something.

"It's the bloody Nest, right?" Penny guessed.

"Aidan Beecher's suddenly become the Invisible Man."

"Doesn't surprise me. Wait till you want to pick one of 'em up for shoplifting or drugs. Their own mothers'll deny ever laying eyes on 'em."

Brendan smiled. "Blood is thicker than water."

"Over there it is."

Brendan thought of the people he'd spent his afternoon trying to cajole into telling him something about Aidan Beecher. It was the last two he'd met that stuck in his mind: the teenager and the little boy with the teddy bear. "Do you know anything about a little blond guy? Cute little kid. He was with his big brother." Brendan thought back to what the teenager had said. "Nico, I think he called him."

"Oh, right," Penny said immediately. Brendan wasn't surprised; she was only in her late twenties, but she'd been working in this area for years. "The McIntyres. Mum's a drunk and the oldest girl's a bit of a Goth princess, but the rest of them are all right. Although I think Raj cautioned Jason for carrying a knife sometime last year."

"How many of them are there?" That was the first thing he'd noticed about the estate. Their parents might deny knowing them when they were in trouble, but nearly every house seemed brimming with kids.

Penny furrowed her eyebrows. "Just the four, I think. Jason's the eldest. He's got to be nineteen by now." Brendan felt surprisingly glad to hear the boy wasn't sixteen or seventeen. "Then there's Jess and the little ones are Zoë and Nicholas. Jason takes care of the family, mostly, what with his mother being in the state she is. He works at the CostSmart and the Ship and Anchor pub." She looked at him curiously. "Why do you ask? Has he done something?"

Brendan shook his head and sipped his tea. "Not that I know of."

Yet, anyway.

* * * *

Jay thought Nico had forgotten about meeting the new cop. He sat in front of the stove with his teddy by his side watching the fish fingers cook until Jay pulled them out and served them with a big spoonful of defrosted peas. Zoë came back from Brownies just as they sat down to eat. She entertained them with stories about her friends and some hilarious misunderstanding over applesauce in the school dinner line until Jay had to tell her to stop talking and eat her supper. She did, fixing him with a cold stare.

It wasn't until Jay was putting them to bed that Nico brought up the policeman again.

Zoë and Nico shared a bedroom at the front of the house. Jay wasn't sure what he was going to do when she got too old to share a room with her little brother. He hoped Jess would have moved out by then, maybe gone on to a university somewhere. He doubted it sometimes, unless she could find a school that offered a course in melodrama and eyeliner application, which seemed to be the only things she was remotely interested in.

"We met a new bad policeman today," Nico said as Jay tucked him in.

Zoë looked over from her bed on the other side of the room. "A new one?"

"A man. Like PC Bankhead. But taller." He looked at the bear perched beside his pillow. "He liked Teddy, though."

"Oh."

Nico put up his arms for a hug then lay down. As Jay went over to Zoë's bed, she looked at him as scornfully as an eight-year-old in *Beauty and the Beast* pajamas could look at anyone.

"You shouldn't tell him all policemen are bad," she hissed as Jay pulled up her duvet. "What if he gets lost in a shop one day and has to ask for help?"

"Zoë, you know what could happen if we get the police in here." They all knew it, Jay more than anybody. Zoë didn't argue but let Jay kiss her goodnight. "I need to go to work, so you two stay in bed, right?" He turned on the nightlight between their beds. "Jess will be home soon." He didn't know if it was true or not, but it sounded comforting to him. Zoë and Nico didn't seem bothered. Nico's eyes were already shut and Zoë, although obviously trying to stay awake, was heading the same way. "If there are any problems, you go to Nancy next door."

"I know, Jay," Zoë said, but her words were swallowed by a yawn. Jay left the room and went downstairs. He locked the front door behind him.

The Ship and Anchor was within walking distance of the house, but not close enough or cheap enough to be the local for most of the people who lived in the Nest. One of the past owners wanted to turn the Ship into a trendy club, so the upstairs had been made over with flashing lights and a DJ booth. The downstairs had kept its peeling, yellowed wallpaper, heavy wooden bar and horse brasses on the walls.

It was nine o'clock when Jay got there. The bar was empty, except for a few regulars at scattered tables.

"Slow night tonight, love," the regular barmaid, Val, said. She wiped down the counter that had obviously been wiped down many times before. "Hope you don't bore yourself to death."

She went into the back to get her coat and handbag, and Jay perched on the stool behind the bar. Slow was fine with him. It gave him a chance to sit down.

It didn't last long. Val was barely out the door when a group of drunk men in rugby shirts and shorts rolled in, ready to continue their party. Jay had just finished handing over their tray of lagers when a familiar person came in and sidled up to the bar.

"Hi, Jay."

Jay looked at Aidan Beecher. "Police are looking for you, mate."

"Yeah, I know." Aidan sighed like this was a terrible injustice he had to bear. "It's a stitch-up, I swear."

"Nothing to do with me. Just don't bring them round my place."

"No, you're all right." Aidan looked at him hopefully. "Give us a pint, would you? I'm a little short on cash right now, but I swear I'll make it up to you later."

Jay pulled the pint into the glass. He'd known Aidan since they were at primary school. He hadn't changed a bit, unless you counted cadging pints and cash instead of cadging homework answers and sweets. Aidan guzzled the pint then leaned in close. "Hey, do you want to make a little extra money?"

"No. And I really don't want to know how you plan to make it."

"Not me. Chris Wilkins."

Jay dried a glass and looked at the rugby players on the other side of the pub. They were throwing darts into the walls, the floor and everywhere else but the actual dartboard. "Chris is in prison." And it had been the happiest day of Jay's life when he'd gone there.

"Not for much longer. He's already got plans for when he gets out."

"I don't want to hear about them."

"Your loss, mate."

Jay was certain it wasn't.

Chapter Two

It was two days before that Brendan had been in the Nest. In the meantime, he'd been kept busy by shoplifters and lost children, feuding neighbours and an elderly lady who insisted gnomes were terrorizing her back garden. He didn't find any, but told her he'd call in an expert to help her deal with it. He put in an email to Carole Findlay-Jones at the Social Services and made a mental note to stop by after his shift one day to see if anything had been done for the poor woman.

Brendan didn't go back looking for Aidan Beecher. The graffiti on the public toilets had been cleaned up and Brendan had more important things to deal with. He couldn't stop thinking about the McIntyres.

Although he was still new at the game, he'd been with the police long enough to know to trust his instincts. When he had a free moment, he drove the panda car to the estate and parked at the end of Jason's road.

He saw a social worker first, not Carole but Philip Pradon, a self-important prick with a Mercedes. Brendan ducked and hoped Pradon didn't notice him. He didn't. He walked up to number twenty-eight and knocked, but left when there was no reply.

About fifteen minutes after Pradon drove off, the door to number twenty-eight opened and a girl came out. She was younger than Jason, probably about fifteen, and dressed in black, with dyed black hair and rings in her ears, eyebrows and nose. She was wearing a pair of long fishnet gloves. "The eldest girl's a bit of a Goth princess," Penny had said and Brendan assumed this was the princess herself.

She walked to the bus stop and sat on the bench. She had a satchel bag with her, decorated with badges and happy faces drawn in felt-tip pen with Xs for eyes and blood dripping from their mouths. Brendan watched until the bus pulled up. As it pulled away, he stopped himself from following.

He was losing it. He had enough actual troublemakers to deal with, especially on this estate.

Just as he was about to start the engine, a boy crossed the road in front of him. He was about Jason's age, with bright red hair and acne. He stopped dead in front of the car and looked Brendan in the eye. Then he took off running, sprinting down the pavement and rounding the corner.

In Brendan's experience, anyone who ran from the police usually had good reason to. Throwing the door open, Brendan leapt out of the car and ran after him.

Brendan tried to balance a daily jogging and exercise regime with his fondness for curries, chocolate and lager, but clearly the latter was winning out. He was breathless by the time he reached the next street but pressed on. He could see the kid at the end of the road about to leap over a hedge. Brendan was ready to give up when the boy made the mistake of looking back. He ran straight into the hedge and fell to the pavement, which was all it took for Brendan to make it the rest of the way. Trying not to cough up a lung, Brendan leant over the boy, wrestled his hands behind his back, and said, "Aidan Beecher, I presume?"

* * * *

Nancy Stewart and her family had lived next door to the McIntyres for as long as Jay could remember. She'd been friends with Jay's mum, Sheila, and although her own kids were grown now, Nancy still took in Zoë and Nico after school when Jay couldn't get away from work in time.

When he got back from his shift at CostSmart Tuesday afternoon, he went over to Nancy's and found Zoë and Nico at her kitchen table, eating chocolate digestive biscuits while Zoë told her about some science experiment gone wrong.

"And then," Zoë giggled, "the stuff foamed out of the beaker and all the way down the front of Mrs. Johnson's jumper. She was stained purple all day."

"Is that right, love? My goodness." Nancy laughed from her place beside the sink. She was a middle-aged woman, with dark hair she liked to style in unusual – sometimes startling – ways and had friendly laugh lines around her mouth. Sometimes, when he was younger, Jay had imagined she was their mother instead of Sheila. Life would have been much simpler.

She turned her smile to Jay as he came into the kitchen. She had two pencils in her hair today, holding it up in some kind of ponytail. "Look who's here, my dears."

Jay's brother and sister gave him a smile as Nancy said: "Why don't you get your schoolbags and things from the other room, and I'll ask Jay if you can have another biscuit before you head home?"

It was an effective bribe. Zoë and Nico bounded off.

"I hope they weren't too much trouble."

"They never are, Jay, darling." Nancy lowered her voice and moved closer. "I don't want to worry you, but a social worker was here earlier."

"Carole?"

"Philip Pradon."

Jay sighed. "Okay. Thanks." There was nothing else he could say. Pradon would be back, and they would be ready for him. As always.

"I saw a police car outside earlier this afternoon, too. It was about one o'clock." Nancy looked apologetic.

Jay tried to sound cool. "You're just full of good news today. What were they after?"

"I don't know," Nancy replied. "It was that new bloke PC Cully or Cuddy or something like that. He sat outside for a few minutes watching your Jess get on the bus, then that stupid Aidan Beecher came by and he took off after him." She smirked. "Boy was in tears by the time he brought him back to the car. I'm sure it's nothing, love, but your Jess hasn't been up to anything has she?"

"Not that I know of." Jay didn't know everything that Jess did. "I guess I'll have to have a word with her."

The kids came racing back, schoolbags in their hands. Nancy reached for the packet of biscuits and glanced at Jay, who nodded. He could hardly deny them now. She handed another biscuit to Zoë and Nico. "Run back home, dears. I just need a word with Jay and he'll be right along."

Jay expected another warning but when Zoë and Nico had gone, Nancy smiled. "Our Lisa's coming home from uni next weekend."

"Oh, yeah? That'll be nice." Jay suddenly felt awkward.

"If the two of you wanted to go to the pictures or out to supper or something, I'd be more than happy to sit in with the kids, don't you worry about that."

"Thanks very much, but I'm working at the pub all weekend."

"I know Lisa would be tickled pink to spend some time with you," she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You can't give your whole life to those kids, love. You're just a kid yourself. You ought to go out and have a bit of fun."

Jay had fun – with Zoë and Nico, and occasionally with Jess. They gave him all the fun he needed and all the fun he had time for.

"I'll think about it," he lied, because Nancy was a good neighbor. "Thanks again for keeping an eye on them."

"Don't mention it, dear." He could feel Nancy's eyes on him as he crossed the space between their houses and opened the door for Zoë and Nico.

"Nancy wants you to take Lisa on a date," Zoë said as she hung up her jacket and Nico ran off with his teddy under his arm. "You should go. Lisa would be an excellent girlfriend."

"Oh, yeah, Zoë? What makes you think that?"

Zoë looked thoughtful. "She has nice teeth."

* * * *

Brendan had never dealt with anyone who cried as much as Aidan Beecher. Not even that girl who'd wrecked her parents' new Jaguar while driving without a license had bawled quite so loudly, copiously and incessantly. Finally, after an incredibly long car ride back to the station followed by an even longer attempt to have a conversation in an interview room, Brendan broke down and said, "Look, mate, it's just a vandalism charge."

It was like turning off a tap. "In that case," Aidan said, his voice calm and his tears dry, "I ain't saying nothing till I got a solicitor here."

Brendan wasn't surprised that he'd had dealings with solicitors before.

The man, a harassed young guy with glasses and a Palm Pilot, showed up an hour later and Brendan spent the rest of the shift mired in paperwork.

It was after seven o'clock in the evening before he left the station. Usually, he would have called it a day and headed home. Today, though, still smarting from nearly having been outrun by a guy who looked like he got most of his exercise from an X-box, he headed for the gym.

It was at least a month since he'd been. It was fairly busy, even at this time of night. Brendan recognized a few of the regulars, including a few overly muscled men who were flexing in front of the mirror exactly where Brendan had left them a month earlier.

He changed and climbed onto one of the stationary bikes. There was a television in front of him, playing some inane sitcom. After about twenty minutes, just when he was about to move onto something else, there was a movement beside him. A well-built blond man climbed onto the bike beside him.

"Hi, Rowan." Brendan was certain Rowan had already seen him, but he acted surprised, raising his eyebrows and grinning when he looked at Brendan.

"Brendan, hi. I haven't seen you for a while. Been keeping busy?"

"You could say that." And it would, Brendan thought, be putting it mildly.

Rowan knew that. He was a casualty ward nurse; he understood about job-related stress.

They rode together in silence for a while. Finally, Brendan let his wheels spin to a stop and got down with a cheerful, "Well, see you later," to Rowan, who seemed to be absorbed in the television sitcom.

Brendan did another half an hour on the treadmill and then a little while on the weights. He hit the showers; when he came out, Rowan was sitting on a bench in the locker room, tying his shoes.

Brendan opened his locker and got dressed, pulling on a long-sleeved T-shirt and buttoning his jeans. Rowan was still there, doing something with his gym bag. When Brendan turned around, he said, "Hey, I was just thinking, if you wanted to go for a pint or something, I'd be up for it."

They'd had pints before. They'd dated for a year, and while Brendan had enjoyed it, there were reasons they'd stopped. Not least of which was Brendan's job.

Brendan wanted to say no but the look on Rowan's face was so hopeful and it had been a long time. A pint was just a pint. It didn't have to mean more or lead to anything else. "Yeah, all right. Just a quick one, though, I'm on shift again in the morning." He slung his bag over his shoulder and followed Rowan out of the locker room.

Chapter Three

Zoë spent the rest of the evening enumerating reasons why Lisa Stewart would make a good girlfriend, including her height, dress sense, love of the color blue and the fact she'd once let Zoë use her "Passionberry Pink" lipstick. Jay was more than ready when it came time for her to go to bed. Since he had a rare night off from the pub, he waited up for Jess after Nico and Zoë were asleep. It was after midnight before she came in.

He was in the darkened sitting room watching TV when he heard her key in the lock. He waited until she was inside before he said, "Nancy said you were skiving off school today."

Jess jumped and Jay felt a glimmer of satisfaction. She recovered quickly, and put her hands on her hips. "Yeah? Well, Nancy's a nosy old bitch."

"She helps me with the kids, which is more than you do." Her heavy makeup was obvious even in the low light. She was his little sister but at the moment she looked like the wannabe vampire kids who showed up at the CostSmart looking for razor blades.

"Go to hell." She sneered at him. "I'll do what I like. It's none of your business."

"It is if you're bringing the police around here."

"That ain't got nothing to do with me."

"Nancy says the new PC was sitting outside in the car this afternoon. He watched you get on a bus."

"That's not my fault. How am I supposed to know what he was doing here?"

Jay didn't argue that point. "I'm responsible for you, Jess, but if you put the rest of us in danger, I'll have to protect Zoë and Nico."

"Ooh, that's dead scary." Jess rolled her eyes. "Fuck you, Jay." She stomped upstairs, her heavy boots loud on the steps.

They'd been friends once. Jay remembered it vaguely. He'd been four years old when she was born, the precious little sister he'd been anticipating for months. Jess' father hadn't been in the picture much longer than Jay's. From the beginning, Jay had decided he would be Jess's big brother and father all in one. It had worked well for a few years. It was when he'd been forced to be her mother as well that things had started to go down hill.

"Are the police coming for Jess?" a small voice asked. Nico stood at the bottom of the stairs, his teddy dangling by one leg from his hand.

"What? No, of course not, Nico." Jay went over and picked him up. Nico was getting big and Jay had to juggle him against his hip until he could hold him comfortably. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I don't want the police to get Jess," he said, putting his arms around Jay's neck. "Or you or Zoë."

"They won't," Jay promised, carrying him back to bed. "I'll protect you." That was Jay's job, the only worthwhile thing he'd ever done in his life, and there was no way he was going to stop now.

* * * *

Brendan wasn't used to waking up next to someone else. It was a shock when he opened his eyes in his sunlight-filled bedroom and saw Rowan lying beside him. Damn. He tried desperately to remember how they'd come to this. Then he moved and the splitting hangover headache brought it back to him.

"Good morning," Rowan sounded as uncomfortable as Brendan felt.

"Yeah. Hi." Brendan forced himself to sit up and look at the clock. Half an hour until he was due on shift at the station. "Listen, I've got to run. I mean, if you want to hang about, that's fine, but..."

"I'll get going." Rowan was already picking up his clothes and Brendan felt a flash of guilt.

"Don't let me rush you. If you want to get cleaned up, or have breakfast or something..."

"I should go home anyway," Rowan said. "I need to get changed for work." He'd already pulled on his shorts and jeans. There was a silence, and as it dragged into awkwardness, Rowan went on. "Things didn't work out last time, Brendan. It'd be mad for us to try it again."

"Right. Mad." Even as he said it, he remembered laughing with Rowan over their pints at the pub, coming back here for a nightcap and being swept back into what they'd left eighteen months earlier. "We're much better as friends."

"I know," Rowan said. There was another pause, and this time Brendan broke it.

"But if you ever wanted to get another drink or something, I could probably find the time."

Rowan smiled and stopped fastening his shirt, his hands hanging mid-button. "Are you free this evening?"

When he got into the station, Penny was waiting at Brendan's desk. He was convinced everyone in the station must know what he'd been up to the night before, but no one looked at him any differently. Even Penny didn't say anything except, "Got some news for you."

"What's that, then?" Brendan sat at the desk, moving the bobble-headed bobby, a long-ago gift from Rowan, to one side.

"You're not going to like it. DS Barkley nearly shit a brick when he heard."

"They're going to stop selling the shepherd's pie in the canteen?"

Penny laughed. "Worse than that." She waited while Brendan logged on to his computer, then she leaned over and used his mouse to bring up a picture of an ordinary-looking tough guy with a tattoo on his neck and a stud through one eyebrow.

"Fetching," Brendan said.

"Christopher Wilkins. Really nice guy, as you can imagine from this charming picture. Been inside for just about a year."

"And he's getting out?" Penny nodded. Brendan assumed this would have something to do with them, otherwise he wouldn't be hearing about it. He waited for Penny to continue.

"He's got family in the Nest, so he'll be our problem soon. You'll be pleased to know, him and your boy go at each other like a couple of rabid dogs every time they get the chance."

"My boy?"

"Jason McIntyre. I don't know why, it's something from years back, but they can't stand each other. That's why Raj picked McIntyre up last year for carrying that knife." She sighed. "So that'll be another little bundle of joy thrown our way."

"Right." Brendan looked at the photo, trying to commit the face to memory. If Penny was right, he was pretty certain he would come to know Christopher Wilkins very well in a very short amount of time.

"Maybe," Penny went on, "we ought to have a word with Jason before Chris gets back."

* * * *

If Jay had to choose between them, he preferred the job at CostSmart to the job at the Ship and Anchor. At CostSmart, while he occasionally had to deal with dense customers who couldn't find a tree in a forest let alone a bottle of shampoo or a roll of dental floss in a supermarket, most of the time he was left alone. Stacking yogurts in a fridge and mopping up broken jars of tomato sauce wasn't exactly stimulating, but it was better than throwing out drunks and cleaning up puke.

He was kneeling in front of the big dairy case, arranging cartons of milk, when PC Stiles and the new guy, PC Cuddy, came up behind him. He ignored them at first. For a while, they stared at the cottage cheese and the sour cream like it held the secrets to the universe. Then Penny Stiles asked, "You all right, Jason?"

And he knew he wasn't.

"How can I help you lot, then?" He couldn't, but he was supposed to ask. It was printed right there on his apron.

PC Cuddy answered. "We've heard Chris Wilkins is coming back. PC Stiles tells me you haven't exactly gotten along in the past."

What's it to you? The question was on the tip of Jay's tongue, but he bit it back. "Yeah, well. You'd have to speak to him about that."

It was Chris who caused problems, Chris who wouldn't leave him alone. Chris who made him do things he knew were stupid, like get nicked for carrying that bloody knife because he felt like he had to.

"We thought we'd speak to you first," Cuddy went on. Jay glanced at him, then back at the milk. He wasn't a bad-looking guy. Big and strong, the kind of build Jay liked and knew he would never achieve, and his face was handsome. Not, of course, that Jay was noticing that kind of thing.

"We know you're the more reasonable one," Stiles continued. "You're a hardworking guy. We can see that right now." There was a movement at the end of the aisle and Jay looked up. The assistant manager was there, with his short-sleeved white shirt and skinny tie, standing between two racks of Extra-Tastee Potato Crisps and looking in their direction. "Look," Jay hissed, "Move along, would you? Please? You're going to get me in trouble."

The last thing he wanted was for his bosses to see him talking to the police and getting ideas about what he might do in his spare time.

"If you let Wilkins bait you into doing something stupid," Stiles continued, "You will be in trouble, mate. We'll nick you just as fast as him and you won't be getting any lenient treatment, trust me."

"Okay, fine." Jay tried not to sound desperate. The assistant manager was still there, pretending to straighten bags of crisps. "Just leave it out, would you?"

Cuddy reached past him suddenly and took two containers of strawberry-banana yogurt from the shelf. "Thanks, Jason." He smiled. "We'll see you around." They left, but the assistant manager didn't.

Bloody typical. Anger was suddenly rising in Jay's chest. He was working hard, trying to support his family. That was more than half the parents in the Nest ever did, and the police were after him. Not after Chris fucking Wilkins, who'd never done an honest day's work in his life, but after him.

He picked up another carton of milk, but it slipped out of his hand and crashed to the floor in front of a woman and her two little kids. A pool of milk leaked out and one of the kids jumped happily into it as her mother shrieked at her to stop.

Jay glanced down the aisle, but the assistant manager was gone. He sighed and went to get a mop from the back room.

Chapter Four

After seven straight days of shifts, Brendan was looking forward to a day off. He didn't know whether Rowan was on-shift that day or not and he'd made a point of not asking. He liked Rowan but he really needed a day to himself.

Which was why, naturally, his mobile phone rang at eight o'clock in the morning on his day off and his mother said: "I'm in town, Brendan, love. Do you have time for lunch?"

Victoria Bannister was, in a word Brendan rarely used for fear of succumbing to a stereotype, fabulous. There was no other way to describe her. She worked at a fashion house in London. While that meant Brendan had spent much of his childhood as her carefully dressed accessory, it also meant she had been as nonplussed as it was possible to be when he came out of the closet.

She was less supportive of his career choice and as they sat on the patio of a café in town, she said, "Are you sure you won't consider coming to London, dear? There are so many exciting opportunities there. You don't need to spend your life as a suburban plod."

"I like my job, Mother." Victoria had never been a "Mummy."

“Ah, well. I suppose there is something to be said for a man in uniform.” As she said it, Brendan noticed her eyes scanning the people at other tables. She was out of luck. Apart from an elderly married couple and a young teenager with his girlfriend, the tables were occupied by small groups of women. Even the staff was mostly female.

She sipped her tea and looked up at him from beneath her astonishing false eyelashes. “A little birdie tells me you’re seeing Rowan again.”

“What little birdie is that?” No one knew about them; Brendan had made sure he was discreet, and not only because he wasn’t ready to be outed on the job. “Did Rowan tell you?”

Victoria gave what Brendan knew she thought of as a mysterious smile. It looked more like she’d eaten something that didn’t agree with her. “Rowan and I were always close, my dear. He is a lovely boy. I’m so glad you’re trying to make it work.”

Brendan didn’t know if that was what he was doing. He hadn’t discussed it with Rowan and he certainly hadn’t expected to be discussing it with his mother.

“It’s none of your business.” Before he could say more, the waitress arrived with their food. Victoria picked daintily at her green salad as Brendan took a large, consoling bite from his double-decker hamburger.

“Is that really wise for a man in your job?” She asked, looking critically at his plate of chips. “I mean, what if you needed to run down a criminal on a moment’s notice?”

Brendan took another bite and refused to remember how difficult it had been to chase Aidan Beecher through the Nest.

“Anyway,” Victoria continued. “I simply must have you and Rowan down one weekend. Just let me know which dates work for you. We’ll have a lovely

time. I've got a marvelous new friend with a houseboat on the Thames; he throws the most wonderful parties."

"Mother."

She batted her eyelashes with false innocence. "Yes, darling?"

There was a lot Brendan wanted to say to her. As usual, all he came out with was: "How long are you in town?"

* * * *

Mornings were difficult in the McIntyre household. For someone so small, it was fiercely difficult to get Nico out of bed in time for school. Zoë, on the other hand, couldn't wait. Often, when Jay got up at his usual quarter-past six, she was sitting on the sofa, watching breakfast television in her school uniform and crooked ponytails. Jay had long since given up trying to get Jess up in the mornings. He now resorted to banging on her bedroom door four or five times before turning on a CD player full blast outside her door.

The mornings when Jay had an early shift at CostSmart were the worst. This morning he was rushing about the kitchen, trying to find Nico's missing socks and keep Zoë from pouring milk down her jumper when there was a knock on the door.

If it was Philip Pradon or another social worker, Jay didn't know what he was going to do. It wasn't. Instead, when Jay flung open the front door, he came face-to-face with Nancy Stewart's daughter Lisa.

Suddenly, Jay wished he had spent less time dressing Nico and more time dressing himself. "Hiya, Lisa." He pulled his dressing gown shut over his boxer shorts.

"Hi." Lisa smiled. She was a pretty blonde girl, the same age as Jay. They'd gone to school together from primary to sixth form college, although Lisa had

always run with a smarter crowd than Jay. "Mum wants to know if you need her to watch the kids before school."

"Yeah. Thanks. We're just on our way over."

Lisa looked past him into the house. "Can I come in?"

Again, he wished he'd taken more time to clean it. "Yeah, sure." He stepped backwards and tripped over a pile of schoolbags and homework in the entryway. As he stumbled and righted himself, he saw Lisa grin.

"How's uni, then?" he asked going back into the kitchen. Zoë had started to eat her corn flakes but she was spending more time reading the back of the box than spooning the cereal into her mouth. Jay removed the box from the table, took the newly popped toast out of the toaster, and set it on the plate in front of Nico, buttering it and cutting it into triangle halves the way he liked.

"Busy." Lisa looked around. "But not as busy as you, it seems."

Lisa was one of the few people who knew about Jay's situation. Nancy knew, of course, and Jay could hardly ask her to keep it a secret from her children. But Lisa was trustworthy, like her mother, and Jay had never worried about her giving the game away. "Well, you know how it is."

"I don't, Jay. I admire you." She smiled encouragingly.

Jay wasn't interested in her. He had told Nancy the truth, partially anyway, when he said he didn't have time to date. He had two jobs and three kids to look after. By the end of the day, he was so exhausted he didn't want anything other than pass out, preferably in his bed but the sofa would do. If he had been able to go out with someone, it wouldn't be Lisa or any of the girls he'd known at school. They weren't his type.

For a brief, inexplicable moment, the self-satisfied face of the new copper, Cuddy, flickered in Jay's mind. Then Nico demanded, "Jay! Where's my teddy?" and the image disappeared.

Lisa found the teddy lodged beneath the television and took both of the kids back to her mother's. Jay showered and dressed, pulling the green CostSmart apron over his T-shirt and trousers. He banged on Jess's bedroom door as he passed and stopped when it swung open at his touch.

"Jess?" He couldn't remember the last time she hadn't locked her door. He poked his head into the room. Beneath the "My Chemical Romance" poster, her bed was rumpled, unmade and empty.

* * * *

"You told my mother we're back together?" Brendan had meant to lead up to it gradually but he couldn't help himself. The words were out of his mouth as soon as Rowan came through the door.

Rowan looked surprised, but he tossed his gym bag into the cupboard by the front door. It was Brendan's flat, but more and more of Rowan's things seemed to be migrating over. "I sent her an email, yeah. Sorry." He didn't look sorry. "I mean, I like her and I thought it wouldn't matter. You didn't seem to have any problem with her knowing last time."

"Things are different now." Last time, Brendan had been a student, finishing his sociology degree and wondering what he was going to do with his life. Now he was a uniformed police officer. He had a different standard to maintain.

"Because of your job?" Rowan asked.

Brendan sat on the sofa. His mother had tried many times to get him to redecorate but he liked the beige walls, the old, comfortable brown sofa and the worn carpets. The only concession he'd made to Victoria's tastes was a painting she'd given him, a bold abstract in yellows and blues that hung above the sofa. That wasn't enough to keep her from staying in a hotel when she came to town.

This trip was half business anyway and she had left after lunch to do some business with a fabric supplier on the industrial estate. Brendan had come home to two messages and an email from Rowan, wondering if he had the afternoon off.

"The job is part of it," Brendan replied. *A large part, but not all.*

Rowan obviously knew that. "Do you regret us getting back together?"

Yes.

"No." Rowan sat beside him. His expression was uncertain and Brendan felt a surge of sympathy for him. "I like you, Rowan. You know that."

Rowan was anything but stupid. "But?"

"But, we broke up for a reason, right?" Several, actually. They were different people. They liked different things. They wanted different kinds of relationships. "Nothing's really changed since then."

"It has for me." Rowan looked at him meaningfully, although Brendan wasn't sure what he meant. Until he said, "I love you."

Shit. But he put his arms around Rowan and hugged him close.

Chapter Five

Jess's best friend was Aneesa Chaudhry. She lived with her parents on the other end of the estate. When Jay got to their house, she was just leaving for school.

"I haven't seen Jess," Aneesa said, glancing at the house. The net curtains on the window twitched and Aneesa turned back to him. "Do me a favour and piss off, would you? My parents'll go spare if they see me talking to a white bloke."

Jay ignored her. She was wearing black nail polish and bright purple eyeshadow as well as half a dozen rings in each ear. Her parents couldn't be that strict. "You don't know where she might be?"

"No. She never told me nothing."

She tried to sidestep him but he cut her off. "Aneesa, it's important. Jess might be in trouble."

She sighed as only a teenage girl could. "Ross Duncan, all right?"

"Who's that?"

"Some bloke we met at a club in town. A DJ. But that's all I know, Jay. I swear." Jay let her go. She skipped down the road like a kid and Jay went to the person who was bound to know more.

Aidan was still in bed when Jay got to his house. His father, a sweaty old man in a pair of stained boxer shorts and a yellowed string vest, answered the door. "Aidan?" For a second, he looked like he didn't know who Jay was talking about. Then he spat onto the dying flowers beside the front door and said: "Gimme a minute."

As he waited in the dim hallway, Jay glanced at the time on his mobile phone. There were twenty minutes until he was due to start his day at CostSmart and he rang the shop.

Amy at the front desk picked it up. "Good morning, CostSmart."

"Listen, Amy, I might be in a little late today."

Amy was not the most flexible of people. General CostSmart gossip had it that her three illegitimate children had been conceived on tight schedules. "It says on the schedule you're due in at half-past eight."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm having some problems at home. With my mum. I'll be in as soon as I can, all right? It's just..." He imagined the assistant manager looking for him and checking his watch. "If anyone asks, tell them it's an emergency, okay?"

She made a noncommittal sound and Jay rang off. If Jess wasn't already lying dead in a ditch somewhere, he was going to kill her.

Aidan eventually wandered downstairs, in a Megadeth T-shirt and striped pajama bottoms. He yawned, showing Jay a mouthful of teeth stained almost the same yellow as the walls and said: "Yeah? What do you want?"

"Who's Ross Duncan?"

Aidan blinked. "What?"

"Jess didn't come home last night. Aneesa Chaudhry told me she was with Ross Duncan."

Aidan ran a hand through his disarranged blond hair. "He's a DJ at Elliptical. Scottish bloke. From Edinburgh or something."

"Where does he live?"

"He's got a flat in town. But are you sure..."

"Get dressed, Aidan. Quickly." Aidan stared at him like he was mad, but went back upstairs. When he returned, he was wearing a stained jumper and jeans and they headed for the bus stop.

* * * *

When Brendan went back on shift Sunday afternoon, Penny was already there, sitting with a cup of tea and a digestive biscuit.

"Hiya." She smiled when Brendan came in, straightening his uniform.

"Hi, Penny."

"Cup of tea?"

Brendan shook his head. "No, thanks."

"Did you enjoy your days off?"

"They were all right." Victoria had insisted on taking Brendan and Rowan out for supper on Thursday night. She had gone back to London on Friday, but not before repeating her offer to have them down one weekend to see her friend's "fabulous houseboat on the Thames." Rowan, of course, was all for this. "We'll let you know as soon as we get our schedules sorted," he promised and Brendan immediately decided he would be working every weekend from now until the end of time.

Rowan stayed over at Brendan's flat on Thursday and again on Friday.

"I'll give you a ring later," Rowan promised when he left on Saturday, holding onto Brendan's shoulders and kissing him like they were parting for good. Despite Rowan's theatrics, Brendan felt about as much passion as he did when he kissed his mother or his elderly aunts.

"I saw you in town on Friday," Penny went on, munching her biscuit. "You were coming out of a shop on the high street. I would have stopped, but my friend Karen was driving and she was in a rush to get to the cinema." Penny paused. "That bloke you were with was pretty cute, though. Is he single?"

There was a mirror on one of the station walls, covered in various football team decals. Brendan could see himself blush. "Not exactly."

He glanced up and saw Penny looking back at him. There was a long silence. Penny drank her tea and said, "There's a pub quiz night this Tuesday. You should come; it's always loads of fun."

"I don't think I'm really..."

"You could bring your friend," she continued. "I'm sure everyone would like to meet him."

"I'm not so sure they would."

"I'd make sure of it." She stood up and took her cup over to the sink. Brendan watched as she rinsed it out with a squirt of washing up liquid and placed it on the drying rack. "Shall we go and see what adventures await us today?"

* * * *

"This is the place," Aidan said. As soon as they got off the bus, he brought Jay to a warren of flats in a rough area of town. Once they got there, Aidan couldn't remember exactly where Ross Duncan lived. They circled tower block

after tower block until Aidan stopped in front of one beige building, covered with graffiti, and said, "This is it."

"You're sure?"

Aidan nodded. "I came to a party here once."

Jay strode up to the heavy metal front door. It was locked. "Have you got his phone number?"

Aidan dug around in his pocket for a moment and produced his mobile phone. While he scrolled through his contacts, Jay took a step back and looked up. The building was twelve stories high, the sheer concrete broken only by dozens and dozens of small square windows.

"He's not answering," Aidan said, putting away his phone. Jay glanced at the time. Twenty past nine.

"Fuck it." If Jess wanted him to leave her alone, then that's what he would do. He had work to do; he had the kids to look after. If she wanted to waste her time with the likes of Ross Duncan, then why should he care? "Come on, Aidan. Let's get out of here." The words were barely out of his mouth when the front door swung open and Jess appeared in the doorway, her schoolbag over her shoulder.

She stopped dead when she saw Jay. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Jess turned around and took off running, back inside and up the stairs. Jay grabbed the door before it swung shut and followed her, stomping up the concrete steps.

He caught up with her on the second landing. There was random spray-painted graffiti on the cinderblock walls, gang symbols and assorted swear words and it smelled like piss and puke. Jay had to try hard not to gag as he grabbed Jess by the arm and swung her around.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped, with the nerve to sound annoyed.

Jay took a deep, calming breath, and gagged that time. "What do you think I'm doing here? Aneesa said you were fucking around with some DJ."

Jess looked at him defiantly. "So what if I am? It's none of your business."

"You're fifteen years old, for Christ's sake."

"And you're nineteen," she spat back, like that was some kind of argument. "You can't tell me what to do. You're not Mum." Jess winced and looked down at Jay's hand gripping her arm. "Ow, Jay! You're going to hurt me." For a brief moment, Jay would have liked nothing more.

But that wasn't him. Violence was the trademark of his father and Jess's father and just about every man their mother had brought into their house, but it wasn't Jay's. He released his sister, noticing the white marks his fingers had left on her arm. A second later, she took off running again.

Jay didn't follow her. Instead, he sat on the filthy concrete step and put his head in his hands.

Chapter Six

“Right, then,” PC Rajinder Kassam said, as they found a table in the corner of the busy Ship and Anchor pub. “Rules are, newbies get the first round, have to do any forfeits involving the removal of clothing, and have to answer any and all questions pertaining to the Royal Family, nautical terms, or proper grammar.”

“Well, I can get the first round,” Brendan offered, squeezing into a seat at the back of the table. Rowan sat beside him and Penny’s busty friend Karen, in an extremely tight top and skirt, sat on the other side. “I’m not so sure about anything else.”

“Oh, I’m sure you could manage the forfeits,” Karen replied suggestively, her eyes skimming his body. When Penny had arrived at the pub with her friend, Brendan had wondered, briefly, if they might have something in common with him and Rowan. But Karen had soon put a stop to any mental speculation about her sexuality by loudly eyeballing every man in the room, including Brendan, Rowan and the elderly quizmaster.

“My special subjects are rare diseases and nineteen nineties footballers,” Rowan put in, grinning.

“Ooh, sounds kinky,” Karen squealed.

“Well, that’s all right, then.” Raj smiled. “None of the rest of us has a special subject at all.”

“Except drinking,” another officer, Dave Bankhead, put in. It was just the six of them: Raj, Dave, Penny, Karen, Rowan and Brendan. “My Steph won’t come out to quiz nights since I embarrassed her last time. Speaking of which, Brendan, mate, mine’ll be a pint of bitter, if you please.”

The pub was jam-packed. Brendan hadn’t been to a quiz night since he was at university, but it was clearly popular. There were easily a dozen tables of people eager to play, laughing and joking with each other with their pencils and their drinks at the ready.

It was crowded around the bar as well. Brendan had to wait a few minutes before a space opened up and he moved forward only to come face to face with Jason McIntyre.

“Hi.” Brendan didn’t know what else to say. After leaving Jason stacking shelves at the CostSmart the other day, he had felt a little guilty. Maybe he and Penny shouldn’t have accosted the poor guy at work. But when he’d mentioned that to Penny, she’d just said: “They’re all trouble, Brendan, if you give ‘em half a chance. You’ve got to keep on top of them.” They’d left it at that.

“Get you something, sir?” Jason looked at him blankly, like he didn’t recognize him. Brendan gave him the drink orders and watched as he pulled the pints into the glasses.

“You’re a busy guy,” Brendan said as Jason loaded the tray. “Two jobs at your age. Wow.” The words sounded stupid as soon as they came out of his mouth. Brendan cringed inwardly. He clearly wasn’t cut out for the matey, community relations aspect of police work.

“Yeah,” Jason replied. “Right. Anything else?”

Brendan shook his head and took the tray back to the table. They all took their drinks eagerly. Karen said, "That barman's a bit of all right, isn't he? Wouldn't mind him giving me a pull, if you know what I mean."

Everybody did. Penny rolled her eyes as Brendan, struck by a sudden urge to defend Jason McIntyre, said,

"I think he's a little young for you."

He had no idea how old Karen was. Somewhere between twenty-five and forty, he guessed, but probably closer to the older end.

Karen giggled loudly. "Nothing like an older woman to show a young lad the ropes, am I right?" She nudged Brendan forcefully, pushing him into Rowan, who moved quickly to save his gin and tonic.

Moments later, the quizmaster, an elderly man in a novelty wizard's hat, took the stage with an enthusiastic, "All right, then, have you all got your pencils ready?"

There was a drunken cheer and Penny leaned forward and said, "Next time, I won't let her start drinking before we get here."

* * * *

Jay didn't mind quiz night. It was busy but he liked that once in a while. Anyway, once the punters had their drinks in their hands, old Andy and his Big Book of Trivia kept them entertained for hours.

Lisa Stewart had come along. She sat on a stool in front of the bar, watching Jay.

Jay told her about his problems with Jess. Lisa was sympathetic. "All teenage girls have moments like that." Jess had come home and immediately shut herself in her room. Jay hadn't been getting phone calls from the school, so he assumed she was going, but he hadn't seen her in nearly three days. "I

remember Heather and me driving our mum absolutely batty when we were Jess' age."

"I was at school with you, Lisa. I know you were never that bad."

Jay laughed and put away another glass.

"Do you want me to ask my mum to have a word with Jess?" Lisa went on. "She's good about things like that."

Jay shook his head. There was nothing Nancy could say to Jess that he hadn't already tried. He didn't know what he was going to do now, but he knew bringing Nancy or Lisa or anyone else into it wasn't going to help.

There was a roar of laughter and Lisa turned to see what was going on. Jay looked past her and saw Andy standing at the front of the room with his microphone. "I'm afraid our lowest scoring team for that round, 'History of Medicine,' was, unfortunately, the Plods!"

Jay glanced at the police table. He'd noticed four constables there, along with a couple of people he didn't recognize. They were all in civilian clothes, jeans and T-shirts mostly. Cuddy had tried to be friendly earlier, but Jay was having none of it. Even if they were off-duty, they were watching and they couldn't be trusted.

Andy waved down the cries of "Forfeit! Forfeit!" and gave an indulgent, grandfatherly smile. "Now, of course, as the losing team, there is a forfeit to be paid."

"Take it all off!" Someone shrieked. There were cheers of approval and Andy, who had once told Jay he was a failed actor and had the dramatic flair to prove it, paused for suspense. "As the category was about medical procedures, I think it's only fair that someone on your team shows us their most astonishing scar."

Jay had filled orders for that table more than once or twice during the course of evening already. It showed as they argued over who should do the

forfeit. The woman Jay didn't recognize, a big blonde, seemed eager to take her top off, but PC Stiles stopped her. Cuddy was nudging the skinny, blond man beside him, but eventually it was Cuddy himself who stood up beside their table and unbuttoned his shirt.

Jay didn't particularly want to watch, but the laughing and cheering made it hard to look away. Cuddy smiled a little as he took off the shirt and showed a long, faded scar that ran across his stomach and dipped below the waistband of his jeans.

He wasn't in bad shape, Jay thought, but most coppers weren't. Andy laughed and made some remark about near misses and wondering where the scar stopped. Cuddy put his shirt back on and sat down again, to cheers from his table and an unmistakably lustful look from the earring-wearing guy beside him.

* * * *

"That was a nice night," Rowan said, as they climbed the stairs to the flat. "The people you work with seem great."

"They're okay."

They'd done dismally on the quiz, finishing in the bottom five teams, but Raj still said: "You'll have to help us out again sometime." He unlocked the door and let Rowan in first. "It doesn't mean I'm ready to fly the rainbow flag at work."

Rowan shook his head. "No, I understand." Brendan was pretty certain he didn't really, but he didn't say anything. Rowan took a step closer. "Although I have to say, I don't think any of them minded getting a look at your scar." He tilted his head up. Brendan knew exactly what he wanted and how selfish it

would be not to give it to him. As they kissed, Brendan found himself thinking about anything but Rowan.

Brendan pulled away as soon as Jason McIntyre's young, handsome face and slim body appeared in his mind. Rowan smiled but Brendan cut him off before he could say what Brendan knew was on his mind. "I've got an early shift tomorrow."

"Oh. Right." If Rowan was disappointed, he didn't show it. "I guess I'll ring you later, then."

Brendan nodded. "Good night." He shut the door behind Rowan and headed for bed.

Chapter Seven

Jay had slept with one guy. He'd been seventeen at the time and he'd taken the bus by himself to the only gay club in town.

Once he arrived, he spent the first half an hour petrified that someone he knew was going to see him. The second half-hour he spent afraid no one would notice him and the third half-hour he was scared someone would. Finally, when he had at last started to feel comfortable, a guy in a tight silver T-shirt and platform heels danced over to him.

It had been quick and easy. He couldn't remember the man's name, if he'd ever known it, and he had never seen him again. Jay might have gone back again, looking for that guy or a different one, but he'd never had the chance. That same night, his mother walked out and Jay suddenly didn't have time for any kind of clubbing any more.

He didn't have time for sex either. Even if he did, he could hardly bring a guy to the house he shared with Zoë and Nico. It was too dangerous in too many ways. He couldn't expect Nancy to look after them just so he could get laid on occasion. So Jay made do with his imagination, his dreams and his memories of that one time.

The night of the pub quiz, where he'd spent the evening talking with Lisa, he had a particularly vivid dream. A strong, broad-shouldered man was holding him close. He was wearing a uniform with a white shirt and epaulets. As Jay reached up to loosen the man's tie, PC Cuddy smiled down at him.

"Jay! Jay!" Jay's eyes flew open to see Nico and Zoë sitting on either side of him, wearing their pajamas. Zoë was poking him in the shoulder while Nico dangled his teddy over Jay's face.

"What is it?" He pushed Zoë's hand away.

"It's Saturday," Zoë replied. "You said you'd take us to the park."

"What time is it?" He looked past Nico at his digital alarm clock. "Six-thirty? Are you nuts?"

"I can tell time, even on clocks with hands," Zoë informed him, scathingly. "We really want to go to the park."

He thought about telling them to go downstairs and watch TV until a more reasonable hour. Then he thought about going back to sleep and continuing his dream about PC Cuddy, and he said, "All right, all right, I'm up."

* * * *

Brendan was a little surprised when his radio hissed and the dispatcher said: "Some poor old dear's seeing gnomes kicking over her plant pots, Brendan. Think you could swing by and take a look?"

"Yeah, no problem." The dispatcher gave him the address but Brendan didn't need the GPS to find it. He'd been there before.

Just like last time he'd visited, old Mrs. Gregory was watching for him from her front window. Brendan pulled the car up in front of her tiny semi-detached and strode up to the door.

"They're back," she whispered, clutching her hands to her chest. "I saw them in the garden."

She sounded so genuinely terrified that Brendan felt a surge of sympathy. "I'll go have a look, Mrs. Gregory. Tell me, has anyone been to see you from the Social Services?" It had been well over a week since he'd sent the email. Even with the usual bureaucratic delays, he would have thought something would have been done by now. He headed through the little house. Mrs. Gregory followed behind him.

"The Social?" Mrs. Gregory sounded even more horrified about that. "Oh, no. I wouldn't have them in the house. Not after what they did to my Neil."

Brendan didn't ask what they'd done to her Neil. He opened the door and wondered whether he should draw his truncheon for effect. He decided against it and walked out into the back garden.

It was small, a postage stamp of lawn with flowerbeds on three sides and a large washing line in the middle. He walked around, conscious of Mrs. Gregory watching from the window. He made a show of looking behind a wheelbarrow and standing on tiptoe to peer over the fence into the neighbor's garden. After three minutes or so, he went back inside. "Right, I've given them all an official caution. If they come back again, I'll take them in."

"Oh, thank you, constable." She looked so grateful it almost broke Brendan's heart.

"Listen, Mrs. Gregory, have you got any children? Anybody who could look in on you from time to time?"

She shook her head. "There was only ever our Neil and he hasn't been about for a long time." She blinked, her eyes pink-rimmed and mole-like. She looked around the kitchen, like she had never been there before. "Can I get you a cup of tea, constable? I think I've got some biscuits somewhere, too."

His radio buzzed to life. "Another time, Mrs. Gregory. I promise."

He meant it.

* * * *

When he was still at school, Jay had seen pictures of Hyde Park in London and Central Park in New York and other parks of the world. The one on the estate, known simply as The Park, was nothing like any of those. It was a small patch of weedy grass at the end of the estate, with a rusty climbing frame, a couple of sickly trees and more often than not used condoms and hypodermic needles littering the ground.

To Zoë and Nico, though, it was a tropical paradise. Jay felt bad about that, sorry that he hadn't been able to give them a more stimulating childhood. When they got to The Park, he checked the ground carefully and spread out a blanket beside the climbing frame.

Zoë had brought a book with her, something about a girl detective solving crimes. She lay beside Jay and read while Jay watched Nico try to scale the climbing frame with his teddy under his arm.

Jay saw Chris Wilkins before he had even set foot in the park. He was with a couple of his friends – Matt Collins and a big, dreadlocked guy known only as Mad Dog – walking down the path on the other side of the fence. The ever-observant Zoë immediately looked up from her book. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Zoë." He forced a smile, but it didn't fool her.

She looked at Wilkins and his friends. "Are they still bad?"

Jay shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes people change after they've been to jail. They learn their lesson."

"Like at school," Zoë replied thoughtfully. "There was this boy, Paul, who used to always be very naughty until Mrs. Johnson sent him to the head teacher's office." She continued to talk. Jay hoped Wilkins and the others

would pass by. They didn't. They turned in at the park gate and came towards them.

Jay called, "Nico, come here for a minute, mate."

Nico hopped off the climbing frame and sat between Jay and Zoë. Sure enough, Wilkins and his friends stopped in front of them.

"McIntyre," Chris grunted. He was wearing jackboots and his dirty black jeans seemed to be held up entirely by a series of chains. There was also a tattoo on the back of his hand that Jay didn't remember him having, a small skull with a large knife in its forehead.

"Hiya, Chris." Jay looked at him evenly. Now that the conversation was started, there was no way Jay could back down. "I heard you were coming back."

"Yeah." He snorted and spat on the grass. "Fucking stitch up, that was. I'll be getting my own back, though. You want to give me a hand?" He stared at Jay.

If the kids hadn't been there, Jay would have told him to go fuck himself, preferably as enthusiastically and painfully as possible. Since they were there, Jay smiled. "We'll talk about it later, yeah?"

Mad Dog gave some kind of strangled cough that Jay guessed was a laugh and they walked away. Nico clutched Jay's hand and Zoë shook her head, as if she was greatly disappointed.

"No," she said, gravely, "I don't think Chris has learned his lesson. Maybe he should see our head teacher."

"Maybe," Jay agreed and tried to calm his pounding heart.

Chapter Eight

If there was one aspect of police work Brendan found tedious and pointless, it was collaring teenage shoplifters in the shopping center. He knew a lot of them went straight after one scary encounter with the police. He had probably saved at least a dozen kids from lives of crime in the few months he'd been on the job. Still, he just couldn't get himself worked up about prosecuting teenagers for trying to steal a tube of lipstick or a packet of crisps from a multi-billion pound retail conglomerate.

He was expecting to see yet another frightened impulsive kid when he was called into the manager's office at the local CD Center Plus on Saturday afternoon.

"This is the thief," the security guard said, opening the office door like, Brendan thought, he was unveiling a notorious gangster or mass murderer.

She was a skinny teenage girl, like most of them, obviously into the Goth craze with her severe black hair and assorted piercings. She was slumped in a chair, making her look even smaller, and it was only when Brendan saw her face that he recognized her.

"She won't give her name," the guard said, like this was a personal insult.

"It's all right. I know who she is. Right, Jess?" Jess McIntyre's eyes flicked up at him, but she didn't say a word.

"We found her with six CDs in her bag," the guard went on. He pointed to the desk, where a satchel bag lay open, half a dozen CDs piled beside it.

Brendan glanced through them. Funeral for a Friend, Fallout Boy, the expected sort of stuff. He would have been astonished to find a Cliff Richard album, or even Coldplay, among them. "We have the CCTV footage to prove it. Would you like to see it?"

"Not right now."

"Of course, we're very eager to press charges. This is a serious offence." The guard, who was probably all of eighteen, stared at Jess coldly.

"I know. I'll take care of it." The guard seemed reluctant to leave. Since Brendan wasn't about to handcuff her, he passed over her bag.

"Come with me, please, Jess."

He wasn't sure whether to expect a fight, but she stood up meekly. Brendan put a hand on her shoulder and as he walked with her out of the store, the eyes of every customer in the store were fixed on them.

And that, Brendan thought, was a far worse punishment than anything they could give a shoplifting teenager.

He helped Jess into the back of the panda car, making sure she didn't bump her head, and sat in the driver's seat. "You know I'm going to have to speak with your mum." He glanced at Jess in his rearview mirror. "Is she at home?"

She stared out the window. Taking that as a yes, Brendan started the car and pulled onto the road.

* * * *

Zoë and Nico ate their sandwiches and carrot sticks in the park, but Jay kept an eye out in case Chris and his friends came back. They didn't and, after a few games of two-on-one football and another go on the climbing frame, Zoë and Nico decided they'd had enough.

A police car was pulling up outside their house as they arrived home.
Bloody Aidan. Obviously, he never learned anything.

PC Cuddy stepped out of the driver's side. Jay kept his eyes down, making a big deal out of asking Zoë about her book and making sure Nico had a firm hold on his teddy. When Cuddy pulled Jess out of the back seat of his car, Jay stopped dead.

"What's going on?" Zoë broke the silence. "Why's that policeman got Jess?"

"Is he stealing her?" Nico asked, panic in his voice. "I don't want him to steal her, Jay!"

"He's not stealing her, he's bringing her home," Jay said, as Cuddy looked up and saw him. "Look, why don't you two pop in on Nancy for a while?"

"But it's not our day to see her..."

"Just go, Zoë. Tell her it's an emergency." He shoved them into Nancy's garden and walked on, not stopping to see if she'd let them in.

Cuddy saw him at once. "Hi, Jason. I need to see your mother. Is she in?"

"What's going on?" Jay wasn't sure whether he should be worried or furious. From the way Jess was avoiding his eyes, he guessed it was the second.

"I really need to speak to your mother."

"She's out."

"Bingo?"

Jay looked at him. "No. She went to see our gran."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

He shrugged. "She's gone for a few days."

"Do you have a number where we can reach her?"

Even as he shook his head, Jay knew how implausible it seemed. "Our gran doesn't have a phone."

"Your mum doesn't have a mobile?"

"It's broken."

"Jason." Cuddy looked at him, and Jay felt a surge of panic in his chest. For two years, he'd been dreading just this kind of situation. "It's really important. Jess was caught shoplifting at CD Center Plus."

"What?"

Jess didn't say anything, which was just as well because Jay would have had to kill her. "What were you thinking? Are you out of your mind?" He'd thought, just for a minute, that maybe she was getting over whatever her problem had been. Obviously, he'd been wrong.

"All right." Cuddy stepped between them like he was some kind of referee. Jay felt anger building up and Cuddy said: "I can't leave until I've spoken to your mother."

"Then you're in for a long wait," Jay snapped back.

Cuddy smiled. "I have time."

* * * *

Inside, the house was cluttered but not dirty. Brendan helped himself to a seat on a threadbare sofa and waited.

There was something going on; he didn't need his honed policeman's instincts to figure that out. From the way Jay and Jess were exchanging looks, he bet that their mother was upstairs drunk or hungover. He waited patiently until Jason stood up and left the room.

"Here," he came back a few moments later, holding a cordless telephone.
"My mother's on the phone."

"I thought your gran didn't have a phone."

"I rang her neighbor."

Brendan didn't believe him for a second but he took the phone gamely.
"Hello?"

"Yes," a female voice, probably middle-aged, replied. "This is Sheila McIntyre."

And I, Brendan thought, am David Beckham. "Ms. McIntyre? Good afternoon. I'm PC Brendan Cuddy. I'm afraid your daughter Jess has been picked up for shoplifting."

"I'm very disappointed in her." That, at least, sounded genuine. "I'm visiting my mother at the moment but when I come back, I'll be sure to deal with her." There was a sudden bang, both over the phone line and on the other side of the house. Brendan stood up and walked over to the wall, looking at the beige wallpaper beside a school photo of the little girl, Zoë.

"What was that, Ms. McIntyre?"

"Oh," the woman replied airily, "Just the dogs knocking over a chair." There was a happy woof from the other side of the wall, the one that divided this house from next door.

Brendan forced himself not to smile. It wasn't funny, really. They'd lied to the police and that was an offense. "Ms. McIntyre, can I assume that you're actually next door at this very moment?"

There was a gasp, audible both through the phone and the wall. "Oh, God. Listen, constable, you've got to be reasonable. Poor Jay's only been doing what's best for the kids, all right? If you lot had any kind of heart at all, you'd give him some help, not make him afraid for his own family."

"Thanks a lot, Nancy!" Jason called.

"It's the truth, Jay," Nancy called back, through the wall this time. "You can't keep on doing it forever; you're just a kid yourself. Maybe he can help."

"I can help." Brendan promised, handing the unnecessary phone back to Jay. "But you've got to tell me what you need help with."

* * * *

Jay had never thought he would tell a copper anything. He'd spent the last two years trying to make sure he would never have to until Jess went and fucked everything up with a little additional help from Nancy. Why she couldn't have taken her damn phone upstairs or into the garden he would never know.

Jay didn't trust Cuddy any more than he trusted Stiles or Kassam or any of the others. Even as Cuddy stood in his home, smiling at him stupidly like that was going to reassure him and make him believe they were all friends, he didn't trust him. Right now Jay obviously didn't have much of a choice.

"My mum left us two years ago."

Jay remembered it like it was yesterday. It wasn't anything unusual at first. Sheila often spent nights away from home, sometimes two or three in a row, but she had always come back. This time, she didn't. "I've been looking after the family since then."

"By yourself?" Cuddy looked surprised.

Jay shrugged. "I've got two jobs."

"You never tried to find her?"

"If she wanted us to find her, she'd come home." Jay sighed. It was almost physically painful to make an appeal like this to a copper, but he said it anyway. "Listen, you can't tell anyone. If the Social hear about this, they'll take the kids away. They'll split up the family."

“Not necessarily. I’m sure they’d be able to sort something out.”

Obviously, Cuddy had no clue what he was dealing with. “There are three of them. Who’d take them all? Besides, that would leave me out anyway. I’d never be allowed to see them.” He’d seen it happen before on the estate, mums losing their kids and never seeing them again. As a brother, a half-brother even, he wouldn’t stand a chance.

Jay looked at Cuddy. “We’re doing fine on our own, all right? I can manage them. I’ll make sure Jess doesn’t do anything stupid again, just please don’t ruin it for us.”

He knew he sounded pathetic, but he didn’t have a choice. If it would save Zoë, and Nico, and even Jess, he’d have gone down on his knees and licked Cuddy’s shoes.

“Did you ever try to find her? Notify the police or anything?”

“If the police knew we were on our own they would have told the Social.” Jay sighed. “Mum’s not missing. She knows where she is and she doesn’t want to be with us.”

Even Nancy, her best friend, had said as much. It had been hard to take at first but Jay couldn’t say he’d ever been surprised. Sheila had never loved any of them as much as she loved drink, men and partying. But it didn’t matter because Jay loved the kids enough for everybody. “She might even turn up back here one day.” He kept that lie alive mostly for the kids but sometimes Jay found himself hoping it might be true. She was a rubbish mother but she was still their mother.

“The security guards at the shop want to press charges against Jess,” Cuddy said after a pause. “There might not be anything I can do about that.” He hesitated again. “But I’ll try.”

Jay could have kissed him. Instead, he said: “Thank you. Really. You don’t know how important this is to us.”

Cuddy nodded. "I think I've got the idea."

Jay felt awkward suddenly. He held out a hand and Cuddy shook it. "I'll be in touch."

When he'd left, Jess disappeared upstairs. Jay didn't even try to follow her.

Chapter Nine

Brendan was far from naïve and he didn't doubt Jason's sincerity for a moment.

The boy wanted to take care of his siblings; now, Brendan realized why he'd been so anxious when they'd spoken to him at the CostSmart. Jason was worried he might lose his job and he wasn't working for pocket money. He was counting on that money to feed three children.

When Brendan got back to the station, he ran their mother's name through the computer. There was only one Sheila McIntyre on record and her record was pretty thin.

She'd had one conviction ten years previously for shoplifting – like mother, like daughter – and another two years before that for being drunk and disorderly in public. That was all. Nothing related to drugs or serious crime or anything that was usually associated with dropping off the face of the planet. Nothing even relating to violence or child neglect or anything that would indicate she didn't care for her children. Jason ought to know best but Brendan couldn't help but think there was something else going on.

If he wanted to find out what, he was going to need help. He looked over at Penny, who was typing on her computer. Her words about Jason came back to him: "They're all trouble and we've got to stay on top of them." Brendan couldn't imagine her caring enough to look into anything to do with the McIntyres.

For a true search, he was going to need an expert. Casually, he got up from his desk and walked over to PC Dave Bankhead.

"Hiya, mate." Since the quiz night, Dave had been remarkably friendly for a man who hadn't known his Egyptian plovers from his American sparrows.

"Yeah, hi. Listen, would you mind looking into something for me?"

Dave snorted. "Add it to the pile. I should get to it sometime before Christmas. Can't promise it'll be this Christmas, though."

"Actually, it's rather important. I need you to find out everything you can about Sheila McIntyre." There was a pause. Brendan actually found himself holding his breath until Dave laughed.

"Good old Sheila M. I haven't seen her in a dog's age. What's she been up to, then?"

"That's what I'd like to find out."

* * * *

Jay expected Nancy to be apologetic about the phone incident when he went over to get Zoë and Nico. She wasn't.

"You might have at least stepped away from the wall," he told her while Zoë and Nico watched the end of some television program.

"It was doomed to fail, Jay. Anyway, if Jess is getting involved with the police, I'm not lying for her. Not after what I watched your mum get herself caught up in."

"So she'll be better off when she's in a foster home, then?"

Nancy looked at him, her hands on her hips and for a moment she reminded him of his mother. "Give over, Jay."

As soon as they left Nancy's, Zoë looked at him with concern. "Why did Nancy tell that policeman she was our mum?"

"It's complicated, Zoë."

"Are we going to be taken by the Social?"

"No." Not if Jay could do anything to help it, including moving to a foreign country, if that was what it took.

"Is he still a bad policeman?" Nico asked as Jay let them in to the house.

"Yes." At least until he did something that proved otherwise. Jay wasn't expecting that any time soon.

Jay made supper, a defrosted shepherd's pie that Nico gobbled up and Zoë spread about with her fork until her plate was covered by a thin layer of mashed potato and meat.

"Would you eat that, please, and not play with it?" Jay asked, feeling suddenly tired.

"I'm not hungry," Zoë said. "Maybe I could take it upstairs and give it to Jess."

"Jess will come down if she wants something to eat." Jay assumed so, anyway, unless the latest Goth fashion was starvation.

"But maybe she's feeling bad. I'll tell her we still love her, even though she was very naughty." She stood up. "Maybe we should all go." Jay shook his head, but he didn't say anything as Zoë went upstairs.

"She's naughtier than I am," Nico said a little smugly. Jay didn't know whether he was talking about Zoë or Jess.

After a few minutes, as Jay was filling the sink to wash the dishes, Zoë reappeared. "Don't worry, it's all sorted," she said, seriously, sitting back in her chair and pushing a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth.

"Oh, yeah?" Jay turned off the taps and took the rubber gloves from the side of the sink. "How'd you reckon that, Zoë?"

"Is there anything for tea?" Jay turned around. Jess was standing in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest.

"Jess..." Jay began, but he didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry." She said it simply, without any of her usual attitude. "Really."

"That's it?" Jay frowned. "You do understand what might happen because of you?"

"Yeah, I do." A frown flashed across her face, and then she stepped forward into the kitchen. "And I really am sorry, all right?" She put out her arms and, for a moment, she looked like his little sister again. Jay was nowhere near ready to forgive her, but he hugged her while Zoë smiled into her shepherd's pie.

* * * *

"So what would you think about that, Brendan?"

Brendan didn't realize Rowan had been speaking to him until he stopped expectantly, waiting for some kind of answer.

He considered trying to fake it, but it was hopeless. He had no idea what Rowan had been talking about. "Sorry, Rowan, I was miles away." He looked out of the window of Rowan's flat. It overlooked the back of the hospital and he shared it with two other nurses, women he'd apparently had to bribe, threaten and blackmail to let them have the place to themselves for the night.

Brendan would have been just as happy, happier in fact, to have Rowan over to his place, but Rowan had wanted to make a special meal.

Now, looking over the dirty dishes and remainders of steak and salad, Rowan looked hurt and Brendan sighed. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "It's work. It's been doing my head in lately."

Dave still didn't have any new information about Sheila McIntyre, but that didn't keep Brendan from asking on a daily basis. He had other things to worry about, other arrests and a case coming up in court, but he couldn't get the McIntyres out of his head.

"That's all right." Rowan smiled sympathetically and that just made Brendan feel worse.

He knew he should offer some kind of apology or comfort or something, but instead, he asked: "Do you know anything about the Social Services?" He didn't, beyond the email address of the woman he'd tried to contact about Mrs. Gregory and that Philip Pradon was a complete prat. "Children's services, I mean."

"A little. We get them to the hospital when we suspect there's been abuse."

"Do you know if they'd take kids if they were being taken care of by an older sibling?"

"I don't know. It would probably depend on the situation." Rowan frowned. "Why?"

Brendan shrugged. "Just thinking about a family on the estate I've been working with."

Rowan stood up and came around behind Brendan, putting his arms around Brendan's neck. "It's just a job, Brendan. You've got to learn to let it go."

He couldn't. He had never been good at that but lately he'd been even worse. Brendan had called the security guard at the CD Center Plus at least

three or four times trying to convince him it wasn't worth his time to press shoplifting charges against Jess. He'd even dreamt of the family more than once, of Jay in all kinds of compromising positions he would certainly never mention to anyone else, but also of the kids, of Nico and Zoë and even Jess, abandoned and needing his help.

Rowan moved around the table until he was sitting on Brendan's lap and kissed him, sliding his hands into Brendan's hair.

Maybe Sheila had left the country. She wouldn't have to go far; Ireland or France would be distance enough and it would make her harder to track down. Not hard, with the world being so small, but harder. He should ask Dave to look into that as well.

"Brendan." Rowan pulled away suddenly. He looked at Brendan seriously, and Brendan felt a surge of guilt. "Am I wasting my time?"

Brendan didn't think he was talking about this specific instant. He forced Jay and his problems out of his mind and smiled at Rowan. "No." Rowan was right. It was a job; Brendan needed to let it go at least for now.

He stood up, bringing Rowan with him, and headed for his room. They were almost there when Brendan's mobile rang.

"Just a minute," he promised, trying not to hear Rowan sigh. He glanced at the display screen, and saw the number for the security department at CD Center Plus.

He pressed the button and allowed himself a little bit of hope as he said: "PC Cuddy here."

Chapter Ten

Tuesday turned out to be one of Jay's rare days off from CostSmart, which meant he was home around lunchtime, sorting out socks and small pairs of underpants from a basket and half-watching some daytime chat show, when the doorbell rang. He looked out the window before he answered it. PC Cuddy stood on the doorstep with a cardboard box in his hands.

"Hi." Cuddy smiled when Jay opened the door.

Jay tried to sound casual. "Yeah, hi."

"Relax, it's good news. They're not pressing charges against Jess." Jay sighed with relief. "She's not welcome back at CD Center Plus though."

"She'll be gutted." Jay couldn't help but smile himself. It was the best news they could have hoped for. Well, the best under the circumstances. "Thanks."

Cuddy nodded and held out the box. Jay glanced inside and saw a couple of folded-up sweaters and a pair of child-sized jeans. "People bring kids clothes into the station all the time for donation," Cuddy explained, suddenly sounding a little awkward. "I thought you might need some things for Nico and Zoë."

Jay felt a knot in his stomach. "I can take care of my family."

Cuddy blinked. "Yeah, I know. That's not what I meant. I just wanted to help."

Right. Of course he did. "If you want to help us, then keep the Social away. Otherwise, we're doing fine on our own."

Cuddy sighed, which just irritated Jay further. It was how they all started. They acted like they were your friends, like they were on your side and then as soon as you came to trust them, they betrayed you. Everybody was like that, but the police were the worst. When they betrayed you, your life got really difficult really quickly.

"If there's nothing else, constable, I've got work to do." Jay didn't quite have the nerve to shut the door in Cuddy's face. He waited until Cuddy nodded and he went back into the house, shutting the door firmly behind him.

He waited a good five minutes before he peeked out the window again. Cuddy was gone but the box of clothes was on the doorstep. Jay opened the door and, after checking up and down the street, brought the box inside.

He would donate the clothes to a proper charity. Get them to people that really needed them. There were kids at Nico and Zoë's school that hadn't seen a new uniform in three years, let alone jeans and jumpers and things like that.

Even as he thought it, Jay looked at the pile of old, worn-out clothes in his laundry basket, the jeans with faded knees that had been passed down from Jess to Zoë to Nico, the woolen jumpers that needed patching. Then he looked at the nearly new clothes in the box, a pink skirt Zoë would love and a Thomas the Tank T-shirt he could see Nico wearing until it was in tatters and sighed.

When Jay got to work, The Ship and Anchor was busy, especially for early evening. He served a tray of lager to a bunch of teenagers he vaguely remembered being a year or two behind him at school and was pouring a glass of wine for a middle-aged American woman at the bar when Chris Wilkins appeared.

He was alone, and he strode up to the bar like he owned the place.

Jay refused to be cowed. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Pint of bitter."

He poured the drink. Chris watched him; Jay was pleased at the steadiness of his hand as he passed the glass over the bar.

"Thanks." Chris drank it in one long gulp, and then slammed the glass down on the bar. "You know, you could be making a hell of a lot more money than this."

"This is fine, thanks."

Chris smirked. "I met some interesting people when I was inside. There's one bloke who'll set me up with enough coke and Ecstasy to keep the whole fucking town high as a kite for days."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Why do you think?"

Jay sighed. "I'm not interested." He had enough on his plate. There was no way he'd risk getting nicked for selling drugs. Even if he hadn't seen how they ruined perfectly happy lives.

"I'm doing you a favor here, mate. I thought we could help each other out."

"Sorry to disappoint you." There was more to it. Jay waited for the other shoe to drop, but Chris shrugged.

"Your loss." He put down a handful of coins for the pint. "Don't say I never gave you the chance to join in." He left, and Jay wondered if maybe prison had addled Chris' brains after all.

* * * *

"Do you fancy Indian or Chinese for supper?"

Brendan glanced up from his computer monitor. She'd already taken her handbag out of her desk drawer and was flipping through her wallet.

"Doesn't bother me. We could always nip by the pub."

"There's a new kebab place I've been wanting to try up on the High Street," Penny countered. "Karen says it's dead cheap, and not bad."

"Fine." Brendan shut down his program and was about to log off when Dave Bankhead appeared beside him.

"I looked into Sheila McIntyre like you asked."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." Brendan tried to sound casual. Penny looked at him with interest, but he ignored her. "Did you come up with anything?"

"Nothing in the last two years or so. Either she's cleaned up her act or her kids have buried her under the floorboards. Might want to take a look." Dave laughed and moved on.

Brendan counted the seconds before Penny said something. He got to seven.

"Is there something going on with the McIntyres?" She stood up from her desk. Brendan did the same, making sure he had his wallet in his back pocket.

"Not really."

"Because now that I think about it," Penny said thoughtfully, "I don't remember seeing Sheila lately either."

Brendan thought of Jason and the trust he had that Brendan wasn't going to betray his family. "I saw her," he said, a little surprised at how easily the words came out of his mouth. "When I brought Jess in for shoplifting. She's still there."

"Oh. That's all right, then. We've got enough to do worrying about the ones who are causing trouble to worry about the ones that aren't."

* * * *

When Jay got home just after nine, Jess was sitting in front of the telly alone.

"I put Zoë and Nico to bed half an hour ago," she said, sounding proud of herself. Well, he couldn't blame her. "They whined a bit, but I told them it's a school night."

"Right. Thanks, Jess."

She shrugged, like it was all in a day's work, and he went upstairs.

He couldn't help but glance into Nico and Zoë's room as he passed. Zoë was sleeping soundly, lying flat on her back with her arms and legs outstretched, starfish-like. When Jay looked into the room, Nico stirred and sat up.

"What's the matter, mate?" He lowered his voice, careful not to wake Zoë and knelt on the floor beside Nico's bed. He had his teddy clutched to his chest.

"Jay, who's my mummy?"

"What?"

"Zoë said you were mad at Jess because she made Nancy pretend she was our mummy for the policeman." That sounded like a Zoë-like explanation.

"But if she's not our mummy, then who is?"

"You know who Mummy is, Nico." There was a picture of her on top of the television

"Why isn't she here?"

Nico knew that, too, at least the simplified version Jay had given to the kids when she'd gone. He brought it up every few months just the same. Jay put his arms around his brother and Nico leaned in, holding his teddy tightly. "She just went away for a while."

"When is she coming back?"

“I don’t know. But we’re doing all right, aren’t we?” Nico nodded. “And when she does come back, she’ll be proud of how well we’ve managed without her.”

Jay said it so firmly, he nearly convinced himself.

He kissed Nico on the forehead and tucked him in, making sure his teddy was beside him. He went back downstairs afterwards and sat on the sofa beside Jess, who was watching some ear-splitting music video and reading a science textbook at the same time.

Chapter Eleven

After Brendan finished his shift, he went home and changed before he picked up Rowan at the hospital. He'd noticed that a policeman in uniform tended to draw attention, even if he was just sitting in a parked car.

Rowan wasn't the least bit worried about drawing attention. He came out in his nurse's scrubs and trainers and kissed Brendan on the lips as soon as he got into the car. Brendan tried to look about unobtrusively to see if anyone had seen them. Apart from the cluster of smokers, clutching their IV bags in one hand and their cigarettes in the other, the car park was deserted.

"It's your turn to make supper," Rowan said as Brendan pulled onto the road.

"I thought we could go to a restaurant."

"It's nicer at home," Rowan claimed.

"I haven't got any food in the house." *Nothing decent, anyway.* He doubted Rowan would be satisfied with cereal and toast for supper.

"We can stop by the CostSmart. It's on the way."

"There's a Tesco's just a few miles further on," Brendan said but it sounded ridiculous even to him. The chances of Jason being at work were minimal. There was no way he would be at the CostSmart.

He was there. Brendan saw him first, stacking apples in the fruit section.

"Do you want brown or rye bread?" Rowan asked.

"I don't mind."

Rowan disappeared toward the bakery. Jason was piling the apples in pyramids, Brendan noticed, three on the bottom and one on the top. Then he would try to increase it: four on the bottom, three on the middle and one on the top, and so on, until they cascaded down and Jason lunged to catch them before they fell to the floor. He looked like the teenager he was, and Brendan smiled to himself as he watched.

He should leave the poor kid alone. He'd get a few oranges, maybe an onion or two, and go meet Rowan over by the discount DVDs. As soon as he headed over to the oranges, Jason looked up at him and Brendan couldn't bring himself to look away.

"Hi."

"Hiya." Jason turned to the box beside him and took out another handful of apples. He piled them neatly with the others on the stand. Brendan wasn't sure whether he should move on or try to make conversation, when Jason continued, "Listen, thanks for those clothes."

"No problem." Jason didn't look at him but Brendan had to ask. "You haven't been bothered by anyone, have you? You know, from the Social Services or anything?" Like Philip Pradon?

He shook his head. "No. Thanks for that, too."

Brendan felt like there was something more he should say, some way he should let Jason know he really was on his side. He glanced over and saw Rowan at the end of the next aisle, examining bulk washing-up liquid. "Here."

Brendan reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. "Have you got a pen?"

Jason handed him a worn-down pencil out of the front of his apron. Brendan hoped he wasn't blushing too deeply as he quickly scribbled his mobile number on the paper and handed it to Jason. "Give me a ring if you ever need anything." He left Jason standing there, pencil in one hand and paper in the other, looking a little stunned.

When he reached Rowan, Brendan noticed he'd put brown bread, meat and eggs, not to mention the washing up liquid and a robust-looking head of lettuce, into his basket. "Got everything, Rowan?"

"I just need some milk."

Brendan walked beside Rowan as he headed for the dairy section. "So," Rowan said as they looked at the cartons of milk in front of them, "is that the guy who's doing your head in?"

"What?"

Rowan shrugged. "Just asking."

"It's not like that, Rowan." Brendan forced down a surge of panic. "He's just a kid. He lives in the Nest and he's having some trouble with his family."

"All right." To Brendan's surprise, Rowan looked amused. He couldn't see anything funny about it but Rowan smiled as he put a carton of milk into the basket beside the lettuce. "It's okay, Brendan." They headed for the till. "You can't help looking, as long as that's all you're doing."

"I'm not even doing that." It would be ridiculously inappropriate, for one thing. "They need my help."

"Of course." Rowan nodded and the carton of milk slipped out of Brendan's hand. It hit conveyor belt hard enough to jolt the lettuce beside it and earned Brendan a disapproving look from the teenage girl behind the till.

* * * *

Jay wasn't sure what he was meant to do with PC Cuddy's telephone number. In the end, he put it in the pocket of his CostSmart apron and left it there. Maybe Cuddy was trying to pick him up. He wanted to laugh at the idea but instead he imagined Cuddy out of uniform, sitting on the sofa beside at their house while Zoë and Nico played with their toys on the floor.

"Get out of the way, Jay!" Nico cried happily, as he pushed his little plastic locomotive toward Jay's feet. It bumped against him and jolted him out of his imagination. Jay lifted his feet obligingly and rested them on the table in front of them, next to a stack of Jess's schoolbooks.

Jay was exhausted. It came over him every now and then, when his jobs and his life caught up with him. He wouldn't have traded his family for anything, but these were the nights when he wished he could just lie in his bedroom, maybe put on a CD or a movie he wanted to watch instead of the latest Disney release.

He couldn't do that now. Zoë abandoned her train and jumped on top of him, knocking the wind out of his lungs. "God, Zoë..." Nico joined her, bouncing on his legs. They laughed, high-pitched and happy, and Jay had to smile.

"All right, all right." He stopped them with raised hands. When they paused, he grabbed them, shrieking, one under each arm and carried them up the stairs to bed.

He followed close behind them, showering and getting into bed in the room that had been their mother's. It didn't take him long to fall asleep. Jay didn't usually dream, or if he did, he couldn't remember it. Except for the dream about Cuddy, Jay couldn't recall any dreams he'd had lately.

Tonight, he dreamed about his mother. She looked the way she had the day she left: forty years old, dyed dark hair, a cigarette in her mouth and bright blue makeup on her eyelids. She was smiling at him, telling him that he was a good son and that she loved him. Then, just like that, she was gone and Jay opened his eyes to see Nico standing at his bedside, teddy under his arm.

"I don't feel good," Nico rubbed his eyes with his hands. Jay lifted the duvet and he crawled into the bed beside him.

* * * *

Brendan thought about sleeping in on his day off, but Rowan had an early shift. They ended up having breakfast together and Brendan drove him to the hospital. Since he was already up and about by then, Brendan drove over to the Nest.

Old Mrs. Gregory peered through her window when he knocked on her front door. At first, she didn't seem to recognize him, so Brendan smiled and said,

"It's me, Mrs. Gregory. PC Cuddy." Understanding dawned on her face, and there was a prolonged rattling of locks and bolts. Finally, she opened the door.

"The gnomes haven't been back," she said, sounding pleased about it. It was early, but she was already fully dressed in a cardigan and brown skirt, thick white tights and brown court shoes. "You must have frightened them away."

"Good."

"But you can come in and have some tea, if you like." She sounded so hopeful Brendan couldn't refuse.

"That's my Ernie," she said a few moments later. Brendan sat on the flowered sofa with a cup of tea and a plate of digestive biscuits balanced on his knees. She pointed at a picture in the big, heavy photo album he'd been surprised she could lift, let alone handle with such dexterity.

Ernie was a pleasant-looking, wrinkled man with a red boozier's nose and what looked like a New Year's party hat. A much younger Mrs. Gregory stood next to him in the photograph, in curls and a checkered apron. "Has he been gone long?" Brendan asked, sipping his extremely sweet tea.

Mrs. Gregory shook her head. "Oh, no, dear. He just popped out for a packet of cigarettes. He'll be home any minute and we'll go to the zoo like I promised."

Brendan swallowed his tea and decided it might be best to move on.

He turned the page and, judging from the fashions, skipped forward about fifteen years in Mrs. Gregory's collection. He looked at the pictures of women with big hair and bigger earrings, and was about to turn another page when Mrs. Gregory said: "Of course, that's dear Sheila."

Brendan stopped. "Where?"

"Just there." Mrs. Gregory pointed to one of the pictures, of a young woman with piles of dark hair and bright red lipstick. "And that's her little boy." The woman was holding a kid, maybe three years old, in her arms. He looked a little like Nico and Brendan assumed it was Jason.

"Do you know them?"

"She used to bring her little boy to visit all the time. She hasn't been by since I've had the trouble with the gnomes, though. And too right, you wouldn't want a little lad influenced by the likes of them." Brendan stifled a sigh. "No, wait," Mrs. Gregory shook her head. "That's not right." She frowned. "It was earlier than that. Sheila told me..." She trailed off. Brendan smiled, in what he hoped was an encouraging way, and waited. "She told me

she was going to Scotland. With a man. That's right." She nodded. "'I'm off to Edinburgh, Mrs. Gregory, but I'll be back for the kids as soon as we're settled.'" She smiled with satisfaction.

He knew it was probably a pointless question. It might never have happened, it might have happened fifteen years ago, it might have been someone else. He asked anyway. "When was this, Mrs. Gregory?"

"About two years ago, I'd say." She turned the page. "If you see Sheila, let her know the gnomes aren't a problem anymore. I'd love to see her and her little lad again."

Chapter Twelve

Nico threw up twice during the night, once spectacularly over Jay, his bed and his carpet. In the morning, while Zoë and Jess got ready for school, Jay went next door to see if Nancy would sit with him for the day.

There was no answer at Nancy's. Trying not to think of the money he'd lose, he picked up his mobile and rang CostSmart.

"Hello?" Amy at the front desk picked up the phone, sounding unimpressed as always.

"Hi, Amy, it's Jason McIntyre. I'm really sorry, but I can't make it in today..."

"You need to come in," Amy replied. "You're on the schedule."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm really ill."

"We're already down two people today," Amy said, as if that were his fault. "And the manager wasn't impressed when I told him you showed up late last week."

Then why did you tell him, you stupid cow?

"I'm sorry, Amy, really, but there's no way I could..."

"If you don't come in, you might lose your job, and I'm afraid I won't be able to help you." She rang off abruptly.

Big fucking surprise. Jay swore and snapped his mobile shut.

Nico, sniffing and coughing, allowed himself to be stuffed into his school uniform, Zoë looking on judgmentally all the while.

"He's really ill, Jay," she said thoughtfully, as Nico shivered under Jay's hands.

"I know that, Zoë. I'll pick you up as soon as I can, all right, mate?" He looked at his brother. Nico's skin was pale and clammy. "I'll try to get off early and I'll come right to school."

"I don't feel good," Nico replied sadly. It felt like a knife to Jay's heart, but he didn't have a choice. He dropped them off at the school gate and got on the bus for CostSmart, refusing to look back.

He was at the shop just long enough to punch his timecard and make his way down to the refrigerated room at the back, where he was meant to start his day stacking lettuces. He had barely touched his first lettuce of the day when his mobile vibrated in his apron pocket.

"Hello?" Jay ducked behind a shelf of chilled carrots and hoped no one was listening in.

"Mr. McIntyre? This is Mrs. O'Brien, from Westwood Gate Primary." Of course it was. "I'm afraid Nicholas is ill." She sounded even more judgmental than Zoë.

"Yeah, I know. But I've got to work..."

"He can't stay at school," Mrs. O'Brien snapped. "The nurse isn't in today, and he is much too ill to be in class with the other students." Jay looked around the shelves. The assistant manager was standing in the middle of the room, looking at the unstacked lettuces. "If you are unable to collect him, perhaps someone else would be able to."

Jay knew what that meant. The last thing he needed was Social Services picking up Nico because he couldn't leave work. "I'll find someone, OK? I'll ring you back." He closed the mobile and went over to the lettuces, giving a cheerful: "Good morning," to the assistant manager. He looked suspicious but moved on to the dairy section to stare at the cottage cheese. Jay tried to think.

Lisa Stewart was back at university. He didn't know where Nancy was, but when he tried her number, there was no answer. He wouldn't trust Aidan Beecher with a goldfish for half a second, let alone with Nico for a whole day. Finally, he slipped his hand into the front pocket of his apron and pulled out Cuddy's number.

* * * *

Mrs. Gregory had dozens of stories. Most of them, Brendan suspected, weren't entirely accurate, but he listened. She seemed glad of the chance to talk.

When his mobile phone rang, Brendan apologized and glanced at the number. He didn't recognize it. "Hello?"

"PC Cuddy? I'm really sorry to bother you, but I need your help."

"Jason?" His heart sped up and Brendan forced it to calm down. "What is it?"

"Nico's ill and I can't get away from work. Do you have five minutes just to get him and take him home? There's a key under the plant pot on the back terrace. You can just put him to bed and leave him there; he'll be all right on his own until I can get back."

"That's all right. I've got the day off."

"I really hate to bother you with this. There's no one else I can ask." He sounded desperate.

"It's okay. Really," Brendan replied honestly. "I'm glad to help."

Jason told him the name of Nico's primary school, which Brendan had visited several times already to give talks about drugs and "Stranger Danger" and how important it was to look both ways before crossing the street. When he rang off, he turned to Mrs. Gregory, who was nibbling a biscuit delicately.

"I've got to run, I'm afraid."

"Of course. Thank you for visiting." She beamed at him.

"I'll come back another day."

She nodded. "Give my love to Claire and the boys, Neil."

Brendan didn't say anything and went out to his car.

A severe-looking woman bearing the nametag of "Mrs. O'Brien" met him in the front office when he arrived at school.

"Ah, yes," she said, when Brendan explained who he was. "I was told you were coming." She sounded disapproving, like he could have been quicker about it. She got up from her chair and waddled over to a curtained-off area beside the office. When she came back, she had a pale and ill-looking Nico with her. He had a teddy under one arm and his school bag over his shoulder and his eyes widened when he saw Brendan.

"Are the police taking me away, Mrs. O'Brien?"

"Of course not, love," Mrs. O'Brien replied absently. She'd already wedged herself behind her desk and was looking at her computer screen. Brendan took a step towards Nico, who took a step backwards.

"It's all right, Nico. Your brother asked me to come and take you home, because you're not feeling well."

"But you're a bad policeman." He sounded convinced of it. Brendan took another half step forward and Nico took another step backwards.

He glanced at Mrs. O'Brien, who seemed to have completely discharged her duties now that Brendan was here. "I'm not bad." Nico looked

unconvinced. "Look," he tried, "I'm not wearing my uniform, right?" He gestured at his rugby shirt and jeans.

"No," Nico admitted.

"So," Brendan went on wincing inwardly. They would definitely have to have a proper talk when Nico was well again. "If I'm not wearing a uniform, how can I be a bad policeman?"

Nico considered this. "But you're still the same person. You were going to take Jess away."

"But I didn't."

"Are you going to take me away?"

"I'm just going to take you home."

Nico still looked skeptical. "Do you promise?"

Brendan reached into his pocket. "Here, speak to Jason." He dialed and handed the phone to Nico. Nico held it gingerly against his ear, like he was afraid it might explode.

"Hello?" He listened carefully to whatever his brother was saying to him. "Okay, Jay." He closed the phone like an expert and handed it back to Brendan. Then he held up his arms. It took Brendan a moment to realize he wanted to be picked up and when he did, Brendan staggered a little under the weight.

"Let's go home," Nico commanded. Brendan complied, taking him out to the car and buckling him carefully into the backseat.

Nico was asleep before they reached the house. As Brendan lifted him out of the car, he glanced back and saw Philip Pradon's Mercedes coming down the street.

Brendan hoped he would continue on his way, but he pulled to a stop outside the house. He didn't get out of the car, but opened the window and said, "PC Carling?"

"Cuddy." Brendan corrected him. Nico slumped against his shoulder, a dead weight.

"I'm looking for Sheila McIntyre. "Have you seen her?"

Nico stirred and buried his face in Brendan's neck. He looked at Pradon, took a deep breath, and lied. "She's away at the moment. I'll tell her you stopped by."

"Tell her she's way overdue for a meeting, too," Pradon replied, but his expression had changed. Instead of seeming suspicious, he looked bored.

"Will do," Brendan said. He watched as the Mercedes drove on. Then he bent down, picked up the key from beneath the doormat, and let himself into the house.

* * * *

The instant Jay's shift finished, he whipped off the CostSmart apron and headed home as quickly as possible. He wasn't sure what he was going to come face-to-face with when he got there. He was expecting a screaming, frightened Nico when he opened the door and saw his brother, sitting calmly on the sofa in front of the Wiggles, his head on PC Cuddy's shoulder and toys spread around them.

"Hi, Jay." Nico barely glanced up as he came in. He took a sip from a juice box and turned back to the telly.

"Hi." Jay wasn't sure what to say. Cuddy glanced back at him and he had to say, "Thank you."

Cuddy shrugged. "I had the day off, anyway." He hesitated a moment, then disengaged himself from Nico and stood up. "I guess I'll be going."

"Yeah." Jay blinked. Cuddy had saved them—literally saved him a lot of problems and hassle, quite probably saved Jay's job. Jay felt like he should do

something more. "You can hang about, if you want. I mean, if you're not doing anything else." Jay felt suddenly embarrassed. "I've got a few bottles of lager in the fridge."

"Stay, Brendan!" Nico exclaimed with a lot of enthusiasm for a kid who was apparently on death's door. "When Zoë gets home from school, we can watch 'Thomas and Friends.'"

"How can I resist that?" Cuddy smiled, more at Jay than at Nico, and Jay flushed.

"I'll get the drinks, then." He disappeared into the kitchen. When he came back out, he handed a bottle to Cuddy and sat beside him.

Cuddy stayed for supper. Nico didn't eat anything, but he got more amusement out of Cuddy giving high-pitched voices to the fish fingers than anyone, except perhaps Jess. She'd stopped in the kitchen doorway when she'd seen him, but once Jay had said, "PC Cuddy helped me with Nico today," she had come in, warily, and sat with them.

"Call me Brendan," Cuddy had said, seemingly talking to all of them. Nico and Zoë did it, eagerly, but Jay thought it might take him a little longer to get used to that.

Nico went to bed early and Zoë, like someone's old aunt, had said she was going upstairs to read. When she'd gone, Jess asked: "Is it okay if I go out for a while, Jay?" She'd never asked before. Before Jay had chance to wonder if he was on a hidden camera, or if Jess was on drugs, she looked at PC Cuddy and said: "It's nothing bad. I just want to go over to my friend Aneesa's for a while."

"Yeah, all right," Jay said, still feeling stunned. She picked up her bag and left.

Cuddy glanced at his watch as Jay piled dishes in the kitchen sink. "I should probably get going."

"Right. Your girlfriend'll be wondering where you are."

Cuddy looked at him and suddenly Jay remembered the guy with the earring sitting beside him at that pub quiz night. Jay looked away and turned on the taps to fill the sink.

"You're doing a great job with them, Jay."

Jay snapped on his rubber gloves as if he hadn't heard and squirted the CostSmart-brand washing up liquid liberally into the sink. "Listen," Brendan said, "you don't remember your mum mentioning anything about Scotland before she left, do you?"

"What?"

"I was speaking to Mrs. Gregory down the road. She told me she remembered your mum saying something about going to Edinburgh about two years ago."

"Mrs. Gregory's batty."

"Yeah, I know. I had to hear all about Prince Philip's favorite cakes. But she sounded like she remembered that all right."

Jay felt a knot of anger rise in his chest. "My mum's gone. We're doing fine without her, you just said so yourself." He took a deep breath. "Thanks for your help today, all right? But leave it be, yeah?"

Cuddy looked at him for a long moment. "Yeah, fine. Take care, then."

"Bye." Jay waited until he heard the front door close, and then rested his head on the cupboard above the sink.

This was exactly why he didn't want any of them getting involved with police officers in any sense of the word.

Chapter Thirteen

Rowan was on the stationary bike when Brendan got to the gym, watching some evening soap on the small television in front of him. He didn't look up when Brendan climbed onto the bike beside his. Brendan assumed that meant he was annoyed.

"Sorry I'm late. I got caught up at work." He'd telephoned the Edinburgh police to see what they had on Sheila McIntyre. It turned out they had nothing, but it had taken more time than he'd thought to come to that conclusion.

Rowan pedaled like he was trying to climb a mountain. Brendan set his controls and started at a leisurely pace, listening to the bike's wheel spin in front of him.

"Is it about that guy from the shop?" Rowan finally asked, glancing away from the television but still not looking at him.

"What? No, of course not." Brendan was getting better at lying. First Philip Pradon, now Rowan. Rowan looked at him for a moment then changed the subject.

"Your mum rang me earlier. She's dead keen on us going down to London."

He'd forgotten about that. "Oh, right. Shame, I think I'm on shift all weekend."

"That's what I thought. So I told her I'd go on my own if that's all right with you." Rowan fixed his eyes on the bicycle controls in front of him.

Brendan was struck with the horrific image of his mother and Rowan alone together for an entire weekend. He didn't know what they would come up with but he knew it wouldn't be good. He knew Rowan could tell what he was thinking; he wasn't smug, but he did smile a little when Brendan said: "No, that's all right. I'll see if I can swap shifts with Dave or Raj."

Rowan had driven his own car to the gym. As they went out to the car park, Rowan said, "I've got an early shift tomorrow."

Brendan nodded. Rowan took a step closer and kissed him quickly on the lips. Brendan glanced around automatically, but the car park seemed deserted. Rowan got into his Volkswagen Golf and left, and Brendan got behind the wheel of his car.

Without really meaning to, he took the long way home, the one that brought him past the estate and then the Ship and Anchor pub.

One drink, he thought, glancing at the dashboard clock. He had time for one drink.

And if Jason happened to be working, then that would be an unexpected bonus.

* * * *

"I think you were wrong about Brendan," Zoë said as Jay got them ready for bed before heading out to the pub.

"How's that, Zoë?"

"I don't think he's a bad policeman."

"He was nice to me," Nico agreed. "He can't be a bad policeman if he's nice."

"Can we have him over again?" Zoë arranged her stuffed animals beside her.

"I don't know." Jay couldn't say he hadn't thought about Brendan since the incident with Nico. He had thought about him a lot. But he was a policeman. On top of that, he seemed strangely interested in finding out what had happened to their mother. "I guess we'll see." He kissed them goodnight and left, noticing the light on in Jess's bedroom.

The pub wasn't too busy. There were a cluster of guys watching football in one corner and a couple playing pool in the other, but neither group gave him any trouble. Jay was bent behind the bar, playing with the five-CD stereo system that continually spewed out "Hits of the Eighties," when someone sat on a stool in front of him.

"I'll just be a minute," he said, setting the CD player to Kylie Minogue. When he stood up, Brendan Cuddy was on the other side of the bar.

"Hi." Cuddy smiled. "Can I get a pint?"

"Yeah, sure. Of course." Jay refused to notice that his heart rate had picked up and his palms were sweaty. He wiped them on a tea towel and took down a clean pint glass.

"I was just in the neighborhood," Cuddy went on, although Jay hadn't said anything. Couldn't, in fact, think of anything to say. "Thought I'd stop by for a quick one on my way home."

Jay nodded and pulled the pint. He passed it to Cuddy, who took a long drink. Jay looked away quickly, but not quickly enough. He still noticed Cuddy's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed his lager. "Thanks again," he said,

when Cuddy put the glass down on the bar. "For the other day, I mean. For helping with Nico."

"It's fine. I like them. They're great kids."

"They're certainly keen on you." Jay smiled. He could do this. He could invite Cuddy over for a meal, or for a trip to the park, or something entirely innocent like that. Zoë and Nico would be thrilled, Jess probably wouldn't even mind, and it wouldn't have to be anything even the slightest bit like a date. There was no way Jay could consider dating anyone at the moment, least of all a man. Least of all a cop.

"I know you told me to leave it alone," Cuddy said, before Jay had the chance to continue. "But I'm only trying to help. If we could find your mum, wouldn't that make your life a lot easier?"

Jay felt cold. "No."

"Really? You want to spend your life looking after your brother and sisters?"

"I don't have a choice." And the fact that Cuddy could even raise the question was proof that he was just like the rest. He didn't understand. "If she wanted to be with us, she would be. If she doesn't want us, we're better off without her."

Cuddy hesitated. "What if she wants to come back, but she can't?"

"What, you think someone's kidnapped her or something?" Cuddy didn't say anything. "That's not how it was, believe me."

"Why? What happened before she left, Jason?"

Jay glanced around the pub. No one was interested in them; the men were too absorbed in the football, and the couple at the pool table was too absorbed in each other. Jay still didn't feel like sharing his memories with the whole room, so he jerked his head at Cuddy. "Come here." Cuddy came around the bar and Jay went with him into the back room.

Sheila McIntyre had always been unreliable. She would promise Zoë or Jess a book or some new doll she wanted for her birthday, then forget. She would put a pan of bacon on the stove when she got in from the pub then pass out on the sofa. She brought men into the house constantly, boyfriends and one-night stands, jerks who made rude jokes in front of the kids, swore at all of them and sometimes even slapped them about.

"I had my babies too young," Sheila often told Jay. "Fell for the first looker who smiled at me and see where I ended up, wasting my life in this shithole. If you do the same, I'll bloody kill you, I swear." She would look at him seriously for a moment, and then she would laugh. "But of course, I wouldn't give up any of you, sweetheart, not for anything."

Jay had always suspected that was a lie, but she was their mother. He loved her and even when he was a kid himself, he covered for her. He got his sisters the birthday presents she forgot to buy, he made sure they were all fed and washed, he took them to school and brought them home and helped them with their homework, just like he did now.

The one time he'd been irresponsible had been when he'd gone to the gay club in town, that one night he'd done something for himself and nobody else. And he'd paid for that.

"Her last bloke was a guy called Neil Gregory," Jay said, fixing his eyes on an empty Smirnoff carton under the shelves. He expected Cuddy to ask police-type questions, like who Gregory was and how he'd met Sheila, but he didn't say anything. "He was married, like most of them. I came home one night —" Jay didn't mention from where — and found mum passed out on the sofa, like always. I went upstairs to go to bed, and I heard some noises from Jess's room." She'd shared with Zoë, at that time, but Zoë often slept with him and Nico instead. She wasn't in the room that night and Jay had always been grateful for that.

"I opened the door, and Gregory was trying to fiddle with Jess." She'd been thirteen years old, for God's sake. Jay could still remember the outrage he'd felt once he'd realized what was going on. It was no wonder she was screwed up now.

Jess claimed that was the first time he'd tried anything, but Jay wasn't so sure. He remembered pulling Gregory off her and punching him, hard enough that he thought he might have broken his hand. Gregory hit back, of course, and a skinny seventeen-year-old was no match for a big, broad man like him. Jay was crouched against Jess's wardrobe door, trying to defend himself, when his mother came in.

She was half-dressed, in a skimpy top and short skirt. She screamed, but not at the man who was in the middle of assaulting her son. "Jay! What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?"

Gregory stormed out of the room without saying anything, and Sheila looked between Jay, bleeding on the floor, and Jess, weeping on the bed. "If he walks out on me because of you lot, I'm finished," she said and ran after Gregory.

"Are you okay?" Jess asked when she'd gone. He noticed a streak of blood on the sleeve of his jacket where he'd wiped his face.

"Are you?"

Jess nodded, then sobbed, and Jay put his arms around her.

"Mum came back the next morning, before I went to school," Jay said, ignoring the look on Cuddy's face. He'd expected sympathy and pity. He didn't want either, but if explaining all this made Cuddy realize why he had to leave things alone then it was worth it. "She told me she was going to Scotland with Neil Gregory and I had to keep an eye on the others until she got back. As if I ever did anything else."

"You never saw her after that?" Cuddy's voice was quiet in the small room.

Jay shook his head. "She chose her worthless boyfriend over her own kids. That's why you can't force her to come back."

"That's a terrible story."

Jay laughed, suddenly nervous. "What, you were expecting a fairytale?"

Cuddy shook his head. "I just had no idea things had been so difficult for you." He looked at Jay seriously and Jay felt that stupid heartbeat thing again. "It's no wonder you don't trust anybody."

"I trust you." The words were out before Jay could think twice about them. But it was true, wasn't it? Cuddy was trustworthy. He hadn't told anyone else what had happened that night, not even Nancy or Lisa.

The silence seemed to stretch forever. Dimly, Jay could hear the football announcer and the screams from the fans in the pub. Finally, slowly, Cuddy made a move. He inched towards Jay and before Jay had the chance to find out what he planned to do, the door opened.

"What are you doing back here?" Val the barmaid, dressed for an evening out in a sparkly frock and heels, looked suspiciously at Jay, then at Cuddy.

"I thought you were done for the day." Jay's voice sounded surprisingly hoarse. She had left hours earlier, excited about her date.

"I am, but I only forgot my bloody flat keys, didn't I?" She rooted around in a desk drawer for a moment, and then found them. "Lucky thing, too. I don't think Bob was too keen on having me stay over at his." She winked then looked at PC Cuddy again. He wasn't looking at her. "Right, then, I'll be off. See you tomorrow." She left and there was a moment's awkward pause.

"I'd best be going, too," Cuddy finally said.

Jay nodded. "Right. See you." He left and Jay went back out to the bar without a single regret about what had just happened.

Well, maybe just a small one.

Chapter Fourteen

Victoria Bannister lived in a garden flat in West Hampstead. As soon as they arrived, she kissed Brendan on the cheek and said, "Get changed. We're meeting my friend Alan for drinks at seven."

It was a long time since Brendan had been to London. He looked at the skyline from the cab window as they headed for Alan's houseboat: the massive London Eye, the suggestively shaped "Gherkin" office tower, the glass buildings that lined the river. He wondered if Jason and the kids had ever been here. He doubted it and that was a shame. He could imagine Zoë and Nico running wild at Hamley's toy shop and the British Museum and all the other places he had loved as a kid.

"Great to meet you, Brendan," Alan Bradshaw said, shaking his hand as they arrived at the boat and Victoria made the introductions. He was a little older than her, probably in his late fifties, with thick gray hair and a big gold ring on his right hand. "And Rowan," Alan turned to him. "Vicki's told me a lot about you."

Vicki? Brendan waited for the correction but his mother didn't even wince. It must be love. She certainly seemed happy as Alan gave them the tour of his

mansion on the water. She held Alan's hand like a teenager while he showed them his "games room" with pool table and dartboard, his gourmet kitchen, his sitting room with leather sofas and an original Monet he "picked up at Sotheby's a couple of years ago." He even had a recording studio, a soundproofed room beneath the hull of the boat with a wall full of fancy-looking electronic equipment Brendan wouldn't have the first clue how to operate.

"I've got a bigger studio in Kensington," he said as they looked around the room. "But sometimes my artists prefer a more private location." Brendan assumed as they climbed the narrow staircase back to the deck that Alan was a record producer. Or maybe a professional poser.

Alan had other guests arriving, so he left them in the kitchen. Brendan's mother opened a cupboard and poured them a glass of wine each, while Alan greeted someone on the deck.

"What do you think?" she asked, handing Brendan a glass.

"I think it's great," Rowan replied for him.

When it grew dark, most of the party moved inside. Brendan wandered around the deck and stood at the back of the boat, looking at the lights of the City glistening on the river in front of him.

"Do you like him, darling?"

Brendan turned around and saw his mother sidling up next to him. She laid a carefully manicured hand on his back and leaned up against him.

"Alan?" Brendan shrugged. "He seems all right." If you liked that kind of man, and Victoria did.

"I'm thinking about marrying him," she said, conversationally.

"You think you could live on a boat?"

She smiled. "He has got a proper house in Somerset and a dreadful ex-wife in Chelsea." She shuddered. Brendan took a drink from his perpetually refilled

glass of wine and felt his mother's eyes on him. "There's someone else, isn't there?"

"What?"

"Between you and Rowan. Another man." He shook his head, but it was clearly pointless. "Brendan. I'm your mother." She leaned in a little closer, pressing her thin frame against Brendan. "Whose side, yours or his?"

"Mine," Brendan admitted.

If Victoria was surprised, she didn't show it. "What's he like?"

Brendan thought of trying to describe Jason to her and gave up immediately. "It's complicated."

"It always is. But if it makes you happy, it's worth it." Brendan didn't know if Jason would make him happy, or if he was even interested. "You do need to be fair with Rowan, though."

"I know," he said. He just wasn't sure how fair it was to break the guy's heart for a second time.

* * * *

Jay didn't expect for a moment that Val would let what she'd seen go without comment and she didn't. As soon as he showed up at the pub Friday night, she started.

"So, are you dating a cop then or what?"

"No."

She didn't even pause for breath. "I'm not complaining, mind. If you've got an in on the force, we might actually get someone out here next time I ring in for help with the drunken idiots."

"He's just a friend." At least, Jay hoped he was. If Cuddy wasn't, after everything Jay had told him, then they would be in trouble.

“Right,” Val nodded slowly. “He is fit, though. You can have him ‘round here any time you like.” She went off to wipe down a table and Jay wondered if he was that obvious to everybody.

He didn’t think so. When he dropped off Zoë and Nico next door for the evening, Nancy mentioned again that Lisa would be coming home for another weekend soon. She was still keen on going for supper or a movie if Jay could get the time off from work. He made a vague excuse and thanked Nancy for looking after the kids.

Jay had tried to ring Cuddy. The voicemail had picked up and Jay had left a message: “Hi, Brendan, Zoë and Nico were wondering if you’d like to come to the park someday. Give us a ring if you have a chance.” As soon as he put the phone down, he realized how stupid it sounded. And also that, for the first time, Jay had called Brendan by his first name.

They probably meant nothing to Brendan, Jay told himself as he dried out a stack of glasses. He was a policeman; it was his job to be professionally sympathetic. Just because none of the others, Stiles or Kassam or anyone, showed Brendan’s kind of interest didn’t mean anything. He was just a friendlier bloke than the other constables and, to be honest, that wasn’t difficult.

Still, Jay couldn’t help but wonder what might have happened if Val had remembered her flat keys the other night.

Chapter Fifteen

The last time Brendan broke up with Rowan, there had been tears. There weren't any this time. Instead, Rowan was furious. While Brendan couldn't blame him, he couldn't help but think that the tears had been easier to cope with.

"It's that kid from the CostSmart, isn't it? I knew it."

"There's no one," Brendan tried but Rowan wasn't listening. Brendan checked over his shoulder and merged smoothly onto the motorway.

"Brendan, he's just some low-class teenager. He's not interested in you."

"You don't know anything about him," Brendan replied before realizing that rather ruined his 'it's nothing to do with him' argument. He braked as a truck cut in front of him. "Look, I didn't mean for you to get hurt again, Rowan, but you were the one who wanted to get back together."

"I didn't see you complaining earlier."

Brendan had to admit he was right. But he was doing it now. "You're a great guy, but we're just not right for each other."

"I love you," Rowan replied.

Brendan sighed. "I'm sorry." They rode the rest of the way home in silence.

He dropped Rowan off in front of his flat. "Do you want a hand..." Rowan slammed the car door hard enough to rattle the mirrors. Brendan couldn't exactly blame him although he did hope he hadn't chipped the paint.

Brendan should go home. He had a double-shift the next day; he owed Dave Bankhead for swapping shifts so he could have the weekend off. He definitely needed to rest up for the coming week, no doubt about that.

So he was a little surprised, but not at all unhappy, when entirely of its own accord his car turned away from his flat and headed for the Nest.

* * * *

Jay hated Sunday evenings. Someone, usually Zoë, always remembered right before supper that she had some homework assignment due the next day and someone else, usually Nico, but sometimes Jay himself, always discovered at the exact same moment that he didn't have any clean underwear for the upcoming week. This week was no different. Jay was loading the washing machine, trying to remember his multiplication tables and keep an eye on the stove at the same time when the doorbell rang.

"Shit."

"Don't swear, Jay," Zoë said, looking up from her maths book. "Mrs. Johnson says it's a sign of a small mind."

Fuck Mrs. Johnson. "Put the rest of the clothes in, would you, Zoë?"

Zoë made a face. "I don't want to touch Nico's dirty undies."

"Do you want me to help you with your homework?" Zoë didn't reply.

"Then do that, please. And then you can set the table."

He looked out the window before he opened the door. He hadn't seen Chris Wilkins since their weird conversation in the pub, but he didn't expect him to stay away forever.

It wasn't Chris or any of his friends. It was, in fact, Brendan Cuddy, looking amazing in a tight white T-shirt, denim jacket and jeans. He took a deep breath and hoped he looked casual when he opened the door. "Hi."

"Hi." Brendan smiled.

Jay tried to think of something witty to say, something casual and cool and completely un-stupid.

"Nico spilled his juice on the floor," Zoë called loudly. "And I think the beans are burned."

Brendan smiled. "Need a hand?" Jay held the door open and let him step inside.

Ten minutes later, Brendan was at the stove while Zoë and Nico watched, enraptured. "Now," he said, "the secret to a truly excellent eggs-in-a-basket is to use a drinking glass." He upended an empty glass on a piece of bread, turning it until a circle was cut out of the middle of the slice.

Zoë giggled and held up the piece of bread, looking at Jay through the hole. "Look at this, Jay! I can see you!"

"Great, Zoë." He tossed the last of the clothes into the washing machine and turned it on.

"Who can tell me where you keep your frying pan?" Brendan asked.

"I can!" Nico raced towards the cupboard. Brendan glanced at Jay and held his eyes for a second. Jay looked away just as Nico came back, staggering under the weight of the big cast-iron pan in his hands.

By the time the first load of clothes was finished, they'd eaten their eggs-in-a-basket and Zoë was nearly finished her homework.

"You're much better at maths than Jay," she said, all but batting her eyelashes at Brendan as they sat at the kitchen table.

"Steady on there." Jay tossed a handful of clean mismatched socks at Nico.

"I think the problem is that Jay does maths all day long," Brendan said, "at the shop and the pub. All I've got to do is figure out how fast someone is driving their car and how much money they owe me because of it."

Jay smiled but Zoë wasn't that easily distracted. "Were you good at school?"

"Not bad. I didn't like school, though, because I had to live there all the time."

"You were at a boarding school? Like Harry Potter?" If Zoë hadn't been in love with Brendan before, she definitely was now.

"Not exactly. It wasn't quite that much fun. I was there because there was no one at home who had time to take care of me. You're very lucky you've got Jay to look after you."

Zoë made a noncommittal grunt. When Jay tucked her in later she gave him a hug and a rare kiss on the cheek.

Jay expected Brendan would leave once Nico and Zoë were in bed, but when Jay got back downstairs, he was sitting on the sofa and didn't seem about to move.

"You're really good with them," Jay had to admit. "Do you have brothers and sisters?" Brendan shook his head. "Kids?" Brendan laughed, but it wasn't impossible. There were plenty of people younger than him with kids on the estate, and, judging from the looks a few dads had given Jay in the pub, having kids didn't necessarily mean you were straight.

"I didn't have good enough parents to want kids of my own," Brendan said. "What about you?"

Jay shook his head. "I reckon by the time I'm done with this lot, I'll be happy if I never see another kid as long as I live."

Brendan didn't say anything. Jay felt fidgety but before he could stand up again, Brendan had moved closer and was looking at him with determination in his eyes.

Jay could think of a million reasons why they shouldn't do this, but when Brendan moved even closer and pressed their lips together, he couldn't remember any of them.

It had been two years since Jay had kissed anyone like that and Brendan was a million times better than the stranger in the club. Jay opened his mouth a little and Brendan slipped his tongue inside, sliding his hands up to grab Jay by the shoulders.

Jay could feel someone's heart pounding hard, but he couldn't tell if it was his or Brendan's. When he pulled away, Jay kept hold of Brendan's shirtfront and rested their foreheads together.

"We can't do this." It was almost physically painful to say it, but he had to. "I can't sleep with you, not with the kids in the house." That was what his mother had done, time and time and time again with any man she clapped eyes on and Jay had sworn he would never subject them to it.

"It's okay," Brendan said, but he sounded as breathless as Jay felt. "We don't need to have sex." Brendan kissed him again, sliding his hands into Jay's hair and pulling their bodies close.

Jay heard the front door open a second too late. He sprang back from Brendan like he'd been shocked, but not fast enough. He was sure it had been obvious what they were doing, and the confused, surprised look on Jess's face confirmed it.

"Hi, Jess," Brendan said. Jay didn't know how he could sound so calm. His heart was hammering a mile a minute and he felt like he was going to throw up.

“Hi,” Jess said, slowly, staring at them. “I think I’ll go up to my room.” She went, her boots clomping on the stairs. Jay couldn’t even get his head together enough to tell her not to wake Zoë and Nico.

“It’s OK,” Brendan repeated and put his arms around Jay.

Chapter Sixteen

"I was thinking of doing a country-and-western night," Val said as Jay wiped down the bar. "Theme nights are always popular. It might stir up a bit of interest from the young 'uns." She looked around the pub which was quiet even for a Monday night. "You could bring your boyfriend." Jay stared at her. "You know, kind of a Brokeback Mountain thing."

Jay wasn't even sure where to start. "He's not my boyfriend."

Val rolled her eyes. "No one cares if you're dating a man, love. It's the twenty-first century."

The man bit wasn't what Jay was worried about. It was more what would happen to him if it came out he was dating a copper.

If dating was even what they were doing. It had been after midnight when Brendan went home, but they hadn't done anything more than kiss. Jay couldn't see any way they would ever get to do more than that. It wasn't like he could drop the kids off for a weekend at Nancy's, and he was determined he wasn't going to sleep with Brendan, or anyone else, while Zoë and Nico were in the house.

He'd meant to speak to Jess about it this morning, but the younger kids had been awake by the time she came out of her room and she'd left before he could find a moment alone with her. He was going to have to bring it up sooner or later and he didn't have the faintest idea what he was going to say to her.

"Think about it, anyway," Val told him. "I bet he'd look dead fit in a cowboy hat."

Jay went into the back and picked up the two black bags of rubbish they'd gathered over the course of the night. Hefting them over his shoulder, he opened the back door and went out to the bins in the alley behind the pub.

He'd just dumped them into the bin and was about to go back inside when someone grabbed him from behind and pushed him face-first against the brick wall.

"Fuck off, Wilkins." Jay tried to struggle free but the hands held him tighter. He caught a glimpse of dark skin and bright silver rings and knew immediately Chris wasn't alone.

"Seen your sister about lately, mate?" It was Chris's voice but Jay couldn't see him.

"My sister?" Jay heard a police siren in the distance and tried to look over his shoulder.

Mad Dog tightened his grip and Chris laughed as the sirens drew closer.

"Fuck, Chris," it was a third voice this time, not one Jay recognized. "Cops."

Jay braced himself for a blow but it didn't come. Instead, Mad Dog let him go, shoving him to the cold, dirty ground of the alley. They were gone in an instant and Jay heard footsteps on the gravel.

He stood up, wiping his hands on his jeans, just in time to come face-to-face with Brendan.

"Are you all right?" Brendan was in uniform and Jay firmly refused to let himself think how sexy he looked.

"Yeah, fine." He glanced around the alley but there was no trace of Chris or his friends. "What are you doing here?"

"I stopped by the house, but you weren't in." Brendan reached out to put a hand on Jay's shoulder but Jay stepped back. Just because he couldn't see them didn't mean they weren't still hanging about. "Jay, we need to talk." Jay nodded and waited for him to go on, but Brendan said: "Inside."

"I'm kind of busy right now..."

Brendan looked at him. "Is something wrong?"

Everything. "No," he lied. "But I'm kind of busy right now."

"Is this about what happened?"

"Nothing happened, okay?"

Brendan frowned and Jay felt a twinge of regret. Better that than the regret he'd feel if Chris Wilkins and his mates got hold of the fact he'd kissed a copper.

Brendan looked at him for a long moment, but he finally said: "Okay." He glanced around the back room and out at Val, who was lining up glasses at the bar and pretending she wasn't listening in. "If you're done here, maybe we could go back to yours for a little bit."

"That's not a good idea."

Brendan looked a little taken aback but not for long. "If you're worried about the kids, I've got a flat not too far from here. I could drive you home later."

"I really can't do that, Brendan," Jay said before he had a chance to talk himself out of it. "You'd best be going."

This time, Brendan's surprised look lasted longer. It was almost physically painful for Jay, but he steeled his heart and refused to look at the other man until Brendan said: "All right, then. I guess I'll see you later."

Val stared at him when Brendan had gone, like she was dying to say something, but he cut her off.

"I don't want to hear it, Val." At the end of his shift, he went out the front door and made sure to stick to the lit pavement paths all the way home.

* * * *

Jay was frightened of something but Brendan didn't think it was him.

Thanks to his childhood in boarding school and his fashion-industry mother, he'd never felt ashamed of being gay. He didn't feel like advertising it, necessarily, but he wasn't embarrassed by it. He'd been with guys who were though, worried closeted men who went from eager kissing to complete meltdowns in a matter of seconds.

Brendan didn't think Jay was like that. He wasn't experienced but he hadn't seemed nervous when they were together. He had seemed just as frustrated as Brendan felt when Brendan had respected Jay's wishes and left his house that night.

Something had happened between then and now to make Jay afraid. Brendan would bet any amount of money it had to do with Chris Wilkins.

* * * *

Jay had the knife in his hand when Jess came downstairs. He dropped it quickly into the drawer and turned back to the breakfast, pouring milk onto three bowls of cereal.

He waited for her to speak first. She did, looking critically into the fridge.
“Have we got any juice?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll get some in after work.” There was no easy way to say it. “Are you involved with Chris Wilkins?”

“What?”

“Wilkins. Are you seeing him?”

“Are you insane?” Jess scowled. “Anyway, shouldn’t you be worrying more about your own love life?” Jay blushed. Jess stormed off, and he didn’t follow her.

Jay fed the kids and washed their dishes and, when they hurried off again to get their things for school, he opened the drawer and took out the knife again.

It was a switchblade, the second one he’d bought from a specialty shop in town. PC Kassam had confiscated the first before Chris had gone to prison. Jay slid the blade into the inside pocket of his jacket and said: “Okay, guys, let’s go.”

* * * *

“Knife violence amongst youth is a national scourge,” the Detective Inspector told them monotonously, making the subject sound about as interesting as a treatise on Franco-Prussian relations prior to the First World War. “It is our duty, it is your duty as uniformed officers, to improve this situation for the good of everybody.”

“Especially CID,” Penny whispered next to him. “All those murders are getting in the way of their darts tournament.”

Brendan stifled a snort as the Inspector looked at them like a suspicious schoolteacher. Still, he dismissed them from the briefing and Brendan and Penny headed back to their desks.

Brendan had barely sat down when the sergeant was in front of them. "Ross Duncan," he said, dropping a picture onto Brendan's desk. It was a guy in a white hoodie, excessively baggy jeans and sunglasses and could easily have been any young man. "He's a DJ at Elliptical in town. I need you to bring him in for us."

"What's the charge?" Penny smirked, "bad fashion sense?" Clearly, she was on a roll today.

The sergeant smiled. "He's been named as a witness to a fight that took place there last night. We need a statement."

"Easy peasy," Penny determined. Brendan wasn't so sure.

Ross Duncan's address was listed as a tower block in a rough end of town. There was a row of buttons beside numbers inside the front door. Brendan pushed the one next to Duncan's number and straightened his helmet while they waited.

He had to ring twice more but finally, just as he was about to leave, there was a buzzing noise. Penny tried the front door and it swung open.

There was graffiti all the way up the walls, and the stairwells smelled like urine and vomit. By the time they reached the fifth floor, Brendan was trying not to breathe deeply and Penny was swearing under her breath. "Why can't we ever bring in a nice doctor or something? A solicitor maybe. A member of Parliament..."

"That's for CID to do," Brendan replied as he pried open the rusty-hinged door that marked the fifth floor and entered the dimly lit hallway. "It's our duty as uniformed officers to pick up teenagers and thugs."

Ross Duncan's flat was number 507 according to the information they'd had from the sergeant. It didn't take long for Brendan's super-sharp policeman's brain to notice that none of the flat doors had numbers, so he counted seven from the stairwell and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

"PC Cuddy and PC Stiles." There was muttering and shuffling behind the door that didn't sound the slightest bit innocent. Even if it wasn't Ross Duncan's place, there was something interesting going on in there.

When the door opened, a young redheaded man came into view, conveniently wearing the same white hoodie he'd had on in the picture. "Mr. Duncan?"

"Yeah? What do you want?"

"You saw a fight at Elliptical last night," Penny informed him.

"Yeah? So? It happens all the time." Penny explained that he'd been named as a witness and would need to make a statement at the police station. Brendan looked past Duncan into the flat. It was messy, as was to be expected, with piles of CD jewel cases and clothes and dirty plates everywhere. In the middle of this disaster, tossed carelessly onto a torn sofa was a bag, a satchel decorated with badges and marker pen graffiti that Brendan had definitely seen before.

"Are you on your own at the moment?"

Duncan looked at him. "Why do you care?"

Brendan forced an easygoing smile. "Just a question, sir. You wouldn't, for example, have a teenage girl in the flat with you?" Brendan could feel Penny's eyes on him but he didn't look away.

Duncan flinched, just a little, before the bravado came back and he said:

"I wouldn't know about that, mate. And I guess you won't, either, unless you've got a court order to search the place." Brendan should have expected

that answer. He let it go, walking with Duncan down the fetid stairs and out to the car.

Chapter Seventeen

Jay didn't think even Chris Wilkins would be stupid enough to attack him in the middle of CostSmart. He still felt comforted by the weight of the knife against his side, resting beneath his green apron as he stocked cases of baby formula and jars of pureed peas on the shelves in the Infants department.

He couldn't remember when the troubles between him and Chris had begun, if he'd ever known. Chris had come to the estate when Jay was about thirteen. He lived on the other side, near Jess's friend Aneesa, and his family was similar to Jay's: single mum, lots of kids, too many people and not enough room in the house. They could have been friends, but they never had been.

He wondered if he would have ended up like Chris, a bored, useless petty criminal, if he hadn't been forced to grow up so quickly. Maybe he owed his mum a thank you after all.

When Jay got home, the first thing he noticed was the police car parked outside the house. It would have been hard to miss.

Jay went up to the driver's side window and knocked. Brendan looked up from the notes he'd been writing. He smiled and opened the car door. "Have you got a minute?"

Jay shook his head. "No. You can't be here. I can't be seen talking to you."

"I think you're overreacting, Jay."

Of course he would think that but he had no idea what it was actually like to live here. Jay turned away and headed for the house. "Does your sister know someone called Ross Duncan?" Brendan called after him, and Jay stopped in his tracks.

He turned around and went back to the car, opening the passenger's side door and climbing in. "We need to go somewhere else."

"Where..."

"Anywhere," Jay sighed. "But quick. Val's expecting me at the pub at six."

Brendan drove to a car park in front of a cinema a few miles away from the estate. He told Jay about taking in Ross Duncan as a witness, and about seeing what he thought was Jess's bag on his sofa. "I'm going to kill her." Anger rose in his chest and he took a deep breath. "After all that. I can't believe it. What's the matter with her?"

"I can't be sure it was Jess's bag," Brendan reminded him.

"Of course it bloody was." Jay gripped the door handle so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"We've got to be careful," Brendan warned.

Jay felt the knife resting against his chest. "I can handle it."

Brendan shook his head. "I'd just as soon you didn't, actually. If you take matters into your own hands, you're going to end up in trouble."

"And who are you, Brendan?" he snapped. "My father?"

Brendan looked at him. "I'm the police."

That was a lot worse. "I need to get to work."

"It's only quarter past five." Brendan started the car anyway.

"And do me a favor," Jay added, as Brendan drove out onto the road, "don't come to our house any more. If people around here see you talking to us, they'll think we can't be trusted."

"Jay, listen. I understand that you're frightened, but..."

"You don't understand anything."

They drove to the Ship in silence. As Jay opened the door to get out, Brendan said: "If you do something to Duncan or anybody else, you will be taken in."

"Is that a threat?"

Jay knew Brendan was only a few years older than him, but suddenly Brendan looked very old and very serious. "It's a promise, Jay. How are you going to look after your family from prison?"

"Fuck off." Jay slammed the car door and went into the pub.

Val looked up when he came in, with a startled,

"You're early, aren't you?"

"Are you complaining?" Jay snapped.

"No, but..."

"Then leave me alone, all right?"

* * * *

The conversation with Jay had gone even worse than Brendan had expected and his expectations had been pretty low to begin with. He felt like a drink, but since he didn't think he'd be particularly welcome in the Ship, he headed home and opened a bottle of lager from the fridge.

There was nothing he could do about Ross Duncan. He was right; they didn't have a court order to search his flat and since he was only a witness to a bar fight, they didn't have any reason to get one. Brendan thought about

ringing Rowan for some tea and sympathy, but that idea was dismissed as soon as it appeared. Instead, he sat in front of the television, staring blankly at the screen until he heard his mobile buzz on the table beside him.

He checked the number, which was the station, and answered. "Hello?"

"Sorry to bother you at home, Brendan." It was Dave Bankhead. "Some old biddy's been ringing all evening wanting to speak to you."

"Who?"

"She says her name is Mrs. Gregory. Keeps going on how you wanted to meet Sheila McIntyre and she's at her house now." Brendan hesitated. "Like I said," Dave went on, "I wouldn't have rung you, but the poor old dear's been calling for hours..."

"It's okay. Thanks." Brendan put down the phone.

Mrs. Gregory was senile, Brendan was reasonably sure they'd established that on his first visit, back when she was worried about gnomes in her garden. Sheila McIntyre couldn't be at her house any more than Prince Philip had been.

Still, on the off chance she knew what she was saying, Brendan left the house and headed for the car without even pausing to turn off the television.

Chapter Eighteen

The woman at Mrs. Gregory's wasn't Sheila McIntyre.

Brendan had been expecting it, but he still felt a stab of disappointment when Mrs. Gregory let him into her sitting room and he came face-to-face with a tired-looking, washed-out middle-aged blonde.

"Look who's here, dear!" Mrs. Gregory exclaimed, excitedly. "It's Neil." The woman looked at him impassively. "I'll just get us some tea, and we can all catch up. Isn't this lovely?" Mrs. Gregory beamed at him. "What a nice surprise."

"Who are you, then?" the woman asked when Mrs. Gregory had disappeared into the kitchen.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

"I'm Neil's ex-wife," she answered. "Claire. So I know you're not him."

"I'm a police officer," Brendan replied. "Brendan Cuddy. I've been looking in on Mrs. Gregory from time to time."

"At least someone is. God knows Neil never gave a toss about anyone except himself."

"Neil's her son, then?" Brendan tried to sound casual, like Jay's words "Her last bloke was Neil Gregory" weren't echoing in his ears. "Have you seen him lately?"

Claire shook her head. "Like I say, he never gave a toss about anyone but himself. He left me and our kids two years ago to set up with the local slag."

"Sheila McIntyre?"

The woman looked at him, her eyes cold but not surprised. "I guess everybody knows her."

Brendan could hear Mrs. Gregory banging about in the kitchen and his heart beat faster. "Do you know if they're still together?"

"As far as I know. She's welcome to him, if you ask me. They deserve each other."

"Are they in Edinburgh?"

Claire stared at him and Brendan wasn't sure whether she thought he was really stupid or about to arrest Neil for something. He had a feeling he knew which one Claire would prefer. "No, of course not. They've got a flat over the launderette in town. He still works at the pawn shop where he always has."

"Here we are, then," Mrs. Gregory came back with a tray of jam-filled biscuits and three empty teacups. "Tea will be along in a moment." She set the tray on the table in front of them and sat beside Brendan, placing a wrinkled hand on his knee. "This is nice," she repeated, smiling at them. "The family, together again."

* * * *

Jay had to get his head together. He snapped at three customers and spilled half a pint on some girl's new skirt, causing her to shriek and her boyfriend to

threaten to “knock his fucking head off his shoulders.” Jay appeased them with a free round and a basket of chicken and chips and went into the back room.

Val followed him in. “What’s the matter with you?”

He sat back, resting against the big metal safe in the corner of the room.

“It’s just family problems.”

Just.

“Oh. Well, I know myself, nothing’s a bigger pain than family.”

“No.” *Except, maybe, for Ross fucking Duncan.* “Do you mind if I leave early?”

“Why?”

“I have some stuff to take care of.”

Val looked at him. “Nothing stupid, right?” Jay shook his head. She stared at him for another long moment then said: “It had better not be. I don’t want to have to train up someone else for your job.”

* * * *

Brendan needed time to think, space to clear his head. Instead, he sat making small talk with Mrs. Gregory and Claire, sipping tea and eating biscuits until Mrs. Gregory yawned widely. “I’m terribly sorry, my dears, but I’m afraid I’m terribly tired.” It was all Brendan could do not to leap up and head for the door.

“I’ll help you to bed,” Claire said. They disappeared upstairs and when Claire came back down, she took a jacket from the back of Mrs. Gregory’s wingback chair.

“Do you visit her often?” Brendan asked, standing. As they left the house, Claire shut and locked the door behind her.

"Every now and then. She's a nice old lady. She was a good mother-in-law. Too bad she has such a shitty son." Claire headed down the drive to the battered Volkswagen Golf that was parked in front of Brendan's car. She stopped when she reached the driver's side, and looked back at Brendan. "Are they in trouble? Neil and Sheila, I mean?"

"Not as far as I know."

Claire made a face. "I wouldn't mind seeing him in the nick."

Whoever Neil Gregory was, Brendan thought, as he got into his car, he certainly wasn't a popular man.

He had to tell Jay what he'd found out. His mother had been living in this town for the last two years; it seemed unbelievable to Brendan that they'd never run into each other and that she'd never come home to check on her children. Brendan knew what Jay had said about her mothering skills, or lack thereof, but he couldn't believe someone could live so close to her family and have absolutely nothing to do with them. Even Victoria, hardly mother-of-the-year material, made some effort to spend time with him when they were near each other.

He didn't know how Jay was going to take the news or whether he would even speak to him, but Brendan had to try. Putting the car into gear, he headed for the Nest.

There was no answer at the McIntyre house, but Brendan could see the light on next door. After a moment's hesitation, he went over and rang the bell.

* * * *

As soon as he left the Ship, Jay took out his mobile phone and rang Aidan Beecher. "Where does Ross Duncan work?"

"What?"

"Duncan. Where's his club?"

"Elliptical, in the High Street. Why..." Jay switched off the phone and headed for the High Street before he changed his mind.

Apart from that one trip to the gay club years ago, Jay wasn't a club goer. Even if he had been, he liked to think he'd have the taste to go to a classier place than the Elliptical.

It was a noisy, dirty bar with sizzling neon lights outside and pulsing music inside. Jay pushed his way inside, squeezing between sweaty dancing bodies, his feet cracking on the alcohol-sticky floor until he got to the DJ booth at the far end of the room. A man with long dreadlocks was behind the decks, bobbing vaguely in time to his music. Jay leaned close to shout: "Where's Duncan?" The man pointed towards one side of the club and Jay headed over.

The knife felt heavy in his pocket and he could feel his palms sweating. He wiped them on his jeans as he reached a door and, glancing around to see absolutely no one paying him any attention, he tried the handle.

* * * *

Jay's next-door neighbor, a middle-aged woman with messy brown hair and a cigarette hanging from her mouth, opened the door when Brendan rang. Brendan searched his memory for her name.

"Mrs. Stewart?"

She raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Good evening, constable."

"I'm looking for Jason." Looking past her into the house, Brendan could see Zoë, in pajamas and a pink dressing gown, sitting on a sofa in front of the television. A couple was ballroom dancing across a studio on the screen.

"He's at work," Nancy Stewart replied. "At the pub."

"Hi, Brendan!" Zoë looked over her shoulder and gave him a friendly wave. Nancy glanced between them and Brendan smiled.

"Hi, Zoë." He turned back to Nancy. "When do you think he'll be back?"

She looked at a clock hanging in the entryway. "Any minute now, I should think. He's usually home by now." Her eyes narrowed. "What do you want him for?"

Brendan hesitated. He wanted to speak to Jay before anyone else, but Nancy had known Sheila McIntyre. She might know more about what was going on.

"I've just run into Claire Gregory."

She knew more, all right. Immediately, Nancy glanced back at Zoë, who was absorbed in the television again. "You'd better come in." She stepped aside and let Brendan into the kitchen.

"Bloody Claire, eh? She always was a little troublemaker." Nancy tapped her cigarette on a misshapen clay ashtray, probably formed by a kid in a long ago art class, in the middle of the table. "Couldn't hold onto her husband and blamed Sheila for stepping in."

"Jay told me Neil Gregory attacked Jess the night Sheila left them."

Nancy looked away, but Brendan couldn't tell if that was news to her or not. "No one ever said he was a prince," she replied. "And Sheila was a godawful mother, I'll admit that. But she always tried to do what was best for her kids."

"She left them." Brendan kept his voice down, conscious of Zoë in the next room.

"She knew Jay would do more for them that she ever could."

"He was a kid." He still was.

"He's different," Nancy countered, puffing on her cigarette. "Responsible, like my Lisa. Sheila knew the little 'uns would be safe with him and I'm here to keep an eye on them."

"She's never even come back to visit them?"

"What good would that do anyone?" Brendan wasn't sure where to start with that. "I see her, now and then. Let her know how they're all getting on. She's dead proud of them."

"She's their mother. She should be the one looking after them." Brendan sighed. "What if Jay wants his own life? What if he doesn't want to be saddled looking after his brother and sisters?"

Nancy looked at him, her eyes cold. "Jay loves his family, constable. He wouldn't do anything that would hurt them."

"Does Jay know his mother's still in town?"

Nancy shook her head. "I'd think twice about telling him, if I were you." She set down the cigarette and glanced over her shoulder. Zoë was nowhere to be seen but she lowered her voice anyway. "Val from the Ship and Anchor told me you and Jay are together."

Brendan blinked. "Together?"

"Dating, like." Nancy held up a hand defensively. Her nails were painted blood red and there was a big, cheap-looking ring around one finger. "Don't get me wrong. I'm a modern woman and I've always had my suspicions about Jay. He's never been interested in going out with my Lisa and there's no other explanation for it. But you're not doing him any favors if you start putting your oar in where his family's concerned."

"We're not together, Mrs. Stewart." That was pretty obvious. "I'm just trying to help. All of them."

"Well, then." She stubbed out her cigarette on the picture of Warwick Castle in the bottom of the ashtray. "If you know Jay, then you'll know he likes to be left alone, won't you?"

* * * *

The longer Jay stood in front of the closed door in the club, being jostled by passing dancers and deafened by the ear-splitting music, the more his nerve evaporated. What was he going to do if he found Ross Duncan in there with Jess, anyway? Stab him? Her? Both of them?

He was about to turn around when the door opened. "Hi, Jay." Aidan Beecher looked at him evenly.

"Aidan?" Jay blinked. "What are you..." An arm reached out and pulled him into the room.

It was a small, dingy lounge with a coffee table, a stained sofa and a collection of torn music posters hanging off the walls. A redheaded guy Jay guessed was Ross Duncan stood against the wall, next to Chris Wilkins and a couple of his mates. Jess was with them, fidgeting. On the table in front of them was a stack of plastic bags and more pills than you'd see at a typical chemist's.

"Jay!" Jess shrieked.

Chris grinned. "Jay. Hi."

Jay felt his chest constrict but he couldn't go back now. "Jess," he said, keeping his voice as steady as he could. "Let's go."

"It's not what you think, Jay," she said, surprisingly tearful. "I didn't know Ross was into this stuff, I swear..."

Chris was watching like he was at a movie. Ross was twitching. Jay didn't take his eyes off his sister.

"Just get out of here," he told her. For the first time in her life, Jess listened. He tried not to look surprised when she ran for the door and no one tried to stop her.

"Nice to see you, mate," Chris said when she'd gone.

"Look, I don't give a fuck what you do, all right, but leave us out of it."

"Right." Chris stood up. "That ain't going to work, I'm afraid. Jess is going to get us into the school and that's a big market. We need her." He took a step forward and Jay reached for the knife in his inside pocket.

He wasn't fast enough. There was a sudden, sharp pain in his side. He turned around to see Ross Duncan with a switchblade in hand.

It was the last thing Jay remembered seeing for quite some time.

* * * *

Brendan was driving away from Nancy Stewart's when his mobile vibrated in his pocket. Balancing the steering wheel in one hand, he reached for it. Rowan's mobile number came up on the screen and Brendan pressed the button and brought the phone to his ear.

"Hi, Rowan." There were hospital noises in the background, beeping and footsteps and voices over the intercom, and Brendan assumed he was at work.

"I thought I should tell you — your friend has just been brought in," Rowan replied.

"What?" Brendan blinked. "Who? Penny?" She was on-shift tonight. Worry gripped him.

"No. Jason McIntyre."

Brendan felt time stop. "What for?"

"I didn't see, but they wheeled him right up to surgery."

Brendan checked over his shoulder and pulled a wide U-turn in the middle of the road. "I'll be there." There was silence on the other end of the line. Brendan knew he had to say something but all he could come up with was: "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Rowan said and put down the phone.

* * * *

Jay couldn't remember anything between passing out in the club and waking up in the hospital. The transition between dark, searing pain and bright, comfortable numbness, was completely lost to him. He guessed that was probably a good thing.

For now, he felt like his eyes had been glued shut. As he struggled to pry them open, he heard a voice beside him. "Jay. It's all right."

The voice was reassuring and Jay looked up at Brendan Cuddy, his face swimming woozily in front of him.

A bolt of panic struck him as he remembered how he'd got here. "Jess." His voice came out hoarser than he'd expected, a dry whisper.

"She's fine. She's with the police."

"Is she..." He trailed off.

Brendan seemed to know what he meant. "She's not hurt. Kassam told me she's the one who got the police and the ambulance to the club on time." He smiled. "And don't worry; Zoë and Nico are safe at Nancy's."

Jay nodded and immediately regretted it. He felt a hand on the blankets covering his legs and Brendan said: "It's all right."

It wasn't. His mind flew back to the club – minutes ago? Hours? Days? Jay forced his sore throat to form the word: "Ross Duncan."

Brendan's eyes were bright and something like relief was written across his face. "I guess you helped catch him for us."

He smiled and, using more energy than seemed like it should be necessary, he put his hand over Brendan's.

When he woke up for the second time, someone was standing beside him. "Brendan," he murmured, but when the person beside him said,

"Jay," his eyes flew open.

She looked the same as she had two years ago. Same hair, same makeup, same clothes. She even smelled the same — sweet, cheap perfume that no one in their right mind would ever choose. That was how Jay knew he wasn't dreaming.

"Hi, Mum."

She smiled at him and then she started to cry.

Chapter Nineteen

Three weeks had passed since Jay was released from the hospital. Brendan had wanted to go over to the house to see how Jay and the kids were getting on and see how he could help, but he forced himself to stay away. Jay was a victim in a criminal case; Brendan didn't want to think about how his superiors would react if he was seen visiting him in his off-hours.

At least, that was what he told himself.

He was finishing up some paperwork one evening, wondering whether he ought to visit Mrs. Gregory on his way home, when his mobile buzzed. Brendan took it out of his pocket and read the new text message.

Hi Brendan, haven't seen you around for a while. Val is having her country-and-western do at the Ship tonight. Should be good fun, if you're up for it. Feel free to bring your friends. Jason McIntyre.

Brendan closed the message and looked across the room. Penny was typing away on her computer. He considered, briefly, asking if she had a Stetson hat, but in the end he just texted back: See you then.

Brendan waited until late in the evening before he went to the Ship and Anchor. The party was in full swing when he got there with Garth Brooks

twanging over the stereo and Val, in a large pink cowboy hat and fringed shirt, pulling pints behind the bar. Brendan, who had dragged out a pair of old jeans and a checked shirt for the occasion, didn't see Jay until he came up behind him.

"Hi." He was semi-countrified himself in jeans and a red button-down shirt.

Brendan smiled. "How are you feeling?"

Jay shrugged. "Great. I start back to work at CostSmart next week."

"So soon?"

"Yeah, I know." He made a face. "But I've got the kids to look after."

Brendan had thought about Sheila McIntyre a great deal in the last month and not only when he was visiting Mrs. Gregory. Every time he thought about picking up the phone, of telling Jay what he had learned about where she was, Nancy's words came back to him and he put the phone down again.

They stood in silence for a moment as a group of giggling teenage girls whooped by them. "How's Jess?" Brendan asked when they'd passed.

"Still Jess," Jay replied. "But she's settling down to school. She wants to write her A-levels next year and get into graphic design."

"That's good." Brendan looked at him, unsure what else to say.

"Do you want a drink?"

"Yeah, definitely."

He hobbled a little when he walked, but he waved off Brendan's offer of help and went behind the bar. As Brendan waited, Val looked up from under her pink hat and winked at him.

"Here you go," Jay handed him a brimming pint and poured one for himself. "Want to go somewhere quieter?" Brendan didn't need to be asked twice. He went around the bar and followed Jay into the room at the back.

He perched on the desk while Jay eased himself into the wheeled office chair. "You sure you're all right?" Brendan asked, worried.

Jay nodded. "I just get a little stiff sometimes but I'm fine." He smiled into his beer. "Nico gave me his teddy when I was in the hospital. I think that made a world of difference."

"Yeah, I can see how that would."

"Why did you stop visiting?" Jay looked up at him. Brendan looked away. "You only came a couple of times after I started to get better. Zoë hasn't stopped asking when you're coming over to the house."

"It was inappropriate," he said, but it sounded weak to his own ears. "Anyway, you told me..." Before he could remind Jay of the conversation in which he'd been told to leave them all alone, Jay stood up, looked him in the eye and kissed him.

It was almost painful, but Brendan had to ask. He pulled away and said, "Look, Jay, about your mum..."

"Do we really have to talk about her now?"

Yes, because Brendan wouldn't be able to live with himself if they didn't. "Nancy told me something the night you and Ross Duncan had your encounter." Brendan felt Jay sigh, a puff of air ruffling Brendan's hair.

"I know."

"What?"

"Nancy brought my mum to see me when I was in the hospital."

Brendan blinked. "And that's it?"

"What more is there to it?"

A lot. "Did she see the others?"

"No. Nancy thought it was for the best."

"What do you mean, 'for the best?' She's your mother." A thought struck him. "Is she coming back?"

Jay looked at him. "We don't need her, Brendan." He took Brendan's hand. "She left because she thought I could do a better job with the kids than she could and she was right. I'm a better parent than her; I always was."

"But you're just nineteen. You should be out living your own life..."

"That's what I'm doing." Jay looked at him. "Finally."

* * * *

When Nancy offered to take the kids for a sleepover at her house, to "give Jay a chance to rest up," Jay was overjoyed. Almost as soon as they were out of the house, he rang Brendan, who arrived with remarkable speed.

"So, what do you want to do?" Brendan asked, as they lay casually on the sofa together. Jay hesitated. They were alone in the house, but the kids were just next door. If he strained his ears Jay could hear them, watching the television and playing Cluedo with Nancy.

"Maybe watch a movie?"

If Brendan was disappointed, he didn't show it, on his face or in the enthusiasm with which he selected a DVD from Jay's meager collection.

When Jay stirred awake, the sun was filtering through the half-open sitting room curtains, illuminating specs of dust floating in the air. There was a solid, warm presence at his back. Brendan, fully clothed, was asleep on the sofa behind him.

Jay smiled as he remembered the night before. They'd stayed up until nearly dawn, talking and watching movies and trashy television shows. He was about to nudge Brendan awake when there was a rattling at the door and Zoë appeared, Nico close behind her.

"I thought you were having breakfast at Nancy's."

"She went in the shower. We wanted to come home and see you." Zoë's gaze went to Brendan, who stirred and yawned. "I didn't know Brendan was sleeping over here." Just as well. She would probably have wanted to stay.

"Neither did I." Brendan smiled sleepily. "Tell you what, Zoë, why don't you get the stuff out the fridge and I'll make us some eggs in a basket?"

Thrilled, she skipped off to do his bidding. Jay felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You all right?" Brendan looked at him.

"Never better." It was the truth. He stood up and straightened his rumpled T-shirt and jeans. He leaned forward and gave Brendan a quick peck on the mouth. Then he went into the kitchen to help the kids, with Brendan following close behind.

~*~*~*~*~

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