



CHRISTMAS IN JANUARY

Charlie Cochrane

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October. Sunday morning bells ringing, calling the faithful to the eight o'clock service at St Thomas's church.

The parishioners attending so early in the day were generally past retirement age, although whether that was because this was the only service of the week that used the old prayer book or because older people got up early and needed something to occupy their time, the Reverend Dan Miller couldn't tell. He was simply pleased to see the usual crowd of regulars arriving while he got on with his routine of arranging what needed to be arranged. He noticed that every member of the congregation was coming through the door layered in coats and hats against the cold wind outside. The heating had cut in but the church hadn't fully warmed up yet—the ten o'clock congregation would be warm as toast—so those coats might well stay on for the whole service.

October? Today felt more like the depths of winter.

They were in the seemingly endless part of the church calendar that counted the Sundays after Trinity, although soon it would be the countdown to Advent, then that season itself, before Christmas, the new year and—at last—his holiday.

His and Steve Dexter's holiday, he should say. Everybody had been told that they were going together because of a shared interest in walking and historical sites. The Roman remains at Caerleon and Caerwent, Henry V's birthplace at Monmouth, the more modern

sites associated with industrial heritage: the kind of places that many people found boring compared to the prospect of a beach in Spain but which both Dan and Steve liked.

While that was all true, the reality would be slightly different. The thought of a fortnight away from the parish, two weeks of not wearing his dog collar and most importantly being able to share a house—and bed—with Steve, brought on a lascivious grin, totally unsuited to the occasion. Dan caught sight of it in the little vestry mirror and immediately wiped it off his gob. They weren't supposed to be flaunting the fact the pair of them were an item, even though several of the parishioners had worked it out and didn't seem to give two hoots.

One of his early morning congregation—Marjorie, whose piercing tones were penetrating all the way to the vestry at that very moment—had been completely pragmatic when she'd found out.

“Neither Harry or Mavis will mind about you and Steve,” she'd said, “but go carefully with the rest of us. We'll take a while to get used to the idea, especially given the official church line. Some people never *will* get used to it and while that may be hard for you two to accept, as the Archbishop of Canterbury might say, we'll need to learn to disagree well with each other. I'd advise you not to flaunt things.”

Dan and Steve had taken the advice and continued to be discreet, which was right on every count, including the personal. They were still in the *Is this or isn't it long term?* stage of things, having had a protracted period of being at each other's throats following Dan's arrival in the parish. Their stratagem of discretion was clearly working, as some of the more oblivious members of his flock simply regarded the thaw in relations between the two men as an act of Christian reconciliation.

It was still a matter of navigating tricky waters, trying to develop their relationship at the same time as not falling foul of what the church—and some of the more reactionary members of his own congregation—demanded of its vicars, but it was better than the alternative of agonising celibacy.

Dan glanced at the mirror again, pointed at his reflection and said, not too loudly, “Thoughts on the job in hand!” then strode out into the main part of the church to lead the worship.

After both the morning services were done, and lunch eaten—followed by forty winks on the sofa—Dan decided he should text Steve. Often, they spent Sunday afternoon together, maybe going out for a walk somewhere not too local or watching the sport on the telly before Dan had to lead the evening service. Though, the previous Friday Steve had needed to nip down to Exeter to see his parents because his dad had tripped over in the garden and broken three ribs.

Dan had met Mr and Mrs Dexter twice, and they'd proved a lovely couple. Which wasn't surprising, considering how great their son was. They were both silver surfers, with minds sharp as razors and totally accepting of their son's sexuality, a fact which was supposedly to do with Steve's maternal great-uncle, Gordon. He'd come out in 1944, just after being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the bravery needed for the former had no doubt been much more than for the latter. The resulting attitude among his relatives had generally been remarkably enlightened. So, if being homosexual was acceptable with Uncle Gordon back then, it was acceptable for anyone else in the family.

“I knew when he was about twelve,” Mrs Dexter had told Dan when the pair had been in Exeter on a visit and Steve hadn’t been in the room. “It was obvious, given the way he used to look at the footballers during *Match of the Day*. Steve had pictures of David Ginola all over his wall and I guessed there was more to it than hero worship.”

Dan wasn’t sure which side of the family his lover had inherited his spiky temper from. That thorny streak had shown itself when he and Dan had first met, suppressed sexual attraction leading both to believe that the other would be horrified at knowing they were fancied something rotten.

Time to stop wallowing in memories, come back to the present and get a message sent.

Dan typed the usual banal stuff, hoping all was well, wishing Mr and Mrs Dexter his love and saying he’d be putting a good word in with The Guvnor a) for a swift recovery on the rib front and b) for Steve to have a safe journey home. There’d been a major accident on the A30 near Honiton earlier in the day—not that Dan had checked the traffic more than every quarter of an hour when he hadn’t been in church, honest—but it seemed the holdups were now easing.

The reply arrived ten minutes later.

Sorry for delay. Was driving but back at Dexter Central now. Took Mum and Dad out to lunch. They send their love. Want to know when you’ll be down here again.

Dan smiled. Even the most trivial and prosaic message from Steve lightened the whole day.

Hope lunch was good. Tell them we’ll do diaries soon.

Not that there was much room in his diary for the next few months. Dan ended with some kisses then concentrated on the important matter of his cuppa, savouring the aroma as he indulged in daydreams about the following day. Monday being his day off he could have a lie in, go out for a run, then spend the afternoon pottering around in the kitchen. That was another change in this vicar’s life: when he’d first come to the parish he’d had Friday as his guaranteed free day, but more couples wanted to get married on a Friday, given that venues for the reception tended to be booked up on Saturdays, whereas Monday was rarely required for anything in the hatch, match or dispatch departments. Nothing to do with it being easier for Steve to get Monday off, especially when he’d accrued time off in lieu.

No. Not at all.

For dinner this Monday, Dan planned on creating a beef stew, with Yorkshire puddings on the side. Thank goodness Steve hadn’t eaten roast beef for Sunday lunch or all plans would have had to be changed. Dan grabbed a biscuit alongside his cuppa, put the footie coverage on the radio in the lounge and then settled down to give a once over to his sermon for the service he’d be taking later. Being an astute—or was it lazy?—type, Dan liked to reuse sermons that had been successful in other parishes. This recycled version focussed on the old chestnut of defining exactly who the neighbour was that you were supposed to be loving and what that love actually meant. Dan took the former in its widest possible sense to include everyone you had dealings with and the latter to summarise as, “Do no harm and if you can, do some good”.

That homily had gone down well in Brighton although not everyone in his flock in his present parish was so broad minded. A few of them possessed the sort of views that would have seen Jesus strung up for being a long-haired-leftie troublemaker. It was a constant

wonder to Dan—and to Steve—how parts of the church could have strayed so far from the original message its founder had preached.

The thought of Steve brought serious thinking to a halt. Lord, how Dan missed the bloke, even it was simply a matter of seeing him in the pews and receiving an especially warm handshake between them when they shared the peace. They didn't spend Saturday nights together on principle, although not an ecclesiastical one. It was simply the practical matter of the risk of Steve being spotted lurking in the vicarage when the regulars rolled up for the eight o'clock communion. But even the post ten o'clock service refreshments with Steve hovering in the general vicinity made the world a better place: Dan had sorely felt the lack of that earlier.

He gave himself his second kick up the backside of the day, because he was rapidly turning into a mawkish old sod. Then he sent up a swift prayer of thanks to The Guvnor for having brought the blessing of love into his life, before getting his head down over the sermon to make it suitable for the ears of those whose bums filled the pews of St. Thomas's church.

Monday

The next day brought a slight rise in temperature and a consequent rise in people's spirits. Everyone Dan encountered when on his morning run had a grin and a bright "Hello!" for him. Better still, the next few weeks were supposed to be mild—St Luke's little summer back for its annual outing—before turning wintry again. Shame he couldn't wear Steve close to his skin to keep him warm when they were out and about.

By the point the clock had reached *S minus thirty*—half an hour to the time Steve was due to arrive—the vicarage was filled with the delicious aroma of slowly stewing beef and Dan had showered, slapped a bit of cologne on himself and put on a clean, crisply ironed shirt. He knew that Steve wouldn't mind if he was still sweaty from the combination of his earlier run and slaving in the kitchen, but wasn't it right to make the best of the occasion? Getting tarted up would make a simple stew eaten in his little dining room feel like a proper date night.

Dan got a couple of bottles of beer from the garage, stuck them in the fridge to keep cool, then sat down with the crossword, waiting for the doorbell to ring and telling himself not to be too eager to answer it. There'd been an evening in September when he'd heard the bell, assumed it was Steve, had leaped up and broken into a run, only to go arse over tip by tripping on the hallway rug. When he'd managed to pick himself up and hobbled to the door he'd found Harry the verger there, dropping off something Dan would need for the next PCC meeting. When Steve arrived five minutes later, instead of being greeted with the expected sloppy vicary kiss, he found Dan being administered first aid by Harry and swearing like a trooper at how much his knee hurt.

Good old Harry. Far from being shocked at the swearing, he'd had a good laugh.

"I appreciate your choice of language, vicar. Some of the priests I've served with thought the word *ruddy* beyond the pale. There's nothing wrong with a good stream of Anglo-Saxon words when the occasion demands."

Harry wasn't shocked at Steve and Dan's relationship, either. Not long after they'd started going out, the verger had come round to the vicarage for what he said was going to be a heart to heart. It had consisted of him opening the beer he'd brought for them both, then

saying, “Whatever you and Steve are getting up to, it’s none of my or anybody else’s business.”

Dan had been speechless, managing only some incoherent if appreciative noise and swigging back a mouthful of much-needed beer. Everybody could do with someone like Harry on their side.

This Monday, Dan had got barely three-quarters of the way through his crossword when the doorbell rang, so he sauntered through the hall to answer it. As expected, he found Steve standing on the doorstep, wearing a sappy grin and with a chinking bag—beer or cider, probably—in his hand.

“Missed you,” he said, once they were inside and he’d deposited his bag on the floor. “Fancy a snog with a member of the legal fraternity?”

“What do you think?”

They emerged from the clinch a couple of minutes later, both considerably tousled and extremely satisfied, at least for the moment. “Whatever you’re cooking smells good,” Steve said. “Almost as good as you do.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” Dan led him into the kitchen.

“Shall I pour us both a beer?”

“Please. You’ll find some cooled in the fridge if you want to start with mine. I’ve got to give this a stir.” As Dan opened the oven, the kitchen was swamped with mouth-watering aromas. “About ten minutes and it’ll be perfect.”

“Not enough time to rush you upstairs and make use of that big bed of yours?”

Dan snorted. “I can turn the oven down. I’m only serving the stew with Yorkshires and I’ve cheated with them by buying ready-made, so there’s nothing else to worry about and they’ll take no more than five minutes to cook.”

“In that case, I’ll hold fire with the beer.”

To his annoyance, just as Dan lowered the oven temperature, the phone sounded. “Sorry. I’d better get that.”

“Give them short shrift if it’s a parishioner. Your day off, remember?”

“Try telling the rest of the world that.” Dan shrugged and went to answer the call. Why was life never straightforward?

Ten minutes later Dan returned to the kitchen, looking sombre. Steve, who’d been amusing himself filling in the quick crossword in the newspaper, gave him a sympathetic smile then went across for a hug. What he’d heard of the conversation suggested it definitely wasn’t one that could have waited until the next day and couldn’t have been easy to handle.

“Was that about Alice Greaves?”

“Yeah.” Dan sighed. “The matron at the nursing home just letting me know that she’s gone, so I wouldn’t get a shock when I drop in tomorrow morning. Assuming I still go, seeing as my visit is—was—primarily to give Alice communion.”

Steve rubbed his lover’s back. “Want to talk about it?”

Dan shrugged. “I was expecting this would happen. She wasn’t herself when I last went to hold the monthly service there, although she was sharp as a pin, right to the end. She thought the world of you.”

“Did she?” That must have dated back to when Steve had helped her with the conveyancing on her house, part of Alice carrying out her plans for what she pragmatically described as the last move but one in her life. When Steve had asked her to clarify that statement, she’d said the first move was into the nursing home and the second would be through the pearly gates, if they’d have her. “I used to go and see her every month, as well. Usually the evening after you’d been to take the service. We used to discuss your faults, so that gave us plenty to talk about. Then we started to discuss your few virtues,” he added, with a chuckle.

“I can remember her saying that if she’d been fifty years younger, she’d have set her cap at you and that it probably wouldn’t have done her any good. I wish she’d shared that theory with me sooner, because then we might not have lost so much time in getting together.”

Steve nodded. They’d spent far too long treading warily around each other. “We can’t change the past, so let’s enjoy the present.”

“I’ll use that for my next sermon. Not when you’re likely to be in church, though. I’ll get the giggles in the pulpit.”

“You can get ointment for that. Giggles up your pulpit. Ow! Sneaking your hand down and pinching my arse isn’t turning the other cheek, is it?”

“You’ll get the other cheek, if you’re not careful. Left one to match the right. I’d better get us our food.”

Once everything had been cooked to perfection, the casserole had been ladled onto plates and the Yorkshire puddings carefully nestled beside it, Steve and Dan could take their meal through to the vicarage’s dining room and relax. The windows gave onto the garden, which had a large laurel hedge all round it so couldn’t be overlooked by passers-by.

“Mum was telling me that she’d had someone round for coffee who saw our photo and wanted to know if we were brothers. Like we even resemble each other.” Steve rolled his eyes. When they were out together, they’d been mistaken for colleagues or relatives, despite their differences in appearance.

“People like to make connections, to categorise the relationships on view. I guess it’s habitual to try to spot a similarity and convince yourself the link’s familial rather than romantic. I’m trying not to let it rile me. Hiding in plain sight.” Dan waggled his fork to emphasise the point. “What did your mum say when she was asked?”

“You can imagine. How that picture showed me and my partner and how she was so happy we’d found each other and that if you were female, she’d be throwing a veil on you and how she hadn’t given up hope of having to buy a mother-of-the-groom outfit.”

“She’s a legend. What did her guest make of it?”

“Flabber totally gasted. I’m not sure the woman will be round for coffee again.” Steve had another mouthful of beef. “Mum doesn’t expect us to get married or even civil partnered, by the way. She knows the situation we’re in. This isn’t Brighton.”

Dan nodded. He’d been a curate there and had told Steve how much he’d enjoyed the odd occasion he’d able to hold hands with a bloke when out and about. He always swore he’d been a better servant of God for having a man he loved at his side. As he’d been with Jimmy then and was with Steve now. “Even in Brighton it’s situation dependant. You can’t be as open in every crowd. If that makes sense”

“Slightly more sense than some of your sermons. Oh!” Steve flinched at the slap Dan gave him. “That’s your second outbreak of violence. What happened to *love thy neighbour*?”

“I’ve temporarily abandoned it in the face of insult. My sermons always make perfect sense. Harry tells me so.”

“Harry thinks the sun shines out of your arse.”

The conversation turned to more local gossip, both from the Dexter home in Devon and here in the parish, Steve acutely aware that the matter of a civil partnership or other formal recognition of their relationship was a conversation that would need to be had at some point over the next few months. Maybe their holiday would be a good time, away from the parish and the pressures it brought.

January at last. Friday morning, trying to clear all his decks at the same time as packing for the next day’s car journey, Dan felt the prickling of something like cold feet. While he was still looking forward to a much-needed break—more well-earned than ever after the Christmas season—one element had him growing increasingly sensitive. The delicate topic of filthy lucre.

Steve had been in charge of holidays arrangements, and very cagey about everything. He’d made all the bookings of accommodation, only letting slip that they’d be heading up to the M4 and then heading west along it to a part of Wales that promised a smorgasbord of delights, including a night at the Celtic Manor Hotel and a show at the ICC en route. He’d been guarded about how much this was going to cost, although Dan knew that reticence was simply part of his character, going hand in hand with his professional outlook and his private life. Yet this seemed to be more than the usual tendency to playing cards close to his chest. Money, the love of which was said to be the root of all evil, had reared its ugly head again.

Vicars weren’t well paid, whereas successful solicitors pulled in a hefty whack, so logic said there was nothing wrong with Steve picking up the lion’s share of the costs. Maybe that would have been okay if they’d been in a committed legal or even common-law partnership. But they weren’t, and Dan didn’t want to be treated like some toyboy, even though he knew that would never be Steve’s intention. They’d discussed the funding of this holiday the previous autumn, but things had got so tense they’d left matters at Steve asking Dan to trust him to do the right thing. He’d managed to do that so far—if a vicar couldn’t exercise trust and faith who could?—but now Dan felt he wanted to clear the air before they left, even if that risked a blazing row. He’d prayed about it, asking for wisdom, although the only answer he got was what felt like a nudge to ring Jimmy. Maybe his *ex* would have the answer.

Jimmy answered promptly. “Hello stranger. To what do I owe the honour of your gracing me with a phone call?”

“Don’t be snarky.” Dan winced at the tone of Jimmy’s reply. Okay, it had been a month since last he was in contact—to wish him a happy birthday and an early Happy Christmas—but that wasn’t an unusual length of time for them to go without speaking.

Jimmy sighed. “Sorry, been a bit of a week. Shouldn’t take it out on you, but you’re a natural target. Always been too nice to tell me to piss off when I want to have a whinge.”

“I might just do that, this time. Want me to ring back when it’s more convenient?” Or when Jimmy was less like a bear with a sore head.

“No. I’ll take my penance by listening to what this is about. I’m guessing you want to pick my brains about something?”

“Have you taken to reading my mind?”

“No, just my experience of your behaviour. That’s why you usually ring these days. And that’s not me being snarky, either. I’d rather you called me about something, rather than keeping up radio silence.”

It wasn’t strictly true that Dan only rang when he wanted to pour his heart out. Nor was this conversation going in any of the directions Dan had wanted. He’d almost forgotten how Jimmy could behave when he got into a slough of despond—which he was clearly experiencing now. That had been one of the many reasons that he hadn’t felt it worth fighting to save their former relationship. Best to play a straight bat: by the time they next spoke, Jimmy would hopefully be back to the happy self he was ninety-five per cent of the time. “Okay. I’d better come clean, then. Money. Never a problem between us, I know, both being skint, but it’s different with me and Steve. He’s comfortably off, much better off than a vicar, anyway, and while he doesn’t make a big thing of the fact, he doesn’t let me pay my way. This holiday we’re off on tomorrow’s an example.”

“You feel like a kept man? I get how bad that must feel. It’s beneath your dignity.” Slough of despond or not, Jimmy’s perception was a sharp as ever.

“Something like that. I know he means well, but don’t they say the road to hell is paved with good intentions?” An unrelenting pursuit of what the giver regarded as suitable charity, without checking whether the recipient felt the same, could be exhausting. Not to mention demeaning. “I don’t want to upset him or sound ungrateful. Let’s face it, I don’t want to do anything at all to risk our relationship but I don’t fancy holidaying without clearing the air.”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Dan had thought he really loved Jimmy, back in the day, although with the benefit of hindsight, the feeling hadn’t quite been what he now had for Steve. “I don’t want to screw this up.”

“Then talk to him. Tell him how you feel about the money side. If you can’t resolve it, then your relationship can’t last. And if he doesn’t understand, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

Thursday evening came, with all the holiday packing done but the emotional baggage waiting to be sorted. Steve had suggested going out for a pub meal, something they enjoyed doing when the venue was well away from the parish, thereby reducing the risk of being seen looking lovingly into each other’s eyes. Tonight, though, Dan had suggested fish and chips from the local takeaway. He’d used the excuse that they’d probably be eating out a lot on holiday, although Steve had to be astute enough to suspect it was so they could talk candidly.

Certainly, he was in wary mode when Dan arrived at his house.

“Okay, out with it,” Steve said, once they’d settled at his table, food on plates and a glass of beer each. “I know when I’m being set up for what the PCC secretary describes in the minutes as *a full and frank discussion*.”

“You keep seeing right through me.” Dan blew out his cheeks. “This holiday. How much do I owe you so far?”

Steve avoided his gaze. “Nothing. I mean, nothing as yet. We’ll do a reckoning at the end when we’ve paid for meals and whatever.”

Dan waved a chip at him. “I’ll hold you to that. I’m not a pauper.”

Steve, sighing, laid down his knife and fork. “Look, I didn’t want to tell you this. If I do, first, will you keep it to yourself and second, will you shut up about how much this holiday’s going to cost in total? Because it isn’t half as much as you think it will be.”

“Really?” Dan struggled to keep his anger in check. “I can read websites, you know. I’ve found out how much cottage rental is likely to be. Ball park figure, anyway. I’m expecting to pay my whack.”

“You will.” Steve reached across to briefly touch Dan’s arm. “Only neither of us will be paying as much as we might have expected to. Mum and Dad are contributing.”

“What?” Didn’t that make things worse? “It’s bad enough having charity from you. I don’t want charity from them.”

Steve made a sucking-lemons face. “It’s not charity, you big plonker, it’s an early birthday present to me. My parents are comfortably off and they’ve just had a five-year bond mature, so they’re looking for all the ways they can to avoid me paying inheritance tax in the future. They’re not contributing as much as they’d like to, which is the total bill, because I dug my heels in at that. A man has his dignity to preserve. Both of us do.”

“Quite right.” That took the wind out of Dan’s sails. A sensible financial arrangement was something he could live with, so long as it wasn’t tax evasion. He could imagine Jimmy telling him to shut up and accept the gift in the spirit in which it had been offered. If Mr and Mrs Dexter wanted to be generous with their money, that was their prerogative. “Is this like Marjorie and her deed of wotsit that she came to discuss with us?”

“Deed of variation. Not quite but a similar idea.”

Dan couldn’t remember the details of the conversation, except that he’d been called in for a moral opinion and Steve for a professional one. They’d been sitting in Steve’s conservatory and the light playing on the bloke’s hair had been too distracting. He was very distracting now, with colour on his cheeks, and a lock of hair falling over his forehead.

“Sorry for being such a pain in the arse,” Dan said. “I’ll shut up about money, if you promise to let me pay my way.”

“Deal.” Steve held out his hand to be shaken. “Do you want me to write that down and sign it or is a spoken contract as good as a written one?”

Dan rolled his eyes “How am I going to cope with two weeks of listening to your drivel? I’d better cancel this holiday right now.”

“That’ll be cutting off your nose to spite your face.” Steve gave him a wink. “There’ll be two weeks of other things, as well. Things not suitable for tender eyes or ears. Just think of being somewhere no nosy parishioners can spot us sitting in the kitchen together bonding over bacon in our pyjamas. No making old jokes about what bacon might be doing in our pyjamas.”

“Old jokes never get stale.” Dan finished the last chip on his plate—a crispy one, left to the end because it would taste the best.

Steve pushed away his empty plate, stretched and yawned. “Sorry. This week has knackered me. Need to preserve my energy and not waste it chasing wild geese like inheritance tax.”

Dan got up and manoeuvred himself onto Steve’s knee. “I like wild geese. Especially since I found out that in the Celtic tradition, they call the Holy Spirit the Wild Goose.”

Steve put on his serious but tender face, the one which Dan now reckoned was reserved only for him. It had once lain beneath a self-protective surface of bad temper, sarcasm and indifference—a veneer they’d both hidden behind. “One of the many things I

love about you is the lack of separation between the spiritual and the secular in your thinking.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they *can’t* be separated. What would be the point, otherwise? Church isn’t just for Sundays.”

“And what about when we’re up there doing bed things?” Steve jerked his thumb ceiling-wards.

“Ah, that gets a bit fraught, as you can imagine. I can barely string two sensible thoughts together. But I do send up a prayer of gratitude that He sent me you. You may be a cantankerous old trout but you’re *my* cantankerous old trout.”

“How romantic.” Steve eased Dan out of his lap, then took his hand. “Shame the alarm’s got to be set for so early tomorrow or I’d get you to come upstairs and prove it. I guess I’ll have to wait until tomorrow night.”

Deepest south Wales at last.

Friday morning had broken chilly but with a blue sky and the promise of a lovely day developing and, for once, the M4 had behaved itself for their journey. Their hotel had been comfortable, the show entertaining and now they could head further west, skirting Cardiff to the north before turning a touch south.

“*Now* it feels like we’re on holiday,” Steve said, as they stopped for coffee in Caerleon. He raised his mug of coffee and chinked it against Dan’s. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

They’d planned to head out to Penarth and take a walk along the front before driving to their rental property which was only ten minutes or so from the town, but the stiff southerly breeze had put paid to that, so staying inland and poking around Roman ruins had seemed a better bet. Despite much questioning from Dan, Steve had insisted on playing his cards close to his chest about exactly where they were staying and what the accommodation consisted of. He’d assured Dan that reticence was nothing to do with how much it cost—he felt the air had temporarily cleared on that touchy subject—and that his motive was simply the element of suspense. He only hoped the house would live up to expectation.

That afternoon, as they reached the final few miles of their journey, Steve had his first pangs of misgiving. You could look at photos on a website ad nauseum yet never eliminate the risk that when you got to the real thing, it would prove to be completely different. So, when they pulled into the small circular driveway and he could see the place in real life, Steve heaved a sigh of relief.

Dan, with a mutter of, “Bloody hell!” burst out of the car, looked at the cottage, glanced at Steve, turned through one hundred and eighty degrees to take in the garden, then looked at Steve again.

“This is amazing.” Dan waved his arm around wildly. “There’s a lake.”

Steve nodded, temporarily lost for words. This was exactly the reaction he’d wanted to see—the expression of absolute delight on his boyfriend’s face—and now it had appeared on cue. “There’s supposed to be an old, ruined mill in the garden, too,” he managed to get out, although Dan didn’t seem to have noticed the delay in replying. He was still rooted to the spot, gobsmacked.

“No wonder you wouldn’t let me see the details. It’s...perfect. Amazing. Fabulous. Like you.” Dan enveloped him in a hug.

“Don’t tempt fate,” Steve said. “We haven’t looked inside yet. It might be a total dump.”

It wasn’t. The property, which looked hundreds of years old, must have been two separate cottages at some point. They’d been knocked through to form one long, low building with a more recent conservatory built onto the end. It had clearly been modernised and refurbished at some point recently, and to a high standard.

“I’ve not changed my opinion. It *is* perfect.” Dan gave Steve another hug, with a scorching kiss to accompany it, now that they were indoors. “Bed looks comfy, too.”

“Desperate to try it out?” Steve chuckled. “You’ve got a choice, actually.”

Dan’s brow wrinkled. “I’ve only seen one bedroom. Where’s the other hiding?”

“Over here, according to the website.” Steve led them back to the conservatory. “See that building with the fancy decoration? I think that’s it.”

“Ruddy Norah. I thought that was next door.” Dan tried the conservatory door, finding it locked.

“I think I saw the keys on a board somewhere. Hang on.” Steve scooted off to the kitchen, where he’d spotted them on a rack. Grateful for the things each being well-labelled, he grabbed the two he needed and headed back. Dan, having plonked himself down on the conservatory sofa, was sitting with eyes closed, basking in the winter sunshine.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty!”

“I wasn’t asleep. Yet.” Dan opened one eye. “I shouldn’t have sat down. Too comfy here.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for sleep this next fortnight. Plenty of time for other things you do in beds, as well.”

Steve opened the conservatory door, then led his lover along a path through the garden to an orangery that probably wasn’t as old as it looked. “Wow. That’s even more spectacular than I expected and I’d seen the pictures.”

As he peered through the glass doors into an ornately decorated room, one dominated by an enormous bed, Steve’s excitement built. Once inside, they realised the anticipation was outweighed by the reality. Whoever had decked out this place not only had an eye for elegant interior design, they’d appreciated the practicalities, too. An umbrella stand located beside the orangery doors—matching one Steve had spotted in the conservatory—with a selection of brollies in each, ensured that you could make your way between the two buildings without getting drenched by the inevitable Welsh showers. A brief exploration located tea and coffee making facilities, and a small fridge for milk or wine, which ensured you could have your tea in bed, or champers if you preferred, without having to walk outside to fetch it.

“You’ve picked an absolute winner,” Dan said, patting Steve’s arm. “I can’t get over the size of that bed. There’s room for an entire rugby team. Not that I’m intending sharing it with anyone except you.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. That bed’s going to get a lot of use.” Steve chuckled. “And if past performance is anything to go by, it’ll be worth every minute. You’re magnificent.”

“Am I?” Dan’s expression registered both delight and embarrassment.

“Like a tiger. I can’t wait for a repeat.”

“Then why wait?” Dan hauled him into a hug. “The sooner the better, if you want my opinion on the matter. And I can tell your opinion already, from the state of your body.”

Steve was about to make a case for why that would be a bad idea—broad daylight, mid-afternoon—before realising he was being stupid. The doors had locks, the windows had blinds, there were only a handful of houses close by and none of them overlooked the place. What a change from being in the parish with the constant risk of being seen in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Hold that thought, then. Sorry to spoil this romantic moment with practicalities, but no matter what my lower portions are saying, I need to check we locked the car and the cottage doors.”

“Good point. I don’t want my mind on anything else while we’ve got the freedom.”

Steve got slightly lost on his way back from the orangery to the car, having gone via the garden. It proved to be a maze of paths that wound themselves around flower beds or opened onto unexpected areas with seating tucked into arbours. They’d need to come back here in summer, to make the most of it, although exploring the grounds and admiring the lake took second place at present to exploring and admiring Dan’s body.

Jobs done and back in the bedroom, Steve found Dan in the process of pulling down the last of the blinds, leaving the room bathed in a pleasing half-light. He locked the door behind him, the final act of securing themselves from the world outside, then went to sit on the bed—which appeared to be every bit as comfortable as anticipated—and waited for Dan to join him.

“Hello Mr Vicar.” Steve brushed his hand across Dan’s cheek, enjoying the slight stubble rubbing against his knuckles.

“Hello Mr Solicitor. Are you going to show me your articles?”

“Behave. How I am I supposed to seduce you if I’m fighting a fit of the giggles?”

“Steve, you can seduce me any time, just by glancing my way with *that* look. The one you wore when you called me *Mr Vicar*. Only don’t do it in the middle of a PCC meeting, please.”

“I promise.”

Afterwards, they both must have dozed off: Dan awoke to find Steve nestled against him, face as beatific as a child’s in what little remained of the light and that seemed to be coming from a lamp in the garden, which they’d have to work out how to turn off. Lying alongside the person you loved, on a still evening—what could be better? This was the sort of life Dan could get used to, assuming he would ever be able to persuade his conscience not to nag him about being over-pampered. Maybe it was best to keep these sorts of luxuries just for holiday time when they could be appreciated as a special treat, without a layer of guilt slapped on top of them.

Dan had always wrestled with the balance between the injunction to sell everything, give it to the poor and follow Jesus, and the demands of living something like a normal life in the twenty-first century. His tutor at theological college had told him that living generously was what counted, not hoarding everything away or being selfish. Generosity that was meant to extend to everything, he’d added, not just money. There was also Mother Teresa’s view, that you had to look after yourself to be able to look after others, and if Dan didn’t get a

proper break from work, he knew he'd be unable to properly care for his flock the rest of the time. This January he was going to have a fortnight of living it up and knew it would do him the world of good.

"What are you filling that head of yours with?" Steve murmured sleepily.

"Nothing but good things. I'm temporarily being a hedonist," Dan said. "So, where do we start?"

"I thought we already had started. Or was that some wonderful dream?"

"You're sex mad." Dan rubbed his lover's head with his knuckles. "Two weeks to fill. What have we got planned?"

"Nothing much, although plenty of ideas." Steve repositioned himself, like a cat seeking the comfiest position to lie in. "I thought we could spend some time this evening in front of the fire, putting together a plan of campaign. Cardiff Bay, Museum of Wales, Barry Island...there's plenty to do. I think there's a game at Rodney Parade on Friday evening, if we can get tickets."

"That all sounds great. Now I know exactly where we're based, I'd like to be in on planning the rest, though. I know you're the natural organiser in this partnership, but it can't always be you in charge, even if it's in aid of as nice a surprise as this place has turned out to be." Dan hadn't meant to be quite so frank, but better to air these things than leave them to fester, like he'd done with the money issue, the roots of which still hadn't been entirely eliminated.

"Point taken. I did mean well." Steve leaned down and gave him a kiss. "That'll be on my gravestone, I guess. *He meant well*. Damned with faint praise."

"Hush." Dan put his fingers to Steve's lips. "Don't do yourself down. I wouldn't have you any different, honest. Right, I must stink like a sailor's jockstrap. Time to try out that shower. And much as I love you, I'd like to do so alone or I'll end up in a worse state."

"I fear you're right. Boring things like a trip to get in supplies are calling us and we can't go in this condition. It would traumatise the natives."

"Indeed. I'd rather not be arrested first day of my holiday. I've got plans for eating dinner somewhere by the lounge fire. Olives, ciabatta, meats and cheese sort of thing."

"*A loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou.*" Steve slapped Dan's backside. "What more could a man want?"

What was left of Saturday, then all of Sunday and Monday, passed in a pleasant haze of walking, eating, and alternating being touristy with getting off what might be the summer tourist trail. They'd found a little church, the website for which promised a friendly welcome to anyone who dropped in and—much to their surprise—actually delivered on the promise. Evensong was a delight, made more so by the fact that Dan could simply sit back and enjoy it.

The weather behaved itself, the inevitable rain keeping mainly to the hours of darkness and Tuesday broke glorious. An ideal day for getting down to Cardiff Bay and as long a walk as they could find.

"Enjoying yourself?" Steve asked as they meandered around the waterfront.

"Having a great time. You?"

“Best holiday I’ve had in years. Almost as good as when I saw the killer whale off Nairn.”

Dan glanced at his lover sidelong. “You’re winding me up.”

“I’m not. For once. Want to hear the story?”

“I’m all ears.”

Steve dropped his voice, despite the fact there was nobody within earshot. “No, you’re not. There’s one bit of you which couldn’t be more unlike an ear. The one you demonstrated last night.”

Dan groaned. “Smutty beggar. Keep to the point. No jokes about those, either.”

“Spoilsport. Anyway, I was in my first year at Uni and we were having a family summer holiday up near Inverness. We were strolling along the beach at Nairn and I saw a great black fin break the water.” Steve looked suddenly deadly serious. “Mum and Dad didn’t see it, of course, because sod’s law always applies, and they assumed I was pulling their legs.”

“I’d have assumed the same. Don’t tell me you’ve just seen one in the bay?”

“Pillock.” Strange how an insult could sound so endearing when Steve said it. “We went to a hotel for a drink and the waiter started chatting about the local wildlife. I asked him what came that far up the firth and he said they got seals, which was what attracted the orca. Which is the thing I thought I’d seen but I was sure I was wrong. Until he said that and before I even mentioned my sighting.”

“I doff my hat to your superior zoological knowledge—only I won’t do that really because it’s too cold—and apologise for doubting you.” Dan grinned. “I’ve never seen one but from now on I’ll be watching any stretch of water like a hawk. Maybe it could be a sign.”

“What do you mean, *a sign*? Isn’t it a wicked and adulterous generation that asks for one of those?” Steve chuckled.

A year ago, he might have thrown that at Dan with fervour, looking to catch out the vicar at every turn, but that was in the bad old days. They could have mature debates now, even on sticky points of theology.

“Well, I wouldn’t say either of us are wicked or adulterous—unless you’ve got a husband or wife hidden away somewhere—and anyway we didn’t actually ask for a sign, so it doesn’t apply. We might get given one free and gratis.” Dan gazed up at the blue sky. “A bit like a rainbow appearing. A little sticky note from God saying that He’s pleased.”

“You big softy. You’re *my* big softy, though.” Steve cuffed his arm. “The only sign I’ve ever wished for was one to show that you didn’t hate me and I got that. Eventually. In spades.”

Dan gave him a watery smile. “If you say anything more like that, how am I going to get through lunch without getting all soppy and holding your hand over the sandwiches?”

“You could put on that serious expression you adopt when Marjorie gets on her high horse at PCC meetings.”

“I don’t put on a special face for her. Do I?” Dan was horrified at the notion.

“I’m afraid you do. A sort of *I’m listening to what you’re saying and am about to tell you, in Christian charity, why you’re totally wrong* expression. The waiters will think you’re my boss, giving me a dressing down.”

“I might just try that, then.”

They'd had a great—if tiring—day, an equally great supper and had both fallen asleep within minutes of hitting the bed. But Steve had woken at just gone one, probably unsettled by a fox which was determinedly making its eerie calls in the garden. Half an hour later he was still wide awake and certain he'd not get back to sleep any time soon. Insomnia, while only an occasional visitor, wasn't a welcome one.

He slipped out of bed, threw on some clothes then made his way over to the main house, determined not to wake Dan, who'd been spread out in bed with an angelic look plastered over his face. A hot, milky drink and some old film on the telly might just tip Steve back over the edge of sleep land and if it didn't, at least he wouldn't be bored. Watching the television might also keep his thoughts from the issue of where he and Dan stood going forward. If his lover had been in just about any other profession, they could have been seriously contemplating moving in together, maybe tying the knot, because they both knew their relationship wasn't for the short term. But Dan wasn't, and they couldn't, not with any degree of simplicity.

As if the thought had summoned the person concerned, the distant creaking of the conservatory door announced the imminent arrival of either Dan or an audacious burglar. Steve got out a mug in case it was the former but kept the rolling pin close to hand in case of the latter.

“Having trouble sleeping, petal?” Dan, tousled and now less beatific in appearance, came and slipped his arms around Steve's waist.

“Yeah. I went out like a light then I woke about half an hour ago and thought it had to be morning, so I'm wide awake. Sorry if I disturbed you.”

“I doubt it was you. More likely a combination of my bladder and a bloody fox sounding like nothing on earth.” Dan disentangled himself then stretched. “I hope there's some dreadful old film on the telly we can doze off to.”

“Want some cocoa?”

“Just hot milk would do me fine. There must be some of those digestive biscuits left to have with it.”

“Very midnight-feast-in-the-dorm. Or how I imagine one would be.” Steve poured some more milk into the pan. “Don't think I'd have liked boarding school life, although the concept of the illicit eating and the tuck shop appeals.”

“I bet it does. I've seen you attacking the biscuits when we have coffee after the ten o'clock service. I'm surprised Marjorie doesn't ration you.”

“She wouldn't. I'm her favourite.” Steve shivered. “I'll rustle up those biscuits. Can you go in search of a couple of blankets?”

“Yep. I've seen a supply somewhere.”

They were soon nestled down on the settees, comfort food and drink in hand and a creaky old war film about to start on the telly.

“Michael Redgrave's in this one,” Dan said, gleefully. “He was a bit of all right in his day.”

“Yep, although I suspect his being in uniform and the film being in black and white adds to the allure. He's not going to be ripped under that battledress.”

A quarter of an hour in, either the film or the milky drink was starting to work its magic. Dan, curled up under his blanket like a little boy, kept nodding and even Steve could feel himself drifting off.

What seemed like moments later, he woke, to discover that the TV was off, which was either Dan's doing, or *he'd* done it in his sleep. It was coming up to seven in the morning and Dan was snoring gently. In the process of trying to tiptoe to the bathroom in inadequate light, Steve stubbed his toe, let out a groan and woke sleeping beauty.

"I feel stiff all over," Dan said, with an exaggerated stretch. "Are you off to the loo?"

"Yep. Then I'll put the kettle on."

"Hurry up, then. I'm desperate."

Once they'd each made the necessary visit to the bathroom, and the equally necessary preparation of breakfast, they headed back to their warm settees.

"If I say something important, please don't take the piss out of me for it," Dan said, halfway through consuming his bowl of cereal. "I wanted to thank you for letting me be part of your life this fortnight. Simply being a couple on holiday. Like normal couples do."

"We *are* normal. Didn't anyone tell you?" Steve gave him a smile.

"You know what I mean. Like we might live all the time if I wasn't in holy orders. These past few days have put everything into perspective. Suddenly all my concerns about our monetary inequality have seemed so stupid. Just a sideshow from the main issue of our relationship."

"You've been reading my mind. Scootch up." Steve took his breakfast over to Dan's sofa. "I'm not going to spoil our holiday by harping on about how unfair it all is, but I do feel the same. I'm really enjoying cohabiting with you and looking forward to another opportunity of doing so." He snorted. "That sounds so pompous. Like one of your sermons. Joke!" He added, when Dan whacked his arm.

"If you don't want it to happen again, don't insult my preaching. It's taken me years to persuade myself I'm not spouting a pile of codswallop. And no, I'm not fishing for compliments."

"I wouldn't take the bait, anyway. You already know I think you're an improvement on the last bloke. He never could grasp that less is more."

"Somebody—can't remember who, some bishop in the past—once said that a really good preacher could write one sermon in a week but a useless one could knock out half a dozen. Anyway, I don't want to think about the parish, because I'm going to miss the domesticity when we get back there. Apart from your cold feet on my legs."

"Yeah, me too." Steve could hear the constrained quality in Dan's voice that only came when he was being absolutely serious. "I would never have guessed how much I'd appreciate eating breakfast in front of an imitation log fire. Or milky drinks in the middle of the night. I sound like I'm eighty-seven."

"You're only eighty-seven out of that bed." Dan sighed. "It's a shame that holidays have to end. It isn't just the sex I'm appreciating. It's being able to sprawl over each other while we watch the telly without worrying someone will look through the window. Sharing a significant glance across the table when we go out for a pint. I wish we could carry on like this and not get back to the grindstone."

"Got to earn our crusts for the next holiday." Steve kept his voice light—this was getting deep for so early in the morning.

"Yeah, I know that and I have no objection to the fact. It can't be a life of leisure all the time. But other folk can take all the little things they enjoy back with them and resume everything at home, can't they? With you and me it'll be back to our separate houses, our separate beds and furtive meetings when we think we can get away with it. It's wearing."

“It’s wearing for me, too.” Steve laid down his bowl then went to slip his arm round Dan’s neck. “I’m not pretending there aren’t times I wish you were a doctor or a dustbin man or whatever, so we could set up shack together with only the usual amount of risk of alienating other people that ordinary gay couples face.”

Dan tensed. “I couldn’t give up my vocation. Not even for you, Steve.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Steve hugged him tighter. “Just confessing how I feel sometimes. I usually give myself a stiff talking to and a reminder not to be selfish.”

“If this is a case of absolute honesty over breakfast, then I’d better confess that I *have* contemplated chucking it all in and finding service of a different kind, like working for a charity.” He snuggled closer. “Which is the reason why I know I can’t. Head, heart and soul tell me it would be the wrong thing. We need to find another solution.”

“Like what?” Steve didn’t feel combative, simply gearing up to tackle another problem. “I mean there’s no realistic prospect of me moving in and pretending I’m your lodger. Unless I feign bankruptcy or pretend a sink hole has appeared under my house or something else I could never keep up the pretence of. I’m not a great liar at the best of times.”

“That’s one of the reasons I love you. And yes, the lodger strategy horse won’t run back at St Thomas’s like it did in Brighton, will it? Falls at the first fence.”

“Seeing as it was Brighton, I’m not sure there was much need for pretence anyway.” Steve stroked the back of Dan’s hand. “You hate the hiding, don’t you?”

Dan returned the caress. “Yeah. Especially when I’m pretty sure at least a third of the parishioners already know about us and any of those that object would have gone to another church already.”

“You mean the Purkiss family?”

“I did have them in mind. To my face they said they were giving the Abbey a go, but it’s funny how their departure happened the week after Mr Purkiss saw you and me in the pub together.”

“Bit too much of a coincidence.” Harry had hinted as much, too, saying St Thomas’s was well rid of a bunch of Leviticus-obsessed hypocrites, which was the nearest Steve had ever heard the man get to slagging someone off.

“Maybe I should find a new parish, too. One that’s more universally sympathetic. Although I’d miss Harry—I’ll never find another verger like him—and then there’s your work. I couldn’t expect you to up sticks.”

“My job’s the least of your worries. I could always look into relocating or finding a different way to work at the same office, remotely or whatever. More importantly, you need a sympathetic bishop, because that’s going to narrow down your choice of parish.” Steve intertwined his fingers with his boyfriend’s. “Ever think of changing denomination? Somebody else has to be more forward thinking than the Anglicans.”

“I’ve considered it, but the notion doesn’t feel right. Better to fight the cause from the inside, rather than run away with your tail between your legs. Which is what the anti-LGBT brigade would probably like best. Us all to bugger off so we don’t have to be looked at holding hands or thought about, doing whatever outrageous things we do.”

“Like watching telly in the middle of the night with a cup of hot milk? How scandalous is that?” Steve took the point, though. Well, the most important conversation they might ever have had been started, even though the chances were it wouldn’t be resolved any time soon. He and Dan might not have an immediate solution, but one thing was certain: he wasn’t willing to enter into a celibate civil partnership. The Anglican rule that ordained

ministers could undertake a civil marriage with their same sex partner yet couldn't consummate that relationship would be laying an unbearable burden of temptation on the pair of them.

Dan kissed the top of Dan's head. "Right, seeing as we can't plan for the future, let's settle for planning today."

"Righty ho." Although Steve's day would include sending up a prayer for guidance about how they could find the right way forward. One that didn't see them both heading into a lonely old age.

The morning had seen a parting of the clouds and the hint of a pleasant afternoon to come. They'd headed out to the coast for a long, brisk walk and plenty of fresh air to counter the effects of not enough sleep. The walk was made all the more enjoyable by the fact there were so few folk around they'd been brave enough to hold hands on a couple of brief occasions, partly prompted by another gay couple they'd spotted who'd been doing the same thing.

"I feel very naughty," Steve said, after they'd dared a good hundred yards with fingers entwined.

"It's all you're getting. You know how I feel about public demonstrations of affection, gay or straight." Dan knew his lover felt similarly, having been known to mutter, "Get a room," at couples sharing a kiss in the street. It was another point of commonality, along with views on so-called reality TV, which Dan was pretty sure was scripted most of the time.

"They're taking selfies. Bet they're going to put them on *The Gram*." Steve snorted. "That's one good thing about us being in the position we're in. We don't have to do the whole 'cute gay guys' social media thing."

Dan grunted approval at the sentiment. "Each to their own and 'don't judge' notwithstanding, it does make me feel uncomfortable at times, when people—particularly ladies who should know better—fawn all over gay couples. Same thing with social media pictures of children who've been dressed up in so-called cute costumes."

"I wonder if in a few years' time we'll see people suing their parents for posting embarrassing pictures of them on the internet when they were little." Steve rubbed his hands together. "The legal profession can look forward to making a fortune."

A discussion on the morality of different types of legal claims, and how they aligned with a faith that basically demanded you turn the other cheek, occupied them all the way to lunch. In the afternoon, they went to the local cinema to see the latest Ealing comedy-esque British film offering—cue some further surreptitious hand-holding in the dark—before heading back to some instant meals and a bottle of red. They finished the evening with a DVD of *Where Eagles Dare*, which they'd found among those at the house.

They'd done the whole "Broadsword Calling Danny Boy" bit and the baddy had been duly uncovered after all the cross and double cross, when Dan sighed happily and kissed the top of his lover's head. "Great film. Talking of great things, you're all right, you are."

"Such romantic words to woo me with. We Brits are renowned for producing this kind of slop, of course."

"Of course we are. It's part of our heavily reserved charm. When you call me a big daft pudding it turns my legs to jelly. Definitely come-to-bed words."

“Let’s try that.” Steve twisted his head round to favour Dan with a coffee-flavoured kiss. “Big daft pudding.”

“Yep, that worked.” Dan returned the kiss with interest. “You clear the cups and I’ll go lock up.”

Once everything was settled for the night, they could shut and secure the orangery door against the night and maybe the world, this room having become the place where they could truly be themselves. Again, he reflected on how they’d miss that freedom—and the enormous bed—when they were home. As they’d miss sharing breakfast every day, lying entwined on the settee, doing the laundry together and all the other bits of domesticity that het couples, or gay couples in a more accepting environment, took for granted.

“What are you thinking about? Your brow’s as furrowed as a newly ploughed field.” Steve said, grinning at his turn of phrase.

“Oh, you can guess. Thinking about what we’ll miss when we’re back in the parish. Regretting that we haven’t got another week of this. Or another month.” Dan stretched on the bed, stifling a big yawn. “Or as long as we need until we get to the point of contemplating murdering each other.”

“As ghastly as it may be to contemplate getting so fed up with each other that I consider running you over on the drive, I’d love the chance to try. Although we’re back there again, aren’t we?” Steve puffed out his cheeks. “Let’s not think about it now, please. I don’t want to waste a single moment here. Unless you’re too tired for *it*, of course, in which case, just say so. I wouldn’t want to put my desires ahead of yours.”

“And there was me thinking your sex drive had no boundaries.” Dan gave his lover a kiss, one he hoped was full of promise, encouragement and love. He knew the conversation had to be carried on another time, and that using sex to distract themselves wasn’t a viable solution long-term, but for tonight it would be the right thing as well as the easy one. “Then it turns out that even insatiable Steve has limits.”

“I do, actually. Although I’m happy to see how far I can push them.” Which is exactly what they proceeded to do.

Afterwards, lying in bed listening to the hoot of an owl somewhere outside, Steve produced an even more massive yawn than Dan had. “I need my sleep. You’ve raddled me.”

“Call that a raddling? You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Promises, promises.” Steve yawned again, then swung his legs out of the bed.

“Tomorrow, though. I’m off to the bathroom and then sleep calls.”

“Don’t take forever, then. I’m in need of abluting, as well.”

“Abluting isn’t a word,” Steve said over his shoulder, as he headed out of the room, smiling as Dan shouted *It should be!*

Cherishing the moment of domestic bliss, then shuddering at how soon it was going to have to end, Dan closed his eyes and tried to gather his thoughts. They had to work out how to make the situation work full time, or else what was the point? Keeping his eyes fixed on his tightly clenched hands, Dan offered up a silent prayer that inspiration would come, that he and Steve could somehow be together in a way that wasn’t a compromise for either of them. He finished with the paternoster then sat quietly while Steve finished in the bathroom.

And, having put the matter in the hands of the Almighty, Dan tried not to keep worrying at it.

Saturday came, with a late start. Friday night had featured the delights of Newport—tapas and a game at Rodney Parade that felt like stepping into a 1970's retro rugby experience—and a tricky journey home on the M4. They slept in, dawdled over breakfast and then did nothing more exciting than having a walk before a late lunch and a stock-up at the supermarket.

Domestic bliss, once more and Steve guessed it would come at a price. At first it had been glorious to wallow in the novelty and pleasure of it but now the signs were that Dan was finding the experience increasingly bittersweet. No doubt that poignancy would increase as their holiday moved through its second and final week and the return to constricting normality beckoned.

They were settled down on the sofa that evening with the prospect of another war film to enjoy when Dan suddenly asked, "How would you feel if I left the parish?"

"You're not asking me how I'd feel if you left me, are you?" Steve was ninety percent certain that wasn't the case but he'd learned never to count his chickens.

"No, you prune. I sent up a particularly heartfelt prayer a few nights back about you and me and the future." Dan's sombre expression illustrated how serious he was being. Prayer was no joking matter. "While I'm not saying I've had a definitive answer, I've had two things come clearly into my mind. Nothing I've not thought of previously, although they'd been more a case of passing ideas. Now it's like I'm being nudged into taking some proper action. The easier one—maybe easier—is to find somebody who's worked out how to do it."

"Do what?" Steve raised a hand. "Sorry, being stupid. How they can be a vicar, be in a civil partnership and still have sex?"

"That's it. Not that I've run across anyone in that category whom I can buttonhole. I'm not planning on tapping up Richard Coles."

"There's a couple of gay vicars I've run across on Twitter, although they're not based over here and it's going to look bloody odd you contacting them out of the blue to ask deep spiritual questions about their sex lives. Isn't there some Anglican group for gay people? Changing Attitude or something?"

"I'm sure there is but I've avoided it, even on social media. Too much risk of outing myself inadvertently. Outing *us*." Dan rubbed Steve's arm. "I've thought about talking talk to the bishop, or someone else at the Diocese, to see if they can point me in the right direction."

"The bishop? Wouldn't that be shooting yourself in the foot?"

Dan shrugged. "I've kept thinking he was pretty useful on giving advice when those poison pen letters were flying about. I'd have to be totally upfront, rather than pretending I was asking for a parishioner."

"If one of those hasn't already told the bish about you."

"Nah, he'd have been in touch already if that had happened. Runs a tight parochial ship and cares for all his flock, clerics or laity. And he doesn't see enough of me to have guessed why I'm not happily married with two point four kids."

"No other gay priests locally?" Steve couldn't think of any offhand, although the subject of personal lives didn't tend to get mentioned at church meetings.

"There was the incumbent at the Priory a few years back. His was pretty open about everything—his partner was on the staff—but then he'd built himself a pretty solid reputation within the Diocese. Got things done, sorted out some knotty issues, and was well respected

on all sides, which is almost unheard of in any diocese. And he was nearly at retirement age by the time his private life became less private so people may have thought he was past bedroom activity. Not the same case as someone who's still young and virile, who might just be at it." Dan rolled his eyes. "Anyway, by the time I'd plucked up courage to maybe speak to him about his lifestyle, he retired and went off to live in Spain. Family money."

"Can't help you with that, I'm afraid. Unless we win the lottery and seeing as neither of us buy a ticket, no chance of that." Steve's brow puckered. "You talked about leaving the parish. You think another bishop might be more sympathetic?"

"Possibly. There's a few around, coming out of the woodwork with their views or airing changes of heart. I could make a list and keep an eye out for suitable vacancies, but there's two of us to consider. I know you said you could relocate as well..." Dan paused. Het couples must face this, especially when one of them got a job offer that involved upping sticks and moving half the country or half the world away. The ramifications might be much wider, with not just a partner to find a new job but children to move schools, make new friends, establish a whole new way of life. People managed it: surely he and Steve could find a way forward? Inspiration suddenly hit. "Actually, moving may not need to be an option. Having a different boss than a bishop might be a start, because they could be more open minded in a different setting. Hospital chaplaincy or a pastoral post at a university, the sort of place where you're less likely to offend the twinset and pearls brigade. I know a couple of gay vicars in exactly those positions."

"And what sort of positions do these gay vicars employ and don't they risk the hospital chaplains giving their patients a heart attack?" Steve guffawed, clearly ignoring Dan's eye roll at the predictably smutty response. "Are they Anglican?"

"Nope. Which helps them."

"Do they have long term partners? What do they do about the whole celibacy thing?"

"I've not asked. Surprisingly enough, our sex lives don't tend to be top of the agenda when I run across them on pastoral courses or like their Instagram posts. That really *would* give other people heart attacks. I suppose I could ask one of them for some spiritual help in that direction but it feels prurient. Your sex life is your own and no business of anyone else, irrespective of whether they're asking out of the best of motives." Dan sighed. "They do seem happy, though."

"That sounds like a minor miracle. Although surely there's hope that the Anglican church will get its act together. I mean, we've got female bishops now and if you're going to get technical about certain parts of scripture, that's completely wrong, as well. As is women not wearing hats in church but I don't see people objecting to Marjorie arriving bare headed."

"Quite. Can you remember my sermon on the subject, based on Galatians? *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

"I remember the stir it caused among some of the congregation. The very idea that men and women could have exactly the same rules applied to them because they were equal in the eyes of God? Shocking." Steve gave Dan a hug. "We'll get there, sonny Jim. It took us long enough to realise there *was* an 'us', rather than not liking each other, so we should realise it'll take time to work out what's best going forward. If it helps, I *do* want to be with you and I'm assuming I still want to be with you this time next year."

"That's how I feel, too." Dan sighed, happy despite the problem they needed to solve. If Steve was committed long term, then it would be worth any amount of energy put into

finding their workable solution. “Right, here’s a suggestion. We’ve a week of holiday left. We’ll live it in the moment. Enjoy what we do and not worry about next week or next year or what the parish will say when we get home. Leave it with The Guvnor to sort, one way or another.”

“I can shake hands on that. As long as we make sure we do our bit. Pray as if only praying has an effect and work as if only working works.” Steve snorted. “You get my drift.”

“I do indeed.”

“I’d just hate to drag our heels and suddenly find it’s next summer and we’re still doing what we were doing before, grabbing time together piecemeal until the next occasion we can get away together and a viable excuse to spread around the parish about why we’re always in each other’s pockets.”

“I’m all for that.” Dan stuck out his hand. “Deal?”

“Deal.”

Saturday morning, they had one final look around the cottage and garden before leaving. Such happy memories they’d take home, although in Dan’s mind the place would always be bathed in sunshine, rather than being wreathed in the damp air that abounded today. Irrespective of the fact that the January sun hadn’t really shone that much. Perhaps it was best to take their departure in such weather. Were the sun to be beaming down like it had been the day previously—when rather than being at one of the historic sites they’d peppered the last week with, they were on a blustery beach looking at a grey-blue sea—it might prove impossible to leave. He glanced over to Steve, who turned to give him a watery smile.

“Thanks for a great holiday, Dan. Not that I want this trip to end. Playing at married couples has been fun.”

“Is that what we’ve been doing?” Dan grinned. “I should be thanking *you*. You found this place and made the arrangements. I’m sorry I was snitty about it before we came, but you know...” He drew his lover into a hug. “Thanks for letting me pay my way on the daily stuff.”

“No worries. I promised I would and I don’t break promises.” Steve held him tight. “I’m going to hold you like this until the last moment. Got to make the most of our freedom.”

Dan didn’t reply, aware of the tear forming in his eye and the fact his voice would betray his emotion.

“You okay?” Steve asked. “You’re allowed to feel blue.”

“I’ll be fine if I have a moment. I’ve just been so happy this last fortnight. Everything’s felt so right. Not that it’ll feel completely wrong when we get home.”

“Not wrong, just different. Not as good. I know.”

They stood hugging for a couple of minutes before taking another—definitely final—look at the garden and started on the road home.

Just gone seven o’clock the same day. After having very visibly having dropped Dan off at the vicarage then headed to his own home for a few hours, Steve sneaked out of his back door

and headed for Dan's, a bottle of wine in his hand. Thank heaven Dan wasn't on preaching duty the next day and only had to lead evensong, so they could squeeze a last, spontaneous, ounce of value from their time off.

"Is everything okay?" Dan said, after opening the vicarage door and ushering Steve in. "You sounded a bit mysterious on the phone earlier. I thought you'd have wanted a break from me after a fortnight."

"Not yet. There's something I need to tell you."

Dan shot him a puzzled glance, then shrugged. "Okay. Make yourself comfy in the lounge and I'll fetch us the wineglasses."

Once his lover had returned and the drinks were poured, Steve said, "I wanted to talk to you. Seriously. Before we get our noses back to the grindstone."

"Are your parents okay?" Dan had gone pale. "Your gran and bamps?"

"Of course, you prune. Do you think they'd shuffled off this mortal coil and I hadn't told you straight away?"

"No. Well, yes, because it did cross my mind that something might have happened to them this last fortnight and your Mum hadn't told you because she didn't want to spoil our holiday, so you've only just found out. Or that one of them had some bad news, health wise and..." Dan spread his hands. "You know. You're breaking it to me gently."

"You're hopeless. I love you madly, but you're hopeless." Steve took a healthy sip of his wine. "Funny how one's primary allegiances begin to shift. Go back a couple of years and my life revolved around my work and the church. They're still important, as are my family, but now my life is primarily centred on you. The last fortnight has shown me that and when I went home today—to an empty house—I knew I had to come round and tell you."

"You have no idea how much I appreciate that." Dan raised his glass in a toast, then took a drink. "Things have become clearer to me, too. Just so we're clear, nobody's ever been a primary allegiance, not even Jimmy, except on a sort of visceral level. You *are*."

"And I appreciate that in return." Steve took another draft of beer. He had to concentrate on the purpose of his visit, because this situation—with Dan's tender words and the look in his eye and the memory of that glorious fortnight in Scotland still fresh—risked seeing them both heading to the bedroom with the question unasked. "You're right about me having been in contact with mum and dad. Wanted to thank them for their input to the holiday costs and to say what a good time we'd had. Thing is, Mum and Dad aren't daft and they know I'm potty about you. If they could wave a magic wand and make it that we could live happily ever after in *vicar and solicitor land* they would."

"Did they say that?"

"Not in so many words, but Mum's dropped unsubtle hints." Steve chuckled. "I'm surprised she's not writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury on a daily basis insisting that synod drags the church into the modern era."

"Good luck to her." Dan swirled the remains of his beer. "Or good luck to *him*. In a fight between Mum and Justin Welby I know who I'd have my money on."

Exactly. Anyway, waiting until her nagging works isn't good enough anymore. Dan Miller, I don't exactly know how it'll work, but..." Steve put down his beer glass and got onto his knees, "Dan Miller, will you become my lawfully wedded something or other? Even if that ends up meaning a new job for one or both of us? Because I can't carry on not living with you."

Dan paused for a moment, clearly taken aback, then broke into a glorious smile. “Yes, I will. I mean, I don’t know when it’ll happened or what my title will be, but yes. As soon as we can work out how.”

“Day made. January made. Life made.” Steve drew him closer, triumphantly to kiss his vicar.