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One

Dad woke me in the middle of the night.

I opened my eyes to find his weather-beaten face looming anxiously over mine. The room was dark, though a faint light crept in through the open window.

'River?'

I blinked, bleary-eyed, at him. 'What time is it? What's wrong?'

'Just gone four,' he said. 'I need your help.'

I sat up, suddenly afraid. 'What's the matter? Is it Gemma?'

Dad's girlfriend Gemma was pregnant, though her baby wasn't due for another six weeks.

'No, Gemma's fine. I just don't want to wake her. It's that last Jacob's sheep. She's been in labour for the past hour. The generator's gone down and I need you to bring out some lamps. I've got to go straight back. Okay?'

'Sure. I'll be right there.'

Dad vanished. I sat in bed for a second, psyching myself up for the dash out from under the covers to get my clothes. It was always cold in the commune at night, even when the daytimes were sunny.

I took a deep breath and threw back the covers. The air nipped at my arms and feet as I pulled on sweatpants over my pyjamas, plus two pairs of socks, a fleece and a jumper. Downstairs I slipped on my boots and one of dad's woolly hats which was lying on the kitchen table. Not exactly a glamorous look, I thought, as I fetched the three hurricane lamps from their cupboard by the back door.

I tried to make an effort at sixth form college, remembering to put on earrings and a bit of make-up before I headed off each day. I did that to show people – especially Dad – that I was fully over my relationship with Flynn. It had ended last year when Flynn found out about a meaningless, two-second kiss I'd had ages before with his best friend, James.

I had only seen Flynn once since then – a few weeks later – when he'd sought me out for a few minutes to apologise for the way he'd vanished so angrily. Up until that point I'd done nothing but hate myself, but afterwards I started to move on.

That was seventeen weeks, two days and three-and-a-half hours ago.

I filled the three hurricane lanterns with paraffin, lit them and headed out to the barn. The pre-dawn air was damp and cold, the grass at my feet glistening with dew. The barn was in virtual darkness when I arrived, just Dad's torch sending flickering shadows across the walls. The sheep was on her side, her belly twitching as the lamb inside moved. Dad was stroking her flank, murmuring softly.

'Come on, girl, you can do it.' He looked up as I walked in. 'I think she's close, Riv. The miracle of birth in our own barn, eh?'

I rolled my eyes. Dad had always been a bit of a romantic hippy about stuff like birth and the cycle of life. He was in his element on the commune. Over the past year I had grown to like it too, though I definitely didn't see myself living here forever. I didn't have strong feelings about where I would go or what I would do. But then, I didn't feel strongly about anything. Since Flynn had gone, nothing seemed to touch me in quite the same way any more.

'Put the lamps over there,' Dad said.

I placed the lanterns carefully, then squatted down next to him. The minutes ticked away. The sky outside was shot through with pink now, but still no lamb, although the sheep was clearly getting more and more uncomfortable.

'I think we're going to have to give her a bit of a hand,' Dad said.

I held the sheep steady while Dad felt for the lamb. He talked the whole time. When he wasn't soothing the sheep, he was exclaiming about how amazing it was to witness birth like this. We kept about fifteen sheep on the commune and so far this season only two others had needed help delivering their lambs.

There were tears in Dad's eyes as he pulled the latest newborn free by her legs. 'Wow,' he said. 'It never stops being miraculous, does it?'

I bent down to free some of the gloop around the tiny lamb's mouth, then rubbed it vigorously with a handful of hay.

'Never stops being messy,' I said with a grunt.

Dad sighed. 'You should get up to the house, River. I can finish here.'

I stared down at the baby. The first time I'd seen a newborn I'd been shocked by how ugly it was – nothing like the frisky white lambs you see bouncing around in fields. I knew that it *was* amazing to witness a birth, so why couldn't I *feel* that it was amazing? All I had felt for months, it seemed, was a dull ache in my chest. I wasn't unhappy any longer – I'd accepted Flynn wasn't coming back – I just couldn't seem

to get really excited about anything either. Still, maybe that was what most people's lives were like, maybe this was normal.

'Isn't there a second lamb?' I asked.

Dad shook his head. 'Nah, just the one this time. It's her first.' He sighed. 'Like it will be for Gemma soon.'

I sat back and yawned. 'Well I hope you don't have to pull my little brother or sister out by the legs.'

'*River*!' Dad grinned.

We sat, watching, as the sheep nuzzled at the baby and the little lamb started moving. It was properly light outside now. I could see the sun rising in the blue sky. It was going to be another beautiful day.

I stood up and stretched.

'Go on, go back to bed,' Dad said. 'You've got sixth form in the morning. Those exams coming up.'

I snorted. 'Dad, it *is* morning.'

Dad checked his watch. '*Goodness*, it's nearly half past six.' He glanced at me, a guilty shadow flitting across his face. 'I'm sorry, River, I—'

'It's fine, Dad,' I said. 'I've got three private study periods today. I can take it easy.'

'Good.' Dad gave me a hug. He was yawning himself now.

'Is everything okay?' It was Leo. He was standing in the barn doorway, a slight figure casting a long thin shadow over the hay.

'Yup,' Dad said proudly. 'One lamb, safely delivered. Come see.'

The three of us stood looking down at the lamb which was now struggling to its feet. Leo was already dressed in his clothes for college – black trousers and a long-sleeved top under a cotton jacket. He'd obviously just showered as his fine blond hair was still wet.

'Wow, that's brilliant,' Leo said.

Dad beamed at him.

'Er, I'm making toast in the kitchen,' Leo went on.

'Excellent.' Dad rubbed his hands together. 'River you go on ahead. I just want to make sure everything's okay here.'

Leo and I walked up to the main commune building in a companionable silence. Leo was, at this stage, pretty much my best friend and in the same year as me at the local sixth form college.

'Dad's talking about moving out of the commune,' Leo said, jolting me out of my reverie.

'What?' I turned to him, shocked. 'Why?'

'He and Ros want to move in together,' Leo explained. 'They're talking about leaving the commune, going to another part of the country to live.'

'Really?' I was surprised. Ros, another member of the commune, had got together with Leo's dad last year. They'd been sickeningly into each other ever since, but Ros had always been adamant she would never live 'in patriarchal monogamy' with a man after her previous series of disastrous relationships. 'How d'you feel about that?' I asked.

Leo shrugged. I was guessing it was hard for him to see his dad with someone else. His mum died just a couple of years ago and I knew Leo missed her a lot. I followed Leo into the commune kitchen. It was empty, though the smell of toast wafted deliciously towards us. I headed for the sink and filled the kettle with water.

'How I feel about it depends on you,' Leo said.

I stopped, my hand on the kettle. Leo and I had grown close after Flynn and I split up. Leo made it clear around that time that he'd like us to be even closer, but he'd accepted our friendship and I thought he understood that going out together just wasn't an option. The whole issue hadn't been mentioned for months, in fact, and I was seriously hoping Leo had got over me.

'Does it?' I said, trying to keep my voice light. 'Why's that?'

'You know why,' Leo mumbled. 'I need to know if there's any point me staying for … for *us*.'

I pressed the on switch on the kettle. Then took a deep breath.

'We're friends, Leo and I really value that. But there isn't an '*us*'. Not like that.'

'What about in the future?'

I frowned. This was agony, really awkward. I knew that I should tell Leo I would never go out with him but it seemed too cruel to be so direct.

'I don't know, Leo,' I said. 'I'm sorry.'

Leo nodded, then he left the room. I buttered my toast and sat at the table. Why did life have to be so complicated?

After a while the rest of the commune appeared, each of them in turn trooping out to the barn to check on the new arrival. Gemma was the last to arrive. She looked tired, with dark rings under her eyes. Her pregnant belly stuck out in front of her. It looked huge but then, as Leo had privately pointed out, that was partly because Gemma herself was so tiny.

'There's some post for you River. I just saw it on the mat.' She grimaced. 'Sorry I didn't pick it up but bending down at the moment is a nightmare.'

I got up and headed out to the hall. I needed to go upstairs and get showered and dressed, ready for college. My mind was on whether I had time to wash my hair as I picked up the large, flat envelope.

I opened it absently, not really thinking about what might be inside. To my surprise, it was an invitation from Flynn's sister, Siobhan:

Siobhan Daniella Mary Flynn and Gary Goode
request the honour of your presence at their marriage
on Saturday 17 May at 3pm
at the Church of Our Lady, Harrow
followed by a party at Lyttenham House.

My heart thumped as a single question threaded through my head: would Flynn be there? I turned over the card. Siobhan had scrawled a note on the back:

Dear River, hope v much u will be able to make it. U were the first person after Mum I ever told about Gary and it would mean a lot if u came. Thought u wd want to know Flynn will be there too. (Mum is over moon!) Just so u also know, he will be bringing a friend. U can bring someone too if u like. Really hope u can make it. Lotsa love S xxxxx

The hallway spun around me. I put my hand against the wall to steady myself. So Flynn *would* be there. And not alone either. Bringing 'a friend' meant a girlfriend. Didn't it? Jealousy flickered at the edges of my mind.

I pushed the dark feelings away. I was *so* over Flynn. I only thought about him now maybe once or twice a day. My decision shouldn't be based on our old relationship.

The question was simple: did I want to go?

The wedding was in three weeks and would mean taking the day off from my new Saturday waitressing job. Still, I'd like to go for Siobhan. And it would be nice to see Flynn's mum and little sister Caitlin again as well. But how would it feel to see *him*?

I tucked the invitation back in its envelope and headed upstairs for my shower. I shouldn't go. There was no point raking up the past again.

On the other hand, I couldn't deny I was curious. And I'd already moved on so far, maybe seeing Flynn would be the final bit of closure that I needed to lay the whole relationship firmly to rest. I grabbed some clean clothes and headed into the bathroom.

I would have liked to call Emmi and ask her opinion but I hadn't spoken to my former best friend since she'd betrayed me to Flynn over the stupid kiss that had sent him storming out of my life last year.

Still, I had to talk to somebody. Leo was no good; he disliked Flynn. I settled on Grace. She had always been a good friend and fair-minded about Flynn. It was true that the kiss that had caused all the problems had been between me and Grace's boyfriend James, but Grace – unlike Flynn – had understood exactly how meaningless the whole thing had been.

I was seeing her later, after school. I'd make up my mind about Siobhan's wedding when I'd talked to her. It wasn't that big a deal. The point was that I was over Flynn. The rest was just the dust settling around the fact of us being apart. Seeing him again wouldn't – couldn't – make any difference to that.