
AULD LANG SYNE

A Glasgow Lads Holiday Short

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Chapter 1

EVAN HOLLISTER WASN'T MEANT to be here.

Or so everyone in this chapel must have been thinking. *What sort of daftie would attend his ex-boyfriend's wedding after such a toxic breakup?* At least he was sitting alone in the back row, so the other guests would have to stop staring at him once the ceremony started.

Despite the awkwardness, Evan didn't regret being here. This was one of seventeen same-sex weddings taking place in Scotland just after midnight on the thirty-first of December, marking the official advent of marriage equality. It was an honor to have been invited to such an historic occasion.

Besides, it wasn't every day he got to drink, eat, and dance in a 589-year-old castle.

The Auld Keep's Great Hall was still laden with red ribbons and white faerie lights for Christmas, though in a few minutes it would be Hogmanay, the true center of the Scottish holiday season. The string trio in the corner was playing a strangely cheery version of Pachelbel's Canon. Through the nearest narrow window cut into the ancient stone wall, Evan saw the first sweep of snowflakes. Fergus and John had a perfect night for a perfect wedding.

Evan would do everything in his power to keep it safe.

Officially he was off duty, but psychologically...not so much. As an MI5 counterterrorism officer, he could never truly relax—especially not now, when his current operation was investigating threats to same-sex weddings. He'd seen no intelligence indicating tonight's nuptials were in danger, but it never hurt to stay vigilant.

Bang on the stroke of midnight, the music changed. The celebrant, a forty-ish woman wearing a white robe draped with a rainbow stole, approached the altar from a chamber to the left, followed by John's maid of honor and best man. To the celebrant's right, a curtain opened on a small side-altar space. Out stepped Fergus's brother and best mate.

Evan was flooded with memories of drinking and laughing in the company of these two lads. This side of the chapel was filled with Fergus's family and close friends, plus teammates from their LGBTQ football club, the Woodstoun Warriors. Many had once loved Evan; now they either hated him with the venom of a thousand vipers or tolerated him because he scored goals.

After a dramatic pause, the music swelled. Evan rose to his feet with the rest of the guests, his stomach rippling with dread. He checked the chapel's rear door, glad it was situated at his seven o'clock rather than directly behind him.

All at once, the happy couple appeared. Fergus approached from the left, a tall, lean ginger in a mostly green kilt, the same age as Evan at twenty-five; and John from the right, a short, burly man of only twenty-two, with dark hair and a red tartan kilt. Opposites in none of the ways that mattered, they met in front of the altar, ready to join their lives forever.

From the corner of his eye, Evan saw someone enter through the rear chapel door. He jerked his head round to see Fergus's cousin Maggie, a harried-looking blonde of about thirty. She slunk into the back of the room, cringing at her own tardiness. When she spied Evan, her face brightened, then scrunched up in confusion.

Realizing she needed a seat, Evan stepped into the aisle and behind his chair so she could move in beside him. With a grateful grimace, she scooted past him into the back row, then leaned in to speak as the music crescendoed to an end.

"I'm surprised you're here," Maggie said. "Didn't realize you and Fergus were still friends."

We're not. Evan didn't deserve that friendship. He probably hadn't even deserved to return to the Warriors, the team he'd once captained, back before...

Before his job had reached between him and Fergus and yanked away their connection, tearing out their hearts in the process.

The guests sat, and the ceremony began. Rather than listen to the vows of the man he'd once hoped to marry, Evan mentally reviewed the castle's layout. The fact he could spend a wedding calculating which exit to herd people through in the event of a terrorist attack probably meant he would've made a terrible husband.

There was another movement at the rear door. Evan turned to see a slim man in his early twenties, wearing a smart black suit which matched his glasses and hair. The latter was carefully sculpted into a swooping quiff above his forehead. A few strands at his temple had fallen loose, either by design or through the travails of a hard night's work.

Evan's "reconnaissance" told him this was Ben Reid, the wedding planner. Fergus had sung his praises at football practice, told the team how Ben had rescued them after their previous planner had overbooked herself and canceled less than three weeks ago.

Ben crept forward over the plush crimson carpet to slide onto the chair opposite Evan on the other side of the aisle. Evan followed his gaze back to Fergus and John, who were now exchanging rings.

"Fergus," the celebrant said, "please place this ring on John's

finger and repeat after me: 'I take you for now and for always, for always is always now.'"

Maggie gave a soft snort, then whispered, "What's that even mean?"

Evan shrugged, then glanced over at Ben to find him mesmerized, his eyes glazed over with bliss. What relief he must have felt at setting aside all his wedding-planning worries and simply... enjoying the moment.

Then Ben blinked and furrowed his brow, as though realizing or remembering something. He turned his head to look straight at Evan.

Evan froze. It wasn't like him—or any spy—to get caught out staring. Usually he was much more subtle.

Ben released a giddy, "Isn't this brilliant?" grin, the sort one would share with a close mate. Evan couldn't help smiling back.

Ben blinked rapidly, his eyes nearly crossing. He looked away, shifting in his seat and tugging at his shirt collar. Then he glanced back at Evan and grazed his teeth over his bottom lip.

Evan's mouth watered. He swallowed hard and looked at the grooms. *You can't flirt with the wedding planner of the man whose heart you crushed—especially not during the ceremony.* He was pretty sure that was a rule.

Just then, Maggie leaned into his personal space, trying to see around the tall man sitting in front of her as the grooms had their first kiss. Then she squeezed Evan's knee—in apology or sympathy, he wasn't sure.

A glance at Ben showed the wedding planner with his arms crossed and his shoulder angled away. He was no doubt assuming Evan was with Maggie, that he'd been barking up the wrong tree.

Evan couldn't imagine being anyone's *right tree*. Who would want the secrecy and lies of this life? His dad, a fellow spook, had urged Evan to find a nice man within the Service, someone who could hear the words *I can't tell you* without taking it personally. Someone Evan could be "real" with, whatever that meant.

Ben stood and slipped out of the chapel as quietly as he'd slipped in. The Great Hall now seemed strangely bare and cold. Evan wished its enormous hearth was full of flames instead of flowers.

The ceremony ended, none too soon. Evan stood for the recessional, avoiding Fergus's eyes so he wouldn't see Fergus avoiding *his* eyes.

A soft hand touched his back as the two families filed out. "It was good of you to come," Maggie said. Then she looked round. "You didn't bring anyone special?"

"No." Evan scoured his memory. "What about your partner... Gavin, was it?"

"Och, we broke up ages ago. I can't believe you remember that prat's name." She looked him up and down. "You're still gay?"

"Completely."

Maggie frowned. "Save a dance for me anyway. We can be sad singletons together." She scurried off to talk to the rest of Fergus's family.

Evan made his way alone down the spiral stone staircase to the banquet hall, which looked like the set of a medieval film. A pair of iron chandeliers loomed over each end of the hall, filled with electric candles that sent a thousand shimmers over the pale stone walls. The hearth here contained a real fire, contained by a spiky iron grate.

The dour vibe was softened by the towering Christmas tree at one end and the ten-foot-tall wreath hanging on the wall at the other, both accented with white faerie lights and red silk ribbons. The room smelled of pine with a hint of cinnamon.

Though he knew he should mingle, Evan needed to survey the room first for potential threats. With all fifty guests plus staff members and caterers packed onto the small dance floor or around the U-shaped dining table, it was hard to keep track of everyone.

After fetching a drink, he stood near the tree, his back to the

wall, surveilling the crowd whilst pretending to be absorbed in his phone.

He saw Ben's approach as soon as it began, halfway across the room, which gave Evan several seconds to calm his racing heart and prepare a look of pleasant surprise.

"Hiya." Ben leaned into his field of view. "Am I interrupting?"

Evan opted for honesty. "As a matter of fact, I'm busy fake-reading my phone to avoid looking a complete saddo."

"Oh, well, it's totally working."

"Because I've spent weeks practicing my pasted-on smile." He demonstrated, curving his lips up while keeping his eyes empty.

Ben laughed, his chin tilting up at a charming angle as the faerie lights glinted off his glasses. Then he extended his hand. "I'm Ben Reid, the wedding planner."

I know. Evan introduced himself and added, "I heard you were rather a miracle worker with this wedding. You pulled all this together last minute, aye?"

"I'd loads of help. Fergus and John's friends are amazing." Ben winced and pressed his lips together. "I mean, your friends. All of you—plural you—your friends...and all. Sorry."

"It won't kill me to hear the grooms' names, if that's what you're thinking." Evan realized what was happening. "Did you come over here because I looked pathetic? I don't need your pity."

"Good, because you've not got it. I don't pity you—I'm in awe of you." Ben gave Evan's elbow a fleeting touch. "You must have known you'd be miserable, yet you came anyway. To me that's incredibly courageous."

"Oh." Evan rubbed at the ache behind his breastbone, thinking of his MI5 Commendation for Bravery, the one he'd held but a few minutes at the awarding ceremony before it had been whisked away to be kept in eternal secrecy.

"I had to come. I *wanted* to come." Evan struggled to express his sorrow without sounding like he was searching for sympathy. "I still regret what happened between me and Fergus, but seeing

him and John so happy together...it feels as though things worked out the way they were meant to do."

Ben's ink-dark eyes were soft and kind. "So this gave you closure."

"You could say that."

"Interesting. Usually people find closure at *funerals*, not weddings."

"True." Perhaps this wedding was a funeral of sorts. Perhaps that was why Evan was here—to face the fact his old life was well and truly dead. "How much do you know about me?"

"Literally only what your teammate Robert told me a minute ago: that you're Fergus's ex and no one thought you'd show up—I mean, not that you were invited because they thought you'd say no. I'm sure they wanted you here." Ben winced again. "I've already said too much. Curse this babbling mouth of mine."

At the sound of the word *mouth*, Evan focused on Ben's lips. They were as full and red as the Christmas ribbons on the tree beside them. Evan wanted to do something, *anything* to that mouth besides curse it.

He offered another smile. "What else would you like to know?"

EVERYTHING, Ben thought. *I want to know everything.*

This Norse-god-gorgeous blond was well out of his league, but that had never stopped Ben before. Thus far their flirtation seemed on track, and Ben's habit of speaking before thinking seemed to charm Evan rather than turn him off.

Normally Ben didn't try to hook up while he was working, but that moment of connection upstairs, when Evan had flashed him that crooked smile—the same one he'd released just now—made for an irresistible exception.

Now the trick was to hold Evan's attention. Small talk

wouldn't do, and obviously the usual *How do you know the couple?* wedding chatter was right out.

"Tell me your favorite moment from Christmas last week."

Evan's eyes lit up, and his smile accentuated the dimple in his chin. "Don't laugh, but my favorite Christmas moment every year is that last trip out to the byre to see to the kye."

Ben felt his own gaze go blank as he mentally rewound the final few words. Evan's Orkney accent was deliciously distinctive, with its lilting cadence and heavily rolled Rs.

"I grew up on a farm, see," Evan added.

Ben gasped. "Oh, the *kye*, as in cows. Why's that your favorite?"

"My family's big and loud, and there's neighbors coming in and out the hoose all day Christmas Eve. So those few minutes in the barn at the end of the day, the way the kye are all just standing about swishing their tails, or lying in the straw with their legs tucked under, so peaceful and quiet-like..." He passed a self-conscious hand through his golden hair. "I'm not religious and that, but it almost feels holy."

The bustle of the banquet hall seemed to suddenly hush as Evan's afternoon-sky-blue eyes had gone soft with tenderness. Ben could almost smell the fresh hay and feel the warmth radiating off the sleepy beasts.

"That sounds lovely," he said, needing to clear his throat.

"It is." Evan seemed lost in memory. "This year, being home for Christmas meant more than usual."

Ben felt an unwelcome tug of emotion. He wanted to feel Evan against him—not feel anything *for* him. He changed the subject slightly. "So you're an animal lover?"

Even blinked, then nodded. "Beasties aren't fooled by facades. You've no choice but to be real with them." He chuckled, as if at a private joke between him and himself. "So what was your favorite Christmas moment?"

"You'll think me shallow as a puddle, but my favorite moment was when I got my new phone."

Evan laughed, deep and throaty. "Sounds special."

"It was." Ben covered his face with both hands in embarrassment. "My phone is like my baby—only most people don't get a new baby every two years."

"Or if they do, they don't trade in the old one."

"Right? Aren't I awful?"

Evan moved closer and bent his head to speak low near Ben's ear. "I think you're probably not awful."

Ben suppressed a shiver at the feel of Evan's warm breath. He angled his head to lock their gazes. "We'll see about that."

"Pardon me, Mr. Reid?"

Ben turned to see Clive, Dunleven Castle's part-time footman. "Yes? Is everything all right?" *This better be important.*

"It's nearly time for the toast and I can't find the champagne glasses. They were brought in, apparently?" Clive added with a noticeable cringe.

"Yes, just a moment." Ben turned back to Evan. "I need to sort this or we'll all be drinking champagne out of coffee mugs."

"Away and do your job. I'm not going anywhere." Evan gestured to the door. "Likely none of us are, if this snow doesn't stop."

Ben groaned. It was a long drive from the castle to the nearest road that might be gritted and plowed. As he followed Clive across the banquet hall, Ben opened his to-do list on his phone, tapped the microphone icon, then said, "Ask Lord Andrew about accommodating four dozen unexpected guests in his castle."

He found Fergus's teammate Duncan Harris, whose parents owned a posh home-decor shop and had donated loads of last-minute items. "Where did you leave the champagne flutes?"

"They're with all the other glassware. 'Mon, I'll show you." They entered the kitchen, where Duncan went to an open box and pulled out a tall, narrow, stemless glass which flared at the top. It could have been a kid's toy called *My First Pint*.

"Ah." The footman arched a disapproving eyebrow. "I thought they were bud vases."

"They're a modern design," Duncan said. "Fergus's choice."

Clive sniffed. "They'll need washed and dried."

"I can do that," Ben said, desperate to stay on schedule.

"You wash, I'll dry." Duncan lifted the heavy box with ease and headed for the sink.

As the two of them worked on the glasses, Duncan said, "I noticed you chatting to Evan Hollister."

Ben's face warmed at the sound of the name. "He seemed lonely. But also lovely, and not just on the outside."

"Erm, yeah. He's..." Duncan examined the glass with wide blue eyes as he dried it. "Do you know why he and Fergus broke up?"

"I try not to delve into my clients' romantic history." This wasn't strictly true, as he was a glutton for secrets.

"Normally I mind my own business," Duncan said, "but if you fancy Evan, it's better you hear the story from me rather than from someone who hates him."

Ben's stomach felt suddenly sour. "Go on."

"So...last April, the Warriors were about to play the quarter-final in the Scottish Amateur Cup tournament. We were just starting warmups when we got a delivery. Evan had sent his captain's armband to Fergus with a note saying he'd run off to Belgium with his new lover and he was never coming back."

Ben stared at Duncan, trying to process the sheer dickheadedness of Evan's departure. "If that's the version of the story from someone who *doesn't* hate him..."

"I'm a wee bit biased. Evan brought me into the team and believed in me when I was struggling at the beginning." Duncan checked over his shoulder, then leaned closer. "I don't know what happened in Belgium, but when Evan came back in July, he'd changed."

"In a bad way?"

"In a deep way." Duncan shook his head. "I'm just a second-year psychology student. I know enough to know that I know nothing." He stopped drying the glass. "Except that Evan

deserves a second chance. And if his Belgian-lover story is just that—a story—then the rest of us deserve the truth. It's the only way we can move forward as a team again."

"Are you saying you'd like me to play detective?"

Duncan chuckled. "I'm saying I'd like you—I'd like *someone*—to steal Evan's Grumpy McGrumpy-Pants and never give them back."

Ben laughed, but on the inside he felt uneasy. If Evan wasn't a callous bastard, he sounded like a man with wounds a one-night stand couldn't heal. It had been years since Ben had dared to try anything more, so he definitely wasn't up to Duncan's challenge.

Evan might be worth it, said that voice inside him, the one which all too often spoke inconvenient truths.

Chapter 2

“WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE PASTA SHAPE?”

Evan looked up from his plate—which was definitely not a pasta of any sort—to see Ben slipping into the adjacent chair, which Duncan had just vacated to dance with his partner.

“Linguine.” Evan set down his fork. “Why? Is there another course to be served before the cake?”

“No, thank God.” Ben set his phone on the table between them, then covered it with what looked like the run sheet for the reception. “I just wanted to ask a question that wouldn’t make you sad. So why linguine?”

Evan considered a suggestive answer involving the word *mouthfeel*, but didn’t want to lead Ben on. After the rush of their initial chemistry, he’d quickly come to his senses and faced reality.

He couldn’t hook up with Ben—couldn’t so much as have dinner with him—without having MI5 check his background first. Evan had seen colleagues get suspended, even sacked, for failing to follow this protocol. Ben seemed a law-abiding citizen, but if he had dodgy acquaintances or even innocent connections to a hostile foreign power, Evan could lose everything by getting close to him. He’d not made life-shattering sacrifices only to risk his career over a fleeting attraction in a moment of vulnerability.

“Linguine’s like spaghetti,” Evan said, “but with more integrity.”

“That’s the best answer I’ve ever heard.” Ben leaned close and spoke over the din of dance music. “Did you know ‘linguine’ is Italian for ‘little tongues’?”

Evan felt twin waves of heat move up the sides of his neck. “I didn’t know that.”

“Ziti’s my favorite.” Ben gave a coy shrug. “No profound reason—it just feels good in my mouth.”

Evan coughed and shifted in his seat. *Must. Resist.* But with Ben wearing that impish look and once again biting that delectable lower lip, resistance would take all his strength tonight. “My turn to ask you a question.”

“Yaaaaa!” Ben pumped his fist. “Anything.”

“Promise not to turn it round and make it about me?”

“Whatever. I promise. Ask.”

“Why do you love weddings so much?”

“Apart from the kilts?”

“Apart from the kilts.” Evan picked up his glass of wine. “Take your time to think what you really want to say. I’ll wait.” As he sipped, he took the opportunity to scan the room, ensuring no one new and suspicious had arrived. Soon he’d give in to the urge to go out in the snow for a perimeter check.

“Weddings make the world a better place,” Ben said finally.

“How?”

“A better world comes from better people.” Ben folded Duncan’s discarded napkin as he spoke, the olive tone of his hands a warm complement to the ivory linen. “And love makes people better. I don’t mean just the couple who are marrying. The guests, too. Going to a good wedding, it sort of rejuvenates the soul, you know?”

Evan nodded, then realized he wasn’t just being polite—he actually agreed. As painful as this night had been, on another level it was...if not *healing*, at least restorative.

“At every wedding,” Ben said, “I see guests filing in wearing

these cynical looks. Maybe they don't like the couple, or they like one half but hate the other half and think the first half is making a terrible mistake. Or maybe they're happy for the couple but unhappy in general for their own reasons." He turned the napkin over and kept folding, his slim, graceful fingers moving faster than Evan could keep up with. "Maybe they're not feeling well or had a bad week at their job. Maybe they just got divorced. By my estimate, roughly 45% of wedding guests are miserable when they show up. My goal is to have 100% of them happy—or at least happier—when the night is over."

"One hundred percent? Is that realistic?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Ben tucked the corners of the napkin into its fold. "I know I can't singlehandedly save the world by laying the perfect table, but I believe the happiness generated in this room counts contributes to a larger, I don't know, pool of planetary positivity." He set down the completed napkin, in the form of a floppy-eared rabbit, and nudged it against Evan's forearm.

Something flipped over inside Evan, and he was stabbed with a sudden sadness. This man was too kind, too pure a soul to suffer through life with a spy. Evan would only sully him, maybe one day break his heart as he'd broken Fergus's.

Ben was too good for him.

"What about you?" Ben asked. "Do you save the world for a living?" He tilted his head, then removed his glasses and pulled out the scarlet handkerchief from his suit pocket. "What is your job, anyway? Something exciting, I'll bet."

The time for honesty was over. "I'm an architect, like Fergus. But mind on, you promised not to make the question about me."

"I was hoping you forgot." Ben carefully polished his lenses with the handkerchief. "I was only wondering whether you were one of those people who think making the world a better place is an irrelevant dream and that we should all just look after ourselves and our own."

"I'm definitely not one of those people." Evan paused. "Life

would be easier if I was." *Then I could take what I wanted, which right now is you.*

Ben's phone beeped. He looked at the run sheet. "That's cake time. I need to go." He paused. "You'll be all right?"

Evan didn't want to watch Fergus and John feed each other cake, because half of the guests would be watching *him* for his reaction, as they'd done during the first dance. "I'll keep myself busy. Maybe I'll shovel the snow between here and the nearest road. It's only what, two miles?"

"Och, the snow!" Ben lurched to his feet, scraping the chair against the ancient stone floor. "I need to see about all these guests. They'll need rooms, towels, toothbrushes—oh my God, there's so much to remember."

"I'll do it."

Ben stopped. "Why?"

"To help you. You've enough on your plate." Also, Evan would feel safer knowing who every guest was and where they were staying. "I'll get the list from Lord Andrew and sort it all with his parents."

Ben's shoulders slumped with relief. "You, sir, are a Christmas angel."

"Six days late, but okay."

"A Hogmanay angel, then." Ben took a step away, then stopped again. "Be sure to come back by three o'clock to sing 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

"I'll be here." Though he knew he shouldn't, Evan wanted to see Ben one last time.

As he set out on his task, Evan made his first New Year's resolution: He'd take his father's advice to try and meet someone within MI5. There were no other gay men at the Glasgow regional office—total staff usually numbered around thirty—but next time he went to headquarters in London he'd seek out one of the lads who'd shown interest in the past.

After seeing Fergus and John marry, Evan knew one thing: He didn't want to be alone anymore. And after meeting Ben, Evan

knew another thing: He couldn't risk ruining the life of another good man.

"HEARD YOU GOT the best room in the castle," Duncan told Ben as the reception neared the end. "Other than Fergus and John, obviously—but only just."

"Who told you that?"

"Lord Andrew. Evan arranged it, said you deserved it for all the hard work you did." Duncan bobbed his eyebrows. "Or maybe he's hoping to stay there with you tonight."

Two hours ago, Ben had hoped for that as well. But Evan had kept his distance ever since Ben had blethered on about weddings whilst folding that ridiculous bunny napkin. What an arse he'd made of himself. He should have kept to shallow flirtation.

But something about Evan pushed all of Ben's Deep Thought buttons. He wanted to *know* this man—and be known by him—inside and out. The things he wanted to say and hear weren't one-night stand material. They were more like first-date or even twentieth-date material. The thought of *that* terrified him for reasons he wasn't ready to explore, not while there was still a reception to run.

Soon it came to an end, with the wedding party and guests forming a circle to sing "Auld Lang Syne," per tradition. Ben searched for Evan, wanting to hold his hand even for just a minute, but Evan was already linking up with two women—a teammate and one of Fergus's cousins. So Ben settled for standing directly across the circle from him, holding hands with Duncan and Lord Andrew.

*"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?"*

As they sang, Ben found his gaze drawn to Evan again and again. More often than not, Evan was looking back at him. His

eyes held a sadness Ben couldn't decipher. All he knew was that he wanted to wipe it away like a fingerprint on a crystal vase.

*"We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne."*

When they reached the final verse, everyone crossed arms and moved to the center. As he and Evan came face to face, Ben heard his deep, sweet voice tremble a bit over the words "for auld lang syne."

Then they parted, the entire circle twisting round to face out before processing back to where they started, this time looking out instead of in. Leaving the past behind, as if that was a thing one could ever truly do.

As the last note faded, Ben turned to look for Evan, who was already heading for the exit to the main part of the castle.

Ben sped through the crowd to catch up to him. "And where do you think you're going?"

"Away to bed," Evan said without meeting his eyes.

"But there's a football match on in the courtyard."

Evan gestured to his suit. "I'm not dressed for football in the snow."

"Nobody is. Some of them are playing in kilts! At least you've got trousers." He tugged Evan's sleeve. 'Mon, it'll be a laugh."

Evan shook his head. "It's been a long day."

"Yes, but we can all have a lie-in tomorrow." Ben knew Evan wanted to be left alone, but he also knew it was the last Evan *needed*. He attempted a joke. "Would you really abandon your team when they need you most?"

Evan finally looked at him, this time in horror.

Ben put a hand to his mouth. "Oh God." Abandoning his team was exactly what Evan had done last April, an act that clearly haunted him to this day. "I'm so sorry. I-I didn't mean—"

"I know. You weren't there. You didn't know me." Evan turned away. "You *don't* know me."

"But I want to." Ben stepped into his path. "Please. Isn't it

obvious?" He cringed inside at the desperation in his voice, but he kept his eyes on Evan's face.

After a long moment, Evan glanced at the door to the courtyard. "Will you be playing?"

Ben barked out a laugh. "Me? I'm the exact opposite of an athlete, and besides, I despise that barbaric sport."

"Goodnight, then." Evan turned away again, this time with a hint of a smirk.

Ben stamped his foot. "Fine, I'll play! If you'll show me how."

Ten minutes later, he was almost regretting it—almost. After his third tumble, his trousers were cold and wet from arse to ankle. But giving up wasn't an option. As Evan taught him the basics, they'd picked up their banter from where they'd left off earlier, and Ben's hopes began to...well, not soar, but at least take a tentative low-altitude test flight.

The game itself was a high-scoring one, as defending was impossible in the slippery snow. Ben got no goals, but he did manage to dribble halfway down the makeshift pitch before the ball got stuck in a drift. And he only lost his glasses once.

Soon everyone was soaked and shivering, so the game was called on account of widespread hypothermia.

"I heard you procured the best room for me," Ben told Evan as they all made their way to the entrance of the larger, Victorian-era section of the castle.

"It's the only one besides the honeymoon suite with a fireplace." Evan ran a hand through his snow-damp hair, then looked round. "Don't tell anybody, or they'll all be wanting in."

Ben was about to ask whether Evan was one of those "wanting in" when they stepped through the foyer into the Hall of the House. "Oh my God."

Down the long corridor, a red carpet stretched beneath a series of white plaster arches, each featuring elaborate, elegant crown molding. Beneath their feet was the finest parquet floor Ben had ever seen.

They all made their way up the grand staircase, passing a

twenty-foot-high stained-glass window. This wasn't Ben's first time staying in a castle—he and his mum had coordinated weddings at several across Scotland—but between the snow, the holiday, and the company, this one seemed downright magical.

Evan stood at the top of the stairs and helped Lord Andrew direct the guests to their rooms while Clive handed out towels, dressing gowns, and other necessities.

Ben held back, letting the others go first—partly out of wedding-planner courtesy but mostly so he could speak to Evan alone.

When it was Ben's turn, Evan came to him and said, "You're in the Stag suite, just over here." Apparently each of the rooms was named after an animal, due to Lord and Lady Kirkcross's impassioned zoophilia.

"Stag sounds fun." Ben followed him to a door not far from the stairway, noticing Evan hadn't mentioned which room he himself was staying in.

Evan opened the door for him.

"Whaaaaaaat?" Ben exclaimed as he moved into the room, spinning round to take it all in. A king-size four-poster bed sat before a massive marble fireplace. Every linen in sight held a sumptuous burgundy-and-gold pattern. Even the bed stairs were elegantly carved mahogany. "And there's a sitting room, too. This is all for me?"

"You deserve it."

"No doubt, but I ask again, is this all for me?" Ben turned to Evan. "It seems a pity not to share."

"Aye," Evan said softly. He swept his gaze over the bed, then met Ben's eyes. "Have you got a business card?"

That wasn't the request Ben had expected, but he recovered quickly. "Why? You thinking of marrying soon?"

"Hmm." Evan slipped his hands into his pockets and cocked his head. "I might do. One of Fergus's cousins just came into a bit of money, and I rather fancy being a kept man."

"Yes, you seem the sort who needs catered to. As am I."

“Obviously.” Evan’s smirk morphed into a grin that weakened Ben’s knees.

In a move he hoped looked slick, Ben reached into his inside suit pocket and whipped out his sterling-silver business-card holder, a Christmas gift to himself.

Evan gave a low whistle. “Fancy.”

“Isn’t it just?” Ben slipped a card out and snapped the holder shut, then stepped close to Evan, who still smelled like snow. “Don’t lose it.” He reached out and gently took Evan’s right hand from his pocket, placed the card in his palm, then folded Evan’s fingers over it. “Okay?”

“Aye.” Evan’s thumb closed on the back of Ben’s fingers. It gave a single stroke, enough to send shock waves of desire down Ben’s spine.

This time, he couldn’t hide his shiver.

They shared an awkward laugh and let go. “Goodnight, then,” Ben said.

“Goodnight.” Evan crossed the threshold into the hallway, but when he reached back for the door, he hesitated. “Thanks, Ben.”

“For what?”

“For not believing the stories about me.”

“I don’t *dis*believe them, but I know they don’t tell the whole truth.” Ben went to the door and placed his hand just above Evan’s. “I believe there’s a whole other story. A story no one knows.” As he closed the door, he added, “Yet.”

Chapter 3

EVAN BARELY DOZED, as always unable to sleep in a strange place. The castle was drafty, and the wind created a thousand noises that startled him awake again and again, heart pounding.

There's no one there, he kept reminding himself. You're safe and alone.

The breathing and self-grounding exercises his therapist had taught him helped to fend off full-blown panic attacks, but they were no match for tonight's insomnia. It had been months since he'd needed a sedative to sleep, but even if he'd brought one, he wouldn't take it now for fear of sleeping past breakfast—what could be his last chance to see Ben.

No, it wasn't his last chance. Evan reached out to the bedside table and picked up Ben's business card. He held it between his fingertips, caressing the corners and engraving on the elegant linen texture.

"I also believe there's a whole other story."

Evan could never tell the world that story. Only his supervisors and psychiatrists knew what had happened in Belfast.

Maybe one day he could tell Ben. Not everything, as that would be illegal. But maybe Ben could learn as much as Evan's

family, the vague outline proving he'd not only left Fergus against his own will, but had nearly lost his life in the process.

Firstly, Ben would have to be vetted. The simplest background check could take weeks, and if there were issues...

Would Ben forget Evan in the meantime? Would he be so pissed off at Evan's delay in contact that he'd refuse to speak to him? By following protocol, was Evan missing the chance to be with the first man he'd connected with since Fergus?

BEN LAY alone in his titanic bed. He was bone-tired, but a restless energy snapped over his skin like static electricity.

He picked up his phone to check the time—a quarter past six. Clive had mentioned something about coffee, tea, and pastries at six-thirty for those feeling peckish. But at the moment, Ben hungered for much more than croissants.

He brought up his Grindr app, limiting the search radius to the Dunleven Castle estate. He recognized a few faces from the Warriors but had no interest despite their cuteness.

The only Warrior he wanted wasn't on the hookup app, which didn't surprise him. Evan seemed too cautious for Grindr—and with a face and body like that, he'd be plagued with nonstop requests.

So Ben brought up a more conventional social network. *Aha!* Evan Hollister wasn't a total hermit.

There wasn't much to see on the public-facing version of his Facebook profile. He was friends with Duncan and Katie from the Warriors, as well as their manager, Charlotte. His likes included several indie/alternative bands, along with Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club. Alas, no TV programs, but nobody was perfect.

The header picture was a Warriors team photo. Evan's face held a strained look, and his shoulders were slightly turned from

his teammates, as though he expected to be shoved out of frame before the shot was taken.

Ben scrolled down to Evan's feed.

Oh.

The most recent photo, posted on Christmas from Kirkwall, Orkney, was a stark contrast to the header pic. In it, Evan posed with several other men in their mid-twenties, all of them bruised and breathless like him.

The caption read, *Mates forever, win or lose (but especially win, like today).*

Ben realized this must have been taken after the annual street-rugby/testosterone-fest known as the Kirkwall Ba. He'd seen it only in videos, but it seemed to him like the Running of the Bulls without the bulls.

Evan's smile was wide and exuberant, despite the smear of blood on his forehead and the rips in the knees of his soaking-wet jeans.

Before he could stop himself, Ben tapped to send a friend request. Then he stared at the photo, wishing he could glimpse this open, unwary man in person.

What would it take—apart from extreme sporting madness like the Ba—for Evan to lower his guard? What could make those ice-blue eyes glaze over in pleasure? What sounds would emanate from that secretive mouth? Maybe Evan was the subdued-orgasm sort, the type of lad who came with nothing more than a sigh and a slightly furrowed brow.

Ben liked to imagine he wasn't.

His boxer briefs were getting uncomfortably tight, so he slid them off and tossed them onto the floor. When he straightened his legs again, the duvet settled against his bare cock, its silky cover making him groan.

First he mentally inserted Evan into videos of the Kirwall Ba he'd seen in the past. He imagined Evan's body pushing against those of dozens of men, straining for the ball and trying to shove

the entire crowd up the street toward their target zone or whatever.

But as much as Ben adored a fit body, violent sports had never really done it for him. After getting to know Evan tonight, Ben would put his athletic prowess at the bottom of the list of things that made him irresistible.

So he started over. He imagined Evan arriving at his door right here in the castle, imagined pulling him inside and helping him strip off his clothes, their fingers trembling with need and the chilly air.

They'd hurry under the duvet's cocoon, still warm from Ben's body. They'd press chest to chest and wrap limbs round limbs. Their mouths would mesh—perhaps clumsily at first from the force of desire, but soon with assurance, tasting every inch their tongues could reach yet still craving more.

"Ah..." Ben's cock stiffened now as he stroked it with just his palm. He would press his shaft against Evan's belly, into the valley between his sculpted abs. Evan would take the hint, would reach down and grasp them both together.

Ben shuddered at the imaginary feel of Evan's cock against his own. Evan would stroke them slowly, sliding their foreskins up and down, sending ripples of pleasure throughout Ben's body.

He drew his knees up now, heels digging into the soft mattress. Yes, they would make it last.

"YOU'VE GOT YOUR PASSPORT, RIGHT?" Fergus asked in the corridor outside Evan's door.

"Aye, for the thirty millionth time," replied John. "It's in my coat pocket."

It was now half past six. Evan had been *this* close to falling asleep when his ex and his new husband had left their room. He didn't know how they were getting to the airport for their honey-

moon flight to Spain. Their drive no doubt involved a very intrepid SUV.

They stopped close to Evan's door. "Prove it," Fergus said. "Show me."

"Fine, just to humor you, it's right..." John paused. "Oh my God, where did I put it? Did I leave it in Glasgow?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Yes! Haha, see? *Voilà, monsieur, mon passport!* Pretend I said that in Spanish."

Fergus let out a whoosh of relief. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"I do know it," John said with a chortle. "I also know that's why you love me."

Evan shoved his pillow over his head to block the sound of kissing and soft murmurs. He never would have played that trick on Fergus, even for a second. He could always sense when Fergus was too tightly wound to be trifled with, and he'd tread carefully in those moments, waiting for the storm of irritability to pass.

But maybe Fergus needed someone who *didn't* tread carefully, someone who could *unwind* him with a reminder not to take life so seriously.

Someone who wouldn't wait.

Evan got out of bed and fumbled his way into his trousers and dress shirt. They were still a bit snow-damp, but he didn't plan to wear them for long.

STILL LOST IN FANTASY, Ben barely registered the sound of Fergus and John in the corridor outside his door. Their voices soon faded as they descended the stairs across the hall.

He brought his full focus back to the image of Evan here in his bed, their naked bodies pressed together, Evan's masterful hand gripping both their cocks.

Ben would move down a wee bit, enough to reach around and

trace the curve of Evan's spine to his perfect arse, firm and soft in all the right places. Evan would moan against Ben's hair, a mixture of *oh* and *please*.

Here and now, Ben sucked on the middle finger of his right hand, wetting it thoroughly, just as he would do for Evan. Then he lifted one thigh the way he would lift Evan's, granting him access.

He would reach round again, this time parting Evan's cheeks and approaching his waiting, willing hole.

"Aye," Evan would whisper, shuddering, as Ben had done just now. Then he'd gasp, eyes widening as Ben touched him there, first with rapid flicks until he opened for him, then inserting just the tip.

"God..." Ben's grasp on his cock tightened, just as Evan's would do as Ben probed deeper. Evan's hips would undulate, driving himself against Ben's belly and rocking their bodies together in an ever more frantic rhythm.

And Evan would not be silent, not at all. The entire castle would know what Ben was doing to him. What they were doing to each other.

When Evan grew delirious and his strokes ragged, Ben would turn him onto his belly. He'd peel back the covers, neither of them feeling the cold, then retrieve the lube and condoms. Finally he'd kiss his way down Evan's back, quickly, no longer teasing, until his mouth reached its destination.

Evan would writhe under him as Ben explored him first with tongue, then fingers—more deeply now, slicked by the lube. But when Ben brought the head of his cock between those luscious cheeks, Evan would go still.

"Yes," he'd whisper, and then—

Ben froze. Was there someone outside his door?

He tried to hold his breath, but with him so close to orgasm, his lungs protested. He rolled onto his side, pursing his lips to slow his breath without passing out.

No shadow appeared beneath his door, so perhaps whoever it was had already passed by. He hoped he'd not been making too

much noise. It was hard to tell over the pounding of his pulse in his ears.

There it was again—the sound of shifting fabric, someone moving without walking. Were they just standing there? Why? Perhaps it was one of the staff, who'd happened to stop at that spot to...check their phone or something.

Ben considered getting up to find out, but he couldn't open the door in his current state. Even if he could somehow hide his erection, he was pretty sure that apart from his boxers, his clothes weren't yet dry.

So he just lay there, prick in hand, listening. Waiting.

I CAN'T, Evan thought as he sat outside Ben's door, his back pressed to the wall. *I can't do this.*

He was desperate for another touch of Ben's hand, another glimpse of those bow-shaped lips and laughing eyes.

All he had to do was knock.

Ben would open the door and let him in, would probably kiss him and take him to bed straight away, no questions asked. Ben would make him forget.

And then what? asked the reality-based voice inside him.

Evan knew the answer: He wouldn't be able to contact Ben again until the MI5 vetting process was completed. How much worse would that delay feel after they'd hooked up? Ben would be angry and hurt, and he'd have every right to be.

So there were two choices:

1) Have a one-night stand and hope his supervisors never found out.

2) Wait, have Ben vetted, and if his background check was clean, invite him to dinner and give him the best first date he'd ever had. Then maybe someday, Evan could tell him everything allowed by law: that he was no architect, but rather a member of

Her Majesty's Security Service. If Ben didn't hate him for what he was, they could have something real.

It should have been an easy choice. But Evan was so lonely, and Ben's arms and mouth and body were so close...

BEN DIDN'T KNOW Evan well, but he already recognized the sound of his sigh.

Remembering the complimentary Dunleven dressing gown, Ben flipped back the covers and carefully descended the bed-staircase. He noticed his bottom lip was swollen, nearly numb where he'd been biting it the last fifteen minutes.

He found the soft flannel dressing gown on the settee. He quickly slid it on, tied the belt, then went to the door and put his ear to the carved-wood surface.

On the other side was silence.

Softly he turned the knob and opened the door without a creak.

Evan was descending the grand staircase, his back to Ben. The smell of coffee wafted up from the Hall of the House below. Ben opened his mouth to call out, but something about the determined set of Evan's posture stopped him.

Ben shut the door without a sound. Instead of returning to bed, he went to the window and drew back the heavy curtain. For what seemed the ninetieth time that night, he gasped in awe at the sight before him.

The snow had stopped and the clouds had cleared, revealing a carpet of stars. The city of Perth shimmered on the horizon to the north.

The land always hunkered down during these darkest days, but at least now it had the snow to shield it from the scathing Scottish winds. With this gift of a swaddling blanket, it could simply rest and renew itself.

Ben sensed a brokenness in Evan, one that couldn't be mended

without a kind companion but not solely *with* one either. If Evan needed time to sort himself, Ben would give it to him. He would have faith in the connection they'd forged tonight.

Perhaps soon they'd have an actual date, then another and another. Perhaps they'd kiss in the park under spring rain and whisper secrets across pillows in the middle of the night, two things Ben hadn't done in...God, how long had it been since he'd trusted someone enough to open his heart?

Perhaps it was time for a change. Time for some courage.

If not now, when? There was more hope in the air than ever in his lifetime. As of six hours ago, every person in Scotland was finally free to marry the one they loved. Now Ben just had to grant himself the freedom to take a chance.

He pressed his nose to the cold window and let his breath form a circle of warmth. Yes...for Evan, he would try to be brave.

For in this new year, anything was possible.

Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed this wee prequel to *Playing in the Dark*. Evan has been part of the series (as a bit of a villain) from the beginning, while Ben was introduced in *Playing With Fire*.

Want more Warriors all to yourself? How about exclusive bonus material like deleted scenes, commentaries, and photos of characters and settings? Then sign up for my mailing list at averycockburn.com/signup and join the fun!

Glasgow Lads Series

- Play On: Duncan/Brodie novella
- Playing for Keeps: Fergus/John novel
- Playing to Win: Colin/Lord Andrew novel
- Play It Safe: Fergus/John short story
- Playing with Fire: Liam/Robert novel
- Play Dead: Colin/Lord Andrew novella
- Playing in the Dark: Evan/Ben novel

Glasgow Lads on Ice (spinoff featuring curling)

- Throwing Stones: Luca/Oliver novel
- Book 2, late 2019

About the Author

Avery Cockburn (rhymes with Savory Slow Churn—mmm, ice cream...) lives in the US with one infinitely patient man and two infinitely impatient cats.

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