



# The Homecoming

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## CHAPTER ONE

It began just as Maddy approached the roundabout at the bottom of town.

The blue, dawn light, which had heralded her arrival at the hospital, had warmed now to the bright sunshine of a fine autumn morning, burnishing the turning leaves of the trees lining the streets of Havenbury Magna and contrasting their richness with a cloudless sky. The air was crisp, the traffic was light after the early-morning rush and pedestrians greeted each other in the street as they went about their daily routines. There was nothing to fear here. No monsters hiding in the dark. No nameless terrors. And yet, as she drove past the docks, turning right to climb the steep high street, her chest tightened and her breath caught in her throat. Gripping the wheel tight, she focused her eyes on the ruined castle at the top of the hill. Breathe slowly. Relax. *Calm, calm*, she chanted in her head, but it was no good; by the time she turned her little car into the narrow lane leading to the car park behind the Havenbury Arms, icy sweat had drenched her and her feet juddered on the pedals as her legs shook. Gasping and sobbing for air she stalled the engine and yanked on the handbrake, resting her

head on the steering wheel as she waited, despairing, for the panic to pass. Gradually, the raw terror ebbed away, leaving her weak and tearful in its wake.

*And this* – she thought to herself as she wiped her cold, dripping hands on her shirt and climbed unsteadily out of the car – *is why I haven't been back.*

She stood, quaking, as she took in her surroundings, concentrating on the feel of her feet on the ground, the sharply cold air pouring into her lungs as she carefully, consciously, slowed her breathing. She was glad no one from the high street could see her.

She may have been alone in the little car park at the rear of the pub but she was not the only one using it that morning. There was already a grubby old Land Rover and a sleek, new navy BMW with an ironed, stripy shirt hanging from a hook above the back seat. The car park was for customers only but a few locals sneakily used it when the pub was shut to avoid the heinous charges in the bigger council one up the road, which annoyed Patrick, the landlord, no end.

Drawing herself upright with determination, Maddy wiped the cold sweat from her top lip with a still-trembling hand and locked the car.

Letting herself into the back hallway, the familiarity she expected was marred by a sense of something amiss, and she swiftly recognised the reason for her disquiet. There was someone in the bar. Two people. They were talking loudly enough to indicate they felt entitled to be there. Which they absolutely weren't.

'Of course this would originally have been two rooms,' said one voice confidently. 'Good size ones too, so taking out the bar and putting the wall back would be a small

matter . . . I'll be the first to admit a couple of improvements wouldn't go amiss.'

The second man made some reply she couldn't quite catch. She peeked through the door from the kitchen and spied the top of Dennis's shiny bald head barely clearing the bar he stood on the far side of.

'I don't know what sort of timescales you are working to,' he continued, addressing the man outside Maddy's field of vision, 'but Top Taverns is expecting to be able to let the place go by New Year at the very latest – most likely in the next couple of months, if I'm honest,' he added in a lower tone, tapping the side of his nose knowingly.

'And precisely how does Top Taverns think it's going to do that?' Maddy demanded, as she marched into the bar to confront the little man.

'What the hell . . . ?' Dennis blustered, as she placed herself in front of him, looking down from a height advantage of at least six inches. 'Ah, it's Maddy, isn't it?' He looked nervously up at her. 'S-sorry to hear about poor old Patrick. Such sad news.'

'He's not bloody dead. And you've not been to visit him. Too busy shoving your nose in here to bring him a bunch of bloody grapes, which, might I say, is a little rich given the way he slaves to fill your pockets.'

'Well, not actually *my* pockets, obviously, although I appreciate Patrick is a loyal partner of Top Taverns, and also,' Dennis added a little more confidently, puffing out his chest, 'I slightly resent the suggestion I am "shoving my nose in" given I am the regional manager for this pub, as I believe you know very well, although I haven't seen you here very recently.'

A low blow, thought Maddy, although admittedly she

hadn't seen the loathsome Dennis since that summer three years ago.

'I'm not likely to forget your little visits in a hurry, though, am I? Interesting, though – to hear you talking about improvements – because I can't help but notice that Top Taverns hasn't felt moved to do anything about the deterioration,' she said, remembering the peeling paint outside and the slime running down a wall from a long-neglected gutter.

'Patrick has a full-repairing lease, as I am sure you are aware,' said Dennis, spitefully, knowing she wasn't, 'and I am bound to agree with you that there is work needed. I have been strongly advising him it's something he needs to be thinking about now his lease is coming to an end.'

'Coming to an end?'

'Yes,' he replied, glad to have caught her out. 'Patrick's lease runs only until the end of the year. Renewal is a possibility, of course, but . . .' he waved a hand vaguely and let the sentence hang in the air between them.

Loath to let Dennis get away with thinking he had won that particular bout, Maddy steered the conversation elsewhere. 'And who the hell are you, anyway?' she said, turning her fierce gaze to the other man for the first time.

He seemed irritatingly unmoved by her fury, leaning one elbow on the bar with casual grace whilst treating her to a leisurely appraisal. It wasn't clear if his lazy grin was generated by amusement at her anger or approval at her appearance, although she doubted it was the latter. She was still wearing the jeans and flannel shirt she had thrown on in London, before driving down through the night to reach Patrick's bedside.

The shirt, an old one of Simon's, had shrunk in the wash, the

cuffs turned back into thick wedges of fabric to reveal long, slim forearms, with a fading tan. Cropped jeans ended in narrow ankles and her bare feet – she hadn't wasted time on socks – were slipped into creased leather deckshoes. Under scrutiny she pushed back her wavy brown hair with unconscious grace, but it fell instantly over her face again, hanging down over one eye, like a Shetland pony's mane. After a night filled with worry and no sleep, and rattling from the panic attack she had barely overcome, Maddy wiped impatiently at the tears that sprung to her eyes, turning the action into a general face rub so the stranger wouldn't see her sudden distress.

'As the lady says,' he drawled, turning his attention diplomatically to Dennis, 'it would appear that reports of Patrick's death have been exaggerated, so . . .' he paused, 'we find ourselves de trop.'

'Right-o.' Dennis wavered, clearly feeling he no longer had control over the conversation. 'I need to get back to the office so, if you prefer,' he nodded his head in the man's direction, 'we'll convene another day.' With barely a glance at Maddy he trotted out of the bar, fiddling with his mobile phone as he went.

'Ben Faraday,' said the man at last, holding out a hand for Maddy to shake. The wavy brown hair flopping over his face could have looked effeminate but his tanned skin had the tough, lined appearance of being out in all weathers and made him look anything but soft. Maddy took his hand, which was so large it encompassed her. She had to resist a desire to reach out and see if his biceps were huge too.

'Arse,' said a baleful voice.

They both jumped.

'Dennis?' said Maddy uncertainly, looking at the door he had exited through seconds before.

‘Butt crack,’ the voice observed, morosely.

This time they both turned towards a shrouded dome in the corner.

‘Pirate.’ Ben laughed.

‘Oh my goodness!’ she exclaimed, going over to drag the cover off the cage. ‘Pirate the parrot. Hello.’

Pirate was thrilled to have the blanket removed.

‘He-llo,’ he replied, as if butter wouldn’t melt. ‘More tea, vicar?’ he queried, running first this and then that way on his perch, turning his head to one side and giving Maddy a beady look.

‘He’s in the bar?’ she said. ‘That’s not like the old days.’

‘He was banned because of the smoke for years, but there’s no smoking now so Patrick thought he may as well have the company. Although I’m not sure it’s doing much for his vocabulary.’

‘I wouldn’t worry. He’s sworn like a trooper all the time I’ve known him and it wasn’t the company he was keeping then.’ Maddy tickled the top of Pirate’s head through the bars of the cage, making him edge closer and shut his eyes in rapture. ‘Actually, we wondered if he had Tourette’s.’

‘Knickers,’ commented Pirate, seemingly in support of her hypothesis.

‘I’m sorry about Patrick,’ said Ben. ‘How is he?’

‘How well do you know him?’

‘He’s a good friend. I wasn’t in last night so had no idea he had been taken ill until this morning. As a matter of fact, I was just coming up to see if there was anything I could do to help when I bumped into lover boy Dennis. Quite a charmer, isn’t he?’

‘Patrick isn’t well at all, but he’s asked me to make sure the pub

opens as usual,' she said as she shepherded Ben towards the back door. 'I'd love to sit and chat but I do have rather a lot to do.'

By this time they were both in the little courtyard and, thanks to all the beer kegs clustered on the ground, Ben was too close for comfort. Impatiently she went to shove a barrel aside with her foot.

'Gaahhh!' she shrieked as her foot buckled against the immovable keg. 'Sodding hell!' she added for emphasis, going on to swear with an inventiveness and fluency that would have made a navy blush as her leg punished her for her carelessness.

'So, it's not just Pirate with the extensive vocabulary,' observed Ben, having waited patiently until she ran out of steam. 'Interesting display of masochism.'

'I thought they were empty,' she muttered, rubbing her foot. 'This is where we leave the return barrels for the drayman. Oh sodding hell again, I suppose he delivered this morning when there was no one here to unlock the cellar. Otherwise he'd have put the full ones in there. At least he took the empties . . .'

'Right, give me the key to the cellar,' said Ben, rubbing his hands together.

'No really, you don't want to—'

'Yes really, I *do* want to. If not for your benefit, then for Patrick's.'

'OK fine,' she said, ungraciously, although privately relieved. The full barrels were unbelievably heavy. It was all she could manage to shove one a couple of feet out of the way to get a new one online when they blew. Getting them down the ramp to the cellar was going to be impossible without a bit of borrowed brawn.

She took the padlock key from its place on the nail inside the door and opened the trapdoor to the cellar. Not wanting to risk any further injury to her feet, she left Ben to it and went to do a recce of the bar area. Unlike the days when she had helped out to fund herself through her degree, it was obvious the room had not been cleaned thoroughly in a long time. The glasses were washed but the shelves were grubby on close inspection, something Patrick would never have allowed to happen in the time she had known him before. The long, wooden bar top was grungy from too much cursory wiping and the chair rungs were dusty where she had made a point of wiping them with a damp cloth once a week. She decided to put aside time for a thorough clean. In the meantime, though, she straightened the chairs, dished out some beer mats and checked the pumps were all set to go.

She went out to check on Ben just as he was pushing the last keg into place. His hair was flopping over his face again but, other than that, there was no sign of significant effort, which impressed her. Not only would she have ultimately failed, she would have got dirty, red-faced and sweaty doing it.

‘I suppose you think you’ve earned yourself a cup of tea.’

‘That’d be nice.’ He straightened and smiled at her.

‘Earl Grey, Jasmine, Lapsang souchong?’

‘Builder’s tea would be fine.’

‘As in PG tips, or are we talking six sugars and a large chipped mug with a picture of a naked woman on it?’

‘Strong – milk – no sugar. Although the mug sounds interesting now you mention it.’

Maddy explored the kitchen and found Tetley’s tea bags, two cleanish mugs and some milk which was just the acceptable end of the fresh/off continuum.

‘So, how do you know Patrick?’ she asked as they sipped.

‘I might ask you the same question.’

‘You might, although strictly speaking I asked you first. But – seeing as you seem fairly helpful . . . Patrick is an old, old friend of my mother’s. Plus, he looked after me when I was studying here.’

‘So you were at the college? Don’t look as if you graduated long ago.’

She hadn’t graduated at all, but she sidestepped deftly. ‘I left three years ago, more or less. I’ve been in London running my own business.’

‘Good for you – you’re young for a successful entrepreneur . . .’

‘Yeah well, not that successful – not rich yet, anyhow,’ she admitted. Her partner – in both senses – Simon was always trying to persuade her to ‘big it up’ a bit when talking to prospective clients.

‘Anyhow,’ she added ‘your turn.’

Ben cradled his mug thoughtfully. ‘The pub’s been my local since I moved back here a couple of years ago. Plus, Patrick’s a good bloke. As a matter of fact, I’m coming back to my roots. I’ve got friends from my childhood around here, so it feels like home. I probably worked my way through my most irritating teenage behaviour at the Havenbury Arms. It took a while and poor old Patrick was very tolerant – kind of a cross between a father and a cool uncle. Now I’m back because of the college.’

‘You’re a bit old to be a student, aren’t you?’

‘I’m thirty-two. Not too over the hill yet, I hope. Anyhow, I’m not a student; I’m a lecturer, if that makes it a bit better.’

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I honestly don’t mean to be rude. My

social skills seem to deteriorate a bit when I'm tired. What are you lecturing on?'

'Psychology.'

'So you're here, on the Havenbury Magna campus, then?'

'Yep, you?'

'Yes,' said Maddy. 'I was . . . business studies and marketing. Strange we didn't meet before.'

'Not really. If it was three years ago I was away in the army. Ships that pass in the night and all that. It's nice, the campus here,' he went on. 'Better than the main city one. Small.'

'That's what I liked about it too,' said Maddy. 'Horrible, grotty student halls, though.'

'They've gone. It must have been just after you left. Big chunk of funding. Knocked down. Rebuilt. Everyone gets their own en suite bathroom and everything, apparently. Although I haven't seen inside any of them myself,' he added hastily.

She was shocked. It was weird to think that the place she remembered, the one that featured in her nightmares, didn't exist any more. She should go and look – or maybe not.

She suddenly realised Ben was staring at her.

'So,' she said, giving herself a little shake, 'psychology, eh? Must be an interesting subject to teach.'

'It is, although I am sort of studying too. I'm here to write my doctorate, amongst other things.'

'Will I understand if you tell me what it's about?' said Maddy, intrigued.

'I'm sure you would, unless I am a very bad lecturer.' Ben laughed. 'I wouldn't presume to bore you with the details, but basically it continues the work I started when I was in the army – strategies for early interventions and management of post-traumatic stress disorder.'

‘PTSD?’

‘That’s right. I’m looking at the efficacy of hypnosis in the resolution of dissociative amnesia, particularly.’

‘Making people remember through hypnosis,’ mused Maddy. She gave a convulsive shudder.

If Ben noticed he pretended not to, the same as he had decided not to notice Maddy’s trembling when they were talking to Dennis earlier.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘I developed an interest in the subject when I was on active service. I couldn’t help feeling, looking after the mental health of my men, that some sort of immediate support on the ground would help reduce the number of men who find it difficult to come to terms with what they experience out there.’

‘Your men?’

‘I was a major in the army. You sort of feel responsible for the men because . . . erm . . . you are,’ he admitted, rubbing his forehead. ‘Anyway, enough of that now. Don’t you need to open up?’

She checked her watch. ‘I suppose so. God knows where the bar staff are. Has Patrick been running the place on his own?’

‘There’s a guy called Kevin.’

‘Kevin Brown?’

‘Rings a bell; not sure. Is he a friend of yours?’

‘No!’ she replied, turning away and busying herself straightening a bar towel that was already straight.