

Futile Wrath and Frantic Foam

by K.C. Carmine

A small plant was the only possession Derrick took from his office on his last day of work. He walked out of the tall, glass building that had been so intimidating when he'd applied for the position in the law firm years before, but now, it felt like only a husk full of money-driven people who'd chewed him up and spat him out.

The May sun blinded him as he walked, contemplating his life, formerly carefully crafted, when a shop window sign caught his attention. While Derrick stopped, the wave of people parting around him remained lost in their own worlds and continued their chatting, listening to music, texting, and zooming. His eyes landed on a shop window.

Need a break? Island Travels can help!

"Fuck it," he said.

A bell chimed as he opened the door and a young woman at the first desk smiled at him.

"How may I help you?" she chirped, her ginger hair glowing in the afternoon sun, which streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Uhh," he hesitated, gathering his thoughts. "I want to go somewhere... quiet."

"Excellent!" she clapped her hands. Taking in his bespoke suit, rich black skin tone, and full beard with apparent appreciation, she frowned when her eyes landed on his scarred hand. It took an exercise of will not to hide it under the table. He hated how self-conscious he was about it, even after all these years. Her eyes snapped back to his face, her smile returning. "How about a warm vacation in Greece, in one of the resorts, or—"

"No, something less touristy." The moment the words left his mouth, he realised that he wanted to escape the stifling air of London—the city he'd called home for years, along with its crowds and tourists. Did it really matter so much where, specifically, he would go? Perhaps not.

“Oh...” Her eyebrows arched before her face brightened. “I may have just what you need!” From the very bottom of a pile of folders, she took out a binder. “Have you been to the Shetland Islands?”

“No, actually, I haven’t,” he said, immediately liking the idea of a trip somewhere not too far, yet remote. He’d travelled around the world on both holiday and business, mainly to big cities, but he’d never explored the Scottish islands.

“What dates are you looking for?”

“What’s the nearest you have?”

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Happy with his impromptu decision, Derrick joined the West End’s lunchtime bustle. The crowd he’d been a part of made him recall the moment three months ago when he had finally had enough of the life of a barrister. After months spent defending a client on a triple murder charge, he had nothing left in reserve, mentally or emotionally. Despite his client’s rightful conviction, Derrick hadn’t been able to face one moment more, so he’d returned to his office, and typed up his resignation letter.

He regretted nothing.

It seemed that now was the perfect time to take a breather, and decide on what he really wanted in life. He had enough savings to be knitting socks whilst watching the waves crash on a sandy beach for the rest of his life. That image of his future seemed very pleasing right now.

* * *

Three days, a ferry, and a cab ride later, Derrick stepped onto the welcome mat of a small inn near the Sands of Meal Beach, in Burra, Shetland.

“Stop footering about and come in!” came a yell from inside, laden with a heavy Scottish accent.

The door squeaked as Derrick opened it, revealing a woman in her 60’s who gasped at the sight of him.

“By Jove! I thought it was ma husband! Ye must be Derrick! Forgive the mess,” she said, indicating the pristine interior.

“Yes, I am. You must be Mrs Tulloch.” He offered a friendly smile, mirroring hers.

“Indeed. Please call me Moira.”

The woman directed him up a steep, wooden staircase to his room. It had a double bed in the middle, with intricate carvings on the wooden headboard and a sheepskin rug on the floor. The painting of a beach hanging in the corner above the armchair completed the sheltered, cosy feel. Mrs Tulloch informed him that breakfast was at 7:30 and not to be late, as her husband would be waiting to take him to the stables at 8:00 sharp.

Since making the decision to change everything about the life he'd led, Derrick thought adding horse riding to the holiday had been a step in the right direction. After all, this trip was about reaching into himself and finding out what he wanted to do with his life. Why not pick up a hobby he used to love years ago?

As it was still early evening, Derrick shrugged into a light jacket and ventured outside, following the hum of the waves. A few minutes' walk from the inn, the fields opened onto a beach facing the Atlantic Ocean. Despite the chilly air, he took off his boots and socks, sighing as his feet sank into the sand, the unmistakable feeling of freedom a clear sign of how much he'd needed this change. The stroll chilled him, the wind swept his short, usually perfectly coiffed hair every which way, and his beard itched with the sand particles in the air. Leaving his boots, he picked up a rock and hurled it into the ocean. The grey dot disappeared the moment it left his hand, the waves swallowing the sound of it hitting the water. He threw another, channelling all his strength into it.

One rock for the job he'd lost, another for the life he'd worked so hard to craft and ended up loathing. He didn't get a chance to pick up a third.

Derrick staggered back with a yelp of surprise at the sound of an angry neigh, accompanied by hooves hitting the sand. The black horse glistened in the moonlight as it charged directly at him, its long mane dancing in the wind, nostrils flared. Terror replaced the surprise as Derrick retreated quickly, falling on the sand, watching the large animal jump over him with effortless grace.

The second neigh was a warning. Scrambling to his feet, Derrick shot towards the inn; his bare feet slapping the grass as he sprinted away, his thighs burning from the strain. Midway, a burst of hysterical laughter left him at the

sheer pleasure of the run. He was no longer being chased, yet he continued running until he reached his lodgings.

He snuck upstairs as quietly as he could, took a hot shower and lay in the comfy bed, still smiling at the ridiculousness of his adventure. Trying to recall as many details as he could, he closed his eyes. Before he'd started running, he'd glimpsed the gorgeous horse, who seemed to have run out of the ocean, with seaweed twisted in his mane and strewn across its flank.

“Holy shit,” Derrick whispered as realisation slammed into him.

Creatures of the preternatural had been known to exist for decades. Some chose to live among humans openly, some hid the other part of their life, deeming the world not yet ready to accept them. In many countries, shapeshifters and other humanoids were a unified part of society. Everything Derrick could remember about the horse, much bigger than a regular Icelandic breed, pointed to it being a tangie. Angry, covered in seaweed, and with a piercing gaze.

Excited, Derrick lay awake, vowing that he'd go to the beach the next day in hopes of seeing the beautiful creature again.

* * *

A knock woke him. Derrick sat up abruptly, looking around the room to remember where he was. He checked his phone: 7 AM—thirty minutes until breakfast. After trimming his beard over the old-fashioned, two-tap sink, he got dressed in clothes comfortable enough for horse-riding, then realised he'd left his boots on the beach. He'd have to buy a new pair before he could ride. However, when he opened the door to go downstairs, his boots waited for him in the hallway, suggesting someone must have found them on the beach and brought them to the closest inn.

After a hearty breakfast, he followed Mr Tulloch for a walk around the grounds before they headed to the stables.

A tall, young man was brushing an elegant horse when they approached. Standing patiently, the animal visibly enjoyed the man's gentle touch.

“Niall will take good care of you,” Mr Tulloch said, clapping the man on the shoulder with fatherly affection.

Black hair falling over his eye, Niall looked at Derrick, nodded once, and extended his hand. Derrick shook it, glad he'd worn gloves, unwilling to draw attention to his scars when he was here to relax.

"Have you ever ridden before?" Niall asked in a pleasant baritone.

"Yes, quite a lot. But it was a lifetime ago," Derrick replied, sighing at the fond memories.

"Okay, let's start slowly. Acquaint yourself with Bára here." He indicated the chestnut Icelandic horse he'd been brushing.

"Hello, gorgeous," Derrick murmured to the horse, standing in her field of vision, showing his hand before he patted her neck gently. She snorted, lifting her head to nudge Derrick's hair with her muzzle.

"She likes you." The surprise was clear in Niall's voice.

"I love horses, she must sense it somehow. They're such smart animals," Derrick cooed, stroking the horse's cheek. From the corner of his eye, he saw a small smile adorn the young man's face.

"I think she's ready," Niall said, leading Bára outside, indicating for Derrick to follow.

With one hand on the saddle's pommel, he placed his left foot in the stirrup and, with a little jump, swung the other leg over. Muscle memory.

"That's a good girl. She's amazing," he directed at Niall, who stood watching them intently. Derrick allowed himself an appraising stare back. The sure stance, sharp jawline, and lifted chin painted the picture of a strong, confident man. Slightly wavy hair fell over his face, obscuring one eye completely, while the other was the most brilliant shade of emerald green Derrick had ever seen.

Only after Bára shook her head did Derrick glance away. Feeling caught, he cleared his throat and tightened his hold on the reins with both hands, thumbs up.

With a nod of approval, Niall directed them to walk through the short grass.

"Aren't you going to join me?" Derrick asked.

"Maybe another time."

The silence that stretched between them was companionable, despite them knowing nothing about one another.

The next morning looked similar, with the exception of Niall joining Derrick on Patty, another unique Icelandic horse. Niall was a well of information about the creatures, spinning tales and trivia for the benefit of a completely enthralled Derrick.

Within days, he found himself enjoying the scenery and company of the people so much, he started to consider the prospect of life in this remote place. When Mr Tulloch mentioned over breakfast that there was a neighbouring cottage for sale, Derrick asked to see it, instantly falling in love with the beautiful interior and the ocean view.

It took four days of early morning rides, three hours each, for Niall to ask the question Derrick had expected the first day.

“What made you stop riding?”

Derrick hesitated, slowing his horse.

“You don’t have to tell me, forget I asked.”

“No, it’s okay.” For an unfathomable reason, Derrick wanted to tell the story no one had been interested in for years. “My mother used to love horses,” he said, looking towards the beach. “She took me to learn on ponies at the local riding schools when I was young, then horses when I was a teen...” His voice trailed off as fond memories filled his mind.

“Used to?” Niall asked, clicking his heels to urge his horse to catch up.

“I stopped riding after she died.” He sighed as a different set of memories surfaced. Talking about her lessened the burden of the heavy memory, as if Niall was helping to carry the weight of it with him. Derrick recalled with horrid clarity how he’d been urged from the house by the fire brigade that night as they went back in to look for his mother.

“I’m sorry.” The sincerity in Niall’s voice was so palpable, Derrick wished he could look at the man. Then again, he might break down if he saw pity marring that beautiful face.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Is that what happened to your hands?”

“What?”

“You’ve been wearing your gloves even when you don’t need them.”

“Well, yeah... You’re one to talk,” Derrick scoffed without malice.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You hide your glass eye behind your hair as if I didn’t see it the first day.”

Niall snorted, the sound so similar to one a horse would make, it made Derrick smile, despite the stormy feelings inside him.

“My hand’s badly burnt. I don’t like when people stare...especially if it's with disgust, or worse—pity.”

“Then you know why I’m not ecstatic about showing my eye. I don’t care if you have scars or a past. You don’t have to hide from me.”

“Pot...kettle.”

“Touché.”

The lingering look they exchanged spoke volumes. Niall seemed to understand Derrick on a level no one ever had, and he felt that if given a chance, Derrick could understand the other man as well.

The words Niall had spoken hit close to home. Derrick had been hiding his scars, his past, and his free spirit for years, but the events of the past several days urged him to break free from the self-imposed bonds. Hoping that Niall would offer his story in return, Derrick stayed quiet.

“How does a trot on the beach sound?” Niall asked instead, changing the subject.

“Sounds good.” Derrick nodded, and they headed towards the water.

With no one around, it felt like they were riding on the moon; just the expanse of the sand in front of them as they left hoofprints on the otherwise tide-smoothed surface.

“Flying pace? Like we practised? I’ll race you to that seaweed.”

“Deal,” Derrick accepted the challenge, squeezing his calves against his horse’s flanks.

In a matter of moments, Bára’s legs moved in unison on each side, creating a distinct moment of suspension. It really felt like flying, and a whoop of excitement tore out from Derrick’s throat as he passed Niall.

He was too excited, too in-the-moment to realise there was something washed out on the beach. In a matter of seconds, Bára flattened her ears and veered off their path. The rapid change in trajectory caused Derrick to lose his grip. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bára’s foaming mouth and her wide-eyed, scared expression before he flew off her completely.

His back hit the sand, punching the air out of his lungs and he lay there, taking in gulps of salty air. He heard his name being yelled before a worried face framed by black wavy hair appeared above him.

“Are you okay?” Niall asked, the mid-morning sun bathing him in an angelic glow.

Smiling softly, Derrick lifted a hand to brush the strands of hair from the obscured eye. Niall’s lips thinned into a line, but he didn’t move.

“You’re so pretty...” Derrick breathed.

This time, Niall pulled away and stood up.

“You hit your head. Let’s get you back to the house.”

Derrick wanted to protest, unwilling to let Niall diminish the compliment. Instead, however, he took the offered hand and let himself be pulled to his feet.

“Can you walk?” Niall asked, already moving towards the house.

“Yeah, I’m fine. What about the horses?” He motioned to Bára and Patty, skittering away along the surf.

“They can find their way back. I’ll check on them later.”

* * *

The downstairs of the inn was equipped with a long bar and several tables with chairs. It was bustling with the locals in the evenings, but during the day, it was mostly empty.

“Milk and one sugar?” Niall asked, making his way behind the bar and into the kitchen, through a swinging door.

“Yeah.” A bit sore, Derrick followed. “I’ve never been behind a bar,” he confessed, looking around. “I didn’t expect a full-sized kitchen.”

“Moira is an excellent cook. And we don’t usually allow guests behind the counter.”

“I feel very special then.”

Niall glanced over his shoulder, a soft expression on his face before he looked back to click on the kettle.

“They’re good people,” Niall said, taking out teacups and a teapot from a cupboard and indicating for Derrick to sit at the small table by the wall.

“The Tullochs? Yeah, they seem so. At first, I thought they were your parents.”

Niall's hands froze for a second before he resumed making tea. "They might as well be."

"There's a story there, huh?"

Derrick watched Niall's shoulders shrug, coupled with a sigh before he poured the tea and took a seat in front of him by the table.

"They took me in when I was eight. I was a problem child, and was just waiting for them to get rid of me, to give up on me."

"I guess they didn't." Derrick blew on his tea, his eyes never leaving Niall.

"Nope. They were more stubborn than me in that respect," Niall chuckled, but his eyes shone with fond, yet clearly difficult, memories.

"I'm glad."

"How so?"

"I wouldn't have met you," Derrick said with sincerity. "And no, I didn't hurt my head," he added, just when he saw a sassy reply begin to form on Niall's lips.

Derrick reached over the kitchen table to place his scarred hand on Niall's where it was holding the cup.

Instead of pulling away, Niall looked at Derrick and raked his free hand through his hair to pull it off his face. It was a sign of trust, and Derrick cherished it more than he dared to admit.

Their gazes met.

The moment was filled with breathless clarity, a realisation of how much the two of them had clicked in just over a week. It was as if everything that had happened to Derrick in his life had led him to this place—to meet this man.

"I take back my previous statement," Derrick breathed, completely enthralled by the open emotion in Niall's expression. "You're not pretty; you're absolutely gorgeous."

Derrick smiled, and this time, Niall didn't shy away from the gaze nor the compliment, but returned the smile.

"You're not so bad yourself."

It was time they stopped denying what they both clearly wanted. The flutter that had started in Derrick's abdomen the moment he touched Niall's hand now spread throughout his body. Filled with elation, he leaned forward.

The kiss was a soft meeting of lips, both a question and an answer. Niall tasted of the ocean, adventure and peace, all mixed into one.

It was perfect.

He was perfect.

“Lads? Are ye here?” Mrs Tulloch’s voice from the bar area broke the hazy bubble of the moment. They pulled away, sitting back in their respective chairs as if they’d been caught doing something wrong. In truth, Derrick felt like he hadn’t done something so right for a long time. Longer than he could remember.

“I need to check on the horses—”

“I need a shower—”

They spoke in unison, standing up in tandem, their chairs scraping on the wooden floor. The expression on Mrs Tulloch’s face as she appeared in the doorway said that she wasn’t fooled in the slightest. She smiled at them fondly and nodded at the semi-awkward greetings they offered.

“Lunch in an hour. Dinnae be late!” she yelled after them, mirth clear in her voice.

* * *

That evening, Derrick lay in bed, grinning like an idiot, reliving the kiss over and over again. The buzz of excitement coursing through him made him spring up and head to the beach, illuminated by the full moon. He wanted to make the best of the last two days of this trip.

As if waiting for him, the black horse, was running along the beach, its rockstar mane wind-blown and shining under the stars. Noticing it wasn’t alone, it slowed down on its approach, hooves kicking the pale sand.

Frozen in place, Derrick held his breath, unsure what to expect. He had been coming to the beach since the first evening he’d seen the magnificent creature. Why did it show itself to Derrick again only now, after nearly two weeks?

The animal stopped a few metres away then neighed, tossing its head. A gasp tore out of Derrick’s throat when he noticed the horse’s left eye was reflecting the moonlight.

“Niall?” he croaked, not so much in disbelief as in awe. He’d had his suspicions.

The horse—the shifter—nickered in affirmation and Derrick held out his hand, taking a step closer. The silky soft cheek of the big creature felt warm against Derrick’s hand as he gently patted the animal’s flank.

“It’s really you, isn’t it?” he whispered. “How extraordinary...”

The horse pulled away, reared, neighed, and ran straight into the ocean. The evening waves swallowed the black figure within moments, leaving Derrick speechless and grinning as if he’d just unearthed the mysteries of the universe.

* * *

He returned to bed, and when he finally let the oblivion of sleep pull him under, he dreamt of holding onto a black, wavy mane, the wind blowing in his face, as they galloped along the beach.

The squeak of the window opening woke him up just a few hours later. Bleary-eyed and panicked, he scrambled to reach for his shoe before he sat up, ready to face the intruder.

“*That’s* your weapon of choice?” Niall’s sassy voice made Derrick sag back into his pillows with relief.

“What are you doing here? Wait, no. I have a lot more pressing questions.” Derrick reached for the lamp on the bedside table, letting the shoe drop to the floor.

Niall shrugged. “You asked me about my story. Now you know.”

“You’re a tangie, an, umm, *each-uisge*,” he tried pronouncing it in Scottish Gaelic. “Wow, just...” he grinned. “I don’t even know what to ask first.”

“Can I sit?” Niall indicated the foot of the bed and Derrick nodded. “I know I have nothing to be afraid of, not anymore, but...” He shook his head and took a deep breath before continuing. “I was eight when my parents and I were attacked by anti-shifters. They were the ones advocating to support the drug.”

“I remember when that was an issue,” Derrick said sympathetically. The ‘definite drug’ or ‘the cure’, as they called it, had been created for all humanoids able to take any other form. They had been forced to choose to forever remain in one form or the other. Only years later was it confirmed that those who had taken the drug had trouble coping with their decision, the

hormonal changes causing psychotic behaviour being one of the milder side effects. Many had been driven to suicide by the loss of such an integral part of their identity.

“What happened?” Derrick asked quietly.

“They threw rocks at my parents and me at the beach when we were in horse form,” Niall looked at Derrick, making him recall how he’d done just that his first night at the beach. “After they saw us change form.”

“No wonder you charged at me. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s fine. You didn’t know. But when I was underwater and a rock landed next to me, it triggered a lot of memories and…” He sighed. “I should be the one apologising.”

“I was scared shitless at the sight of you with nostrils flared. But I haven’t felt that excited in years. How fucked up is that?” Derrick laughed and Niall joined him with a hearty chuckle, before they grew serious again.

“My father was injured that night and so was I,” Niall pointed to his eye. “That made him decide that he didn’t want to live in a world that allowed such hostility towards our kind.”

“He took the drug.”

“Yeah. Mum begged him not to, but in time, he convinced her to take it as well. I was too young to be eligible, thankfully. They had to wait until I was post-pubescent or I could have died. Dad lost his link to humanity within weeks, becoming a wild beast, not recalling who he’d been, not recognising mum or me. She tried to keep things together, but was losing it too, slowly. When she realised that, she told me to run. Lachlan—Mr Tulloch—found me on the beach with the morning tide.”

“I’m sorry about what happened to you…your parents.” Derrick leaned to put a hand on Niall’s that was resting on the bed between them.

“I was lucky to find new ones,” Niall took Derrick’s hand, squeezing it in acceptance of the gesture. With the pad of his finger, he traced the scars on it with reverence before he lifted the hand to place the softest of kisses on it, melting Derrick’s heart.

At that moment, Derrick couldn’t believe he’d met someone who understood him so well and without judgement; someone who had gone through hell, yet had so much compassion for others. Derrick knew he had found a rare gem, a diamond in the rough. He tightened his hand around Niall’s, unwilling to let go.

“Tell me to leave,” Niall breathed in the semi-darkness, his voice taking on a heady tone.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Derrick smiled, throwing the duvet to the floor.

He leaned forward, reaching for Niall who followed his lead without another word.

They met in the middle, their lips touching just for a moment before Derrick felt Niall’s tongue sneak out.

Derrick moaned, opening into the kiss, sliding his tongue along Niall’s, into his waiting mouth. It was deeper than their first kiss, filled with determination rather than hesitance. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Derrick asked, breaking away. He had to be certain.

Niall smirked, placing a warm hand on Derrick’s cheek.

“I’ve been sure for a while. Now...I need you inside me.” The sultry tone and the invitation itself made Derrick open his mouth in shock at the rapid acceleration of the evening. “Oh, don’t act shy all of a sudden,” Niall scolded, poking Derrick’s chest with a finger.

Oh, it is on.

Derrick lunged, pinning Niall to the bed, peppering his neck with kisses.

“That’s more like it,” Niall purred, pulling away to take off his t-shirt. Derrick did the same. They looked at each other for a heated moment, before removing the rest of their clothing.

One thing that Derrick had learnt in the last few weeks was that taking chances and following his gut was sometimes the best course of action. No matter what happened later, he would always have this night to remember.

Spreading Niall’s pale legs wide, Derrick nipped the inside of his thigh before he let his tongue explore.

“You taste like the ocean,” he breathed, right above Niall’s cock. *And I want to bathe in you until I drown in ecstasy.*

The soft gasp that left Niall’s lips was an indication that Derrick’s ministrations were being well received. Sucking slowly, he massaged the sensitive spot behind Niall’s balls with two fingers. The pitch of Niall’s naturally low voice rose as his head thrashed on the pillow, his hands gripping the sheets.

“Inside me!” he commanded, arching his back.

“Not yet,” Derrick growled, kissing Niall’s hip.

He climbed off the bed, only to rush back with a travel-sized bottle of lube and a strip of condoms.

“You pack everything with you, huh?”

“Essentials only, but if you think I haven’t wanked thinking of you for the last week, you are sorely mistaken,” Derrick smirked, squirting a fair amount of lube on his fingers.

“Ohhhhhh,” Niall breathed out slowly when Derrick prepared him. “Yeah, like that...” His needy whispers were the most erotic poetry Derrick had ever heard.

He needed to hear more.

Crooking his fingers, Derrick reached Niall’s prostate and massaged it gently, causing Niall to arch on the bed and release a string of curses that sounded like the local dialect.

“Fuck, Derrick! Inside me now, or I’m—ahhhhhh...I’m—”

Encouraged, Derrick climbed over Niall to capture his mouth. The hungry, desperate, and messy kiss was the culmination of the build-up they had endured until they finally exploded under the pressure of lust.

Derrick yelped in surprise when Niall turned them over, straddling Derrick’s hips. He was a bit taller than Derrick, and a lot stronger than he looked. Derrick loved it.

Pinkened cheeks, parted lips, and messy waves created a vision of the ultimate beauty, and Derrick was momentarily stricken. Gentle hands caressed his face when Niall looked down at him as if trying to commit this moment to memory.

A split second of sadness passed over Niall’s face before the heat in his emerald eye returned, and he leaned in again. Derrick poured his feelings into the kiss, wanting to reassure Niall that this was not a goodbye. When a moment later Niall reached between them, all coherent thought left his brain. Niall stroked gently before he made quick work of opening the packet, rolling on the condom and positioning himself.

Derrick sucked in a breath when he felt the tight heat of Niall’s body around the head of his erection. Exquisite.

Niall threw his head back with a lewd moan; the expanse of his leanly muscled chest tensing in the soft light. Tracing the abs born of practicality with

his fingertips, Derrick watched Niall lower himself gradually until he was fully seated.

His sizable length now lay on Derrick's abdomen, the head beckoning as it glistened with precome. Wrapping his fingers around it, Derrick thumbed across the tip, before he pumped it, twisting his wrist on the upstroke.

"You feel so good..." Niall moaned, rotated his hips, then moved, riding Derrick before he leaned forward, their faces inches apart.

Through a haze of heat and lust, Derrick registered their needy and pleading noises, punctuated by grunts of pleasure.

"I'm close," Derrick whispered against Niall's lips. The other man nodded, straightening his back to lift himself then slam back down in a bewitching dance. Following the rhythm, Derrick pistoned his hips up whilst still retaining his grip.

A loud, beautiful sound of bliss left Niall's lips as his graceful body arched, muscles straining.

He was a sight to behold.

When the contractions of Niall's orgasm gripped Derrick even tighter, ribbons of white come hitting his chest, tingling heat spread from Derrick's abdomen as well, travelling through every inch of his body. Squeezing his lover's thighs with his hands, he delivered one more thrust before a tidal wave of ecstasy washed over him. Bathing in it, he groaned Niall's name over and over again.

Only their rasping breaths filled the night when they both finally stilled, Niall collapsing against Derrick. Turning to his side, Derrick moved a lock of hair from his lover's face to admire his profile. For several lazy moments, he stroked the warm, naked skin covered in a sheen of sweat, tracing the hard muscles of Niall's arm and abdomen. The peaceful moment had none of the post-orgasm awkwardness Derrick was used to after sex with blokes he'd picked up at bars and clubs when the craving hit. This was no quick solution to acute lust, though—no, this was so much more.

With a sated sigh, Niall curled on the bed with his head on Derrick's biceps.

"So, did you climb through the window many times before tonight?" Derrick teased good-humouredly, twirling a lock of Niall's hair around his finger.

Nial's shrug took Derrick aback—as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been poured on his head.

“Oh...”

“Sex is intimate, but it takes more to bare a soul,” was Niall's reply.

“Like what?” Derrick asked, his hand still in Niall's hair despite the hurt he felt at the revelation.

“Mounting a tangie in their true form is the ultimate sign of trust and affection. It would be for me. Running makes me feel free. Sharing that and the connection it builds would be truly special.” Derrick nodded, listening, hoping there would come a day he could earn that level of trust. “It's said that the rider feels some of the tangie's power, and it's important not to let it go into their head. A human can go deranged after dismounting.”

“Has that ever happened to whoever rode you in horse form?” Derrick asked, the pang of jealousy strong in his chest.

“No one ever has,” Niall lifted his head to smile at Derrick before he kissed his pec and pulled him close. “You're pouting.” Niall frowned, as if oblivious to what he'd just said.

“Sorry... This whole trip... you... all of it just seemed too perfect. Yet I still—I hoped there was something between us... that together we could—”

“No, stop.” Niall placed a hand on Derrick's chest. “I don't believe in fairy tales.”

Derrick snorted; he was looking at a fairy tale that had become his reality. “But I believe in second chances in life.”

“You're leaving in two days anyway...” Niall's voice was tinged with annoyance, but he laid his head back down.

“But I'll be back.”

“Mmmhmm,” Niall murmured in disbelief.

“I really will, I even—”

“No, I don't want empty promises. I can't take that. Not from you. And you shouldn't be making rash decisions anyway.”

“All the rash decisions I made lately, led me here, to you. I don't regret a single one of them.”

Niall nodded against Derrick's chest but his face was hidden from view. *Was he sad? Had he heard many promises like that and none were ever true?* Derrick had meant what he'd said, he'd already made arrangements with

the house. He would return soon to get to know Niall more, to spend more time together if the man would let him.

Niall was more than a lover to him, he was his friend.

* * *

Derrick woke up to an empty, cold bed. He hadn't expected Niall to stay, but had hoped for it nonetheless. How naive. With practised efficiency, he dressed and headed downstairs.

“Morning, Derrick,” Mr Tulloch said from behind his paper. “I hope you don't mind that I told Niall about your interest in buying the McDonald's cottage. It came up in the conversation,” he added apologetically. “Are you still interested in buying the house?”

“I've already bought it,” Derrick divulged in a sleepy tone, heading towards the door to meet Niall for their daily ride.

He froze in the doorway to the sight of a beautiful, black horse standing on the grass.

“Niall,” he whispered, running towards his friend, his face breaking into a smile.

Niall neighed, tossing his head before he lowered onto his front legs in an unambiguous sign of invitation. Derrick understood the message—the declaration of ultimate trust.

Taking a deep breath, Derrick sprang up to mount, grabbing a handful of mane to assist with getting onto the back which sat at a considerable height. Once seated safely, he felt a jolt of immediate energy. It was the electric pulse of an unmistakable link that formed between the rider and the horse who was human underneath. He was a part of a whole now. At that moment, the two of them became a linked entity.

With unshakeable certainty, Derrick knew it was the beginning of the rest of his life.

The sea breeze tousled Derrick's hair, and he held onto Niall's mane as they galloped along the beach. A bubble of laughter escaped him before he whooped with joy.

**Title inspired by a line from the poem "The Sheep Thief" by Eric Duncan. Published in a collection "Rural Rhymes, and the Sheep Thief" in 1896.*

K. C. CARMINE is a Polish-born writer, currently living in England. Her MA in English Philology and love of reading inspired her to start writing down the stories her imagination provided. While she is a lover of erotica, she also enjoys horror, paranormal and mystery stories. When she's not writing, she likes travelling, playing the guitar, video games, and reading. You can find her works on Amazon.