

Twice Broken

by Lenora Vale

He was the first man who broke her heart. She let him anyway.

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The thing about running into your ex at a funeral was that grief stripped the social armour off everyone in the room, and there was nowhere to hide.

Jess Hartley saw him from across the crematorium — the straight-backed posture, the dark coat he'd had since his thirties, the way he stood slightly apart from the group of mutual friends who had all aged in the ways that seven years will age people. Connor Marsh. She had last spoken to him in a hospital corridor, both of them exhausted, both of them saying things they had meant in the moment and not meant enough to survive the moment after.

He saw her when she turned to sign the condolence book. Their eyes met across the room and held for a count of two, three, before she looked away. Neither of them moved toward the other. Neither moved away.

Danny Greer had been their friend first, before he was either of theirs specifically. He'd introduced them at a birthday party eleven years ago. She had not stopped thinking about that as she'd driven here today.

The wake was at a pub on the high street. The group colonised two tables near the back, trading Danny stories in the way of people processing the incomprehensibility of someone being permanently absent. Connor was at the far end of the table. She was at the near end. This felt geometrically arranged by something with a sense of irony.

An hour in, he appeared beside her while she was getting a refill at the bar.

"Jess," he said.

"Connor."

A pause. The barman was at the other end. They were briefly in the specific privacy of background noise.

"How are you?" he said, which in the context of a wake meant several things simultaneously.

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"Managing," she said. "You?"

"Same." He rested his hands on the bar. She looked at them without meaning to — the hands were unchanged, which was stupid to notice. "I didn't know if you'd be here."

"I didn't know if you would be."

"Danny would have made us talk eventually," he said, which landed somewhere it wasn't supposed to, because Danny had in fact been making noises about getting them in the same room for two years, and now he wasn't going to get to be smug about how that went.

She put her hand over her mouth for a moment. He didn't say anything. He didn't reach out, either — he'd always been good at knowing when contact helped and when it crowded. She had forgotten that specific thing until right now.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't," he said.

She got her refill. He got his. They stood at the bar not quite ready to go back to the table.

"Are you still in Exeter?" she asked.

"I moved back to Bristol two years ago. You?"

"Still London. New flat." She looked at her drink. "I heard you were married for a bit."

"I heard the same about you."

"Eighteen months."

"Fourteen," he said. "So we both managed to be bad at that."

She laughed, surprised. It sounded strange in a wake but not wrong. He

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smiled — that specific smile, the one that came from the left side of his face first.

"God," she said. "I've missed you."

The words arrived before she'd approved them for release. He looked at her steadily.

"I know," he said. "Me too."

They stayed after everyone else left. Not by arrangement — by the accumulation of small decisions, another round, another story about Danny, the pub getting quieter around them as the evening turned. By nine they were the last of the group, and by ten they were the last people at the table, and by ten-thirty it was just the two of them and the remains of a bottle of something red and the specific intimacy of two people who had once known each other completely.

"What happened," he said. Not a question — more like a phrase he'd been carrying.

"You know what happened."

"I know the facts of it," he said. "I've never been sure I understood the—why."

She looked at him. The pub was nearly empty. The barman was wiping down at a diplomatic distance.

"I was so angry," she said. "At the situation. At you for not being angrier. At myself for making you the person I was angry at when you'd done nothing wrong."

"You weren't wrong to be angry."

"I was wrong about where I put it." She turned her glass. "I said things I didn't mean the way I said them."

"I left," he said. "I could have stayed."

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"I told you to go."

"I know. I still could have stayed."

She looked at him for a long moment. Seven years. Two failed marriages. A funeral.

"We were very young," she said.

"Thirty-two."

"Young," she repeated. "In the ways that matter."

He refilled her glass, then his. The last of the bottle.

"Are you driving?" he said.

"Train."

He nodded. "I've got a room nearby. Hotel."

She looked at him. He looked at her. The statement had been information, nothing more, but they were both forty years old and they both knew what information was.

"I should get my train," she said.

"Yes," he said.

Neither of them moved.

"There's a train at eleven-forty," she said. "And midnight. And half-past."

"There's generally a number of trains," he agreed.

She picked up her coat.

The hotel was five minutes from the pub, which she thought of as either convenient or arranged. The room was unremarkable in the way of

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business hotels — clean, neutral, the kind that doesn't ask anything of you. He locked the door and she turned around and they stood there looking at each other, which they'd been doing for seven years in the privacy of their own heads.

"If this is grief," she said.

"It's also not grief," he said.

"No," she agreed.

He kissed her with the particular care of a person who has missed something specific for a long time and is being careful not to rush it. She felt it from her mouth to her sternum — the remembered quality of him, which had not changed, which was both easier and harder than if it had.

She put her hands against his chest and felt his heartbeat.

"Hi," she said, quietly, into the space between them.

"Hi," he said.

After that, the care went out of it, which was right. Seven years of lost time metabolising into something present and real. She said his name the way she used to say it and felt him still for a moment like he was remembering something. She held him tighter because that was what she meant by it — *I remember, I'm here, I'm sorry it took this long.*

Afterwards, the window showed Bristol's night skyline. She had always liked Bristol.

"I should—" she started.

"Stay," he said. Not demanding. Just asking.

She looked at the window. The last train was 12:30. It was 12:20. She had missed it by intention or accident, whichever her subconscious preferred.

"I have work tomorrow," she said.

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"Bristol to Paddington is ninety minutes."

She looked at him. The left-side smile.

"Danny would be insufferable about this," she said.

"Absolutely," he said. "He really would."

She stayed. They talked until three in the morning, which was something she hadn't done in years — not the edited highlights, the real version. They slept. She took the 7:15.

On the train she texted him: *Bristol's closer than I remembered.*

He replied: *Funny, so are you.*

She was smiling at her phone at Paddington like a person who had just had something returned to them, which was what it was.