

How to Belong

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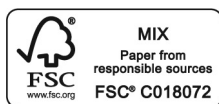
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*For Caroline Baker, who will always mean home to
me wherever we both live*

'You have got almost instant access to your emotions
and that is dangerous, a dangerous thing to have'

DENNIS POTTER

'After all, what are any of us ever after but the
conviction of belonging?'

WALLACE STEGNER

'Should I stay or should I go now?

If I go there will be trouble

And if I stay it will be double'

THE CLASH

Part One

Forging

Chapter One

IT'S ABSOLUTE HEADY BEDLAM IN the butcher's. With just forty-eight hours to go until the day itself, the air is full of the timeless tang of Christmas: meat and gossip, mince pies and anticipation. Tinsel's strung across the fridges, dipping along the bowed curves of the display cabinet in festive smiles. The new Saturday boy has cranked up a Christmas mix; bored kids are ducking and weaving to the front of the till to snake their hands back into the Quality Street. The queue is being constantly splintered by people spotting their neighbours further on up, or remembering they've forgotten the chutney. It's all exactly as it always has been; for the last ten years since Jo Butler moved to London, for the almost two decades beforehand that she grew up here, and probably for at least another four before that when Grandad ran the shop. Jo's life in London – her so-called 'real' life – has no place back

here in the Forest of Dean. In the shop, she's the nucleus of herself again, the Jo she was before she became all the other versions. Better not to consider that this is the last Christmas here.

'Jo!' Mum's behind the counter, replenishing the sausage meat and pigs in blankets. They're sludging down the tray; even to look at them is enough to give you the jitters. An unfortunate reaction for a butcher's daughter.

'Time to do the sherries, love.'

'On it!' Jo moves towards the back of the shop, already primed. There's a moment every year where Mum deems the crowd to have reached peak chaos, at which point Jo unleashes trays full of sherry and the shop turns into a full-blown extension of everyone's Christmas party.

Jo yawns as she pushes through the heavy plastic curtains into the back of the shop, nodding at Ron, Dad's right-hand man. It had been a long day in court yesterday, and today hadn't exactly been a lie-in. That had never been an option, though. This'll be the last Christmas they get in the shop, and the realisation gets her in the gut every time it hits home.

Everything's ready on the counter beside the sink where she'd laid it out in the cold black of the small hours. She takes the bottle of sherry and pours toothfuls into the little plastic shot glasses on the tray, then picks it up and turns back to the shop.

'Bugger.'

Dad's parcelling oven-ready turkeys into their posh boxes, the bit that makes the price worth it, apparently.

He pushes his hat back with arthritic knuckles and winks. 'Wouldn't be Christmas if you didn't forget about the door.'

He holds open the plastic curtain so that she can negotiate the tray through without spilling anything. It's right that he and Mum are giving up the shop. Forty-odd years of doing the same thing; a blessing or a curse, depending on how you choose to see it. Forty-odd years of getting up at the crack of dawn, rain or shine. Of hands that are constantly red with cold and festooned with plasters. Of the smell of meat as your own personal base note. Of dwindling customers, soaring costs, Veganuary.

But also: of vocation. Of a customer popping their head in to tell you how tasty that bit of beef had been. Of seeing the babes in arms move through the generations into customers in their own right, coming to you for their meat because this is where the family always comes for meat. Of the hustle and bustle of the shop on a Saturday, the slow chats on the slow days with the customers slowed by age. Of belonging.

It's no good thinking like this, every step a memory, every action a reminder that this will all be gone. It's not about her; she doesn't even live here anymore.

But it can't be willed away. There's a sickness in her stomach every time she reaches for a tray, pays a customer, hears the thrum of the machines against the hum of customers waiting, greeting each other. Jo's full of it and it's through her like a skewer, holding her together. Without the shop, without this home to come to, it's impossible to know who she is.

The curtain slaps back and Jo's in the throng again.

The crowd seems to have multiplied, the atmosphere buzzing as if they're at a gig. Ron's wife Mo is behind the counter with Mum now, both of them serving at warp speed, smiles as warm as ever.

It's best to start at the back, where the queue is almost out of the door already, but that's easier said than done when there's no obvious straight line through and the tray's wobbling like it's already drunk the sherry itself.

'Back to help your mum and dad, are you, Jo, love?' Phyllis Knight nabs two glasses, the straps of her handbag slung deep over the wrist bones of her left hand.

Phyllis has been queuing here for her Christmas meat since before Mum and Dad took over the shop from Grandad. You could write history from her ever-telescoping orders, Dad says. Phyllis's boys are long since grown and gone, one in Oz and one in America somewhere. She's got a daughter still here in the Forest of Dean, though; she'd been in the year above Jo's brother Gary at school.

'That's right. Can't miss the last time.' Can't trust herself to talk about it either, yet. 'What're you doing for Christmas Day – off over to Sophie's?'

Phyllis swaps her now-empty sherry thimbles for two full ones. At this rate she'll be dancing on the meat counter.

'Oh, they're all coming to me, love!' She beams. 'Chris's home from Perth; he's brought his new girlfriend too, so it must be serious. Then Darren and Claire decided they wanted to meet this Laura, so they're coming too, kids and all – get in tonight, they do.'

‘Do you think Darren or Chris will try and persuade you back over with them?’

‘Oh no, there’s not a chance of me leaving here, love. My life’s all here, see? I’m too old for that game.’ Phyllis puts a hand on Jo’s arm. ‘Your mum and dad’ve got the right idea, moving while they’re still young. Gary must be pleased to have them closer, what with the little ones.’

‘Yeah. His wife’s going back to work in the new year, and with two paramedics in the family it was going to be hard to juggle the kids and their shifts, even with his wife’s family nearby. This works out well for everyone.’

‘It won’t be the same with them gone; fancy Butler’s Butcher’s without a Butler behind the counter. Do you know who’s buying it?’

The deceptive lightness of the question doesn’t fool Jo. This is akin to the nuclear codes in terms of town news, but actually she couldn’t oblige even if she wanted to. ‘There’s someone else interested now, after the first buyer fell through, but Mum and Dad are keeping it quiet even with us, to be honest. I think they don’t want to tempt fate.’

Phyllis nods stoically, enough of a gossip pro to know when she’s beaten. ‘How’s it going in that smart job of yours?’

The tray judders slightly in Jo’s hands.

‘It’s . . . it’s all right, you know. Being a barrister isn’t always as glamorous as it sounds, but yeah, it’s good.’ Phyllis doesn’t need the truth: the casual misogyny, the snobbery, the impossibility of getting anywhere near cases that actually matter even though

she finished pupillage more than four years ago now. The disillusionment Jo wakes up to every morning. She pulls a smile back over the truth, hoists the tray. 'I'd better keep getting these out. Thirsty work, this queuing.' Not that Phyllis is in any danger of racking up a thirst, the way she went for those sherries.

Phyllis's hand is warm on Jo's forearm, her grip surprisingly tight. 'It's lovely seeing you again. You keep up the good work, all right?'

Good work's overstating it. Jo's halfway to a response when the shop door opens.

'Li! *Liam!*'

Liam hasn't seen her yet; he's steering the kids through the throng. Rosie's shot up again, looks like she'd rather be doing anything than holding Liam's hand. What ages are the girls now, nine and six? Jo and Liam were six when they first met, which means that these two might have also already met their most steadfast friend.

'Li!'

The kids have reached Mum behind the counter; she's bent down and stripped off her gloves, arms open wide for Chloe to come in for a hug. Jo's struck with swift, daft envy. Mum knows Liam's kids so much better than she does. By leaving the Forest Jo washed out of the flow of life here, into a tributary. The waters parted to let her go, then joined back up and the relationships continued as if she'd never been there.

At work, when she's on the last train back to London from, say, Doncaster after a losing case, knackered and unrooted, Jo asks herself: what are Mum and Dad doing

now? What's Liam doing now? Just knowing that they're there, that nothing's changed, that with some little effort she could probably name the customers as well as the cuts of meat – this is enough on those evermore-frequent, grey, faceless days for Jo to stop feeling like she's run uphill in a panic and landed in the wrong place. She closes her eyes and lets it play like a tape in front of her: Mum and Dad in the shop; Mum serving up the sausages and the pork pies; Dad with his back to the outside world, working away on the counter behind the curtain, chopping and dicing, his hat pushed back as the shop warmed up with the day.

In her imaginings, Liam's . . . well, presumably Liam would actually be plastering, or doing stuff with Kirsty and the kids, but the details of that are vague. That's Liam's parallel life, the one that really started after she'd left. The Liam in her mind is almost sixteen, sitting on her bed with her, shoes off, backs against the radiator, taking her through their French homework for the fifteenth time until she finally gets how the subjunctive works.

Here, in the shop, Mum reaches up, hugs Liam too, pats him on the cheek in that way she has as she says something to him. Liam's face splits into a beam as he scans the throng, is over in three strides.

'All right, Butler? I thought you were back tomorrow!'

'I was in court in Taunton last minute, couldn't see the point of going back up to London then back down tomorrow, so Dad drove over and met me when I got out last night. I was going to phone you later; thought you'd be at work.'

‘I’m on daddy duty. The girls broke up on Tuesday and Kirst’s on overtime all week. She says it’s mad in the Co-op; half of town’s in there every day like the end of the world’s coming. But the money’s good and nobody wants a plasterer in their house this close to Christmas, anyway.’

Jo wedges the sherry tray on the counter between two mini Christmas puddings. ‘In that case, d’you fancy a quick pint? I’ll need to get back, but it feels like we should take advantage.’

‘What about the girls?’

‘Mum’s fine with them, look.’

Rosie’s behind the counter with Mo, doling out change, and Chloe – well, Chloe’s over at the deli counter nicking a wedge of pork pie, but Mum’s laughing. She catches Jo’s eye, looks at Liam then jerks her head towards the door, still smiling.

‘Remember how she used to put up with us “helping” at that age? She’s in her element, honest.’

Jo’s coat is hung up by the back door, so they push through. The back room’s a sea of turkeys in boxes, Dad standing in the middle with a list in one hand and an empty box in another.

‘I’m just popping out with Liam for a minute, that OK? We won’t be long.’

There are dark shadows under Dad’s eyes – he’s been up since two this morning getting everything ready, will be here for hours yet tidying up and sorting out. He needs the help, really. But he nods warmly at Liam, smiles at Jo like he always has, and her stomach hoops

with love. This man has kept a family and a business running for decades now, and you can see it in the lines etched into those shadows.

‘Heard that from you once or twice before, I have. You got your key?’ It’s a slam-dunk straight into being seventeen again and Jo grins. ‘I have, but it’s only a half, honest.’

‘Yeah, heard that one before an’ all.’

Jo laughs. ‘See you, Dad.’

There’s nothing beats being home for Christmas.

Chapter Two

TESSA DIDN'T THINK THERE WAS anything in town that could remind her of Marnie, but that was without factoring in the holiday. Christmas dusts an extra layer of misery onto everyday existence.

The quickest way from the cottage to the livery yard is three miles into the town and down through the high street, where strings of tinselly lights speckle the drizzle. Tessa learned from Mam to avoid town, and even thirty-odd years on she doesn't come here unless she has to, guarding against the sidelong looks of locals who steal glances as if trying to place her. Sometimes, over the years, the odd person has asked, warmly enough, if they know each other – were they at school together? – but Tessa always shakes her head, keeps conversation to a bare minimum. She's a stranger to everyone here, always has been, and though the spike of loneliness is still sharp, it's buried from long years of practice.

The high street is less welcoming than ever today despite people in Santa hats spilling out of the King's Head and the fairy lights draped everywhere. Inflatable snowmen teeter from pebble-dashed ledges, casting shadows onto the shadows. Even the Aldi car park is in the festive spirit, apparently; mistletoe sellotaped to the 'Two hours' maximum parking' sign, as if this is the obvious place for a festive clinch.

Tessa would laugh, but there's nothing left to laugh at now.

She slows down at the pedestrian crossing beside the butcher's, which is illuminated by fluorescent lights. The huge windows allow a full view of the stream of customers in the shop, which looks more like a pub than somewhere you'd go for meat. A woman in a cosy-looking coat laughs, says something to her neighbour, who laughs too, and Tessa, insulated within the van, nonetheless shrinks from their obvious happiness.

There's a new horse at Susan's livery yard when Tessa arrives there: a thoroughbred stallion, about 16.3 hands, relatively young and quite skittish by the look of things. He's kicking the door of the box, tossing his head as if it were attached to a leading rein still. Horses have always trusted Tessa for her stillness; she stops on her way past and speaks gently to this one, but his ears are back and he's not ready yet to trust anyone. She clucks softly and moves on, knowing the feeling all too well. She'll set the anvil up on the far side of the hardstanding, furthest from his box so that he's not bothered by her.

Tessa goes round to the house and rings the bell. She's

here to shoe the three usual horses, but it's best to let Susan know she's out in the yard. Ern's voice plays in her head, welded there since her years, two decades ago now, learning the trade as his apprentice: 'Good manners never harmed nobody.' Mam would have approved too, not that Mam approved of anything to do with Tessa.

Susan's all right: she's no-nonsense and doesn't scatter words around like horse nuts. But today when she opens the door Susan's eyebrows arch before she can hide it, and belatedly Tessa clocks the row of cars parked up alongside the horse walker.

'Is this a bad time?'

Susan shakes her head vigorously, an attempt to cover the lie demonstrated by the glass in her hand. 'No, no, Tessa, not at all.' She gestures behind her and the wine tips out over the rim. Susan scuffs it into the carpet with her toe. 'I just hadn't expected to see you this side of the new year, I suppose. We've got a few friends over but it's not a problem. Business as usual in the yard.'

Tessa nods and leaves her to the wine and the friends. Her last three Christmases had looked like that: Marnie's friends clustered into the Bristol flat, days joyous and careless with lack of a calendar. It had been cocooning, the belonging. But it's gone now.

She hunches into her jacket as she rounds the corner back into the yard. Truth be told, she'd known that only two days before Christmas was probably too close to the holidays to be showing up for work. But this knowledge made the house colder, emptier. She's come

to the yard today, sticking to the usual routine, because something has to give and if she's not careful it'll be her.

The thoroughbred still needs space, so she walks quietly to the other side of the yard and fetches Julie Oldham's old cob, leads him out onto the hardstanding. Susan's yard's great. The tin roof of the stables juts out, so even when it's a bit drizzly like today you can work on a clean, hard surface. Tessa ties the cob up loosely, rubs her knuckles into his flank. He knows what to expect and he knows her, too.

She yawns. Tiredness lies heavy, so that it's hard to know where exhaustion lets off and misery takes over. Focusing on the cob should push it away. She sets to work on the near forehoof, her breath steadying as she accepts its weight into her own body, her back aching in all the usual places as the heft of the horse is transferred to her. Work soothes her, as it always has; the snickering of the horses, the gentle clopping as they shift their weight along their legs, the heat that exudes from them. Horses and Tessa need the same thing for this job: absolute calm. She undoes the clenches with the hitting buffer on the hammer and reaches into her pocketed belt for the clenchers. There are only four nails in this shoe but it's held OK.

She switches to the hoof rasp and starts rasping the sole level. There's a lot of unexfoliated sole here that needs paring off with the hoof knife. Tessa slows her breathing and pares deftly. *Now* it's ready for the rasp again. Her exhalations are smoke signals, puffing out

and mingling with the cob's own snorts as he shifts slightly on the hardstanding.

The rasping doesn't take long and the new shoe doesn't look like it will need too many adjustments. Tessa swallows a sense of disappointment. It'll be a quick job today.

It's a short walk across the yard to the mobile forge, a day to be grateful for the fierce red heat of the Swanee in its position in the back of the van. She's just lifting out the horseshoe from the forge with the pritchel, ready to scorch it onto the cob's sole for size, when a car pulls into the yard. Someone else for Susan's party.

But it isn't. A youngish woman in fresh jodhpurs and boots that haven't seen a speck of dirt picks her way through Susan's pristine yard towards the stables. She smiles over at Tessa, peers at the anvil and the clashing orange of the forge, and walks on past to the box with the thoroughbred in it.

That's a turn-up for the books. An animal with so much spirit is going to need careful handling, not someone who looks like she's just watched the *Horse of the Year Show* on telly and been given a horse for an early Christmas present. Tessa bends over the anvil, seemingly concentrated on rasping the shoe, and watches. The girl's pulling at the bolt for the loose box now. It sticks; she tugs again and the bolt shoots open, catching her fingers in it and she yelps in pain, jumps about a foot. Tessa winces in sympathy and turns back to the rasp.

There's another cry from behind and Tessa swings round. The thoroughbred bolts out of the box towards

them. The old cob, startled, rears, whinnies and narrowly avoids hitting Tessa's van. The girl races after the horse, screaming, which won't help at all.

It's an instant shock, and as the emotion courses through Tessa, her muscles start to give way. She's going to collapse. She has a split second to decide her movements: risk hitting the anvil with her head on the way down, or get the still-molten horseshoe out of harm's way?

Avoid the anvil; it'll knock her out. Tessa twists and hits the ground. She's cleared the anvil. The horseshoe scorches into her ankle as surely as if she was being branded. The pain is ferocious and the renewed emotion keeps her bolted to the ground.

The girl has recovered the horse. She hurries over, holding him tightly by the halter. Tessa is fully conscious but immobile. The muscle-melting and subsequent falls long since stopped being scary, but being stuck like this in front of a stranger never fails to bring shame, and keeping her eyes closed is protection, however flimsy.

If she can get one muscle moving, sometimes the others will follow. It takes a moment of hard concentration, but then her finger crooks and she breathes out in relief, pushes herself up. That was a bad one.

'Tessa! What happened? Are you OK?'

Susan comes pelting round the side of the barn, all boots and wine glass. The girl hovers at her shoulder. The girl should be sorting out the thoroughbred, by rights. Susan obviously thinks so, too – a none-too-subtle jerk of her head sends the girl back off to the box.

Tessa heaves all the way up, clinging onto the anvil for support. 'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Daisy said you went down like you'd been shot.' Susan cocks her head to the side as if she's assessing the value of a thoroughbred. 'Are you sure you're not hurt?'

People need to see Tessa smile when this happens, however weak the smile. 'No, honest I'm not.'

'Did you trip on something?' Susan considers Tessa, then the yard, shrewd and puzzled. The yard is clear. Tessa's kit bag is beside the van, the anvil a few feet from it.

'No. I just . . .' Can she risk the truth?

I have these funny turns when my muscles become limp, like a ragdoll, and I concertina to the ground. It barely lasts any time and then everything rights itself. It started when I was five and my little sister died, and was harder to control when I was nineteen and my mother finally moved away. I feel like I can get it under control but then something happens, and it swoops back. It's been happening for yonks. It's worse if I let something get under my skin, so I try to avoid feeling anything. It's lonely and it makes me sadder than anyone can know, but it's the way it is. It's all I can do.

Every few years someone well-meaning like you will suggest a doctor, but I know it'll do no good.

I'm scared, and I'm tired, and I'm alone with it.

But there's no point. Susan's exactly the type – confident, rich, concerned – to suggest going to a doctor, and Tessa barely has the strength to keep herself going, let alone cope with that. The doctor couldn't help before,

not when she went with Dad as a kid and not when she went on Marnie's urging, so it's a bit late to hope it will help now. If there was a miracle cure, maybe. But there isn't. So she avoids doctors.

'Been a bit tired lately, I have.' She manages a shadow of a smile through the desperate hopelessness clouding everything. 'Christmas, see?'

Susan watches her for a minute.

'You're living back in the cottage again, aren't you?' Susan never met Marnie, never knew about her explicitly, only that Tessa had moved forty minutes away to Bristol a few years ago, and now she's back. The sheer understatement is full of understanding for everything that's been lost and Tessa nods, on guard against the kindness.

'A big change like that can be draining. Could you take some time off over Christmas, rest up a bit?'

'I'll be OK, honest.' If she doesn't work, she doesn't earn, and things are precarious enough as they are.

Susan places a hand tentatively on Tessa's shoulder, as if she's made of porcelain rather than iron. 'Do you want to come in for a minute, warm up, have a drink and make sure you're all right?'

Company. Warmth. People concerned about her. She longs for nothing else, has wanted only this for as long as she can remember. But a collapse among Susan's well-meaning horsey friends could be the end of her livelihood.

'You're all right, ta. It's better if I get on. Thank you, though.'

'Well, if you're sure?' Susan waves and sways off into

the gloom towards her guests. The house stands waiting for her, a big white pillared square, bordered either side by fir trees glinting with Christmas lights. Tessa watches her go, then starts loading up the van, slotting everything where it belongs.

If she can't get things under control, this could be the beginning of the end for her working life. She's had bad patches before, but until the last one, she'd always managed to fit her life into a smaller and smaller box, until the threat of a mini-seizure or whatever they are had passed.

She has to keep going or she'll lose the business. Susan's livery clients may not be riding much over Christmas but as soon as the new year's resolutions hit, they'll be out here again, raring to go, and horses with untended hooves just won't wash it. Same with Geoff over at the riding centre, another of her big regular farriery clients. Once the tourists start coming back, he needs those ponies ready for customers who want to go pony trekking in the forest. If Tessa can't do it, they'd have to find another farrier. And then she'll be done for. She's already shoeing fewer horses than she used to; if things get any worse she's going to have to resort to something else to make up the shortfall in income. She's going to have to look beyond farriery for money. But it's not like she has any other skills.

There's the spare room, what used to be the parlour. Things would be a bit easier, money-wise.

But.

A stranger in the house.

It scorches at the very edges of Tessa's thoughts, not permitted any space at the forefront of her brain. Ignore, ignore, and it will go away.

The thought persists, though, expands into even less welcome areas. Someone else in the house might come in handy if these bad spells keep getting worse. Might keep her safe.

Degenerative: the word has bored into Tessa in the weeks since she's been back in the Forest and the symptoms she's had all her life, on and off, have intensified. No doctor has said this out loud but that's only because she's been nowhere near a doctor recently, wanting no confirmation of what she knows has to be true. The word has sharpened itself against her fears, digging into her so that every twist of thought she has ends up in the same unexaminable place. It's a mirrored spear, driving her towards threats, forcing her to look into the dark corners, to see how things only get worse and worse, and there's no getting better, no returning from this.

The brain-zapping she experiences, the melting muscles – this will be only the beginning. Soon they'll be joined by tremors and she'll have to give up work. Or she'll lose more and more movement, becoming increasingly trapped inside an ever-more helpless version of herself before she is unable to move or communicate, being fed through a tube. She doesn't have the Internet – too expensive for something that's spotty at best out here – but her mind spirals around possible causes: motor neurone disease, Parkinson's, or things she doesn't even know to be scared of yet.

Each time, these fears play out to the same bitter truth: there's nobody to take her in. Any tube-feeding will be in a hospice, or out at the old people's home beside the bypass, the youngest there by a couple of decades.

Tessa should probably have spelled things out for Susan. But the truth is this: she's not sure she's up to facing it by herself and there's nobody else. No living siblings. Dad's long dead and Mam . . . Well. And Marnie, the strongest love she'll ever know, is no longer hers. It's piercing, shaming proof that Mam was right all along: she's unlovable.

It's better not to know the specifics. The details never helped anyone. She won't be able to stay alone in the cottage; she'll be at the mercy of the NHS and whichever care home is decided for her. In her forties. If this is the best of her life that's left, she has to do all she can to keep steady and avoid that for as long as possible. Knowledge isn't power when you've got no power to begin with.