

Charlie

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the
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Chapter One

“I’m leaving, I want a divorce.”

That was the last thing my husband said to me, so I told him if he was leaving he may as well go to hell then walked out of the house and went diving.

It was the last day before the half term break and I had planned to get home, cook a nice dinner for the two of us and try to have a civilised conversation. To this end I packed my Renault Kangoo van before he got home from work. My little diving club was having a weekend dive at a quarry about a hundred miles north of London, where we lived, and my plan was to leave early in the morning, camp there overnight and be back Sunday evening.

Well, all good plans go wrong and he was in a bad mood when he got home. There wasn't any particular reason, he was always in a bad mood when he got home. He had been for a couple of years now, maybe three. So instead of a civilised conversation we had a fight, and instead of a nice dinner I had a takeaway on the drive up. I don't know what he had, probably his girlfriend. Of course I didn't know about the girlfriend at the time, I only found out later, through my solicitor.

It wasn't even an interesting fight, just a bored rerun of the usual recriminations we'd been practising for a while so we knew our lines. Nothing out of the ordinary so I didn't really see the need to run it through to the usual end. The only things that were different were his asking for a divorce, or telling me I guess since I didn't appear to have much say in it, and me deciding to leave early and camp Friday night as well as Saturday night.

So I shut the door to the double garage and got in my little van and operated the remote to open the garage door then had to go back in to ask him to move his BMW since it was blocking the driveway and I couldn't get out. Surprisingly he just grunted and acquiesced, ordinarily he would have made a sarcastic remark about my, and usually all women's, driving abilities. Still, he moved his car and I went.

Even though we'd had about half of the usual fight I had all the thoughts I normally do after a fight. Guilt, self recrimination, things like that. I suppose it was all my fault that the last ten years of our marriage hadn't sustained the joy of the first two years. It would have been fine if we'd had children, but we didn't so it wasn't and it was all my fault. I pulled over just before joining the M1 and had my usual après fight cry then rejoined the outbound traffic and drove fast for a couple of hours, trying to outrun my misery and depression.

I picked up some fish and chips from a chippy not far from the quarry and took them with me. There were a few campers already there but my dive buddies weren't coming up till the morning so I found a spot where there'd be room for all of us and parked my van there. It was only a small van but what had attracted me was that the bulkhead between the seats and the cargo area was movable so by moving it into the right position and sliding the passenger seat as far forward as it would go I had enough room to lie full length. A piece of foam rubber served as a mattress and all my diving gear stowed neatly alongside my bed.

After parking up I pulled out my camping chair and sat down to eat my fish and chips in the moonlight but I'd barely started to eat when the rain came down so I ended up back in the van, sitting cross legged on my mattress, peering out at the rain and wishing I'd made different life choices. Like not being born perhaps. I cried myself to sleep. Not the serious crying of someone suddenly faced with a major catastrophe but the half hearted and depressed trickle of self pity that comes from knowing your dreams of love and family ended a long time ago and have little hope of being resurrected. It didn't help that my ambitions as a teacher had come to nothing either. After eleven years I was still just a maths teacher and every promotion opportunity went to someone else.

In the morning I saw Karen's tent beside my van and the end of her car poking out the other side. She was still hammering tent pegs so she must have just arrived. I pulled out a wet wipe and wiped my face so as to be presentable and got out of the van.

“Hello,” I said brightly. When you're semi-permanently sad and depressed you learn quite quickly to act bright and cheerful otherwise

people pry and try to cheer you up. About the only thing that would cheer me up would be a loving husband and, perhaps even a little recognition of my worth at school. Certainly not someone telling me a joke or two or saying “count your blessings” or sympathy.

“Hiya Charlie, saw your van so I pitched next to you. Hope I didn't wake you,” said Karen, equally brightly and cheerfully, although at 23 she wouldn't have anything to be depressed about. She'd joined the school as a probationary teacher at the start of term and our little diving club a week later.

We exchanged some small talk then I put on my camping stove to make some coffee while she finished pitching her tent then she pulled out her camping chair and joined me.

“So did you meet any gorgeous hunks last night?”

Karen was of an age where she liked to go clubbing on Friday and Saturday nights and was able to stay out all night and still manage to be cheerful during the day. She could be irritatingly cheerful.

Karen laughed. “Loads,” she said. “But they were mostly losers. One guy wouldn't even buy me a drink. Tosser.”

“Mostly, huh. That means not all.” I'm quick with that kind of logic. It comes from having a degree in maths and being a maths teacher for eleven years. Oh god, was it really eleven years?

“Well, no,” she grinned. “I did give my phone number to a couple of guys. Just have to wait and see if either of them ever bothers to ring me. Hey have you tried this?”

She pulled a bottle of Ultra Swim shampoo out of her tote bag.

“I'm finding all this diving is really damaging my hair, especially all the chlorine in the pool.”

“Oh, I know,” I said. “I used to use that one myself but I prefer Paul Mitchell Shampoo Three now although it's a lot more expensive.”

One of the advantages of being married to the Managing Director of a London advertising and PR company is that he gets paid a lot so I can afford things that I wouldn't be able to if I were a young single probationary teacher like Karen.

Over breakfast of bread and cheese, for me, and fruit and natural yoghurt, for Karen, we talked about hair conditioners and skin creams and how to prevent the damage a lot of immersion in water can cause, particularly chlorinated water. Hair care was probably more of an issue for her than for me because she had long straight light brown hair and was very keen on attracting male attention. I, on the other hand, had a mop of black hair, shoulder length, thick and curly and fairly unstyleable and my man had long since given up caring what I looked like. I still went through the motions though and, of course, skin care is always important as you don't want to look in your thirties when you are actually in your thirties. And you definitely don't want to look in your forties.

One of the big advantages of having a diving club at a secondary school is that you get to use the school swimming pool in the evenings and at weekends which makes it a lot easier than having to fit in with a fixed time at a local public baths. The disadvantage is that you tend to end up using it longer and more often and chlorine is a bugger for hair. Although Allan, our club's diving instructor and one of the science teachers, will tell you, in whatever level of detail you want, that chlorine isn't the problem it's the chloramines, compounds resulting from chlorine reacting with other substances in the pool like deodorant, sweat and so on. Karen wasn't interested in that level of detail as she taught English. She just wanted nice hair.

The rain of the previous evening had disappeared and the weather was mild, with next to no wind and the quarry wasn't particularly busy. There were always some people here as it was a popular diving spot for recreational divers but at weekends and public holidays it was often quite crowded. Even Christmas Day saw a handful of divers, despite the icy cold water, as I could attest having been one of them. This weekend looked like it was going to be reasonably uncrowded.

I ought to mention that the quarry wasn't a quarry any more. It had closed down a long time ago and the Council had flooded it and

turned it into a diving site for recreational divers. They'd stocked it with fish and banned fishing, as divers and fish hooks don't mix well, and over the years added a couple of features like a decommissioned submarine, which lay at the bottom about forty metres below the surface, and the remains of a wrecked helicopter which sat on a platform about twenty seven metres down. Nature had added a lot too so there was now plenty of mud, fresh water weeds and a variety of shellfish and crabs.

While Karen got on with setting up camp I took both my air tanks to the compressor to fill them. Karen had only been diving for a few weeks and hadn't yet qualified so she didn't have any equipment of her own and borrowed what she needed off the rest of us. I let her use my old, smaller, tank, and an old plain off the shelf black wetsuit. My new one was pink and mauve and was tailored especially for me. Erika, another teacher, had lent her an old buoyancy jacket.

Our club had only five members and so far we'd managed to resist attempts by the Principal to open up the club to include the kids. Allan and I had formed it four years ago. He had been an Advanced diver for several years and when he found out I had just finished my Advanced diver training he suggested we formed a club at our school. Because he was more experienced he agreed to qualify as an instructor in the hope that this would encourage other teachers who'd never dived to join. Brian had joined up in the first year and Erika in the second year, both taught by Allan with unofficial help and guidance from me. Others had joined and left over the years and Karen was our newest member.

“A life on the ocean wave, a life on the ocean wave, de dum de dum de daa, de diddly de dum de dum,” I sang happily to myself while I filled the tanks, my husband firmly excluded from my mind so I could enjoy the weekend. Admittedly it wasn't the ocean, it was a flooded quarry but I was a long way from the ocean and sometimes got sea sick anyway. And, it had to be admitted, there aren't any songs about divers that spring immediately to mind. “We all live in a yellow submarine,” perhaps, but it was further from the truth than “A life on the ocean wave” since the only submarine was at the bottom of the quarry and was rusty grey and no one lived in it anymore.

The compressor banged away noisily and my tanks slowly filled. After a while I touched the valve at the top of one and it was getting quite warm so the tank must be nearly full. The compressor was an old one, owned by the diving club that rented the quarry off the Council but it did have the advantage of being able to fill up to four tanks simultaneously although it sometimes shut itself off too early, leaving one or more tanks half empty. I knew its ways well so when it shut itself off with a wheezy sigh I checked the pressure gauges and they both hovered around 3000 psi which was fine.

I disconnected both of them and lifted one in each hand. They both felt about the right weight which more or less confirmed the compressor's pressure gauges so I wandered slowly back to my van.

“Nice day for it, love,” commented a stranger next to a large caravan as I walked by.

“Yes, beautiful,” I replied with a cheerful nod but kept walking. My van was another thirty or so metres further along the edge of the quarry and I was always wary of strange men. Back at our site Karen had finished her breakfast and was already in her wet suit, sitting in her camping chair and reading a cheap novel.

“Here we go,” I said. Karen looked up and smiled.

“I made some more coffee for you,” she said.

“Great, thanks,” I said, dumping both tanks beside Karen's chair. I reached for the mug on the little camping table and sat in my own chair. Some divers were already in the water and a few others were making their way to the main diving platform.

“Any particular dive you fancy?” I asked, taking a sip of coffee. It was still quite warm so Karen hadn't made it that long ago. “Don't forget you still need a deep dive for your certification.”

“Yes, and I do want to go down to the submarine this weekend,” said Karen “ but there's no particular rush. Allan isn't here yet anyway.”

“Well, we'll leave it up to Allan about the deep dive although I'm

happy to go down with you as practise,” I said.

“Oh, let's leave it until late this afternoon, as the final dive,” said Karen. “It seems such a waste of the day to go deep for ten minutes then decompress for hours afterwards. At the end of the day it doesn't seem such a waste.”

“How about we go over to look at the reef then? We can stay shallow there.”

Karen smiled happily and nodded agreement. I finished my coffee and stood up and stripped down to my bikini accompanied, as usually happened, by a wolf whistle or two. At 34 my figure was still lithe and trim and, in truth, I quite enjoyed the attention, so long as they didn't actually try to talk to me. It had been quite a while since I'd had any attention from my husband, other than when he looked at my credit card statements disapprovingly.

I dusted the inside of my wetsuit legs with talcum powder so my legs slid more easily inside the thick neoprene. Wetsuits work by allowing a thin insulating layer of water between the skin and the neoprene but if the suit isn't tight the gap is too big to be insulating and the diver gets cold quickly. If it's tight the thin layer of water warms up and helps protect the diver from the cold but a tight wetsuit can be difficult to get into. Standing up I dusted the arms with talc and got the top half in place then zipped it up to my neck.

By the time I'd strapped my tank onto the back of my buoyancy jacket and strapped my weight belt around my waist Karen was fully dressed, her mask pushed up on the top of her head, and was silently watching me. At her age she still had more energy than a nuclear power station.

I laughed inside a little. “A couple of years of teaching would soon wear her down to more normal levels,” I thought.

“Right,” I said. “Got everything?” Karen nodded.

We slowly walked down to the jetty, a small wooden affair with a couple of sets of ladders going into the water. With the weight of all the equipment you can't walk fast. There were a couple of teenage lads

horsing around on the jetty but they made way for us. We put on our fins and carried out the safety inspections of each other.

“You go first,” I said. I wanted to watch Karen's entry technique as I'd only seen her in the pool before.

Karen slid her mask down to cover her nose and eyes and adjusted it comfortably then put the mouthpiece in her mouth. Holding one hand over her mask so it didn't come off she stepped forward off the edge of the jetty into about fifteen feet of water. Just at that moment one of the teenage boys pushed the other and he fell off the jetty right on top of Karen. I shoved my mouthpiece in quickly and leapt into the water. I could see that the boy's foot had hit Karen on the head and dislodged her mask and knocked the mouthpiece out of her mouth. If she panicked she could drown.

Fortunately we train for this sort of thing in the pool as similar situations happen all the time and it is an essential requirement for basic certification. It was a good opportunity to see Karen react to it in a real life emergency situation in deep water, although I was in the water ready to help if she needed it. After a momentary panic reaction she reached back to her tank and found the hose and followed it to get the mouthpiece and put it in her mouth. Able to breathe again she looked around to find her mask and, full credit to her, she put it back on and cleared the water from inside without having to surface, exactly the way she'd been taught and had practised. She then looked around and saw me and did an OK sign with her hand. I gave her a thumbs up and a pat on the shoulder and we set off to inspect the reef.

When we got back to the jetty a while later and got out of the water I saw Allan's caravan was parked next to my van but he and Brian were nowhere in sight so presumably they were in the water. Erica wasn't coming this weekend. We stripped off our equipment and got out of our wetsuits and rapidly towelled ourselves dry and got dressed. Despite it being a nice day it was too cold to stand around virtually naked and wet.

“Log your dive and I'll sign it,” I told Karen, “I'll make some hot drinks.”

Karen wrote up her log book and I signed it without bothering to check the details. It was pretty academic as Karen was clearly a good diver. We lazed in the sun chatting about school and inspecting our water wizened fingers until Allan and Brian emerged from the water and joined us. They went through the same routine and sat beside us. Because of the risk of nitrogen sickness divers have to wait between dives so their bodies can release the dissolved nitrogen. It is the boring side of diving and four teachers have a strong tendency to discuss school related things which can make the wait even duller.

“Someone fell on top of Karen just as she entered the water,” I told Allan. “She lost her mask and regulator but she handled it in text book fashion. Couldn't have done it better myself.”

“I did start to panic,” said Karen, “but I remembered what to do from the pool so I did it. Hey, it worked!” She grinned happily.

Allan was pleased and we swapped a few stories about diving accidents, including my own on a night diving course when much the same had happened but it was pitch dark and I'd lost my torch as well.

“We're going to the pub down the road this evening,” said Brian, “get a counter meal. You girls want to join us? My treat.”

We both thought it was a good idea. When you cook every day, cooking while camping is no great pleasure and if someone else was paying ...

“Shall we do your deep dive this afternoon?” Allen asked Karen. She smiled and nodded.

“In that case we'd better not dive for at least six hours,” he said. “That way we can stay down for a reasonable time. Say around four this afternoon?”

“You won't need us?” I asked, meaning myself and Brian.

“No, it's perfectly straightforward. You two go off and do whatever dives you want,” he answered. “Now Karen, do you feel up to taking

your exam? I brought it with me and it'll help pass the time.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Karen. “I've been studying.”

Whatever she lacked, it wasn't self confidence.

* * *

“So, how does it feel to be a qualified diver?” I asked Karen that evening in the pub. She passed her exam, only getting one question wrong, and successfully completed the deep dive and Allan had done the paperwork to certify her. All that remained was to post it off and get the little plastic card that said she was qualified. Without it she couldn't rent equipment or use any reputable dive centre facilities without an instructor.

“Pretty cool,” said Karen. “I'm thinking of going for the Advanced diver one next.”

“It's pretty easy,” I replied. “The hardest is the basic one since it's all new. Once you've got the hang of the dive tables the rest is straightforward.”

We chatted about the electives for the Advanced diver certificate for a while then moved on to boyfriends.

“Hey, guess what?” Karen said to me, “one of those guys I told you about phoned me this afternoon. He left a message saying he wants to take me out sometime.” She giggled.

“How come you still don't have a boyfriend?” I asked.

“I don't know, Charlie,” confessed Karen. “I meet lots of guys but they all seem to turn out to be losers or married. I seem to attract them. There's got to be a nice, unmarried guy out there somewhere. Someone like George, maybe. Perhaps this guy is the one, although I doubt it.”

George was my husband. She'd never met him and probably assumed he was a great guy because I always seemed happy.

“How long have you guys been married?”

“Twelve years,” I said, feeling sad and empty inside. “I was twenty two and he was twenty five. I'd just finished my degree and was about to start a teacher training course.”

“Do you have any children?”

I hate it when that question comes up. I'd tried a number of different answers over the years to hide the truth because it made me feel somehow less of a woman, a failure at the one thing a woman should be able to do.

“We can't have children,” I admitted. “We tried hard for the first few years and I got pregnant three times but each time had a miscarriage.”

“Oh no,” Karen was shocked. “Do you know why?”

“The doctor did some tests,” I said, “apparently George's sperm had a high level of DNA fragmentation.”

Even though the cause wasn't me, I still felt responsible. George had made some changes to his lifestyle as the doctor had suggested but it hadn't made much difference and he blamed me despite what the doctor said and to some extent I'd accepted that blame. His personality was such that he couldn't concede there might be a fault with himself. Our early discussions had slowly given way to arguments and blaming and I had taken up diving as a way of getting out of the house and its tensions at weekends four years ago. It hadn't made a lot of difference as the tensions were still there when I got back on Sunday evenings but over the years diving had become the cornerstone of my life, not my marriage. These days the arguments were few and far between and the silences dragged on interminably. I didn't like talking about it with a relative stranger like Karen and I brought the subject back to diving. It was a much more comfortable topic.

We did some more diving on Sunday and then suddenly the weekend was over. I packed my equipment in my little van and sat behind the wheel. As was happening more and more frequently I did not want to

drive home. Home was cold and empty. Loveless. Anywhere else would be better. Even staying here and camping by the lake but that was impracticable. Slowly I started the engine, waved goodbye to the others with a cheery smile and drove away from the quarry. Back home.

I had nowhere else to go. It was a life, of sorts. Secure if nothing else. When all's said and done it's difficult to throw away material prosperity for some vague prospect of love. Maybe if I'd already met someone who'd fallen in love with me it would be worth walking out but I had the same problem as Karen. All the good ones were already taken and if I was going to live alone it might as well be with George.

When I got home, George's BMW wasn't in the double garage. I unpacked my equipment into its area and hung up my wet stuff to dry. I was puzzled as he never went out on a Sunday evening. Going through the door from the garage to the kitchen I could feel the house was cold and empty. No dirty dishes, not even the leftover smell of food. I ran upstairs to the bedroom. The wardrobe door were open and most of George's clothes were gone. I checked the third bedroom, the one that was originally intended to be a nursery but was now his office, and his computer and files were gone too.

“Oh god,” I said out loud to the cheerless walls, “he's actually gone. Shit.”

I sat on the floor and cried. Properly this time, not the half hearted and depressed trickle of self pity I'd been crying for the last few years. And our cold lonely marital bed was really cold and lonely with even the warmth of his body gone.

I moped around the house on Monday after a fairly sleepless night, worrying about where George was, what was going to happen, what had happened, what would never happen. I kept seeing things that brought back memories. The library book I'd stolen from the university library because I'd happened to be holding it when he told me he loved me and wanted to marry me. The cot we'd bought when I first got pregnant and which we'd kept in the spare room after that miscarriage because we thought we'd have another. A tennis racquet he'd bought to try to impress me with his sporting prowess and the

laughter we'd shared when his first game had gone badly wrong. The wine bottle we used as a candle holder which I'd given him to celebrate his first proper job. Things like that. The house was full of them, even the house itself.

Late on Monday afternoon there was a knock on the door. I rushed to open it, hoping it was George and a chance to change things and make everything good again. It wasn't.

"Mrs Charlotte Thurston?" the smartly dressed man on the doorstep asked.

"Yes," I said.

"I am serving papers on you," he said disinterestedly and thrust an envelope at me. I took it unthinkingly.

"Sign here to acknowledge receipt." I signed, confused and not knowing what this was all about.

"Goodbye," and he disappeared.

Johnson, Watkins and Bellman Solicitors was printed on the envelope and I stared at it, my hand shaking and my heart pounding. I took it into the lounge and stood there, trying to get a grip on myself. It wasn't working so I threw the envelope onto the couch and went and poured myself a stiff whisky. It helped.

I found the courage to open the envelope and read the letter. The solicitors were notifying me that George had initiated divorce proceedings and attached a copy of the filing documents. I was stunned. I hadn't thought he had meant what he'd said and it looked as though he must have started the process some time before. How could I have been so blind?

I poured another whisky and drank it then poured another. I drank that, too. Denial set in. It was all a big joke! Of course it was, how stupid I was to have fallen for it! That man must have been a friend of George's. Damn it was a good joke! Any minute now George was going to walk in and we'd have such a laugh.

Half an hour later he still hadn't walked in so I rang his mobile to find out when he was coming home. My mobile was blocked. How strange. So I rang him from the house phone. That was blocked too. So I rang his secretary. She very coldly informed me that Mr Thurston did not want to receive my calls and any future communications were to be directed through his solicitors.

I cried some more then, for quite a long time. And had some more whisky. Grief was taking over from denial. Grief at the end of my marriage, grief at having no children, grief at getting old, grief at my dead end career, grief at the prospect of the rest of my life as a sad, lonely, divorced, childless teacher. I went to the box where we kept our few medicines to see what pills we had. I still had a choice and I was going to take it. Except I couldn't. All we had were half a dozen aspirin and a bottle of indigestion tablets. I staggered around the house, alternately crying and swigging from the nearly empty whisky bottle.

"I know," I muttered to myself, "there's a Stanley knife in the garage, that'll do the job nicely."

I couldn't say out loud what job it would do but I knew it would do it well. I staggered into the garage and pulled open the toolbox. There it was, grey and glistening, just waiting to cut the misery and despair from my life. I grabbed it and lurched back to the lounge and lay on the couch.

"Might as well be comfortable," I told the ceiling.

I had another swig of whisky but the bottle was empty so I dropped it on the floor. I held the Stanley knife firmly in one hand and lifted my other arm in the air. My wedding ring gleamed at me, laughing as if to say it had all been a con, an expensive never ending lie. My blood started to curdle with pain and grief and shock and alcohol and my anger rose suddenly to echo off the sterile, impotent, uncaring walls.

"You bastard, you god damned fucking bastard."

Chapter Two

It is often said that things look much better in the morning. This is nonsense. As I peered bleary eyed at myself in the bathroom mirror I looked like the hag from hell.

My faded, floppy pink dressing gown, while not the height of fashionable attire, was comfortable and a familiar sight in the mirror. My face, on the other hand, or what I could see of it through eyes like fried eggs with tomato sauce topping, was grey, blotchy, tear stained, swollen around the eyes and generally puffy and at some point I had bitten my lip hard enough to leave a smear of blood like a vampire. My nose had run too. My hair, which on a good day could charitably be called 'unaffectedly casual' was worse than a bird's nest. No self respecting bird would go near it, let alone nest in it.

My hands shook and my head had a thunder storm raging inside and felt as though it had shrunk and was pressing on what passed for a brain.

“Jesus,” I croaked to the mirror. “If I was married to that I'd want a divorce too.”

Divorce.

It's quite amazing how a single thought can catch you unawares and smash you to pieces like a sledge hammer on a walnut.

I threw up in the sink and sat on the toilet for a pee and woke up again twenty minutes later to find the thunder storm had extended down my back and into my hips. I sat there staring at my feet and decided my ankles were looking swollen. Time I shaved my legs as well.

“I think my toes are swollen too,” I croaked at the toilet roll.

Divorce.

My chest hurt. I was probably having a heart attack. Good. It would make life easier.

Divorce.

Dimly I remembered seeing some aspirin somewhere in the not too distant past. No good for a heart attack but sometimes useful for headaches although my head wasn't aching. 'Ache' is too small and trivial a word for what my head was doing. Clinging to the walls for support I slowly made my way to the kitchen.

Divorce.

Oh yeah, that too.

"I can't cope with divorce," I told the split level cooker. "Gotta sort my head out first. One thing at a time."

I found some aspirin and indigestion tablets in a cupboard and grimly made my way to the stylish Rock Grey Double Bowl With Integral Drainer kitchen sink we'd had installed when we remodelled the kitchen a couple of years ago, wishing I had one of those walking frames old people use. I needed some water to wash the aspirin down. I made it to the sink but only just in time.

The problem with having two bowls is that you have to make a decision which one to be sick in and there wasn't really enough time for a considered opinion so I threw up on the Integral Drainer which was closest. Fortunately most of my stomach was still in the bathroom.

When the eight drain plugs settled back down to the usual two I turned on the tap to get some water to rinse my mouth, which resembled the playground at school in both colour and texture. A jet of water shot out of the spout and bounced, with such perfect precision that I can only suppose the Hand of God was guiding it, off that dividing thingy between the two sinks and soaked my face. It was actually refreshing.

Divorce.

"Oh, sod the effing divorce," I spluttered to the tap. "My head is about to explode and I'm having a heart attack."

I turned the tap off and looked at the packets of tablets in my hand. The aspirin one was going soggy but the tablets themselves were safe inside their little plastic bubbles. Six of them. I took them all with a handful of cold water. Just to be safe I took half a dozen indigestion tablets too.

“Make me some coffee, would you,” I muttered to the kettle and made my way into the lounge. The couch looked comfy so I collapsed on it and used the damp front of my dressing gown to wipe my face. That's when I found out that I wasn't having a heart attack. I just slept in my bra and it was digging in.

“That's a shame,” I thought and tried to avoid thinking anything else until the aspirin did their thing. I was surprisingly successful.

A while later the pain in my head had receded, on a scale from 1 to 10, to about 12 and the thunder storm had died down enough to let the workmen with pneumatic drills start rebuilding my mind. I felt decidedly better although my stomach was queasy.

“A nice hot shower,” I thought, “then some coffee.”

I got up, with remarkable agility but in slow motion, and walked in a tolerably upright way to the bathroom, pausing only to pick up a Stanley knife that some idiot had left on the floor. Fortunately there were no blades in it or someone could have been injured. I dumped it on the table and avoided the mirror in the bathroom. I stripped off and caught a glimpse of the angry red welts my bra strap had made around my chest but I ignored them and let the hot water stream all over me. Funny how hair can hurt too. And eyelashes. And fingernails.

I made a double strength, double sweet coffee and took it into the lounge and found out why I was feeling like this. There was an empty bottle of whisky neatly placed beside the couch. I must have drunk the entire bottle and since I never drink whisky and only occasionally have a glass of wine I should probably, by now, be dead from alcohol poisoning.

Halfway across the room, over by the window, was a paper aeroplane. After drinking half my coffee, slowly, my dormant curiosity was

slightly aroused and I went over to pick it up. This was not a good move as stabbing pains pierced my head and the room started to spin. I made a wild swipe and managed to grab it and made my way back to the couch and lay down, groaning and holding my head. I went back to sleep again.

Several hours later I was woken by my phone. I reached for it thinking it was probably George's secretary ringing to let me know he had a late meeting or a business dinner or something.

“Where are you?” screamed Zoe at me.

I put the phone on speaker and pushed it to the end of the couch so I could tolerate the noise.

“What?” I said.

“You're meeting me at 12:30 for lunch,” screamed the phone. “It's almost 1. Where are you?”

“Oh god, I forgot,” I said. “Can we make it tomorrow instead?”

“Are you ill? You never forget things. Why's your voice so faint?”

“You're on speaker.”

“There's definitely something wrong, I can sense it.”

“I'm fine, I just got drunk last night, that's all.”

There was a long silence.

“I'm coming over. Be there in half an hour,” and she hung up.

The problem with Zoe is that she is almost psychically perceptive.

Oh great. Now I was going to get the third degree and I wasn't sure I was physically or mentally up to it. I debated whether to make a run for it but decided I simply didn't have the energy so I unfolded the paper aeroplane that was wadded in my hand. The letter from

Johnson, Watkins and Bellman Solicitors.

Divorce.

I started to cry again.

I was still crying when Zoe arrived and when I let her in she took one look at me and enveloped me in a huge hug which seemed to go on for hours. It was wonderful and my tears started to subside. She weighed in at somewhere around 22 stone so she was extra cuddly and soft and immensely warm and comforting and she always smelled of fresh bread and sweet tea.

Finally she released me and wanted to know what the matter was. I held out the letter I still had in my hand, crumpled and tear stained.

She glanced at it.

“Yup, been expecting it for three or four years now. Come on, let's go and have a chat. I'll make some tea.”

Something you need to know about Zoe is that she is absolutely honest, even with herself which is probably the most difficult form of honesty there is. We'd met at uni, during induction week and she'd been a conventional slim 19 year old student.

“I've made a decision,” she told me with great seriousness towards the end of the first year. “I've been dieting since I was fourteen and I have decided that guys simply aren't worth it. I love food too much so I've decided to give up all pretence and go with what I love.”

We'd had a long chat about it and everything she said made perfect sense but I was never able to get over my conformist addiction to the stereotypical marketing image of the ideal woman. Zoe on the other hand finished uni with a first class honours degree in theoretical physics having very happily gained six stone over three years without dating anyone. She got married a couple of years later to Matt, who was six foot four and as thin as a beanpole and who worshipped every single one of her many ample inches. She'd put on another six stone in the ten years since and produced five children. Matt, if anything,

had got even thinner. So much for stereotyped images. George couldn't stand her as he could only think in terms of marketing stereotypes.

“So tell me what happened,” said Zoe. She'd bought several packets of sweet biscuits on the way over and was emptying them onto a large plate.

I told her what had happened on Friday night and how I'd got home on Sunday to find the house empty and how I'd got the papers hand delivered on Monday. I didn't tell her about the Stanley knife. I'd realised later why it was in the lounge and wasn't going to tell anyone, ever.

“Sounds like he's been planning this for a while,” she said, “since you don't find a solicitor, explain things and get the papers drawn up and delivered in just a few hours. He probably started several weeks ago and phoned them Monday morning to give them the go ahead.”

“What did you mean you saw it coming?” I wanted to know.

“Sweetie, you haven't been happy for years. I don't see you often but for years, ohhh since you lost your second I would say, you've been getting more miserable each time I do see you. And the odd times I see George I could see him more withdrawn from you each time. You tried to hide it but you can't hide anything from me. I know you too well.”

“So why didn't you say anything before?”

“How could I? What do I say? If I'd said anything you'd have probably gone charging in like a bull in a china shop and made things even worse. You know you can be very unsubtle at times.”

She was right as usual. How do you tell your best friend that her marriage is falling apart? Especially when that friend is desperately trying to hide it from herself as well as everyone else?

“All I could do was sit back and watch you get miserabler and miserabler, hoping you would both sort yourselves out before it got

too nasty. I've been so worried about you which is why I knew instantly on the phone. You never get drunk, not even at uni when it was a course requirement.”

“What am I going to do?” I started to cry again. She sat next to me on the couch and gave me a another big hug. The couch creaked ominously and my tears didn't last long. Her simple presence was a huge comfort.

“Oh sweetie, only you know what you want,” she said, “I can't tell you that and I've no idea how to get a man back. My problem's keeping Matt away long enough for me to have me dinner.” She laughed heartily.

“About the only thing I can suggest is you get a lawyer. At least get some facts so you have a better idea of what's going on.”

We talked in circles for several hours. It didn't really go anywhere but just talking helped me a lot. Grief, sadness, shock, even denial were still my main emotions but I was slowly coming to terms with things, just through simple repetition. I didn't need any more alcohol, tea is much better. And the three biscuits Zoe didn't eat.

I also realised I had another problem after Zoe had left. What was I going to tell people? Was I really going to have to add divorce to my list of failings as a human being? And how many of my friends would side with George? He'd always been good at PR.

I took Zoe's advice and on Wednesday I made myself pick up the Yellow Pages and turn to Solicitors. I slowly looked through the list, surprised at just how many there were. Pages of them. Johnson, Watkins and Bellman were listed there but there was no way I was going to use them. Flicking the page a box advertisement caught my eye.

**Lovejoy and Hope are
all you need in a nasty world**

Divorce and Conveyancing
are our speciality
Phone now for a free initial discussion

What a great name! And no doubt they cleaned up on the conveyancing needed for the marital homes after handling the divorces. I was surprised George hadn't chosen them as he would have appreciated their marketing skills, although it wasn't impossible that George had done their marketing for them. It had his style. So I rang them and told Mr Hope that my husband had served divorce papers on me and asked what I should do.

“Come in and see me,” he said cheerfully. “How about tomorrow afternoon at 3pm?”

I had nothing else to do so I went in the next day and saw him at 3pm. Mr Hope was a stooped elderly man with old fashioned manners, half moon glasses and a watch chain in his pin striped waistcoat. He gave me a cup of weak tea and a plain biscuit.

“I've brought the papers,” I told him, handing him the papers.

“Divorce is a very final thing, Mrs Thurston,” he said, taking them and putting them to one side on his desk without looking at them.

“Why don't you tell me all about what's been happening and then we'll see about the legal stuff later, hmmm?” He peered at me over his glasses.

I gave him a quick overview and he slowly took me back through the details. Then he read through the documents George's solicitors had sent me. He settled back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of him.

“I'm going to explain a little bit of the law,” he said, “and then I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to think very seriously about your answer to that question. Then we'll decide what to do.”

“OK,” I said. He had a trustworthiness about him that made me, well, trust him. So far he had lived up to his name.

“Assuming the marriage is legal under English law,” he told me, “and has lasted for at least one year, there are five possible grounds on which a divorce may be granted. Unfaithfulness, unreasonable

behaviour, desertion, separation of two years with consent or separation for five years without consent.”

I was a little surprised by this as I expected there would be a lot more grounds for divorce but then 'unreasonable behaviour' could cover many sins.

“Now,” he continued, “clearly desertion and separation are not viable options here and by your account there has been no adultery which leaves unreasonable behaviour and this is indeed the ground that has been specified in the filing document. Now, the details of the alleged unreasonable behaviour are not, at this time, disclosed but I have to say that I have a fair idea of what may well be the behaviour that will be alleged.”

It took me a couple of moments to work out what he meant then I got a little annoyed.

“But I haven't been unreasonable at all,” I said. How could I be? I'm always reasonable.

“The law lays down a number of behaviours,” he continued, unruffled, “which are considered, legally, to be unreasonable. One such is 'obsessive hobbies' and I strongly think that your hobby of recreational diving may well turn out to be basis of the divorce proceeding.”

“But how on earth can my diving be thought of as obsessive?” I was genuinely puzzled.

He dropped his hands onto his lap.

“Well now,” he said, “if I were acting for Mr Thurslow, based only on the little you have told me, I would follow that strategy myself. You did, on your own admission, seek out the hobby of diving in order to absent yourself from the marital home at weekends and, again on your own admission, when Mr Thurslow raised the matter of a divorce you told him to go to hell and went diving and you did not make yourself available for discussion. I would also imagine that Mr Thurslow might well allege that he undertook the measures prescribed by his doctor to remedy his DNA fragmentation but your obsession with your hobby

prevented him from, umm, how can I put it, ermm, making full use of his unfragmented sperm. And consequently the childless state of your marriage is a direct result of your obsession with your hobby.”

“But ...” I began to splutter indignantly.

He held up a finger to quieten me.

“Now this is not a clear cut issue and there are defences that we can make. For example, your hobby only occupied you at weekends thus allowing some five days a week for procreation which, in itself is not unreasonable. However, I believe it is important that you understand that what may seem quite reasonable behaviour can be presented in such a way as to appear unreasonable to a third party. And of course it is entirely possible that I am mistaken and some other behaviours will be presented as being unreasonable.”

I sat there in silence. I could actually see his point. By taking up diving to get out of the house I could be thought, I suppose, of trying to escape my marriage and not of trying to save my sanity.

Mr Hope silently watched me digest this for a minute or so.

“We have three options. One is to make contact with Mr Thurslow and attempt to negotiate an amicable solution which may well prove to be fruitless, in view of his current denial of access. Another is to contest the issue which is likely to be a costly process. One in which I would be happy to represent you as well but which may also prove to be ultimately fruitless.”

He paused.

“The third option?” I asked, knowing full well what it was.

“Don't contest it. Accept the divorce. I might add that I would be happy to represent you in this as well in order to negotiate equitable terms for the disposition of assets which, after contesting and losing, may well be considerably more difficult and add significantly to the cost.”

He paused again and leaned forward, taking off his glasses. He spoke quite quietly and very gently.

“So my question is, Mrs Thurslow, bearing in mind that you did take up diving in order to absent yourself from the marital home which you found and continue to find unpleasant, do you actually want to stay married to this man? Please think very carefully about this.”

We sat there in silence for a minute or so then he offered me another biscuit. I declined and told him I would think very carefully about what he'd said. He gave me back the documents and reiterated that there was no charge for this meeting and that he would await “my further instructions”. I left, my mind in a whirl of contradictions and confusion so I did what any woman would do under the circumstances. I went and got my hair done.

Chapter Three

It was completely unplanned. A sudden impulse brought on by a need to escape. I'd left the solicitors and walked down the road back to the van with my mind a swirling fog and turned left at the end instead of turning right and ended up in an unfamiliar part of town. When my brain decided to re-engage with the world I stopped and looked around in confusion and someone walked into me and dropped the phone he'd been looking at. We both bent down to pick it up, apologising to each other, then he went on his way and I found myself looking at my reflection in a large sheet of black acrylic. A ghostly form in a dark void gazed back at me.

I found it a little disturbing and I looked away and saw the sign in the door next to the acrylic sheet.



D'Hair
by Jewels

I think it was the arrogance of the sign that grabbed my attention. A challenge to be daring by someone who couldn't spell Jules yet who was confident enough to offer no explanation or invitation. I guessed 'Jewels' was a hairdresser so on impulse I went in, vaguely thinking I might make an appointment if the place wasn't too off-putting. It was time I had a trim anyway.

The place was deserted apart from a young black woman lounging on a couch reading *Cosmopolitan* with ornately decorated long fingernails. Apart from the couch there was a single chair in front of a very large mirror and there was a faint smell of hairspray. I turned to walk out again. It looked far too ... minimalist I suppose ... to be a hair salon.

“Don't go,” said the girl looking up.

I turned back to face her and she glanced at my head then firmly shut her magazine and stood up, sinuously, like a cat unwinding.

“Jewels is the only person in town who can save you,” she said softly.

“What?” I said. Had I stumbled on some religious fundamentalist hangout?

“Darling,” she said, coming up close and studying my hair and face, “this is sooooo not you.”

“I’ve had my hair like this ever since I was at uni,” I said, feeling threatened and getting defensive.

“Time the real you was released then,” she said, widening her eyes momentarily. “If you dare,” and she waved her hand towards the solitary chair with an inviting, yet somehow mocking smile.

“I just wanted a trim,” I said. “It’s getting a bit long in front,” and I pulled down a curl to make my point. “Perhaps I could make an appointment for another time.”

“Darling, that may be what you want but what you need is to change your life,” the girl said and ever so gently pushed my elbow in the right direction.

Confused as to how she knew that I needed to change my life I allowed her to take my coat and she led me to the chair.

“I’m Jewels,” she said. “Let’s find out who *you* really are.”

Well, perhaps her arrogance was justified because an hour later someone completely different was staring back at me from the mirror. OK the face was vaguely familiar but my dark mop of unruly shoulder length hair was mostly gone, shaved to a quarter inch or so around the sides and lower half of the back with thick curls on the top, curving gently backwards. In the process my eyes had got bigger, my cheekbones more prominent and my cheeks slimmer. My neck was longer too. Where had I been all my life?

Jewels stood back with a smile of satisfaction, the beads at the ends of her long, tight braids clicking softly.

“Never comb it,” she said “and brush it upwards, from behind, never from the front. Use your fingers to tease the front over to the side, like this.” She gave a quick demonstration and her nails sent flashes through my curls.

She didn't bother to ask if I liked it. She didn't need to. I was still looking in the mirror when she charged me four times what I usually paid at a hairdresser and I handed over my credit card without a qualm.

I know it's such a dreadful cliché but when I stepped outside a man in his late twenties glanced at me, did a double take, stared and walked into a rubbish bin left out for collection. That was truly one of the great moments of my life.

I floated all the way back home and didn't think about divorce once. Although I did stop to buy some more earrings on the way as my ears were now much more visible and deserved something a little more eye catching. Three pairs of earrings actually, since I have three piercings in each ear. And some DevaCurl One conditioner which Jewels had recommended since my hair was a touch dry and she didn't approve of the one I was using. And, since my eyes were bigger and no longer looked lost under a mat of hair, I thought a smokey eye shadow might make them a little more, umm, interesting.

Zoe wanted me to call her when I was done with the solicitor to tell her what he'd said so when I got home I suggested she come over for a while. I would have gone to her place but there was no way we could chat seriously with her kids around and Matt was back at work today. But she readily agreed she'd come round after they'd all been fed and settled in front of a dvd. I didn't tell her about Jewels as I wanted to see the look on her face when she saw me.

Now I can be as emotional as the best but I am also a maths graduate and a trained, experienced teacher and the shock to my system of my radical makeover had begun to make my left brain (or is it the right brain that handles rationality? I can never remember) start ticking over again so I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a chicken sandwich and wrote down a list of bullet points of everything I could remember of what Mr Hope and Zoe had said. I also added a

few things from Jewels too as she seemed an unusually perceptive and switched on person. Then I made another list of all my hopes and fears and worries and joys for as far back as I could remember.

Back in uni I'd discovered that I was an ordinary mathematician, not a brilliant one and the honours degree had taken me a little beyond my abilities. I had developed a technique to help me understand difficult concepts which involved listing everything I knew about whatever it was then leaving it alone for a while then writing a letter to someone explaining it to them. I never wrote the letters to anyone real, it was just a process of forcing my mind to put what I knew into some form of structure and it helped me a lot with grasping difficult concepts. It was probably this habit that made me decide to go into teaching.

Anyway, this whole divorce thing was probably a very simple problem but was confused and complicated by my emotions and on a third sheet of paper I tried to list every emotion I was experiencing and had experienced over the last few days. Obviously shock and dismay were at the top but as I tried to think about it as a disinterested observer, and studying maths does help you become disassociated from reality, I came up with a few surprises.

Like resentment. I was pretty sure I resented being discarded as if I were of no further use. From that point of view it didn't matter if I was in love or not or if George loved me or not. Even being discarded by a stranger can cause resentment.

Fear was another. Fear of the future, fear of not being secure or safe. How would I be able to cope on my relatively small teacher's salary after years of being used to a much higher income as the wife of a successful man? And fear of being alone, of course. I'd never really been on my own before. I went from my parents to university halls of residence to shared digs to married life. Even if some of those people didn't love me they were at least around to talk to and be with. And the biggie, of course, my fear of being unloved and, to a lesser extent, of not being in love with someone.

Hatred came into it too. I hated what my marriage had become, so full of promise to begin with and so full of disappointment now. George had changed. I'd been attracted by his fun loving idealistic 'let's

change the world' attitude and he was now a cautious, serious 'let's manipulate the world' person. I hated what I'd become too. I was just a stereotype of sorts myself now. A wife, a 'not going to happen' mother, a failing teacher going through the motions of living to avoid being hurt any more. One stereotype pretending, stereotypically, to love another stereotype. Yup, hate was definitely a factor.

As my list of negative emotions grew longer one came up and I wrote it down then crossed it out. Then I wrote it down again and crossed it out again. It didn't seem right that such a negative thing as the ending of a love, a life together, of a future should have any positive emotions but there it was, on the list. Three times actually if you included the crossings out. 'Relief'. The pretence was over, the game was up.

I wrote down a couple more negative emotions, frustration for example, not just sexual but of ambitions, and hope and things like that. Then out of habit I unthinkingly went back and added a word to one of the earlier items on the list then went back to the end for the next bullet point. You see, as you write things down, other things occur to you and some are new points and some are continuations of points already noted so you just go back and note them then carry on. I didn't really give it a thought since this was more of a solitary brainstorming session where I just jot things down as they occur to me. The next stage, writing the letter, involves going through the bullet points and sorting them out into a logical framework in order to explain it.

This took me over two hours and I would probably add other points later, maybe when Zoe would be here or maybe later in that floating pre-sleep stage where the mind starts to make free associations. But, for the time being at least, I had run out of thoughts to note so I went and looked at myself in the mirror again. There's nothing like a new hair-do to make your confidence grow! I looked pretty damned hot! Well, at least to myself anyway. The downside was that my neck felt cold and dangerously exposed. Maybe a nice scarf would help with that or one of those svelte high necked jackets that fit snugly and only come down to the hips but have a collar and lapel that you can seductively look sideways over. It would be kind of nice to meet someone I could look seductively over a collar at, if only to show off my new smokey eye shadow. Maybe some false eyelashes would help?

The doorbell interrupted my femme fatale fantasies. It was Zoe.

It was dark in the hallway and she didn't see me properly until we got into the kitchen.

“Oh. My. God!” she exclaimed, just standing there, staring.

“You don't like it?” I could feel panic starting to rise.

“No”, she said. “I bloody love it! Wow! Turn round so I can get a good look, ohh I love the back, you look so chic, sophisticated. Which hairdresser did you go to?”

So I told her about Jewel, who she'd never heard off, and we played around a little with letting the top curls hang to the left or the right or just sit upright and decided that Jewels had got it right the first time since the curls definitely looked better hanging to the right and I explained how Jewels had used a cutthroat razor to get the very short sides and back just the right length and shape and that I had to brush my hair up and forward rather than backward and down the way I was used to.

And I explained how stunned I was at how I felt with this new look, how alive and energised and how cold my neck was. And about the new hair conditioner which gave my hair a glossy look rather than its usual slightly oily look. There's a little Italian in my ancestry, which is why I have slightly olive skin and dark hair and eyes.

“Ohh, this is going to be so much fun,” exclaimed Zoe, “and very expensive.” She laughed her rich, full on laugh.

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“You've already got new earrings,” she said, “but you're going to need a whole new wardrobe of clothes to go with your new image and some nice necklaces or even a choker to set off your neck now that you have one.”

So we moved onto clothes and what would suit the new hairstyle and what shade of image would suit me. It had honestly never occurred to

me that changing your hairstyle would mean having to buy new shoes since I hadn't changed my hairstyle before. It was just longer or shorter but always much the same. But I could see that the kinds of shoes I usually bought were for that old, almost frumpy, me and simply would not do the new, dangerously glamorous me justice. Perhaps even a change of perfume ...

It was a happy two hours. Probably the happiest two hours I'd had for some time, apart from diving of course. My "obsessive hobby."

But, inevitably, we noticed the time after a while and Zoe had a life even if I didn't anymore and we had to get down to business. I made teas and got out a cake I'd bought on the way home for Zoe. The kind she liked, oozing cream and berries. I didn't bother to slice it, just gave her a fork. While I was doing that she sat down in the lounge with my lists and a red pen to appraise them with her physicist's brain, as though they were my homework.

I half expected to see "must try harder" and a grade written on them when I came back with a tray but she hadn't. There were a few red underlinings and a couple of red circles but that was all.

"What did you think of the solicitor's assessment?" asked Zoe.

"I was angry," I admitted. "It hadn't occurred to me that my diving could be seen as obsessive and the cause of our marriage breakdown. It wasn't, of course. It was the result of the breaking down not the cause but I can see that it wouldn't be hard to twist things so it looks like it was."

"If he wants to, I daresay George's solicitor could also argue that the diving was only the latest of a series of obsessive behaviours and I'm sure George can drag up a few examples. After all, none of this can be tested scientifically so once the idea is put into the magistrate's mind it only needs a few trivial instances to make it seem an established fact. And if it's handled the right way anything you've done twice can be made to look obsessive."

I hadn't thought of that. How depressing.

“I'm inclined to think the solicitor is right about the assets as well. I'm no expert but I would think George would be willing to give up more for a quick easy settlement than he would if you gave him a long hard fight to get his divorce. He'd probably fight over every penny then just out of spite.”

I had to agree. George could be very nice when he got his own way and very spiteful when he didn't.

“So you think I shouldn't contest it? Just give up?”

“It's not for me to say babe, it's up to you. But I think you've already made your decision. You just haven't got around to admitting it to yourself yet.”

“What do you mean?” I was genuinely curious. I certainly hadn't consciously made up my mind and my inclination was to fight it.

“It's all in here,” she said, waving the lists, “and there” gesturing to my head.

I looked at her in puzzlement. “You mean there are things in my head that I haven't listed?”

“Oh I'm sure there are. Many things. But I meant your hair, not your head.”

“My hair? What's that got to do with any of this?” I said, wrinkling my nose and curling my lip to emphasise my confusion.

“All the years you and George were together you had the same hairstyle and never even thought to change it. You never even had highlights or streaks. Yet three days after getting the divorce papers you have gone radical. You're changing your image, metamorphosing if you like. You're already moving on, even if you haven't realised it yet.”

“Oh, for god's sake, don't be so silly!” I laughed. “That was just a sudden impulse when I got lost in town. I didn't plan it, I was just looking round wondering where I was and saw the place and went in

for a trim. I didn't know it even existed so I couldn't possibly have meant to go there.”

“Tell me, when exactly was the last time you got a new hairstyle on impulse?” asked Zoe. “And how often do you even go shopping when you're lost? I've been lost with you a couple of times and I've seen how you behave. You start to freak out and can't rest until you've found out where you are and how to get to wherever you should be. Get your hair done? Please, don't treat me like an idiot.”

I opened and shut my mouth a couple of times but no immediate answer came out. She was quite right, it was completely out of character.

“But that doesn't mean I'm already moving on,” I said. “Be logical.”

“Well, I suppose we could argue some spiritual dimension guided you to that salon but realistically the odds are that wherever I plonk you down in town there'll be a hairdresser not far away and I don't suppose it particularly matters which hairdresser you went to or what style you got. What matters is that you chose to do this despite being lost. You didn't freak out, you changed yourself. Anyway, that's just one point. There's plenty more in here.” She waved my lists.

“Show me,” I said. I wasn't convinced.

“OK, look at these emotions.” She pointed her pen at that list. “I see lots of anger, shock, fear, resentment, dismay, loss, panic, even a little self loathing and worry over how you'll manage in the future and how you'll be seen by others.”

“So?” I said. “Isn't that what you'd expect when someone's just been told their husband wants a divorce?”

“I don't really know,” said Zoe, “as I've never been through it myself. But there's something missing. Something I expected to see but don't.”

“What?” I was getting tired of this.

“Love. Nowhere in any of these lists have you mentioned your love for

George. Or your heartbreak over him rejecting your love. You mention, ummm, oh yes, here, about your fear of being unloved, by anyone actually, not specifically George, but where do you talk about the pain of your own love for him?"

I reached over and grabbed the lists and scanned them.

"Oh, I thought it was too obvious to bother to write down," I said.

She didn't bother to even comment on that, it was so feeble.

"And then there's this one." She pointed to the one I'd crossed out and rewritten. 'Relief' and next to it I had written 'freedom' with a question mark.

"Why did you cross it out?" she asked. I didn't answer because I was ashamed to have felt relief and I'd put it back because I was ashamed that Zoe might think I was being dishonest.

"You know what I see when I read these?" asked Zoe, then continued before I could answer. "I see the inevitable reaction to sudden bad news of course, but I also see something else. Well, two things actually."

"What's that then?" I said, perhaps a little aggressively.

"You actually want your life to change," said Zoe. "You're pleased and relieved that it's happening. That's why you put 'freedom' then tried to hide it by putting a question mark. Subconsciously you're seeing this as an opportunity to scrap the past and start over again. Like with the hair. New hairstyle, new lifestyle."

"What's the other thing?" Talking with Zoe could be very uncomfortable at times.

"You're pissed as hell that he beat you to it."

Chapter Four

I told Zoe she was being absurd. I wasn't the one who wanted a divorce, George was, so how could I possibly be upset that he'd started the process before me? She just smiled gently and finished the cake without attempting to justify her position which shows what a lousy theoretical physicist she would have made since theorists spend most of their time justifying their theories. She left not long after, around 11, and I sat in the lounge fuming.

"Of course I'm going to contest the divorce!" was the gist of it. "I'm not letting the bastard get away with it."

I went and had a nice relaxing bath before going to bed.

And, inevitably, lay sleepless. My mind constantly churning the lists I'd made and what Zoe had said, over and over, round and round until my mind was befuddled. The bedclothes were a mess by the time I gave up around 4am and went and made a mug of cocoa and decided it was time I wrote my letter. I addressed it to Nathan, my dive instructor for my basic certification. Not that I knew him well enough to unload my issues on him - I didn't know his address anyway. He was simply a tool, someone to focus on and to explain my situation. I won't bore you with the letter itself but the essence of it was that I laid out the facts as I knew them then started to draw logical conclusions, referencing them back to the facts. It's not an approach that tells you what to do but it sure is good for stopping the merry-go-round in your head and scraping away the mud of confusion.

One inescapable fact was that I had little real hope of successfully contesting the divorce. Maybe if we had kids, or even pets, it would have made a difference but we didn't. The only real issue was how messy I wanted it to be.

It also dawned on me that George really had prepared in advance. Ordinarily during holidays and half terms I'd do things with many of my friends. This break I'd been fully absorbed in my own problems and hadn't contacted anyone but, and this came as a bit of a shock, none of them had contacted me, apart from Zoe. And since all of

them had children they would know it was half term. It looked as though George had spent the weekend contacting the people we knew and explaining our situation to his own advantage. He was certainly very good at PR.

Another was that I wanted to contest the divorce as revenge for my hurts. It became very clear as I was writing to Nathan that, although I didn't hate George, I didn't love him any more either and I rather welcomed the idea of him not being around. I was just in the habit of having him around and habits can be fairly easily changed.

I didn't reach the conclusion that I was annoyed that George had applied for divorce before I had but interestingly I wasn't able to reach the conclusion that I wasn't either. I didn't have enough information either way but, as I wrote about it, I realised that there was a key point I had not listed which was my unthinking assumption that our marriage was for life, for better or for worse. Although divorce is quite common, it had never occurred to me that it was a option with my own marriage. Until George raised it.

And, if you follow through the logic, if that assumption wasn't there, and it clearly hadn't been there for George, it was distinctly possible that I might well have asked for a divorce myself. Quite possibly a long time ago. Not definitely, mind you, but a distinct possibility. And that was an interesting self revelation. Very interesting.

It was interesting because it put a question mark over my diving. Did I really love diving for its own sake or was it because it was my divorce substitute? Well, that could be easily answered. If I continued diving after the divorce then it was a genuine hobby. If I lost interest in it then it was just a substitute. Only time would tell.

It was also interesting for another reason. If I held on to an unpleasant situation because of an unconscious assumption, is it possible that I was holding on to other unpleasant situations because of other unconscious assumptions?

I made another cocoa and started part two of my lengthy thesis to poor old Nathan. It was just as well he was never going to get this letter as he really got an earful that night!

There was indeed another unpleasant situation in my life. After qualifying as a teacher I joined the school full of enthusiasm and ambition. I was quite a good teacher and my students did reasonably well and I was still teaching there eleven years later. But, since I joined, there had been three new Heads of Maths. I had applied for the post each time and each time the post went to a man, twice to a man with less experience than me. Now I quite accept that there may be aspects of my personality that made me unsuitable, such as my 'diving obsession' for the last application two years ago, but it is disheartening all the same. My enthusiasm had dissipated and my ambitions waned. I had applied for the Head of Maths at another local school earlier this year and been scheduled for an interview but I'd cancelled it because I simply couldn't be bothered to make the effort anymore. Even though I intensely dislike Paul Harrison, my current Head of Maths, and don't get on too well with several others in the department, it seemed easier to put up with them rather than make the effort to move somewhere else.

It dawned on me, as I explained to Nathan, that there was indeed another underlying assumption going on here. Even though George's income was very good by any standard, I had simply assumed that I had to work, just as women assumed they had to stay home and run the house fifty years ago. I'd gone into teaching maths simply because I'd studied maths and felt I needed to conform. I hadn't really thought about what I would actually like to do with my time and had looked for a job that merely fitted around the rest of my life. I'd just got married and went into teaching because it was fairly effortless.

And this was where Jewels came in. Her perceptiveness at finding "the real me" look and her remark about changing my life was backed up by Zoe and her comment on "a new hairstyle, a new lifestyle". I'd crunch the numbers later but whatever the outcome of the divorce George wouldn't fleece me so I'd have some money and maybe even the house so why not take the opportunity to get rid of the old marriage *and* the old job? Use the opportunity to find the real me, not the cipher.

After all, as I wrote to dear old Nathan, who was actually younger than me, if I write a description of myself it would say things like 'wife', 'teacher' and so on but surely there was more to me than that?

What more I couldn't say and that in itself was depressing. Jewels was right, I needed to change my lifestyle and this was an ideal opportunity. With a bit of luck I'd leave the marriage with enough money to last six months without any job at all and I could use that time to decide what I really wanted to do with my life and make a start on doing it. Worst case scenario I could go back to teaching as there's a shortage of maths teachers and with my experience I would have no problem getting another job but I might be able to forge a new career doing something different and somewhere where I was valued and respected.

I was so fired up by this revelation that I abandoned the letter to Nathan and wrote an email to the Head Teacher, Dominic Wilton, handing in my resignation and going into some considerable detail about my opinions on the way the school was run, the shortcomings of the current Head of Maths and a few other pertinent matters that I felt should be drawn to his attention. Fortunately internet access was down for some reason and I couldn't send it but I went back to bed and slept soundly, secure in the knowledge that I was doing something positive at last.

I got up mid morning and re-read my resignation email over a mug of fresh coffee and deleted it. If all went horribly wrong and I had to get another teaching job I'd need a good reference so I wrote another email resignation where I thanked the school for the many and varied opportunities they had provided and the quality of the management structure and the staff generally. It felt bad but I justified it as being part of the tail end of my old life. The internet was back up and running so I sent the rewrite. Sod 'em.

"I've decided not to contest the divorce," I said to Mr Hope over the phone, three minutes after sending in my resignation. I'd delayed that long because I had misplaced his business card.

"May I offer you my condolences, Mrs Thurston," he replied gravely, "although I am sure you have made a wise decision."

"I think so, yes," I said. "I was wondering if you would handle the negotiations over the joint assets for me?"

“It would be my pleasure, Mrs Thurston,” he said. “I will contact Mr Thurston's solicitors and notify them of your intent. It will, of course, be non binding at this stage which will assist in negotiations. I will also request a statement of joint assets from them and I will contact you for a discussion when it is received. In the meantime I would appreciate it if you could give me your own statement of joint assets. Don't worry about valuations, my clerks will attend to that.”

“I'll do that over the weekend,” I said. “Do you think it will be straightforward?”

“Sadly, Mrs Thurston, a lifetime of experience in divorce matters has shown me that it is never straightforward. There are always, shall we say, complications.”

“Only George isn't a fool.” I was a trifle anxious. Having decided I was going to abandon everything and create a brand new life I was keen to start straight away. Ideally I would have the divorce finalised by the end of the day.

“Oh, I'm certain you would never have married a fool in the first place. The real question, however, is whether he is a clever man or a wise man.”

“What's the difference?” I asked.

“A clever man will try to hide or misrepresent assets that can be checked,” he replied seriously. “A wise man knows better. I have dealt with many clever men over the years. They have always ended up wiser.”

Oh I did like Mr Hope! Regardless of how successful he turned out to be, he had great style.

“How long do you think this will take?”

“I need to check that Johnson, Watkins and Bellman have actually lodged the filing or if they are delaying for some reason in which case I shall press them to file without delay. I presume you want a speedy outcome?”

“Yes,” I said. “The decision's made so there seems little point in dragging it out.”

“Quite. Now there seems to be a lull in divorce at the moment so the Family Court has a fairly small backlog of cases so assuming the filing has been lodged I would expect a hearing before Christmas.”

That would be fine for me. As a teacher I have to give half a term's notice so with a bit of luck I would be able to start the New Year unencumbered.

“One last question for the moment,” I said, “does the division of assets have to wait until the divorce is finalised?”

“Oh dear me no,” he said. “You are, in effect, selling shares of assets to each other and you are at liberty to do that at any time. You don't even need to be divorcing. You could, for example, be doing it for tax purposes.”

I hung up greatly relieved and went to get some therapy. Retail therapy. Since I had a new hairdo.

I checked my email late that afternoon. My resignation had been accepted, with 'regret and best wishes for the future'. Seems I wasn't the only bullshitter at that school.

I had a quiet evening in, trying on all my new outfits and shoes and posing in front of the full length mirror in the main bedroom which was great fun. Then I spent an hour on the phone with Zoe telling her what decisions I'd made and what I'd told Mr Hope. I desperately needed her approval and reassurance.

“You have no responsibilities,” she said. “You're still young and this is absolutely the right decision. I'm glad you're leaving that school as well. It wasn't making you happy.”

Music to my ears.

“So what are you going to do instead?”

“Ah, I was hoping you wouldn't ask that,” I said. “I've no idea. I'm kinda hoping the settlement will give me enough cash to survive for a few months so I can make some choices rather than just be forced into another dead end situation.”

“You've got an analytical mind,” she said, “and an artistic spirit. I'm so glad I'm not you!”

I didn't know what she meant by that and I was reluctant to ask. Still, the important thing was that she thought I was doing the right thing. OK, my parents wouldn't but I'll tell them some other time. Maybe when it's all over, since they'll only fuss and point out that the values they gave me growing up were being shredded like confetti and that I was being foolish and impulsive.

I went to bed very happy and looking forward to the next stage of my personal growth. I woke up in panic regretting everything I'd decided.

“I'm going to be unemployed, homeless, penniless and alone. I'm going to die horribly in a gutter somewhere, emaciated and covered with sores. Or a drug addled street prostitute. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, what have I done? I must be out of my frigging mind.”

Before I even had a coffee, I rushed out to the local supermarket and bought some chocolate and a packet of cigarettes. I'd given up smoking after finishing my degree and hadn't had one since but I was desperately craving a nicotine fix. It took an entire 200g bar of chocolate and three cigarettes before I regained enough of a positive outlook to even make my first cup of coffee. I put the second bar in the fridge and shredded the rest of the cigarettes into the rubbish bin and went to the library to binge on movies for the rest of the weekend.

I watched Dirty Dancing hugging a pillow and was halfway through The Notebook before I ate my second 200g bar of comfort chocolate. I abandoned Bridesmaids because I really didn't want to be reminded that single women can make a mess of their lives too and, to be honest, I was feeling sick from too much chocolate. I nearly went out for more cigarettes during The Lakehouse but talked myself out of it by the end and decided I needed to become ruthless and give no mercy like Merril Streep in The Devil Wears Prada. I cried myself to

sleep over Notting Hill and that immortal, classic line from Julie Roberts “I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.” Makes me cry every time. Not such a bad day after all.

I was deeply depressed on Sunday morning but that was only because I had to go back to school the next day. The day before going back had been depressing me for years, especially after the summer break when there was a new batch of brats. Still, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Only seven weeks to go! That cheered me up immensely.

I phoned Zoe but there was no answer. They were almost certainly at one or more of their kids innumerable sporting activities. So I phoned my mum and we chatted for while and I debated whether or not to tell them George and I were getting divorced. I chickened out and we talked about my dad's feet instead then I dropped the dvds back to the library.

I made myself a solitary lunch which was normal for a Sunday since George usually played golf until the late afternoon and I was often off on a diving trip anyway. I did the washing up and debated whether to do some preparation for the next day's classes or start on an asset list for Mr Hope. I chose the one that was less depressing and started the list with our house, our beach apartment, his BMW, my van and our stocks portfolio. I put down a number of other things but left a lot off. After all, who really cares about a bed or a lawn mower in the grand scheme of things?

Then, for want of anything better to do I estimated some values and, assuming we split everything fifty-fifty, two very interesting things jumped out at me. Firstly, even if I kept my teaching job there was no way I could afford to buy his half of the house which meant I'd have to find somewhere else that was cheaper, a lot cheaper. The other thing was that, since either he would have to buy my half or we'd just sell it, I would get more than enough to last me six months. More like four years and that wasn't including the stocks portfolio since that was George's baby and I had very little idea of what was in it.

“Don't get excited, girl,” I said out loud, “you may only get a lot less than half.”

Still, it was something to think about. Even two years worth was eighteen months more than the six months I'd thought a few days previously. You can do a lot of "finding yourself" in two years. I spent the evening thinking up fabulous travel itineraries and imagining I'd meet some wealthy jet setting prince and found a dynasty. It must be nice to be fabulously wealthy.

"You stay away from my boyfriend!" was the first thing I heard when I went into the staff room on Monday morning. It was Karen.

"You look fabulous," she said. "I love your new hair, it's so you but you need a new outfit."

I'd gone to school in my usual school uniform. I hadn't seen any point in wasting any time or money on new clothes for work, especially as it was only for seven weeks. The school would tarnish them and I'd already fantasised about a ceremonial burning of my school clothes on the last day of term. In the Head Teacher's office. On his desk.

"Thank you, Karen," I smiled at her. "So what's this about a boyfriend?"

"Oh you remember that guy that phoned me when we were diving? We've been out three times since. He's so cool!"

We whiled away the time until the bell rang for first class talking about him and her hopes and reservations. For some reason I was reluctant to tell her I was leaving. She'd find out about that soon enough through the grapevine and the entire school was now feeling distant. I was leaving and mentally I had already gone. My business was no longer any of theirs so I saw no need to tell her about my divorce. Her new boyfriend would no doubt occupy our breaks for some time to come.

News of my leaving had reached the Maths Department by morning break and Paul Harrison, the Head of Department, was visibly pleased even though he tried to hide it. The others felt some need to comment in their own ways and a couple congratulated me on my move but no one asked where I was going or what I was going to do. It would be old news by lunchtime since my leaving would not give anyone the

opportunity for promotion, just bring in someone new. Life there didn't change in the least.

I had definitely made the right decision. Whatever happened, it would be better than this.

Chapter Five

*Getcha motor running
Head out on the highway
Looking for adventure
And whatever comes my way
Born to be
Wiiii-iiiiiii-i-i-iiiiiiiiiiiiild! **

OK, it sounds better on a movie soundtrack with images of the sun lit Californian countryside flying by than it does on under powered speakers in the rain in South East London in January but the emotions remain the same.

*Head out on the highway
Looking for adventure*

Bring it on! But first I had to drop the house keys off at my soon-to-be-ex's solicitor. Peter Fonda never had these issues in Easy Rider. He got shot and killed by rednecks instead. C'est la vie.

George had readily agreed to buying my half of our house and the beach apartment and all the furniture. Much to Mr Hope's disappointment it had turned out that George was wise. His objective, or so I heard through the grapevine as so called friends started talking to me again and confirmed by Mr Hope, intent on finding ways to leverage the negotiations, was to install Charlie 2.0 in his life, no expense spared, so arguing wasn't in his best interests. Charlie 2.0 being eleven years newer than Charlie 1.0, considerably bustier and seven months pregnant. He'd been beta testing my upgrade for close on two years and my diving had, in fact, been helpful to his own obsessive hobby by providing him with romantic weekend mini-break opportunities. No doubt her added silicon had gone a long way to helping his sperm DNA fragments find themselves and achieve a unity and cohesiveness they'd not had before. I was sure Charlie 2.0 would greatly appreciate Charlie 1.0's cast off secondhand furniture. Not. Small revenge indeed but no less sweet.

* *Born To Be Wild, Steppenwolf, 1969*

So, on that rainy, cold Tuesday morning in the middle of January I walked out of the house, closed the front door gently and ended my old life forever. Footloose and fancy free.

*Hey baby gonna make it happen
Take the world in a love embrace*

I was still technically married because the hearing wasn't for another three weeks but Mr Hope assured me the outcome was a formality. Other than that nasty little detail I was homeless, unemployed, alone and very excited.

The weeks since half term had passed surprisingly quickly and smoothly. At school someone had got a bottle of wine for my leaving "do" and since one bottle doesn't last long when shared between seven people we stood around aimlessly for less than ten minutes, drinking warm wine out of plastic cups. Then the HoD gave a short speech thanking me for my years of service and thrust an envelope at me and we all went home. It had £50 of book tokens in it which I used to buy a book on Diving The Mediterranean, a French phrasebook and a pocket sized English-French-English dictionary. You see, I had a plan.

I'd been diving a couple of times in November and December. Not much but enough to reassure me that I really did love to dive and that it wasn't just a marriage substitute. I'd also realised, in the middle of the night when the best ideas come along, that I didn't actually have to live in London, or even in a house. Simply breaking that restrictive mode of thinking dramatically reduced my living costs. Where would I live? In my van, of course. I'd camped in it often enough and my real needs were simple, unlike my marketing induced needs. Get out of the cold dampness of Britain and the possibilities blossom dramatically.

My plan was flawless in its simplicity. Go to the South of France in January and do some diving until I thought of something else to do. That was it. Cool plan! Open ended plans are always more exciting and it could be fun. Of course, by the time I finished school, my ideas were getting bigger hence my buying a book on diving in the Mediterranean. Maybe I could go round Italy and Greece as well although I doubted that I'd ever get to Algeria or Tunisia. Europe was fairly familiar but Africa and the Middle East were scary. Syria, for

example, probably wasn't a good idea at all. Maybe they'd even have sorted out Brexit by the time I got back. I was thinking positively!

Most of my clothes, they wouldn't fit Charlie 2.0 as they were too small in the chest, and other personal odds and ends I dumped on my parents. They weren't overly happy with the situation as they'd thought they'd raised a sensible, responsible daughter, not a throwback to some sixties hippy dropout wannabee dream fest but resigned themselves to it. Kids are for life, not just for Christmas.

I'd bought myself a small compressor in the January sales and had my mechanic bolt it into the back of the van, just behind the driving seat and easily accessible through the sliding door. Even though it was small it still took up a surprising amount of room but I found a discarded wooden box dumped by the roadside that fitted rather neatly over it, after some liberal use of a hammer, so I could put things on top.

I also bought myself an iPad as I'd trodden on my phone and I thought an iPad would be more useful. I installed Skype and set up an account so I could use it as a video phone if I needed to. I'd trodden on my mobile phone when I was deciding whether or not to pack a pair of high heels with my diving gear. I'd needed to see how they looked with my new skinny mid calf jeans and was looking in the mirror at the time. I felt high heels and skinny jeans would be important on the road since you never know when you'll need to flag down a man to fix something on the van or push it somewhere. It's strange how gadgets targeted at women, like phones, aren't designed to cope with women's issues. But then again I suppose the designers need to build in obsolescence to encourage upgrades. Much like with wives.

The phone still worked, after a fashion, since I could send and receive SMSs and access my contacts provided I could get them displayed in the bottom half of the screen and the alarm worked but it was useless for calls since I couldn't hear the person at the other end and I didn't see much point in keeping it. I also thought the bigger screen of the iPad would be useful as I'd bought a little camcorder because Zoe and a few others wanted to be able to keep track of me. I set up a channel on YouTube called, very imaginatively I thought, "Where's Charlie" so

Zoe, or anyone else for that matter, could check out whatever little clips I posted.

Full of anticipation I headed off down the M20 to Dover to catch a ferry to France. The advantage of January travel is there aren't many people travelling although the weather wasn't too good and the ship was rolling a bit. Still, I found myself a quiet corner in a nearly empty lounge and settled myself to browsing my map of France and finding a nice route down to the south.

“Bonjour, ça va?” said a deep voice.

The only other occupant of this half of the lounge had wandered over. His impressive belly hung over a sagging belt and he could have done with a shave three or four days ago. He smelt of Gauloise cigarettes.

“Bien, merci,” I said, non committally in my schoolgirl French.

“Qu'est-ce qu'un mignon comme tu fais tout seul ici?” he said.*

I had no idea what that meant.

“Je suis Anglais,” I replied, hoping that would be the end of the matter.

“Ahhh, Ingleesh,” He beamed happily. “Permettez?” and he sat down opposite me without waiting to see if I minded.

“So, Jean-Paul, moi,” he said, tapping his chest.

“Charlie,” I replied. I hadn't expected adventures to be quite like this. In the movies they're always exotic.

“Sharlee, bon, on 'oliday?”

“Yes, I'm going to the South of France.”

“You 'ave car or walking?” he demonstrated walking with his fingers.

* “What's a cutie like you doing here?”

“I have a car,” I told him.

He seemed disappointed by this.

“I also,” he said, “I drive truck, take freight to Paris.”

I got the feeling he'd been hoping I was a hitch-hiker in need of a lift and willing to be friendly to get one.

“You are with someone?”

“Yes, my husband. He's washing in the toilet,” I said, surreptitiously flashing my wedding ring. I'd left it on while I was still teaching in case anyone noticed I wasn't wearing it and asked questions and I'd toyed with giving it back to George or selling it to a jeweller but, to be honest, I'd more or less forgotten about it. I was so used to wearing it. It struck me that it would be a good idea to keep it on even though I was, almost, divorced. After all, it would be easy enough to take off if I met a guy I wanted to know I was single but on the whole, it might prove to be a useful protection.

Jean-Paul lost interest in me after that and after a while he wandered off to see if there was anyone else he could talk to.

It was still raining when we arrived in Calais and the streets were dark and slick in the late afternoon. It wasn't particularly auspicious but it had been a few years since I'd driven on the right and I took it very cautiously as I skirted the town and headed out past the Eurotunnel Terminal and headed south towards Abbeville where I planned to spend the night. Most towns in France have a municipal campsite run by the Council. They're pretty cheap and usually don't have much in the way of facilities although they all have a toilet and basic washing. Even if the town doesn't have a municipal campsite there's usually at least one and often several commercially run campsites in the area.

The drive to Abbeville was tedious because of the rain and my soul was getting depressed even before the light faded into night. All the dampness made me not want to cook anything on my little gas stove because there wasn't room inside the van to cook and I didn't have a tent. When I'd been off diving and it rained I had been able to take

refuge in Allan's caravan. I was hoping it wouldn't rain much in the South of France and if it did I'd have to think of some solution. Of course, I hadn't given any thought to what to do in Northern France before I got to the South.

"Just a couple of days," I'd said to myself, "not worth worrying about" so I hadn't.

Feeling down and with the windscreen wipers steadily beating a slow blues rhythm I drove into Abbeville and circled the town for a while looking for the municipal campsite. I couldn't find it. I was getting pretty hungry so I pulled over near a park with a large lake as I had spotted a cafe that was open. I pulled my jacket on and ran to the cafe. It was surprisingly busy.

I ordered a hot meal and asked the girl where the municipal campsite was. She shrugged her shoulders and hurried away. I know my French isn't that good but surely it wasn't incomprehensible? Foolishly I'd left my phrase book in the van.

"Scusi," A woman sitting at the next table leaned towards me. She was sitting with another woman and they were both probably around my age.

I smiled half heartedly at her.

"No municipal campsite here, non" she said in English. Her companion nodded in agreement.

"Oh. Thank you," I said. "Umm, are there any other campsites."

"Oui, but they all closed. Is winter. No toureests." She waggled her fingers expansively. Her companion nodded in agreement and waggled her fingers too. They went back to their meals and chatted very rapidly in French. Too fast for me to follow.

It had never occurred to me that France might have a tourist season. I'd always thought they had tourists all year round.

I slowly ate my dinner, wondering what to do and feeling very foreign

and out of place. I didn't want to go to a hotel as I felt that was cheating. It was important to me to be self sufficient and independent and staying in hotels didn't figure in the little dream I'd had of myself. How could I find out who I really was sitting in anonymous little rooms? I needed my own space and I wanted the freedom to experience life and nature. Besides, I wanted to make my money last as long as possible and hotels are expensive, even cheap ones.

I finished my meal in silence, my head bowed over the plate, then I paid and used the toilets then went back out into the rain. It was getting cold. Despite the street lights there was an air of desolation. The roads were deserted and wet and the park, no doubt green and inviting in the sunlight, looked ominous and scary.

And my van had gone.

I felt panic rising and ran to the edge of the pavement and looked up and down the road and almost screamed with relief. It hadn't gone. It was just parked further away than I thought. I marched up to it and jumped in, my own little cave of sanctuary. I sat there for a couple of minutes wondering what to do and trying to convince myself I was having a good time. I figured I'd best find a hotel or guest house of some sort so I started the engine, turned on the air blower to clear the misting off the windows and flicked the windscreen wipers to clear the windscreen. There was something trapped under one of them and it was getting wrapped up by the wiper so I turned them off and got out to have a look. It was a plastic bag and back inside the dry of the van I put on the interior light and opened it to find I had had a parking ticket. I folded my arms on the steering wheel and had a little cry.

"It's not supposed to be like this," I sniffled out loud. I was unemployed, homeless, alone, lonely, depressed and homesick. For a fleeting moment I wished George was in the passenger seat.

"Pull yourself together, Charlie," I said firmly after a minute or two of self pity. "It's just bad weather and a parking ticket, not the end of the world. Get over yourself. Another day or two and you'll be in the sun and this will be forgotten."

I checked my hair in the rear view mirror. It was looking good despite

the rain. I'd gone back to Jewels a week previously to get the razor trim again. I wasn't sure what I'd do in France but they have hairdressers too so I'd manage further down the track. Worst case I could always fly back to see Jewels every three months or so but any half decent hairdresser could do the maintenance work. Jewels' innovation was in the concept, not the cutting.

“Right,” I said firmly to myself. “Here's what you are going to do. You are going to keep driving through the night and pull over somewhere when you get tired. That way you'll get to the South sooner.”

“Excellent plan,” I replied to myself, cheering up. “And when it stops raining I'll brew up some coffee.”

Five miles out of town I had a puncture.

I shouldn't have done, I suppose, since I'd had new tyres fitted just before leaving England and they say that punctures usually happen to old worn tyres, not new ones. I suppose though if anything solid and sharp enough wants to get itself embedded it will regardless of how old the tyre is. Either way, the steering went all funny and then there was a thump thump thump sound. I pulled over and swore. I'd checked the jack and the little toolkit were there before I left but I'd never had a puncture in the van before and George had changed the wheels in the past. The one and only time we had one.

I jumped out of the van and walked round it and sure enough the passenger side rear tyre was as flat as my soufflés. I kicked it and looked around for help. There wasn't any. There was no traffic on the road and, although there were a handful of houses on the other side of the road, they were all dark. Presumably the occupiers were in bed. However, peering hard, I thought I could see a field next to the little clump of houses and there didn't look to be a fence or gate of any kind. I jumped back in the van and gently drove it across the road and onto the verge. It wasn't a field, more of a clearing and there were some trees sheltering it from the road.

“OK, this'll do,” I said and stopped under a tree and turned off the headlights. The darkness and silence descended, interrupted only by the pattering of rain on the van roof. It was easing. I sat there for a

couple of minutes, just letting the fizz go out of my blood and letting my eyes get used to the darkness. I couldn't see anything particularly threatening so I shifted the passenger seat fully forward then jumped out and got in the back and laid out my foam mattress and the flashy new arctic sleeping bag I'd bought. Guaranteed to keep me warm down to minus five degrees. Sounded good but as it gets below -100 degrees in the Arctic I felt that it was more marketing hype than anything. Still, tonight I was going to test it although it wasn't that cold, perhaps three or four degrees.

I didn't feel secure enough to get undressed so I just took off my bra and trainers but left my sweater and jeans on and climbed into my sleeping bag. I used the remote to lock all the doors and found that, despite the lurch to one side, it was still reasonably comfortable. I figured in the morning I would try out my theory about the high heels and skinny jeans and see if I could get the wheel changed. It would be pretty cool if it worked. I briefly indulged in a romantic little fantasy about a gorgeous hunky man helping out with the wheel and our eyes meeting as he lustily raised the jack, his muscled, shirtless back glistening with sweat in the sunshine. I went to sleep, moderately happy.

I was woken by someone banging noisily on the rear window. I came too, groggily, to find myself tightly pressed against the side of the van with the puncture. I must have rolled that way in the night. The banging continued and I could see someone peering in although the windows were heavily fogged. I unzipped my sleeping bag and retrieved my keys from the clip hook on the seat belt fitting where I normally kept them when I slept in the van and unlocked the doors out of habit before thinking that it was a stupid thing to do and potentially dangerous.

Anyway, the banging had stopped when the doors clicked and I slid the side door open and crawled out of my sleeping bag. It was a policeman. His police car was parked a few yards behind the van. He started talking rapidly at me and gesticulating expansively until he noticed the effect the sudden chill air was having on my bra-less nipples under the thin sweater and his attitude completely changed. Despite being bleary eyed and intimidated by the torrent of French I noticed where he was looking, well staring would probably be a better

word, and folded my arms quickly. It was too late however and nature and evolution had worked their magic. I now had a friend.

“Je suis Anglais,” I said, blinking. It looked as though the sun had not long risen and it had stopped raining. There didn't seem to be any clouds in the sky although the grass and trees were wet. Some birds were tweeting.

“Ahh, Engleesh,” he said happily. “Is everything well, madame?”

I pointed to the flat tyre. Manly pride came to the foreground, obliterating any thought of whatever criminal or civil offence I might be committing.

“Eh oui,” he said. “Un moment.” He undid his jacket buttons and took it off and laid it neatly on the roof of the van.

“You have a, umm, prise de voiture?” he asked, miming jacking up a car with his hands.

“Oui,” I said and showed him where it was.

The ground was a little soft under the van so he searched around and found a couple of flat stones which he wedged under the jack and efficiently removed the wheel and replaced it with the spare. I slipped on a jacket and my trainers while he was doing it. I was getting agitated as I desperately needed a pee and I didn't want to go under the trees until he'd gone. He might get the wrong idea.

“Merci, merci,” I said when he was done and wiped his hands in satisfaction the way men do. “Umm, is there a toilet near here?”

“A toilet? Non, madame.” Then his brain connected my question to the apparent fact that I'd slept in the van. “Ahh, madame needs to ...” and he made some circulating motions with his hands.

I nodded, hoping that he hadn't misunderstood entirely.

He picked up his jacket and put it on then went and stood ostentatiously on the far side of his car, with his back to me. I sighed,

as I'd been hoping he would leave, and quickly had a pee on the ground in front of my van. It was a distinct relief and I felt I would be able to cope better with whatever would happen next.

I couldn't remember the French for 'officer' or 'Mr Policeman' so I called out "Merci, monsieur".

He turned and, seeing I was finished, came over.

"It is dangerous," he said, "to be sleeping in fields at night."

"I am sorry," I told him, wondering if he'd rather I slept in the field in the day time, "but the wheel, it was dark and raining and I was tired. I didn't know what to do."

He said something about an auto club but I wasn't sure what it was. He was probably telling me to join one so I smiled as sweetly as I could and said "Yes" confidently.

He seemed to be searching for something else to say but his radio crackled into life so he went back to his car and tried to look tough while he talked to whoever it was then he came back to me.

"There is wheel shop in Abbeville," he said. "To fix ..." he didn't know the English word for puncture so he gave a short whistle and flung his fingers forward dramatically.

I said I would go there immediately.

"I just need to tidy up my van."

He seemed to understand and after a moment's thought he gave me a stiff salute. He had work to do and couldn't stand around all day chatting.

"Au revoir, madame." He marched back to his car and drove off.

It seemed to me that since the police had just been here it was unlikely that another would be round soon so I got out my little stove and boiled up a kettle. I used a little of the water before it got too hot

to have a good wash then made some coffee. I leaned against the van and gazed at the trees and the birds. An occasional car or truck drove past but otherwise it was peaceful.

I was unemployed, homeless and alone. And in France. It was going to be a lovely day.

Chapter Six

“I’m getting quite frustrated,” I told Zoe in my third video recording.

I’d learnt that the easiest way to record my videos was to have my little camcorder nestle in a scrunched up pair of my knickers on the bonnet of the van. The knickers help stabilise the camcorder and stopped it sliding off and helped to get the angle right.

I’d recorded my first video message to Zoe from the little field where I’d camped overnight when I had the puncture just outside Abbeville. I’d balanced the camera on the roof of the van for my first attempt and found that I had given a voice over to a movie of a tree branch. On the second attempt, with the camera balanced precariously so it pointed lower, a tiny gust of wind blew it onto the ground part way through. I tried the bonnet but its slight downward angle made me tilt in the video and it looked weird so I dug out some knickers and made a nest for the camera and it seemed to work just fine so I carried on doing that. I didn’t have any video editing software so I had to keep things simple.

I told her in the first video that I’d arrived in France safely and about the puncture and the nice policeman who’d changed the wheel for me. It occurred to me later that I should have got his name so that if anyone on the internet ever came across my little video they could applaud his kindness. On the other hand he might have got into trouble with his superiors for not arresting me so, swings and roundabouts. Anyway, after recording the video I went back into town and found a place to fix the puncture and asked them where there was a cafe with internet access where I could go while waiting. After much sucking of teeth and consultation it seemed that if I went up the street then went left then right I would find one and sure enough, to my surprise, I did.

I bought myself “un café crème” but didn’t have the courage to ask for one of the delicious looking croissant-like things since I didn’t know what to ask for and I was feeling very foreign. Asking a French tyre fitter for a cafe with internet access had taxed my language skills to the limit already and for some strange reason it wasn’t given in my phrase book. Still, it didn’t really matter as a very nice, middle aged

gentleman in a suit came in and ordered one with his coffee.

“Permettez?” he said and sat down.

It seems that the French ask if I mind only out of politeness and will sit down anyway. Presumably if I want to sit alone I'll have to bring something to put on the vacant chair. He watched me closely while I uploaded my video to YouTube. His coffee and croissant-like thing arrived as I finished and I put down my iPad.

“Jean-Claude Pascale, ça va?” he said,

“Bien, merci,” I said politely, draining my coffee cup.

“Ah, English,” he said. My pretence at a French accent hadn't fooled him for one moment.

“You are on holiday?”

I explained about my puncture and he was very sympathetic. He took a bite out of his pastry and noticed my coffee cup was empty.

“Would you like another coffee?” he asked.

It would probably be another hour before my tyre was fixed so I smiled and said yes. He must have noticed me looking at the pastry because he asked if I would like one too. I was hungry so I said yes again and he shouted something at the waitress and waggled his fingers over his coffee and pastry so I never did find out what the things are called.

“I have a shop for, how you say, paper and pens,” he said.

“A stationary shop,” I suggested.

“Ah oui.” He beamed. “Very successful, oui, a lot of money! What is your job?”

I explained I was a maths teacher in England which impressed him and that I had left my job to travel in France.

“What are you doing on your computer?”

“I put a video I made onto YouTube,” I told him.

“Ohhh, you are making naughty videos!” he said laughing. He pretended to look shocked.

I was quite taken aback by this so I had to explain that I was going to make videos of my travels and put them on YouTube for my friends in England.

“I do not believe you,” he said with a smile, teasing me. “You look beautiful enough for the naughty videos.”

“Look,” I said, “I’ll show you,” and I turned on the iPad and showed him the video I’d made.

“But that is not on YouTube,” he said. “That is on your computer. Show me your videos on YouTube.”

He pulled out his mobile phone and I had to show him how to find my channel. He laughed delightedly when he saw the same video was there.

“Where’s Sharlee,” he said thoughtfully. “Are you looking for him?”

“I’m Charlie,” I said.

“Sharlee is a man’s name,” he said and carefully looked me up and down to reassure himself that I wasn’t a man. It was an interesting sensation. “You are not a man.”

“Charlie is short for Charlotte,” I said. I was finding him quite entertaining. I’d eaten my pasty by this point and my blood sugar levels were rapidly rising and improving my mood.

“Ahh, oui,” he said. “Sharlee is a beautiful name. A beautiful name for a beautiful lady.”

So cheesy but nice to hear anyway.

“Do you say that to men called Charlie?” I asked, teasing him back a little nervously as I thought he might think I was saying he was gay and be insulted. I was too much of a stranger to know how to handle an insulted Frenchman.

“Oui, if he is as beautiful as you are,” he replied, not to be outdone, and laughed heartily.

We chatted some more until he realised that he was running late to open his shop and he might be losing customers.

“Will the beautiful Sharlee have lunch with me?” he asked.

“I can't,” I said. “I am leaving Abbeville as soon as my tyre is repaired.”

He was disappointed.

“Oh that is so sad,” he said. He gave a deep sigh, full of regret at lost opportunities. “Bien, I must go.” He stood up.

“Au revoir, beautiful Sharlee, I shall see you again on YouTube so I know where's Sharlee.” He laughed and paid for our breakfasts and gave me a wave as he left.

I stayed another ten minutes or so, reflecting that the French were nothing like as reserved as the English when it comes to women sitting alone in public. On the downside, it looked as though I was going to have to come up with some way of getting some time to myself since, as a camper, I was going to be in the public eye quite a lot. On the other hand, it was doing my self esteem no end of good. It had been probably a decade since a man had told me I was beautiful and that had been George.

It took me a long time to get around Paris. There was a huge amount of traffic and Parisians are not shy when it comes to letting other drivers know they are in the way or doing something wrong and I got quite frazzled. But, I survived, and I was definitely getting the hang of driving on the wrong side of the road. I'd planned to miss Paris entirely and head south through Tours but Google Maps, in the cafe,

had said the Paris route was a hundred miles or so shorter and I was anxious to get to the South so I went that way. Lesson Number 1: Don't go near Paris if you're in a hurry.

I stopped at a supermarket on the outskirts of Paris and bought some eggs, potatoes, bread and an onion. As the weather was still sunny, although chilly, I was determined to cook my first camp dinner in France and not get in the habit of going to cafes and restaurants. I was determined to live economically.

I hit Orleans just after dark and didn't bother to look for a campsite. They'd probably be closed and I was feeling very positive so I kept going and found another tree lined field three or four miles beyond. When I went to make myself a fried potato and onion omelette I discovered a problem. Three of the eggs had broken from being bounced around in the back of the van. Fortunately there were enough eggs left for a decent meal.

After eating, I sat wrapped in my sleeping bag and gazed at the night sky. The stars were out and Orion, the only constellation I know, was visible in the clear, crisp air, unaffected by the glow of Orleans further to the north. As the stars twinkled in the sky, unconcerned by human dilemmas, I felt relaxed and happy.

“This is how my path should be” I reflected. “Not like last night where I let myself get depressed and lonely and bothered by silly little things.”

Rain and silly things like punctures and closed campsites happen all the time and I really should not allow them to get to me. It's pointless to let the trivial interfere and suppress my spirits. I smiled happily to myself with this realisation and raised a mug of tea in salute to the rising moon. I'd just thought of a solution to my egg problem too. I slept soundly that night but sadly no rampantly sexy policemen came to rescue me in the morning. Just a couple of inquisitive cows.

At the next town I bought a set of three plastic boxes with lids which nested inside each other. The egg solution was simple. When I bought eggs I would crack them straightaway into a plastic container so they could happily slosh around. Worst case scenario, such as a day on dirt

roads, I'd just have scrambled eggs. I bought a plastic one and a half litre jar with a sealable lid as well for milk and other liquids. Trivial problems have simple solutions. There's no need to stress about it.

I spent the day driving leisurely down to Montpellier in the South of France. It is a beautiful city and I spent a couple of hours just wandering the streets, taking a few short panoramas with the camcorder to show Zoe. I had read somewhere that Montpellier has "the world's sexiest tram system" so I shot a short scene of a tram as well. Now I'm no expert on tram systems, or any form of public transport really, and I will admit that the trams were clean looking and the stops were quite nicely presented but I didn't find them particularly sexy. From what little I saw the system was heaps better than the London Underground but then Dante's Inferno is better than the London Underground so it's no real comparison. Anyway, I wasn't there to admire the trams. I was there to go diving!

I spent the night in a treed hollow just outside the Cévennes National Park and in the morning added a couple of minutes of myself to the video I'd made in Montpellier then went into town to find a cafe to upload it. Once again a nice man bought me breakfast. I was rapidly getting to like the French! Interestingly Jean-Claude had subscribed to my channel, which doubled my subscribers to two. Zoe being the other one.

I found a couple of dive centres in Montpellier using Google and made a note of their addresses. With the help of my phrase book, the English French dictionary and my breakfast sugar daddy, he was in his sixties at least, I composed some sentences that would help me explain what I wanted to the divemasters. I got directions to the nearest and went round there. It was open but empty apart from the proprietor. He looked at me in that way that only a Frenchman looks at a woman.

"Hello," I said

He turned on his best smile.

"Hello, madame."

“I would like to join some of your dives.”

His face fell.

“You are English?”

“Yes.”

“Did you train with us?”

“No.”

“Do you know any of our dive members?”

“No.”

“You are PA or PE Certified?”

I was prepared for this and I knew that PA meant “Plongeur Autonome” or unsupervised diver and PE meant “Plongeur Encadré” or supervised diver. PE divers needed a qualified divemaster to be with them at all times. I was a PADI Advanced Open Water diver with Deep speciality and equivalent to a PA40 diver, meaning I could dive unsupervised to a depth of forty metres, the maximum allowed for non-professional divers.

I showed him my PADI certification card. He sniffed disdainfully.

“You have certificate from doctor?”

“No.”

I didn't know I needed one. He sniffed again.

“You have log book?”

“Yes.”

I showed it to him. Unsurprisingly he sniffed again as he glanced through it.

“This is all fresh water diving,” he said.

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

He didn't answer.

“I'm sorry, madame, I cannot help you.”

“I have diving insurance.”

“I'm sorry, madame.”

He gave one of those shrugs that the French are famous for and turned to check some of his stock. I asked him a couple of questions to try to get to the bottom of it but he just kept repeating “I'm sorry, madame.” I gave up and left after a while. Disheartened but not discouraged.

“Maybe he's just a sexist pig,” I thought to myself.

I found another cafe and sat in the mild sunshine at one of the tables on the pavement and got directions to the second dive centre from Google Maps. The conversation there was almost word for word the same, except that he tried to sell me a Diving Orientation Course, which is what total beginners do before they decide to go for the most basic certification.

Over the next three weeks or so I got into a routine of spending the night in some secluded nook on the edge of either the National Park or the Haut Longuedoc Regional Park and driving to the beaches in the morning for a swim and to laze around then spending the afternoon looking, unsuccessfully, for somewhere that would take me diving. Usually I would then go back to the Parks to cook a meal and get some sleep but occasionally I would go to a cafe and have a meal. More often than not as the guest of a friendly Frenchman. My language skills were improving rapidly.

I did find a place that would accept me but only on fully supervised dives of no more than twenty metres. Now, twenty metres is still quite a long way down and is often just as entertaining as deeper dives but,

frankly, I felt insulted. I had more experience than many of these so called divemasters and to make matters worse, they only dived once a month.

Hence my comment about getting frustrated in my third video to Zoe. I'd been in France for three weeks and managed only one short, shallow dive. I didn't tell her the whole truth though. I wasn't getting quite frustrated, I was getting deeply, madly and infuriatingly frustrated. Not least because I had no idea why no one would take me diving.

Still, there was one piece of good news. When I checked my email after uploading the latest video there was one from Mr Hope. Apparently the divorce hearing had been delayed a few days due to the illness of the magistrate but when he came back to work he ruled in favour after two or three minutes consideration of the facts of the case. I was a single woman again. I confess that gave me pause for thought for a while. Admittedly I had considered myself single more or less since I'd told Mr Hope I wasn't going to contest it and I hadn't given it any thought since I'd arrived in France. I also hadn't even spoken with George since that Friday when he said "I'm leaving, I want a divorce."

The thing was, the magistrate's ruling was so very final. In some funny, strange way it had almost been like a game and perhaps in the back of my mind was a vague idea that after my "holiday break" I'd just go back to being his wife again in South East London. This ruling was, well, what? Logically it was just a legal recognition of the reality of my ended marriage but emotionally it was different. The memories of twelve years of marriage don't just disappear, the love, the joy, the laughter, the pain. That's all still there in my head. I don't know how to describe it but there was a mixture of shock and sadness mixed in with the pleasure of knowing that it was all over.

Well, almost over. Apparently there were yet more documents to sign to make it all official and Mr Hope wanted to know when I'd be back to sign them. I sent him a short email saying I was in Montpellier in the South of France and wouldn't be back in England for a long time. To my surprise he replied before I'd finished my second coffee.

“Find a lawyer in Montpellier,” he wrote. “I can send the documents there and they can notarise your signature and send them back.”

That seemed a remarkably simple solution so I Googled “avocat”, which is French for lawyer. Actually it's French for male lawyer as female lawyer is “avocate” but I figured most French lawyers would be male. As luck would have it, Google told me there was one four doors away from the cafe I was in. On a paper napkin I worked out the French for what I wanted to say and hoped they wouldn't be too legalistic in their replies and went to see them.

I read out my napkin to the girl on reception who seemed to understand it. Enough at least to phone through to someone else and then ushered me into the smallest office I had ever seen. It was smaller than the bathroom back in my house in London. A small man with a shaved head and vaguely Arabic features stood up and politely offered me a seat. There was barely enough room to sit between the edge of his desk and the wall.

“Thank god I didn't comfort eat and put on weight,” I thought to myself. There was a vase with a couple of flowers in it between the two of us so I slid it out of the way in order to see him.

Flush with confidence from my handling of the receptionist I read out my napkin again.

“You are English?” he asked in perfect English.

I nodded.

“You have some papers in England that need to be written here?” he asked, looking a little puzzled.

“No,” I said, “I have papers in England that I need to sign and I was hoping they could be sent here for me to sign and for you to notarise and send back.”

His face cleared.

“Ahh, now I understand.” He took my napkin and made a couple of

corrections for me and smiled gently. "In case you decide to go somewhere else."

I felt a little foolish.

"But you won't need to. I can easily do what you ask. Here are my details for you to give to your English lawyer."

He slid a business card across his desk. He had small, delicate hands, almost feminine. I glanced at the card to see that his name was Farouk Abdelrahman.

"How can I contact you when they arrive?"

"That will be difficult," I said. "I am on holiday and I will be touring for the next few months."

"Will you be in Montpellier for the next week?"

"I can be." I was thinking of moving on somewhere else but I could easily stay a while longer. It was a nice place, apart from the dive centres.

"Where are you staying?"

"I am camping," I told him. "And I don't have a phone. Perhaps you could email me."

He smiled. His teeth were very white.

"Of course, your email address?"

I gave it to him and he wrote it down on a notepad with a flourish, along with my name and Lovejoy and Hope.

"I will email you as soon as the documents arrive," he informed me solemnly.

I went back to the cafe and emailed Mr Hope with Farouk Abdelrahman's details.

Three days later I had an email from Farouk Abdelrahman to say the documents had arrived so I went round to his office straight away. He gave me the documents and advised me to read them before signing but I couldn't be bothered so I just signed where he pointed and he counter signed and stamped in various places with his rubber stamp.

“You are now a single lady,” he said with his very white smile. Obviously he had read the documents.

“Yes,” I replied. I'd got over my momentary regret at hearing the divorce was finalised and was now more than happy about it. “I'm free again,” and laughed. I felt in a chatty mood. So did he apparently.

“As you have no husband, who are you travelling with?” he asked, “or are you alone?”

“I'm alone,” I said. “I love to dive and I'm touring round France diving where I can.”

“I have always wanted to dive,” he said. “Imagine! Floating under the sea, playing with the fishes!”

“Yes, it's wonderful,” I said. “That's why I love to dive.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Forgive me, Mrs Thurston. Ahh, you are not Mrs Thurston anymore. What should I call you?”

“Call me Charlie,” I said. “I haven't decided what surname to use yet.”

“Very well,” he said gravely. “Forgive me, Charlie, if I am being presumptuous. It is almost time for lunch. Would you care to join me? I am anxious to hear about your wonderful dives.”

It was quite strange to hear 'Charlie' and not the 'Sharlee' I'd been hearing for the last few weeks. Anyway, he appeared to be a nice man and it seemed to be a French habit for men to buy meals for women they'd only just met, and with no apparent expectation of anything more. Not that more was a complete impossibility here. Farouk was an

attractive man.

“That would be nice,” I said brightly. “Thank you.”

Chapter Seven

“If I am to call you Charlie then you must call me Farouk,” said Farouk as he led me out of his office and across the street towards the broad overpass across St Roch train station. He took me into a somewhat decrepit narrow little back street called Rue Henri René.

“Henri René was an American composer,” Farouk told me. “His mother was French which is probably why they named a road after him but he was born in New York. Do you know the Beer Barrel Polka? That's what he's best known for although he actually started out as a saxophone player in the 1920s.”

“I don't think so,” I said.

“I'm sure you do, being English,” he replied and burst into song.

“Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun, ...” and burst out laughing.

Of course I knew it. It's one of those old-time favourites that everyone knows and sings along to. It was strange though to realise that someone had actually sat down and composed it one day and that I was standing in the street named after him. A little shiver ran down my spine.

Farouk took me to a shabby, unprepossessing little restaurant, packed with Arabs. As far as I could tell, I was the only woman there although no one seemed to mind and they were all very courteous. Farouk called out to the man behind a counter who waved and motioned towards the back of the restaurant. There was a small table there, empty despite the bustle around it and we sat down. The table was rickety and had a thin white plastic cover on it.

“This is an Algerian restaurant,” said Farouk, “and the owner, Amine, is a friend of mine. He keeps a table empty for me.”

“Are you Algerian?” I asked.

“I'm French,” he replied “but my family is from Algeria.”

“Why did your family come to France rather than say England or America?”

“Algeria was a French colony,” he said. “There was a lot of trouble and civil war leading up to independence and in the aftermath there was much blood shed. My mother's family were accused of aiding the French against the National Liberation Front so we fled. It was a long time ago. My mother was born a few days after they arrived here.”

“When was independence?” I asked.

“1962. Charles de Gaulle was the French President.”

“Ahh, I've heard of him.”

“Have you heard of Ahmed Ben Bella?” asked Farouk.

“No, who is he?”

“He was the leader of the Algerian National Liberation Front and Algeria's first President.”

“He was scum!” came from behind me.

Amine had arrived with our lunch, or at any rate Farouk's lunch, and spat on the floor in contempt at Algerian history then smiled disarmingly and disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived.

“Armine doesn't seem to think much of Algerian liberation,” I commented.

Farouk had a dish of something covered by a large circular flat bread. It smelt strongly of cumin.

“Armine's family were related to Houari Boumédiène,” said Farouk, pushing the dish to the centre of the table. “He overthrew Ahmed Ben Bella in 1965 and took Algeria into Socialism. Come, let us eat.”

There was no cutlery on the table so I looked at him with a raised questioning eyebrow.

“This is Tajine,” he said, lifting off the bread, “made with lamb.”

It looked like a meat and vegetable stew.

“We tear off pieces of bread and scoop some up and eat it.” He demonstrated.

“Where's mine?” I asked.

He laughed. “We share it. It is the custom in Algeria to eat out of a communal dish.”

“OK,” I thought to myself. “It's not British but hey, I'm not in Britain. Don't be so uptight!”

I pulled off a small piece of bread and dipped it in the sauce.

“No, no, don't dip it, scoop it,” said Farouk. “Get some meat on the bread. There's a nice piece,” he pointed with his little finger.

I scooped it up with my bread and it dripped onto the table as I manoeuvred it to my mouth.

“You need to move a little faster,” said Farouk with a smile.

I got the hang of it pretty quickly. After all, scooping chunks of meat with hunks of bread isn't as hard as, say, using chopsticks to eat scrambled egg which I could do. It was a bit heavily spiced for my insipid English palette but nice all the same. And filling.

“Now tell me all about your diving,” said Farouk when we'd finished most of the tajine and mint tea was sitting, fragrantly steaming, in bowls in front of us.

“I can't really,” I said. “I came here to do a lot of diving around the Mediterranean but so far I've only been able to get one dive.”

Farouk looked concerned. “Why is that?” he asked.

“None of the dive centres will take me diving. I don't know why.” I

told him about my attempts to get dives.

Farouk thought for a moment.

“I suspect it is because of French sports laws,” he said. “By law, whoever is in charge of a sporting event is fully liable for whatever happens. So if you get hurt he is responsible. That is probably why they won't take you as you are a foreigner and trained in another country. You would probably have no trouble if they trained you themselves or you knew someone in the club.”

“But I have my own dive insurance,” I protested.

“That doesn't matter since it is the diving leader who would be liable, not you, even if you caused the death of another diver. Your insurance does not change that.”

“Bugger,” I said vehemently. “I didn't know that.”

I drank some tea but didn't notice the taste.

“So you're saying that, in effect, I can't dive in France unless I retrain with a French diving outfit?”

“Not at all. The law makes the person in charge liable but that does not mean you can't be the person in charge yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“You do not have to dive with an organised group. Dive by yourself. Pouf, so easy!”

“No, I can't do that. Divers always dive with other people for safety.”

“Are you a good diver?”

“Yes,” I said. “I've been diving for nearly five years. I'm more experienced than many of the divemasters here.”

“So what is the problem? You know what you are doing, yes? Just do

not take any foolish risks. And if you do no one will get hurt except you anyway.”

I stared at him and stifled an unfeminine belch. It wouldn't be ladylike. The tajine was sitting a little heavily in my stomach and the spices were bubbling away happily. I drank some more mint tea and found it was delicious. It also helped with wind.

Dive on my own? It was certainly something to think about.

“But you haven't told me about any of the dives you have made.” Farouk interrupted my reverie.

So I told him about some dives, including exploring the submarine at the quarry and sitting in the helicopter pilot's seat underwater and about looking at the fish swimming around and the strange way the light bent under the surface. He was fascinated.

“Don't you have to go back to work?” I asked after we'd been there a couple of hours.

“Oh no,” he said happily. “I have very little work to do. I spend most of my day surfing the internet or chatting in chat rooms. It is nicer to be here with you.”

“Nice job,” I said, wryly. He took no notice. He seemed to reach some sort of decision and leaned forward conspiratorially.

“OK,” I thought to myself, “here comes the proposition. I just hope I can find my own way back to the van all right.”

It was a proposition but not what I thought.

“Could you teach me to dive?” he asked.

“I could, yes,” I said, a little surprised. Perhaps even a little disappointed. It's nice to be propositioned every once in a while even if you don't plan to take up the proposition.

“I've taught several people to dive although I can't certify you as I'm

not a qualified instructor.”

“Do I need to be certified?” he asked.

“You do if you want to hire diving equipment or join a diving group or something like that.”

“But if I had my own equipment?” he asked.

“No, I don't think so. Certainly in England there is no law that says you need to be certified but I don't know about France.”

“I can easily find that out,” he said. “But if it is not the law, would you teach me to dive? I can pay you if you like.”

I thought about it. I had planned to move on to try to find somewhere else to dive but if, and it was a big if, if I was going to go diving on my own I could stay around for as long as I wanted. And it would be fun to have someone around for longer than a meal. A little voice in the back of my head also mentioned that it would give him time to think up another, more interesting, proposition but I drowned it out by saying

“You'll need to get some equipment.”

“What do I need?” he asked, leaning back and looking pleased.

“Well, you'll need a tank,” I said, starting to tick things off on my fingers, “but I have a spare you can use for now. And a regulator, and a mask and some fins, and a wetsuit as the water is still a bit cold. Oh, and you'll need a buoyancy jacket.”

I paused for a moment, there was something niggling at the back of my mind but I couldn't quite reach it. Then another thought occurred to me. He was about the same height as me and slightly slimmer, the bastard.

“Although, if you are serious, you don't need anything just yet. If you come to the beach with me you can use my equipment in the shallow water and see how you manage. If you like it and still want to dive

then we can see about getting the equipment.”

“You see,” he said, “so easy. A little thought and pouf, all the problems disappear.”

Why do the French gesticulate so much? He'd nearly knocked over his empty tea bowl with that last 'pouf'.

“When would you like to try it out?” I asked.

“How about now?” he said. “I have nothing to do this afternoon.”

“That's fine by me.”

“OK,” he said enthusiastically. “Let's go.”

I hesitated for a moment. “Sure, why not,” I thought, “it'll be fun to get in the water.”

On the way back to my van we passed a sportswear shop and he asked if he should get some swimming trunks. I hadn't thought of that since I'd figured that he'd be able to wear my wetsuit but it hadn't occurred to me he might be naked inside it so I said I thought it was a good idea. We went in and he let me choose a nice pale blue green pair which complimented his light brown eyes.

“You can swim, can't you?” I asked when we got into the van. It should have occurred to me to ask before.

“Oh yes,” Farouk replied, looking around the van. “I swim a lot.”

“So why do you need new swimming trunks?” I thought but didn't ask. I'd soon find out if he could swim and maybe he simply hadn't wanted to leave me to go home and get his. No point in embarrassing him by asking. I noticed his eyes slid over my mattress and focused on my diving gear. I felt a sudden jolt of embarrassed intimacy that I suppose every woman feels when a man sees her, unmade, bed for the first time.

“Now we're not going to do anything serious,” I said as I drove to a

beach I quite liked and had been to several times. “Just get you familiar with the equipment and what it's like breathing underwater. We'll stay in the shallows, so I'll be right next to you all the time. If you like it we will do all the theory later and dive in deeper water.”

“Excellent,” he said. He seemed to be looking forward to it.

It was a clear sunny day although the temperature was only about fourteen or fifteen degrees so the beach was deserted. To the locals it was probably like being on an ice floe. Being a Brit used to winter diving I thought it was fine, although I'd have to wear a bikini when Farouk went into the water.

I took him through the basic operation of the regulator while I filled a tank then pushed him into the van to change into his new trunks. I shook some talc into my wetsuit ready for him to put on but when he started to slide his legs inside it felt disturbingly intimate so I jumped into the van to change. It was almost as though he was sliding inside me, inside my skin. He'd got it on and zipped up by the time I got out again so I showed him how to strap the tank to the buoyancy jacket and fit the regulator and got him to practice breathing through the mouthpiece. I found a length of rope and tied it to the waist strap of the jacket in case he got washed out to sea. The other end I tied to my wrist.

I locked the van and clipped the keys inside my bikini top so I could always feel them and we went down to the water's edge. I noticed that my custom fitted wetsuit was a little baggy around the bum on him and fought back the urge to smooth it tight or make a comment. I'd only known him a couple of hours after all.

I got him to float face down in the water and just breath until he got used to breathing in and out through his mouth then got him moving round a bit to get the feel of things. He seemed to be doing fine and certainly had no fear of the water so I suddenly slipped his mask off while pushing down on the back of his neck. He struggled a bit, as you do when you're unexpectedly attacked from behind underwater, but when I let him up his eyes were already open and he hadn't spat out the mouthpiece.

“What did you do that for?” he asked. It was good to see he wasn't in the least bit aggressive either. He was just curious and appeared to trust me completely.

“I wanted to see how you reacted in an emergency,” I told him. “You did very well. It's very easy for the mask to come off underwater and some people freak out when it happens. Let's go back to the van now.”

I could see he'd rather stay playing in the water but I was getting cold and I was quite goose bumpy so I tugged on his leash a couple of times and he followed me out of the water. I was tempted to say “good boy” and pat his head but I didn't know him well enough for that kind of humour so I offered him a biscuit instead. I thought it was funny but I kept it to myself. He declined the biscuit so I ate it.

I towelled myself dry and got dressed and jogged up and down the beach for a while to warm up while Farouk got the equipment off and put his suit back on. My hair hadn't got wet but I re-tousled it with my fingers anyway, out of habit.

“How did I do?” he asked when I got back, warmer and slightly breathless.

“Just fine,” I said. “Did you enjoy it?”

“I did,” he said seriously. “Will you teach me to dive properly?”

“You're going to need some equipment,” I said. “We're probably looking at around four thousand euros unless we can get some secondhand equipment.”

“Oh, I do not want used equipment,” he replied. “I only ever buy things new.”

“So you don't collect antiques then?” I asked jokingly.

“No,” he said. He hadn't understood my joke. I supposed lawyers are born serious.

“When would you like to start?” I asked.

“Tomorrow?” he said, “if you are free.”

“OK, we'll go shopping in the morning.” It wasn't my problem if he was skipping out of work.

“Excellent. And tonight you will dine with me, yes?”

Well, it wasn't as though I had any other plans and I hadn't got myself any food for dinner yet anyway so I let him talk me into it. Then I dropped him back in town so I could go and wash and get myself ready for an evening out and he could do whatever he needed to do and we agreed to meet at the station at seven.

* * *

I found myself a nice secluded little spot for the night and as I lay on my little foam mattress, snug and cosy inside my arctic sleeping bag it occurred to me that I'd been with Farouk for about nine hours that day, had had two meals with him, shown him my bed and had stripped down to my bikini and he hadn't once acted improperly although he seemed to enjoy my company. He hadn't even shown any sign of wanting to kiss me goodbye outside the restaurant. Maybe the French are just romantics but don't carry it through to the logical conclusion. I wondered if the population of France was declining. I'd have to look that up on Google.

More importantly, since I'd just got rid of one husband and wasn't looking for another relationship, I had to think about buoyancy jackets.

The niggling thought at lunchtime had finally surfaced during dinner. Why do I actually use a buoyancy jacket? Well, the main reason was that you could fill it with air and use it to float on the surface if you needed to and it was useful in helping to compensate for the lightening of the tank as the air was used so you didn't have to adjust so much to stay at the same depth but other than that I couldn't think of any use for it. In fact, as I was an experienced diver I didn't really need it and was still only using one because it was what I'd been trained to do and organised recreational dives required them. Professional divers, like in the navy or the police, never bothered. The

jackets were really for the general public, who dived only occasionally.

This was an interesting revelation. Partly because it meant I could get myself a simple harness to carry the tank and give my jacket to Farouk which would save him some money and me the effort of bothering with it. More significantly though it revealed to me just how much I was constrained by convention and conformity. Much as I loved to dive it had never occurred to me to go outside the bounds of my basic training before.

I thought this was pretty cool because it meant that I was not only becoming independent in body but in mind as well. Awesome.

So, and we really do have to follow the logic through, is there any real need for me to scrap basic training in one area but stick rigidly to it in another? Why couldn't I just pull up somewhere nice and go diving on my own? Be truly independent? After all, I was living alone in a foreign country, driving alone so why not dive alone as well? Be truly free and independent?

Why not indeed.

Chapter Eight

“Which camp site are you staying at?” asked Farouk. “I thought they were all closed for the winter.”

He was sitting on the ground with his back to the van after our morning dive. I was making some coffee but half way through heating the water the gas cylinder has spluttered out and I'd had to replace it with my last spare. I made a mental note to get some more.

“I'm not staying at a campsite,” I said. “I just go out of town and find a field or a dirt track to sleep in.”

He was shocked. “Isn't that dangerous? What about bad men and criminals? Aren't you afraid?”

“No, not particularly,” I said. “Bad men and criminals don't go into the countryside in the middle of the night, they stay in town where there's more people to rob. It's the police that are the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every now and then a policeman comes along to find out what I'm up to.”

“Do they arrest you or make you go somewhere else?” His lawyer's instinct bristled.

“No, well not yet anyway. They seem to just check I'm OK and go away after a while. I think it's because I look respectable.”

Which was true. I made a point of keeping myself clean and neatly dressed and the van tidy so I didn't appear to be the homeless drifter that I actually was. I looked like a respectable person of substance who just happened, through some eccentricity, to be sleeping in a van that night. If I looked like a derelict or a drug addict I'm sure things would be very different. It probably didn't hurt to be a woman or English for that matter.

“I'm always very friendly and polite as well. The police get suspicious

if you get angry or look guilty of something.”

I didn't know if this was true or not as I had no experience of the police as a wrongdoer, apart from a speeding infringement several years ago and the policeman had said he would have let me off with a warning except that it had been recorded on a camera and he had no choice.

“Yes, that is right. You have a happy, friendly aura,” said Farouk, taking his coffee. “Not like a criminal at all.”

“Well thank you,” I said smiling and settling myself next to him.

“It is true,” he said. “It was your aura, your attitude that made me offer you lunch the other day. I have never done that with a client before.”

I thought about it for a moment then I told him about how it was common for me to go into a cafe on my own and for someone to start talking to me and buy me a meal.

“I don't go looking for that,” I added, in case he thought I was some sort of gold digger or exploiter of men, “it just seems to happen and I don't know why. In England, men usually ignore women completely, or just watch us surreptitiously. No one would dream of talking to me in a cafe unless they'd seen me there every day for a week or two. And even then it would only be about the weather. I thought that Frenchmen are just naturally more talkative to women.”

“Yes, the English are very reserved and the French are more open but it is still very unusual. The French respect privacy very much. We normally make some sort of greeting, ...”

With perfect timing, two young men walking along the beach waved and called 'Bon appétit' but kept on walking. Farouk waved back and watched them walk on.

“... like that,” he laughed. “But we respect privacy and will never join someone unless that person shows that they want company. It must be your aura that makes us want to talk to you. Even me.”

I didn't understand the 'even me' part but couldn't be bothered to follow it up. Even though Farouk's English was excellent he still made the occasional mistake expressing his thoughts. This was day three of his dive training and he was doing very well. He grasped the theory quickly and had no fears in the water. Really, all he needed now was practice. As far as I could tell he hadn't been back to work since we went to lunch after I signed my divorce papers. Hopefully he had sent them back to Mr Hope. I was reluctant to ask.

"You could be right," I said. "I've been so much happier since I left England and maybe it shows. Although since I am a woman and on my own I'm always very careful not to be seen to be aggressive or provocative in any way. It's much better to be a little distant and avoid situations rather than take risks."

I was half hoping he might take the hint and become a little more proactive but he didn't. Maybe he was just a bit shy.

"I'm sure you are much the same way."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, you are Arabic and you aren't tough looking ..."

"Oh dear," I thought, "he's going to be insulted. I wish I'd kept my big mouth shut."

He looked at me strangely. He obviously had no idea what I was talking about.

"I mean, you must get some racist, ummm, there must be people who want to pick on you because you're Arabic," I was struggling. I wanted to say because he was small and maybe an easy target but couldn't think of a polite way to do it.

"Ahh, yes, there are many racist people in France," he said. "Identity Bloc and neo-nazis and others but they are illegal. They are a problem in parts of Paris but not down here. No I am not afraid of them."

Being a fool I didn't have the sense to drop the subject.

“I’ve noticed you keep your eyes on men around you,” I said. “I thought it was because you were checking how much of a threat they were.”

He burst out laughing. I was a little irritated as I was trying to be sympathetic and caring and he was treating it like a big joke.

He saw my face and suddenly got serious.

“Ahh,” he said. “You did not know?”

“Know what?”

He looked across the beach and dug his heel into the sand.

“I am, umm, ...” He seemed to not quite know what to say.

Then it hit me and I went bright red and got very embarrassed.

“Oh god, what a fool I’ve been,” I thought. Unconsciously I shifted a little further away from him and crossed my arms defensively.

“You’re ...”

He nodded.

“And that’s why you look ...”

He nodded again.

I couldn’t think of anything to say so we sat there in silence for a couple of minutes while he dug a bigger hole in the sand with his foot and I gazed down the beach, away from him.

“But ...” I turned back to face him, wanting to point out all the times when he’d been quite clearly heterosexual with me but when it came to the crunch I couldn’t actually think of any. He’d never even made a faintly sexual remark let alone tried to kiss me. I don’t think he’d even looked at my chest when I was in my bikini.

"I'm sorry," I said after a few more moments. "I'm being stupid."

"I thought women could tell," he said quietly. "I thought you were just being nice."

"I've never met a ..." I didn't know what word to use and I wasn't sure I could use it even if I did know.

"A gay person?" he said with a crooked smile. "A queer? A pervert?"

"No," I said hurriedly. I wanted to put my arms around him and reassure him but I couldn't. It seemed wrong.

"I mean, I don't think you're a pervert," I said, although some part of me did. I had never known a homosexual before and it was very confronting. Not because of any religious beliefs as I was only nominally Church of England but because, as a woman, I don't know, I guess maybe because men are there for us to love and make babies. They should go to football matches together, not to bed.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked. He put his coffee mug down, only half finished and started to gather his things.

"No," I said after watching him for a couple of moments. "Sit down. I just need some time to get used to it."

That I'd been fancying a gay man? That would take some time to get used to. I went red again when I remembered a couple of thoughts I'd had, alone in my sleeping bag, in the middle of the night.

"I understand if you want me to go," he said but made no move to put on the trousers he was holding in his hand.

"No, don't go," I said. My face was beginning to cool down. "It was just a shock, I really had no idea. I just assumed ..."

"That I was like other men?" he said, sitting back down and folding his trousers again.

I nodded.

“Well, I'm not,” he said. “But you need to remember something very important.”

“What's that?”

“I'm still the same person I was fifteen minutes ago. You liked me then.”

“Yes, but in the wrong way,” I blurted out.

“What do you mean?” Then his face suddenly fell. “Ahh, I understand. I'm sorry. Very sorry.”

He got up and started to put on his trousers again.

“Oh for God's sake,” I said, “sit down. You're not going anywhere. This is stupid. Finish your coffee. Shall I make some more? Would you like something to eat? I can boil some eggs? Or some bread?”

“Get a grip, girl,” I told myself. “Now you're babbling.”

He picked up his coffee mug again.

“Let's just sit quietly,” he said, “and come to terms with what has just happened.”

It was very sensible advice so we sat there in silence for several minutes until I got a fit of the giggles.

“Why are you laughing?” he said quietly.

“I thought,” giggle giggle, “I thought that you looked at men because you were scared of them,” giggle giggle, “and you were checking them out,” giggle giggle.

I can be very silly sometimes.

He started to giggle as well.

“I was checking them out,” he said between giggles.

“Only,” giggle, “in a different way.” I burst out laughing.

He burst out laughing as well and I put my hand on his arm. With only the slightest hesitation.

“Come on, let's go for another dive.”

“OK,” he said.

I made myself become serious.

“First, I want you to work out our maximum time if we limit the dive to five metres. The last dive was also five metres for thirty minutes and we've been out for,” I checked my watch, “three quarters of an hour.”

He busied himself with his dive tables.

“He looks just like any other man,” I thought watching him. “Shame, really.”

We both tried to behave as if nothing had happened but it took a while. He was right though, he was still the same man he'd been before. It's not like I was in love with him or anything. He was just a friend.

We'd got into the habit in only three days of going to dinner after we'd finished diving for the day, although I'd decided that this time I was going to pay since it didn't seem right for him to. We decided to go for an Italian meal since we'd had Algerian, twice, French and Chinese so far. I'd caught myself wondering, when we went in, if everyone could tell he was gay and if they were looking at me, wondering why I was with a gay man. Silly, I know, since I knew he looked normal but then again, he wasn't, was he. Our conversation was a little stilted and we kept mainly to the neutral topic of diving. We were both, I think, a little sad and subdued.

During a lull in our diving talk, after we'd ordered, Farouk noticed me looking at a swarthy, muscular Italian talking to a girl sitting in a parked car.

“I saw him first,” he said with a smile, “hands off.”

I thought this was hilarious and started to relax.

“Maybe I should treat him like a woman friend rather than a man friend,” I thought.

“Do you find him attractive?” I asked, nodding to the Italian man.

“Yes,” he said. “Do you?”

“No, not really,” I said. “I prefer men with some brains not just muscle, and I like an emotional connection.”

“We men are more visual than you women,” he replied. “But still, if I were to get married I would want someone intelligent enough to talk to and an emotional connection as well.”

I'd already figured out he wasn't married since no married man would just walk out of his job and go diving for days with a woman he'd just met.

“I didn't know ... gays ... could get married here,” I said with only the slightest hesitation over the unfamiliar word.

“Oh yes,” said Farouk. “It was legalised here ten months before you did in England.”

“Do you want to get married?”

He thought about it for a while.

“Yes, one day I think.” Then he gave a wolfish grin, “but I like being single too. Do you want to get married again?”

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “I haven't been divorced long and although it would be nice to have someone in my life I don't want to rush in to getting married again.”

“So we are quite alike then,” he said. “Both happy to be single. For

now.”

Our meals arrived and we started to eat. I was still curious though.

“Are a lot of Arabs gay?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Perhaps it's the same proportion. In most Muslim countries it is illegal so people grow up suppressing these sorts of feelings and don't talk about it.”

“Muslims don't seem to like women very much.”

I could have bitten my tongue off. After what had happened today I have to go and insult his religion too? I cringed inside.

Farouk became thoughtful and sat back, abandoning his carbonara.

“I don't think that is fair,” he said. “Islam is a different culture but Muslim men are very respectful of women.”

“But I read a lot in the news about how badly women are treated and there are all those terrorists too.”

“Yes, I read those things as well,” he replied, stroking his chin. “But you have to remember the newspapers always report extremes to sell newspapers. The headline 'Arab is nice to his wife' won't sell many papers.”

“OK, I understand that,” I said. “But surely there is a grain of truth in it.”

“You are a woman, aren't you,” he said.

I agreed I was.

“Yet you drive all over France on your own and sleep out in the open where anyone can attack you and you don't feel in danger.”

“Yes.” I couldn't see where he was heading with this.

“This is because France, like England, has strong laws and strong police to uphold those laws and that goes back for perhaps two hundred years, so people here have grown up to be law abiding people in a law abiding country.”

“OK, I understand that.”

“But in Islamic countries the laws come from ancient times when laws hardly existed and our culture is that the family must protect itself since the state cannot. So, because we respect women we protect them and every woman is at risk from every strange man.”

“So you're saying that women are restricted for their own protection?”

“Yes. I know it seems hard for you to understand but here you can walk down the street safely because you know that any man who would like to rape you is held back by his respect for the law. This is not so in Islamic countries. Men are weak and the law is weak so women are very much at risk unless their family protects them. I agree it is not the best solution for women but it is better than letting any men do what they want.”

“But why are the women forced to stay at home while the men can go out and do what they want?” I asked. I was genuinely curious and it wasn't politically correct to ask things like this in England. I was definitely feeling more relaxed with Farouk again.

“Tell me what you think the men can do when they go out and there are no women?” he asked. “Yes there are some prostitutes but not many and most men do not want to use them anyway. So they go to places with other men and talk about sport and politics while the women stay at home and talk about whatever women talk about, like babies.”

Actually this was a point I hadn't thought of. With virtually all the women off limits there wasn't much the men could do when they were out.

“Well, what about their clothing?” I asked.

“All Muslims wear much the same clothing,” he said. “It is more to do with the climate than anything.”

“But what about making women cover their heads?”

“It is to protect them,” he said. “Women’s faces and hair can make men do bad and silly things. Like you, your face and hair would make most men behave very badly if it wasn’t for the law holding them back.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, pleased with the compliment.

He started eating again.

“There is one very big difference between law and custom,” he continued between mouthfuls. “Laws are enacted by rational debate and as the situation changes the debate and the laws change with it. This is why gay marriage is legal in France. The situation has changed over the last fifty years and the law has changed and very often the change is less restrictive than before. But with custom it is not set by debate, it is based on ancient beliefs and when the situation changes customs might change but they rarely become more lenient, especially as there is no central law to regulate the custom.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Many men see it as their duty to protect their women and do what they have to do but mercifully. Some men, however, and this is true in France and England as well, try to punish women and use custom to do that and because there is no effective legal system they cannot be stopped. It is those people who get reported in the newspapers, not the millions who are genuinely looking after their women. Those men would treat their women badly whatever their religion, they just use the ancient customs of Islam to justify themselves.”

I could see his point but I wasn't convinced. Female genital mutilation didn't seem a suitable topic for dinner conversation though so I changed the subject.

“What about terrorism though? Surely Islam is responsible for that?”

“Absolutely not,” said Farouk. “Terrorism has been around for a lot longer than Islam. But it is the same problem. Islamic terrorists are not terrorists on behalf of Islam, they are terrorists who use Islam as a cover. They would be terrorists regardless of their religion. It is simply that the current global political situation has created a gulf between America and other western economies and the rest of the world. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries people in the west used Catholicism and the Spanish Inquisition as a justification for terrorism against the Jews. And the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups use it now against coloured people. The religion is irrelevant, nasty people will use whatever they can to justify their nasty actions. Like freedom.”

“Freedom?” I said in surprise. “How can you terrorise someone in the name of freedom?”

“It happens all the time,” he said. “Take my country, for example, Algeria. The National Liberation Front carried out more atrocities getting rid of the French than the French ever did as colonial masters, but it was all done in the name of freedom. Carlos the Jackal is probably the most famous terrorist of modern history, all in the name of Palestinian Liberation.” He snorted derisively. “Carlos was a Venezuelan. What did he know or care of Palestinian oppression? He wanted to terrorise and used Palestine as an excuse. It was not the reason. If you look back through history you’ll find most places that fought for freedom ended up with worse than they had before.”

He finished his meal and pushed the plate away.

“Enough,” he said. “Let us forget all this unpleasant talk. You and I are not terrorists and I respect women and their rights and you respect men and their rights too. We should be happy and rejoice in that.”

I raised my glass of wine as a toast to being respected and to not being a terrorist.

“When are you thinking of moving on somewhere else?” he asked, changing the subject.

“I don't really know,” I said. “I haven't given it much thought. Why?”

“I'd like to come with you,” he said. “If you can put up with having a homosexual man around.”

Well that came out of left field very suddenly. I sat there staring at him, stunned.

“Are you serious?” I stuttered after a lengthy pause

“I am a serious man,” he replied. “I worked hard at school to get into university. I worked hard at university to get a law degree and I worked hard to become an accredited lawyer. These last few days are the most fun I have ever had.” He looked at me shyly.

“But what about your job?” I said.

“It is my cousin's law firm,” said Farouk. “I am only there because it is a family thing and there is not enough work for all of us. I get paid for the work I do but I do very little work. Fortunately I have other means or I would starve.” He laughed happily. “They will not miss me and perhaps business will pick up before I come back.”

A thought crossed my mind.

“But where will you sleep? You can't share my bed, it's too small.”

He gave me a look which suggested that space wasn't the only reason he wouldn't be sleeping with me.

“Perhaps I can get a tent?” he said.

“That would make it difficult to stop anywhere other than a campsite,” I told him. “The police wouldn't accept a tent. And it would draw attention.”

“Is that the only reason?” he asked, playing with his wine glass. “It is a problem but one that can be solved with some thought. Are there any other reasons why I cannot come with you?”

He was a nice guy, thoughtful, intelligent and considerate and as I wasn't really looking for a relationship the fact that he was gay wasn't really an issue. It would be fun to have a companion and it would mean I didn't have to dive or drive alone. Maybe he could fix punctures too.

“OK,” I said. “Figure out the sleeping arrangements and we'll see how it goes.”

“Excellent,” he said and raised his glass as a toast. “I shall give it the most serious thought.”

“And I,” I thought, raising my own glass, “have to figure out how to explain having a man along to Zoe and my other 27 subscribers.”

Chapter Nine

I got around the problem of how to mention Farouk in my travel videos very easily. I just said I was teaching someone to dive and maybe somehow gave the impression that he was a paying customer without actually saying that. It wasn't that I was embarrassed about his orientation since there's no need for anyone to ever know that sort of thing in a diving/travel video update, I just didn't want people I knew to think I was in some sort of romantic relationship. Especially when I wasn't.

I did put him in a couple of the updates, just to show how he was progressing and found that I now had almost fifty subscribers. Well, forty three is almost fifty, isn't it, and fifty is a nice round number. Anyway, I thought that was quite astonishing since my camera work is very dull and static and I'm generally stiff and wooden in delivery. And surely these people have better things to do with their time than watch amateurish videos of some unemployed and homeless English woman prancing around on beaches in the South of France in the middle of winter? Apparently not.

Interestingly, a large proportion of those whose sex I could guess from their IDs were women. It isn't always easy to tell with IDs like Plague666 and I suppose it's possible that RocketMan might be a woman or Claire69 might be a man. We live in uncertain times.

Anyway, some of the comments were interesting, once I'd got past the suggestive and, occasionally, downright frank comments from, presumably, men who liked my bikinis and wanted to see less of them. There were three or four from people, most likely women from their IDs and phrasing, who wanted to know more about what I was doing and why, so I thought I might make a longer video giving the background. The problem was deciding how much detail to give of my failed marriage and career and my need to escape and grow. On the one hand you want to give your audience what they want but on the other hand I'm no celebrity and I want to have some privacy. After all, most of them were strangers. Anyway, it wasn't urgent so I let it churn around in my subconscious.

I would like one day to be able to put some underwater footage online

but that will have to wait because underwater photography equipment is very expensive. Even the cheap stuff is expensive and not really worth using since the pressure underwater makes all but the very best seals leak very easily. I'd also discovered that there are all sorts of technical difficulties to cope with when I did my Photography specialism in my Advanced training, using a borrowed camera. Like the water is a lot more murky than air, even when it's clear, which it often isn't. Light is rapidly absorbed by the water so sunlight isn't much use after the first few metres and every tiny particle of dirt, sea life or pollution reflects back any artificial light you are using. Also, water magnifies things by roughly a third and alters the perspective as well so things can look strange and surreal with indistinct things swimming around in a glowing murky fog. I guess this can be artistic and dramatic if you are making a feature movie but it gets dull very quickly.

Something I particularly wanted to do on video though, was my balloon trick to graphically demonstrate the dangers of diving. It's so easy to jump in the water and go deep without realising the pressures that are involved since it feels pretty much like a swimming pool and Farouk was as guilty of this as anyone. So early on in his training I took him down to about ten metres and dribbled a little bit of air from my mouth into a balloon so it inflated enough to take up the slack but not to actually stretch and expand. I tied a knot in the end and handed it to him and got him to slowly rise to the surface.

Now technically, at around ten metres the pressure is about thirty psi so when I put some air in the balloon it was at thirty psi, just like the surrounding water. But, as you go up the water pressure drops to just under fifteen psi at the surface but the air inside the balloon is still at thirty psi. For the record, at forty metres the water pressure is around sixty five psi.

So, as you go up the balloon expands since the air inside can't escape. If you use a cheap balloon, as I do for this demo, it will burst at some point on the way up. Just like your lungs will if you hold your breath, or any other part of the body that has trapped air inside it, like your middle ear or a poorly fitting filling. It's never happened to me but I once met someone who had a tooth explode when coming to the surface and apparently it's very painful. This is why, incidentally, you

shouldn't go diving when you have a cold since the mucus can cause problems with trapped air in the ears, sinuses and eustachian tubes. An exploding sinus would be very messy.

More to the point, like most beginners, Farouk held his breath when coming up instead of breathing out and making sure the expanding air has somewhere to escape. I don't know why people do this but I did it myself at first too. It seems wrong to breath out while going up. However, unlike most beginners, despite my lecturing him and explaining the theory he seemed unable to overcome this particular problem. At the shallow depths it wasn't a big issue but there was no way I was letting him go deep until he sorted it so I did my balloon trick. Fortunately the balloon I found at a market in Montpellier was extremely cheap and burst beautifully and he was wide eyed with astonishment. I didn't catch him doing it again.

“Why doesn't your stomach burst?” he wanted to know when we got back to the beach.

“Because the wind in your gut is there when you start the dive so it simply compresses when you go down and decompresses when you comes back up. I guess if you ate something that gave you wind when you are deep then it might be a problem but you can always fart in your wetsuit,” I explained.

Which is not something I like to do personally since social convention says that women don't get wind and bubbles coming out of the legs of your wetsuit are a bit of a giveaway, no matter how quiet you are. It's easy to forget, as well, that those tiny little fart bubbles can be a metre or more in diameter when they reach the surface.

The day after Farouk's surprise announcement that he wanted to throw everything up and travel with me he didn't turn up at the beach we'd been planning to dive from. I confess I did get a little worried that something might have happened to him and it was a little lonely as I'd got used to him being around. It was also possible that he'd changed his mind and simply gone his own way although he seemed far too polite to do something like that. I was sure he would tell me. On the other hand he just might have thought of a solution to the camping problem and was out and about in Montpellier trying to

implement it.

I'd thought about it overnight and the only practicable solution I could see was for him to travel in a second car and I knew he had a car of his own since he usually drove it to wherever we were meeting. Two vehicles parked overnight somewhere would be less of an issue, I thought, to the police, than a tent since a tent needs to be put up and implies a certain level of intent. A parked car or two though could just mean someone was unexpectedly overcome with tiredness. Travelling in two cars would be a pain though as it meant we'd either need to plan destinations ahead or one car would have to follow the other and risk being separated. It also doubled up on fuel costs and parking and so on. I resolved to say 'no' if that was his intention.

I hung around for a while then decided he knew what my van looked like so I went for a dive on my own. Diving without a buoyancy jacket had taken a little getting used to and I had to unlearn several unconscious actions but, oh my word, it was so freeing! I didn't have this bulky, heavy jacket which made me look like the Michelin Man when it was inflated and I felt I was gliding through the water like a porpoise. When the warmer weather arrived I'd be able to ditch my wetsuit as well and just swim with a mask, fins and a tank nestled between my shoulder blades. It would almost be like swimming naked, experiencing the feel of the underwater world instead of just looking at it. I couldn't wait!

He wasn't waiting for me when I finished my dive but that was no big issue. I packed everything away and went into town to the laundromat I'd found to do my weekly washing. I made sure, when I bought clothes, that they were smart casual clothes that didn't need ironing and, ideally, designed to look a little stylishly crumpled. I'd had to buy clothes because even within a month I was losing some weight from my more active but less stressful lifestyle.

He wasn't there when I got back so I went for another dive and he still wasn't there when I came back. I settled down to sitting by the van, drinking coffee and thinking about my "Why I Am Doing This" video and the time passed quickly enough until it was time for a third dive. It was a little lonely as well, I have to confess, diving without him. It's nice when you come across something interesting to be able to point it

out to someone else and he was as fascinated as I am at life underwater.

My heart lightened a little, surprising me since I hadn't noticed it was down at all, when I saw him sitting in his chair beside my van when I got back. He was, as always when not diving, in a suit and tie, looking fashionably smart and somewhat elegant. Good suits seem to be designed for a certain body shape and more than a few men, despite having good physiques, just don't look their best in a suit. Farouk had the right body type.

Anyway, I waved at him and he waved back and looked incongruous as usual. Suits are not common on beaches and after I'd fumbled around inside my bikini top to find my keys he opened the van and got out the cooker and a pan of water for coffee while I got out of my wetsuit and told him about my day's diving.

I didn't ask where he'd been all day as he isn't beholden to me and I didn't want to look as though I was nagging or anything like that. It was even possible, it occurred to me, that he'd actually had some work to do. And, since he had a slightly strange sense of humour, he made no mention of his absence until after we'd finished our drinks.

"I think I have found a solution to our travelling problem," he said.

"I was thinking about that last night," I said, deciding to bite the bullet and preparing to turn him away. "The only thing I could think of was to take two cars and that would probably end up being more trouble than it's worth."

"Oh that wouldn't work," he said. "Zoe can only go maybe two hundred kilometres before she needs to recharge."

Zoe was his car, a Renault Zoe, and he always talked as if it were a person. I'd forgotten that Zoe was an electric car and recharging stations are few and far between. My Kangoo can do around eight hundred kilometres on a full tank so his Zoe would be quite restrictive even if we did find places to recharge.

He pulled a small tube out from under his chair.

“It's taken me most of the day to find this,” he said. “But I think it will work.”

He slipped its cover off and unrolled it. It was basically just a sleeping bag but with a waterproof outer skin. The fun part was that it had two small flexible rods that slotted in at the head end and fitted into little pockets to form a tiny tent for your face. It didn't need guy ropes or anything cumbersome as the sleeper's body weight held it down.

“What do you think?” he asked, anxiously. “To a policeman it will be simply that I am in a sleeping bag outside the van rather than inside.”

Actually I thought it was pretty cool and pretty innovative and I said so. He was greatly relieved.

“It took me all day phoning around to find one,” he told me, “then I had to drive to Nimes to collect it. Look how easy it is to assemble.”

He quickly slotted the rods in place and climbed inside the bag, still in his suit. He grinned happily at me, lying on the ground.

“It is rated for minus five degrees,” he said, “and is guaranteed not to let in the rain! Ever!”

He climbed out again and quickly repacked it.

“Look how small it folds away,” he said, holding up a tube about sixty centimetres long and five or six centimetres in diameter. He held it out to me, looking anxious.

“Hmmm,” I said, trying to look thoughtful, “I don't know.”

I was teasing him since it seemed to be the ideal solution. Worst case scenario he could simply roll under the van in it and disappear.

He looked like a frightened puppy with someone shouting at him.

I must have a cruel streak since I threw open the side door of the van and pretended to search for somewhere we could stow it and saying things like “No, it won't fit there,” or “it would be in the way here”

until he was almost peeing himself with anxiety. It would fit anywhere to be honest and weighed maybe a kilogram. It could even sit on the dashboard or under a seat.

“Hmmmmmmm,” I said, looking at him and frowning deeply. Then I chucked it in the back of the van and slammed the door shut.

“Just teasing you!” I said. “Any other luggage?”

He visibly sagged with relief and I gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek before remembering that I shouldn't do things like that then I realised that the French hug and kiss all the time so, what the hell, I kissed his cheek again. The problem was my English reserve, not anything to do with him.

We got a celebratory coke each from a beach side cafe that was completely deserted and sorted out a few practical details then unloaded his diving gear out of Zoe and into my van and I followed him to his home. He needed to pack a suitcase and get his toiletries together and let his cousin know he was going away for a while.

“Do you want to sleep here tonight?” he asked.

“Not really,” I told him. “I'm used to sleeping in the van. Sleeping in an apartment will feel very strange now.”

“So shall I shut everything down here and sleep with you tonight or will you pick me up in the morning?”

“How about you try out your sleeping bag with me and that way if you think of anything you've forgotten we can come back here in the morning and sort it out.”

“Excellent plan,” he said. “Let me phone my cousin.”

His cousin, by the sound of it, was not in the least put out that Farouk was leaving.

By the time Farouk had sorted out what clothes he was going to take – he had a surprisingly large assortment of clothes – taken all the

perishables out to the garbage bins and chosen a few books and CDs to take with him it was getting quite late so we ended up getting a take-away from a cafe round the corner and I spent the night in his bed. He, of course, spent the night on the floor trying out his sleeping bag and discovered one significant problem. It had no padding other than its own insulating material and he was very stiff and achy in the morning.

Farouk turned off the lights, double locked his door and left his keys with a neighbour, much the way I had only six weeks previously, except I had left my keys with George's solicitor. Was it really only six weeks? It felt like a lifetime ago. His car was fairly secure in the car park underneath the apartment block.

“So, let the adventure begin!” he said waving his arm at the world with a flourish and got into the passenger seat of the van.

But first we had to find a store to buy two roll up yoga mats he could use as a mattress. “Flying carpets,” he called them.

I didn't play Born To Be Wild this time though. With a French-Arab in a suit in the passenger seat and six weeks of having my motor running already it just didn't seem appropriate. Also Farouk wasn't really the Easy Rider type. He was definitely more a Renault Zoe type than a custom Harley 'cycle type and if he smoked grass he'd given no sign of it.

That first day we drove all of 15 miles, a little further round the bay to the south east to a little town called Frontignan. It was a cold, wet day and we didn't bother to go diving. We just found a nice secluded spot under some trees and stayed in the back of the van chatting.

“My mother's family chose to go to Montpellier when they left Algeria,” Farouk told me, “because it was due north of Tigzurt in Algeria where they used to live. They thought that if they had a telescope powerful enough they would be able to see the place.”

“Where was your father from?”

“He is from Algiers. His family owned a bank in Algeria and sent him

over to Paris to set up a branch there but it failed. My mother had trained as a typist and secretary and went to Paris looking for a better job than she could get in Montpellier. Thirty five years ago things were not so good for French Arabs but Paris was more cosmopolitan, more accepting.”

“So how did she meet him?”

“My mother got a job as a general typist with my father's bank and she was soon promoted to become his secretary. They got married and when the French side of the bank failed, my father decided not to return to Algeria and instead stayed in France and he moved to Montpellier because he preferred the climate to that of Paris.”

“Have you ever wanted to go to Algeria?”

“I have been there, several times.”

“Have you ever thought of moving back there to live?”

“That is a most difficult question,” said Farouk. “Yes, I feel it is my homeland and yes, as an Arab I feel a sense of obligation but, in truth, culturally I am French. Algeria is a backward country compared to France and much needs to be done to improve life for most of its people. Are you going to go back to England when you are finished with travelling?”

“I honestly don't know at the moment,” I said. “I was very homesick for the first two or three days, but I got over it. I am divorced and I left a job I didn't like and, apart from a couple of very good friends and my parents, there is actually nothing for me in England. If I go back I will really have to start all over again and at the moment at least, I am enjoying travelling and diving. So long as I keep enjoying it I will probably keep going until my money runs out then I'll have to figure out what to do next.”

“Would you stay in France?” he asked.

“No, I like France,” I said, thoughtfully. I hadn't really thought along these lines before. Mostly I'd been thinking about travelling round and

diving, not what to do afterwards. “But I really want to see more of the world. I’d quite like to get outside Europe, but to be honest I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

“Well, take Asia for instance. If I drive there I’ll have to go through the Middle East and it’s so unstable, wars can break out at any time. You know, Iran, Iraq and places like that and even though you say that Muslims respect women I really don’t think I’d feel safe there, travelling on my own. Or even travelling with you.”

“Yes, I would not willingly go to those countries myself. Too much unrest. Perhaps you could fly?”

“I suppose I could but then I’d have to leave my van and all my stuff behind. I’ve had it for several years and I feel secure in it. I trust it. I couldn’t do what you have just done and throw up everything and go away with a stranger and just a few clothes and nothing else.”

He laughed. “I suppose at heart all Arabs are nomads. We prefer to trust the people we are with and not the things that surround us.”

“Do you trust me?” I said. “I mean really trust me?” I was a little surprised.

“I am here,” said Farouk, with a smile. “My life is in your hands. You lead and I follow.”

I hoped he didn’t mean it literally. Subscribers on my YouTube channel are one thing but ‘followers’ is a whole new ball game and I’m really not cut out to be a cult figure.

Our plan, such as it was, was to head south for a while, perhaps even as far as the Spanish border then come back and spend two or three months slowly working our way along the Côte d’Azur, or the French Riviera if you prefer, diving as much as possible and enjoying the area before the tourists and the rich and famous came along with the hot weather to ruin everything. Exploring Marseilles, Toulon, Saint-Tropez, Cannes, Nice and Monaco and all the little places in between and

hopefully avoiding the International Film Festival crowds in May. Then I would head off into Italy and Farouk, if he was still with me, would decide whether or not to stay on the road or go home to his empty apartment and his cousin's cupboard.

That was the plan. As it was, a couple of weeks or so after leaving Montpellier and before we even got to the western edge of the Côte d'Azur I nearly killed him.

Chapter Ten

That night we had a storm. It wasn't the worst I'd experienced so far in France but the wind was quite strong and the rain was heavy. I felt guilty about Farouk sleeping outside in it but he insisted.

“This is perfect,” he told me. “An excellent test of the bag. If the night goes well we shall sleep in comfort from now on, knowing there is no problem.”

The rain was battering against the passenger side of the van so he got into his pale blue silk pyjamas, yes they really were silk, and climbed into his sleeping bag. He crawled over the compressor to get out into the lee of the storm and insisted I closed the door behind him.

I stripped off and got into my cheap long cotton tee shirt that I used as a nightie. I'd bought three of them in a market for ten euros because they were a strange pinky green colour and the chap probably couldn't sell them for any more. He also had a very nice silvery black one but that was forty euros for the one. Since I sleep alone I was more concerned about price than look.

I lay on my mattress in my sleeping bag and listened to the rain thunder down on the roof. After a few minutes I heard “Putain!” quite loudly and a couple of thumps on the underside of the van. I leaned over and opened the door.

“Are you all right, Farouk?” I called.

“Yes,” he called back, his voice a little muffled. “The rain was coming in the tent part and my face was getting wet but I've got my head under the van now.”

I turned on the interior light so it spilled out the door and sure enough two thirds of his sleeping bag was sticking out from under the van. It was soaked and there were pools of water already collecting on the top of it.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “You look awfully wet.”

His reply was drowned out by a clap of thunder.

“Farouk?” I called again.

“Inside it is as dry as a dead dingo's donger,” he called back. “Stop worrying and let me go to sleep!”

“OK”

“As dry as a what?” I wondered. Well I'd taught him enough diving technique to stop him drowning on land and he sounded quite happy so I left him to it. I just didn't lock the doors in case he needed to get in. After all, we could be in the middle of a flood plain or a dry river bed for all I knew.

* * *

“So what's a dead dingo's donger?” I asked the next morning.

He had survived and was slightly damp but that was from sweat not rain. The bag apparently was very warm and had not leaked at all, apart from around his head when it blew in under the tent bit.

“I really don't know,” said Farouk. “I think a dingo is some kind of dog but I don't know what a donger is.”

“Where on earth did you get it from?”

“An Australian boy stayed with me for a few days last summer,” he told me. “He said my sense of humour was as dry as a dead dingo's donger. I have no idea why but it makes a change from the usual dull French sayings. It's the first time I've been able to use it. I've been wanting to for a long time.”

I couldn't think of any witty reply to that so I threw his sleeping bag over the top of the van to dry in the morning sun.

We spend a few days pottering around the southern area but the diving wasn't particularly interesting as it was all fairly sandy and sameish so we headed back past Montpellier and continued around

the coast. At Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, roughly halfway between Montpellier and Marseilles where the Rhône river empties into the sea, I saw perhaps the strangest sight I've ever seen in all my years of diving.

We'd followed a minor road down to Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône on the west side of the river rather than the major road to the east and so avoided the town. We found a dirt road that ran through fields down to the sea and decided we'd spend the night on the beach since the weather was definitely improving now we were well into April.

In the morning we went for a dive and made our way round to the river mouth itself but I wouldn't let Farouk go far into it as the current was surprisingly strong and probably would have taken us several miles out to sea. A particular problem with river mouths is that the river is fresh water which is a lot less dense than sea water, because of the salt and minerals in sea water. Now, most people are reasonably buoyant in water which is what allows us to swim so divers wear weight belts to give us extra weight with no increase in surface area to help us sink. Because sea water is more buoyant than fresh we need to have more weight that we would in fresh water. So, when you're carrying the right weight for sea water and suddenly cross into fresh water you suddenly sink because you are now carrying too much weight and it's quite difficult to get back to the surface without dropping a weight or two. If we got caught in the strong current we might well find ourselves carried a long way out to sea and overweight and exhausted so it was easier to play it safe and stay on the edge.

Anyway, to cut a long story short we explored the area then made our way back to the beach where we'd left the van. I was hugging the slowly rising sea floor and Farouk was a length or two behind me when I noticed, perhaps thirty or forty yards ahead of us, a creature with what appeared to be six legs, slowly spinning around in the water.

I was intrigued and signalled to Farouk and veered over towards it. The sea bed continued to rise and I could see that the creature had four hairy dark brown legs and two lighter pink legs that weren't quite as hairy and since the water was only maybe four feet deep at that point I stopped finning and stood up. Moments later Farouk did the

same.

It was no great mystery, just very unexpected. A man was standing in the water exercising a horse by getting it to walk in circles around him. I'd seen any number of sea horses but never a horse in the sea.

The horse bucked and the man cried out "Merde!" as our two rubber clad forms emerged from the sea only a few yards away from them. The tubes in our mouths and our huge single eyes, the masks, probably didn't help.

"Oh you scared me," he said, holding his chest with one hand and patting the horse's neck with the other after we'd taken our masks off and spat out the mouthpieces so he could see we weren't aliens.

"Sorry," called Farouk, "we were just diving. We didn't mean to frighten you."

"C'est bien" he called back and got the horse circulating again.

We took off our fins and splashed to the beach and stripped off our gear then waded back out to find out what was going on. He was in his late twenties and stockily built and wore a dirty singlet and a pair of fairly tight shorts which had been thoroughly wetted by the sea and were clinging closely to him. I concentrated on his face and refused to speculate what Farouk was doing.

"My name is Charlie," I said, "and this is Farouk, my diving partner."

"Raphael," he told us. "This is my family's farm," and waved at the general area.

"Can we camp on the beach tonight?" I asked. It's generally safest to ask permission when the opportunity arises. Hardly anyone will say 'no' and it saves them investigating strangers in the middle of the night with a shotgun. This is why I prefer to use National and Regional Parks to farmland.

"Of course," he said. "Although it is not our beach. No one comes here though, they stay the other side of the river."

Formalities completed I could move on to the main issue.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Collette caught her leg on some barbed wire,” he explained. Presumably Collette was the horse although he might have been exercising the horse to get away from an angry and in pain wife. “So I am exercising her in the sea to help it heal. She is a racehorse and needs to keep exercised. I walk her in the water for two hours twice a day.”

He showed us the inside of one of her hind legs. There was a nasty gash there, almost as long as my forearm, which had been stitched and was healing quite nicely.

“She cannot race again for another four weeks,” he added sadly.

“Do you train her yourself?” asked Farouk.

“Yes, we have three racehorses”

They launched into a lengthy conversation about horse racing which was immensely dull so I wandered back to the van and put our stuff away.

“Would you like some coffee?” I shouted to Raphael.

“Ah yes thank you, this is very dry work.”

They came out of the sea to join me and Raphael tethered Collette to some bushes. He and Farouk were getting on well so I leaned back against the van and minded my own business. After a while Farouk turned to me.

“Raphael has invited me to look at his other race horses,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Would you like to join us?”

I got the distinct impression that my company was not really desired and since horses interest me even less than accountancy and taxation I declined.

“No, you two go ahead, I’ll stay here and read my book.”

I’d bought the book the day before in Arles. It was a thick book on the history of French Cathedrals and looked interesting, especially as it was heavily discounted and, being in French, it would be a challenge.

Farouk stayed in his trunks and just pulled on a sweater and a pair of flip flops and went off with Raphael. He didn’t come back for several hours and I was beginning to worry about what had happened to him.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

He just smiled and waggled his hand the way the French do. I figured it was best to drop the subject. Whatever he’d been up to he seemed to have enjoyed it.

“Raphael told me there is a wreck not far out,” he said.

“Oh really?” This was a lot more interesting than horses or cathedrals. “Does he know exactly where?”

“He said it is about a kilometre, directly in line with the dirt track. Can we go see it tomorrow?”

I thought about it for a few moments. The problem with finding wrecks is partly navigation and partly camouflage. It doesn’t take long for a wreck to get covered with sand, mud, barnacles and seaweed which makes it difficult to see and if you don’t know its exact position they’re very difficult to find. Being a mathematician doesn’t help. It’s easy to calculate that if we were off the correct direction by as little as one degree, we’d miss the wreck by seventeen metres and keeping accurate to one degree while swimming would be difficult, and that was assuming the wreck really was directly in line with the dirt track. Still, it would be a useful exercise on underwater navigation for Farouk if nothing else and the water was fairly clear away from the Rhône current.

“OK,” I said. “I’ll let you do the navigating, it’s good practice.”

I dug my compass out of the van and handed it to him. Compasses

are useful but so is being able to make use of under water landmarks as well. It's also very hard to work out how far you've swum.

I got Farouk to get the exact compass bearing from the dirt track to where he thought the wreck was then asked him how we'd know when we'd swum a kilometre. He thought about it.

"I have absolutely no idea," he admitted after a while.

"Unless you have fancy ge positioning equipment, it's difficult," I told him. "The best equipment can get you to within a metre or less but we have none. The only way we can do it is by educated guesswork. We can count how many fin strokes we take to cover a known distance then try to keep the same fin speed and counting until we reckon it's about a kilometre."

It's a bit rough and ready but it's better than nothing. I had a brand new roll of strong cord which was supposedly two hundred metres long so we got kitted up and went back into the water. The idea was that he'd hold one end of the cord while I held the other end and he'd swim directly away from me, counting his fin strokes, until the cord ran out. Then he'd turn around and swim back to me and we'd average the number of strokes from the two runs. Multiply by five and there's a rough estimate of a kilometre. Easy but pretty inaccurate. We'd be lucky if we got within a hundred metres of the wreck and we'd be unlikely to see it unless we got within fifteen or twenty metres. I also reckoned the water would be perhaps thirty metres deep that far out so if we stayed shallow, which we'd need to do to conserve air, we'd more or less have to get right over it. I explained all this to Farouk.

"This is why so few treasure hunters find the wrecks they're looking for. They're almost impossible to find once they've sunk, especially in really deep water which is why, of course, their cargo wasn't plundered centuries ago and why the treasure hunters look for them."

There was a very good chance we wouldn't even end up back at the same beach but I didn't tell him that. With a bit of luck the errors might cancel each other out rather than add to each other. Fortunately this particular beach was a couple of kilometres long so it was a fairly

big target to aim for, although your horizon when your eyes are at sea level is very small.

Farouk made a tajine for dinner and we ate it together, scooping it out of the saucepan with hunks of baguette. I was getting used to communal eating by now and it certainly saved on washing up.

In the morning I over-filled the tanks a little so we'd have plenty of air and Farouk lined us up with the dirt track and set off, compass in hand. I matched his fin strokes and counted as well just in case and we slowly made our way out to sea, staying at around five metres. Five metres is a nice depth as it gets you away from the waves and whatever is going on at the surface but isn't deep enough to have significant air consumption or nitrogen absorption. When we got to our estimated destination, the bottom was just visible and there was no sign of the wreck.

We started to descend, going in a spiral maybe forty metres wide to give decent coverage but even near the bottom there was no sign. Then, as I was starting to ascend, Farouk spotted something and went to the sea floor to investigate. I stayed above him so I could keep an eye on him. Now, when you dive deep you need to ascend slowly and at about twenty metres stop for two or three minutes to allow some of the excess nitrogen to escape from your tissues. If you don't do this you have a good chance of getting the bends. So, as I was hanging there, at around twenty meters, I could still just see him, fifteen metres below me.

I was just beginning to wonder whether to go back down or carry on ascending when he started to get larger, which meant he was ascending so I waited at twenty metres for him to join me. When he arrived he showed me his pressure gauge which said he had about a third of a tank left. Probably not enough to get back to shore underwater. My own was just over half. Being male he breathed more air than I did and he'd been deeper for longer than I had so it was understandable. He also had a slightly smaller tank. This wasn't an issue since we could easily surface to breath so I pointed to the surface and we started back, ascending at an angle rather than straight up.

As Farouk was navigating I let him get ahead. I was perhaps three or four metres from the surface when I heard a high pitched throbbing whine and a dark shadow passed over me and ran straight into Farouk. By the sound of it, it was a jet ski but it disappeared fairly quickly. My heart started to pound and I fought off panic. Farouk was sinking rapidly and he was going head first, backwards, and he was limp. His mouthpiece was hanging loose and there was a sudden rush of air from his buoyancy jacket then it stopped.

I thought he was dead.

I jackknifed and swam down as fast as I could and caught up with him. His head was surrounded by a haze of blood and some fish were already taking an interest. I forced his mouthpiece into his mouth and grabbed the shoulder of the jacket and started to swim upward. There was a tear in the jacket. It must have been damaged by the jet ski and the rush of air I'd seen must have been when it gave way. He was beginning to regain consciousness and he started to cough and dislodged the mouthpiece so I pushed it back in and fortunately he started to breath again.

I was still swimming upwards and my mind, or at least that part of it that wasn't consumed with worry about Farouk, was thinking about whether or not I needed to stop around twenty metres again. I decided we'd been deep for only a few seconds so it was worth the risk.

Farouk was making feeble motions and his mask was missing. He started to struggle so I had to clamp his arms with mine otherwise he could have knocked out my mouthpiece too. When we got to the surface he fainted again. Fortunately there was not much of a swell so it wasn't too hard keeping his head out of the water. Although I've never seen one, there are shark in the Mediterranean and we really didn't want that complication. I loosened the neck of his wetsuit so the blood ran inside it rather than into the water.

My heart was still pumping like a racing car and I was breathing heavily. Farouk was hanging limply in my arms but by lying on my back with his body between my legs I could keep his head on my shoulder and out of the water. The only problem, apart from being a

kilometre or so from the shore, was that I had lost all sense of direction in the confusion. I had no idea which way the shore was. Get it wrong and I might be taking him back to Algeria the hard way.

When you're on the beach playing in the surf, a wave only one foot high is completely unexciting. When you're bobbing about in the water looking for land, a wave a foot high towers over you so you can't see a thing. It was quite a while before I managed to get my head to the top of a wave and pointing in roughly the right direction so I could see the smudge of land. I turned my back on it and started swimming with my fins, using my body and arms to support Farouk.

I knew exactly what to do since we trained for it; pump up your buoyancy jacket so it keeps you both afloat and swim backwards, supporting the injured diver. The only problem was that I wasn't wearing a buoyancy jacket, Farouk was wearing it, and it was useless since it had a tear in it. It was very tiring trying to swim and support us both and all the equipment.

I hadn't gone far when I realised that it was going to be a real struggle so I stopped and undid Farouk's jacket and let it fall off. The jacket and tank were dead weight and this was an emergency. If he needed to, he could get air from my tank. I figured it was worth the risk. For good measure I dumped both our weight belts too. Instantly the load was lightened and I became more confident that I'd make it.

Whenever the swell raised me high enough I checked over my shoulder to make sure I was still heading for land. I couldn't aim for the beach the other side of the Rhône next to the town and medical help since that would mean crossing the current. I didn't have the strength to fight it and we'd just end up getting swept miles out to sea. I had to stay this side and hope he'd still be alive when I got to shore.

Every now and then he'd regain consciousness and start to struggle but he'd soon relapse into unconsciousness. It was actually easier when he was unconscious but it's not a healthy state to be in. The swim was a nightmare and when my tank finally scraped the bottom in shallow water I was nearing my limits and my thighs were screaming.

There's a cute little problem in maths which requires a reasonable understanding of algebra, which is why we use it. Someone is at point A on the land and needs to get to point B in the water as quickly as possible and you are given the speeds at which he can run on land and swim in the water. The object is to work out the optimum point to jump into the water. It's useful for showing the fallacy of intuition since intuitively, as the person can run faster than he can swim intuition says to stay on land as long as possible and enter the water the shortest distance from point B. The thing is, the further he runs along the land, the longer it takes since he's running along the hypotenuse of a triangle so it's actually better to get into the water a little earlier, thus saving on the running distance. Anyway, I must have subconsciously done this in my head while swimming backwards since we landed not far from the van but not directly opposite it either. Perhaps a hundred yards away.

I managed to drag Farouk out of the water and stripped off my own tank and lay gasping for a few moments then dragged myself up and tried to pick up Farouk. He was too heavy and in no condition to walk himself. He was in and out of consciousness and very groggy when he was conscious. However, if I ran to the van and brought it to him I'd almost certainly get it bogged in the sand, which would be of no benefit to anyone.

What to do?

"Think you idiot, think!" I screamed at a seagull. I dropped to my knees and flopped onto the sand. My brain could only think of one solution.

I hoisted Farouk into a sitting position then half rolled him onto my shoulders and tried to stand up.

"Ho ... ly ... sh ... it"

I managed but my knee joints were popping and there was a stabbing pain in my lower back. Grimly I staggered, six inches at a time, to the van. It took forever and a week.

My head was pulsating like one of those aliens in fifties Sci-Fi movies

by the time I got there. I collapsed in the sand with Farouk on top of me and lay there for a minute or so, gathering what remaining strength I had then forced my way out from under him and got my keys out and opened the door. With my last remaining strength I heaved him onto my mattress and collapsed back on the sand, exhausted and giggling hysterically. He still had his fins on and they stuck up like a circus clown's feet. His face and head was covered in sand encrusted blood too, like a spangled clown's hat.

I crawled into the driver's seat and even putting the van into gear was a major effort. Why hadn't I got the automatic version? Too late now. I could phone from Raphael's farm house except I had no idea where it was so I took the dirt track as fast as I dared, keeping an eye open for houses but there were none. Eight kilometres later I screeched right and crossed the bridge over the Rhône and headed into town. After a kilometre or so I saw a police car on the other side of the road, probably lying in wait to catch speeders, and I zoomed over to it, narrowly missing an oncoming Citroen. Two policemen leapt out, keen to make an easy arrest for god knows how many traffic offences. I don't think I was wearing a seat belt either.

"Help me, help me," I cried in English. I was too far gone to think to say "aidez moi". Fortunately they understood and to their credit they didn't panic. One opened the side door of the van and shouted something to the other then ran to his car and got on the radio. The other stayed with Farouk to administer first aid. Within three minutes an ambulance arrived and took Farouk away. Where I don't know as I was collapsed on the ground in tears with a policeman trying to comfort me and interrogate me at the same time. No doubt he had a report to file later.

He didn't get anywhere as I was exhausted, in shock, semi hysterical and my head was throbbing like a jackhammer. He gave up after a couple of minutes and helped me into the back of his car and shouted something to his colleague. Then he took me to the police station where the police doctor gave me a check over, pronounced me fit and healthy and gave me three aspirin and a glass of cognac and let me lie down for an hour. Surprisingly it worked.

Two hours after getting up again I had given the full story to another

policeman who wrote copious notes.

“You were in charge of the dive?” he asked, for the third time, no doubt sensing the opportunity for some French brownie points for making an arrest of some sort. He'd reluctantly abandoned the idea of smuggling but he seemed confident he could make the charge of illegally running an unlicensed and uninsured diving operation by an unqualified person.

“Yes,” I admitted yet again. There wasn't a lot of point in denying it since I'd already admitted it twice.

We went over it all again then he gave me some weak coffee while my statement was typed and I signed it without reading it. Then they let me go. Fortunately the hospital to which Farouk had been taken wasn't a secret and the other policeman had driven my van to the police station. The arresting officer, or whatever they're called, gave me directions to the hospital and I managed to find it.

The woman on reception had never heard of Farouk so she phoned someone in the emergency room who remembered someone being brought in in a wetsuit so I said that was probably him and gave the woman his name and address and what few details I knew of him that their computer needed then they sent me to a waiting room to wait. So I waited. Then I remembered I was still in my wetsuit so I went back to the van and got changed then went back to the woman on reception who told me to go back to the waiting room so I asked her where I could get some coffee and she told me where there was a cafeteria. I went to the cafeteria and ordered some coffee and found I didn't have any money so I went back to the van to get some money and spotted some shops on the other side of the road.

There was a cafe there too, next to a tobacconist so I went in to the tobacconist and got some Gauloise cigarettes then went to the cafe and got another cognac and a double strength coffee. I knocked back the cognac immediately then sat outside chain smoking until the coffee arrived. No one joined me or offered to pay for me so I guess my happy aura wasn't visible.

Six cigarettes later I finished the coffee and went back in to the

hospital. The woman on reception had gone and another woman had taken her place. She looked Farouk up on the computer and got some of my details and added them to the official records then told me to wait in the waiting room. So I did.

It was late afternoon when a doctor came to see me. Farouk had suffered a blow to his head which had caused his repeated blackouts but he was now conscious and asleep. He also had two large cuts on his head which had been stitched and he had a dislocated shoulder which they'd relocated and substantial bruising around his shoulders. They had performed an MRI scan and found no evidence of any brain injury which seemed to disappoint him. Also there had been a large amount of sea water in his lungs and they had drained that. All in all, he was going to be fine although, the doctor informed me with cheerful relish, there was always the possibility that in weeks to come Farouk might start to exhibit behavioural changes due to micro damage the MRI scan had not picked up. He had to concede that this was unlikely though.

I slowly drove back to the beach with Farouk's fins and wetsuit which they'd given me in exchange for his silk pyjamas. It's a wonder I didn't have an accident as I was semi comatose from cognac on an empty stomach, relief, shock, dismay, fear, worry and extreme exhaustion. Muscles I didn't know I had ached fiercely and muscles I did know I had throbbed, twitched and generally let me know they were not at all happy.

My tank was neatly stacked with Farouk's sleeping bag, my fins, the gas cooker and various other odds and ends where the van had been parked. It didn't occur to me to wonder why until I woke up fourteen hours later when Raphael knocked on the van window.

Chapter Eleven

“You're going to look tough,” I told Farouk. “Attract a lot more attention.”

He groaned and opened his eyes. “Hello.”

He looked a bit of a mess. Most of his head was bruised and lumpy and one eye was swollen and black. That would all die down though but the two parallel scars on his shaved head would be there forever. Unfortunately they weren't symmetrical, being more on the left side and slightly skewed from straight front to back. Still, they'd probably give his head more character.

“How do you feel?”

“Dreadful. Everything from the waist up hurts like hell and from the waist down I'm numb.”

That sounded like spine damage to me.

“What did the doctors say?”

“No serious damage. Apparently I have a skull like a fossilised tree trunk.”

“What about the numbness?”

“I'm not really numb, I just feel numb there because everywhere else hurts so much.”

He clicked a tube of pain killer a couple of times to make his point and groaned again.

“When are they letting you out?”

“Maybe tomorrow. It's all superficial so they tell me. I've got to go home and lie down for two or three weeks.”

“Rest is important.”

“What happened? All they told me was that I was in an accident. Did we crash the van or something?”

So I told him about the dive and how he'd been hit by a jet ski and that I'd taken him to hospital. I didn't tell him about my nightmare swim bringing him back to land. I had been feeling as guilty as hell for allowing it to happen and minimising my role seemed a form of atonement, however pathetic an atonement it was.

He dozed off after that so I just in the chair watching him for want of something to do. Raphael turned up in the late afternoon, after exercising Colette, with a bunch of flowers and some grapes. He stayed for a while but Farouk didn't wake up so he left again as there was the evening milking to do and I left a while after that. I went back at lunchtime the next day and Farouk was sitting up in bed eating.

“Hello,” he smiled happily.

We chatted through some pleasantries about how he was feeling and apparently he was going to be released that afternoon, just as soon as a doctor came back from lunch and signed the release document.

“I'll take you back to Montpellier,” I told him. “I'm afraid I had to ditch your buoyancy jacket, tank and weight belt to get you back to shore but I still have everything else.”

He sighed and looked away. “I very much think my diving days are over,” he said. “I'm sorry. It was great fun but look at me.”

I knew what he meant. After a serious accident you have to be very committed to force yourself to get back in the water. Also I'd junked the most expensive parts of his equipment so he'd need a significant financial outlay to start again. His wetsuit was torn in places and that would need replacing too. My insurance would probably cover it but it would take some time.

“The police talked to me this morning,” he said after a short silence.

My heart sank. I'd been desperately trying not to remember the charges that were hanging over me.

“They wanted a statement from me and said that they were considering charging you with operating an illegal organised dive without licences or certifications and suggested I sue you for negligence.”

He looked at me bleakly.

“Yeah,” I thought. “That sounds about right.”

“I told them three things.” He started to tick them off on his fingers. “Firstly I had no memory of what happened so I couldn't make a statement. Secondly the dive was not an organised event open to the public or for money. It was just two friends diving together for pleasure. Thirdly I pointed out the difficulties they would have bringing charges when the only witness, who could not remember the details, was also your defence lawyer. After consultation with their superiors they have elected not to charge you. And I will not be suing you.”

Well, that was a relief. Although it didn't help with my feelings of guilt and remorse.

“Listen Farouk,” I said. “I'm really sorry about what happened and it was all my fault. I shouldn't have let you surface without checking for danger first. It's fundamental and I got it wrong.”

He held up his hand to silence me.

“I am your lawyer,” he said. “I advise you not to admit liability. They may have bugged the room.”

He laughed then stopped and held his head. I passed him his painkiller tube but he refused it.

I brought up the subject of my negligence again in the van on the way back to Montpellier. He refused to even consider it.

“Diving is a dangerous sport,” he said bluntly. “I knew that before I started and I am not a naturally lucky person. I was fortunate however that you were there and not one of those lesser experienced

divemasters. You saved my life and I will always be grateful to you for that.”

We argued back and forth for a few moments about who was at fault but he insisted that he did not blame me and that I should not blame myself. I shut up after a while, not because I agreed with him, but because I was getting nowhere persuading him I was at fault.

“Anyway,” he said when he'd realised I'd shut up. “I also have you to thank for something else.”

I glanced at him, quickly, as I was driving and didn't want to put him in a car accident as well.

“Raphael came to see me this morning, before you came in,” he told me. “He has invited me to stay with him for a holiday when I am well enough to come down. It is very early of course, but I think we have a little bit of a connection.” His black eye twinkled. “I am thirty. It is time I thought about settling down.”

He paused then said, a little sadly it sounded to me.

“I was thinking last night perhaps I should set up my own law firm.” He sighed deeply. “I have you to thank, Charlie, for giving me some memories of freedom, however brief it was.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence. Farouk retrieved his keys from the neighbour and I helped him to bed. I made some coffee while he phoned his mother to say he was back. Fifteen minutes later a stout woman in her mid fifties with her greying hair in a bun hurtled through the door. She completely ignored the strange foreign woman in her gay son's apartment. Her baby was sick and in pain and nothing else mattered. She examined him more thoroughly than the doctors at the hospital had then barked a staccato list of purchases to make French chicken soup at me and sent me on my way. It was obvious that my presence was no longer needed so after bringing back the ingredients I made my farewells.

I made my way slowly past Marseilles, crossing the Rhône as quickly as I could as it made me uncomfortable to think about what might

have happened and spent a few days camping in the Parc Naturel Régional de la Sainte Baume. I didn't go diving. I guess I was a little afraid to. After all, what happened to Farouk could so easily happen to me and I was on my own. And I still was convinced of my own guilt.

On the third day I made a full and accurate statement and confession on video, clearly explaining how I was to blame and went into Toulon to find a cafe to post it on YouTube. The number of subscribers to my channel had risen to about eighty but frankly I didn't really care. My journey had lost some of its appeal and I was feeling aimless and lonely. Perhaps Farouk was right about my aura as I was left alone again. Loneliness must be a vicious circle since when you feel lonely it seems to repel others which makes you feel lonelier. I cried in bed a couple of times too in those days.

Still, there were some more “why are you there/what are you doing” type comments so after I left Toulon I started to think seriously about making that video as well. Farouk and I had spent a fair amount of our time together talking about our lives and I now had a pretty good appreciation of what I was comfortable with disclosing and what I wasn't and I wrote out a bit of a speech. I'd also kept the lists I'd made of my fears and insecurities and things people had said while I was coming to terms with getting divorced and quitting work and so on. They were in an envelope at the bottom of a lockable metal box I kept underneath the driver's seat and I'd brought them as a kind of talisman. I kept all my important papers in the box, like my passport, birth certificate, banking details, insurance papers and so on.

I spent an afternoon working on that speech, crossing things out, adding things, rephrasing and so on. I even dug out those lists to help me explain a few, what seemed to me, important points. I'd also learnt a thing or two about presenting in the four videos I'd made with Farouk. Most importantly I'd found it much easier to talk to him rather than the camera, even when he wasn't in the video, so my style had become very informal and chatty and I was no longer a tailor's dummy with a stick up my bum. So when I was happy with my speech I set up the camera on a pair of knickers as usual on the bonnet, sat in my trusty camping chair and started.

I went off the rails almost immediately. Instead of making a reasoned, clear presentation like the seasoned teacher that I am, I got caught up in trying to explain things properly to some imaginary person behind the camera who was some sort of indistinct mixture of my parents, George, Zoe and one of my tutors at uni. I even held up my lists at one point and showed them to the camera and read them aloud and part way through I started to cry with the memories and, I daresay, my continuing guilt over Farouk. But I cheered up again when I started on my revelations about my assumptions on which my life had been based and how strengthening and empowering it had been to brush them away and start a journey of discovery.

I even used those words, *journey of discovery*, which was strange as I hadn't really been thinking in those terms before. At the time I'd been thinking in terms of just having some fun and doing some serious diving. Then I found I couldn't stop and started talking about how helpless and completely useless and feeble I'd felt when I had the puncture outside Abbeville on my first night and how that nice policeman had helped me and the various things that had happened to me since. I even went on to talk about Farouk and how shocked I'd been when he expected me to eat out of the same bowl as him with my fingers and my reactions when I found out he was gay and how he'd changed some of my perceptions of Islam. Even how he'd made me question some of my basic training on diving. I was going to talk some more about my guilt trip over his injuries but I remembered I'd already done that in the video I'd just uploaded so I brought it to an end by saying that I hadn't dived since and that I was now questioning the whole validity of what I was doing.

I played the whole forty three minutes of it back on my iPad and called myself a stupid, emotional bitch and deleted it and recorded my pre-written, sanitised speech which lasted just under seven minutes then spent the evening trying to create my own zodiac of creatures of my own design from the stars. I went to bed happier than I had been since the accident and slept soundly, dreaming of flameless dragons escaping from tombs guarded by starfish and sea horses.

I went for a dive at Six-Fours-les-Plages outside Toulon before going back to the cafe I'd been to the day before, in order to upload my 'what's it all about' video. I must have got my happy aura back with a

vengeance as this time two nice gentlemen joined me and we had a lovely meal during which I quickly uploaded the video and drank three glasses of wine and slept them off for most of the afternoon in the Champs du Mars near, ironically enough, the Monument to the Martyrs of French Algeria. It's at times like this that my habit of keeping myself presentable comes in handy otherwise I would have looked like just another drunk, homeless person sleeping rough in a park instead of a respectable, homeless person sleeping rough in the park who just happened to be a little drunk.

I was well into the Côte d'Azur by this point and the scenery was changing. West of Toulon the coastline is fairly flat with long sandy beaches and hills and small mountains inland. To the east however, the countryside gets more and more mountainous as it gets closer to the western end of the Alps and the Italian border. There are still gorgeous sandy beaches but they get smaller and smaller and the promontories between them get bigger and craggier. More importantly, the huge, fairly shallow bay from Marseilles all the way round to Girona, in Spain, to the south west gives way to a sharp underwater cliff that drops, I believe, to something like a thousand metres below sea level, fairly close in to the shore. If I'd lost Farouk around here he would have died for sure as I could never have got him back from a thousand metres. In fact I think the record for deep diving without a submersible of some sort is around a thousand metres. The water pressure there would be around 1500 psi. Not a good environment for recreational divers!

Still, the point is that the diving was getting spectacular and I was back to diving three, sometimes four, times a day, exploring rocky alcoves, cliffs and so on and having a wonderful time. I was on my own so I refused to even consider exploring any of the multitude of small caves but it was glorious all the same. I'm not claustrophobic but underwater caving is just about the most dangerous thing you can do. They're completely dark and usually a tight fit and there are endless sticking out bits of rock which can snag your equipment and trap you or cut off your air supply. Not to mention what might be living in the caves. I probably wouldn't go cave diving with a team of experienced cave divers, let alone on my own. I may have my silly moments but I don't have a death wish.

I spent two weeks almost completely alone, apart from a couple of encounters with shopkeepers when I bought supplies. I stayed in some places a few days, other days I moved on a few kilometres two or three times. I more or less just dived, ate and slept. It was glorious. Because I had no fridge or cooling facilities I'd pretty much become vegetarian with a few eggs now and then but that was cool. I really didn't talk to anyone at all since the tourist season was barely beginning and the area was more or less deserted. I talked to my camera a few times, making some videos of my dives and the scenery but I didn't even go to cafes to upload them. I think I just needed some extreme "me" time. Thinking back now, I suspect that emotional video I'd made and deleted had been the start of a cathartic period, a purging of some aspects of my psyche.

At the end of April I was beginning to feel the need for some company and I really needed to find a laundromat as well so I headed for the town of Grimaud, avoiding St Tropez and the dreadful Azur Park like the plague. Azur Park is a huge theme park of the kind that makes me wish I could be abducted by aliens rather than go anywhere near although a lot of people seem to like it as it is the second most popular attraction in France.

Anyway, I was driving gently along the road only a few kilometres from Grimaud, humming nonsense to myself, when I saw a Toyota Prius with a British number plate pulled over by the side. I hadn't talked to an English person for what felt like years so in a spirit of altruism I pulled up just ahead to see if there was a problem and if I could be of any help. Sure enough, the driver was English and he was staring helplessly at a flat tyre. I knew the feeling. More to the point, I'd watched the policeman in Abbeville change my flat tyre and I'd thought about it afterwards in case there were no helpful people around the next time so this time I knew what to do.

The man helped me get the spare out of the back of the car and in no time at all, well maybe a little longer than that, I had changed his wheel. It was surprisingly easy and I wondered why women make such a fuss about it. More specifically, why had I made such a fuss about it? Even to the point of bringing high heels to try to get a man to stop and do it for me? I hadn't yet worn the high heels, except once when Farouk took me to a fancy restaurant in Montpellier. I'd used one of

them to crack some walnuts as well as the heel was made of steel. It was very effective once I'd sorted out my hand to eye coordination.

"Hey, wow, like, thanks," he said. "Cool."

"You're welcome," I replied nonchalantly. "I'm Charlie."

"Right," he said, nodding. "Do you speak French?"

I wondered if he thought 'Charlie' was a French name.

"I get by," I said. "Do you have a name?"

"Yes thanks."

I gave up on names at that point. He looked at the flat tyre sitting in the boot of his car.

"Do you think it can be fixed?" he asked me.

"Yes, I would think so. Looks like a simple puncture to me."

"Cool."

"There's probably someone in town who could do it," I prompted.

"Awesome." He thought for a few moments. "Ahh, Charlie's your name."

"Yes."

"Sweet. I'm Clark."

"Nice to meet you, Clark."

"Someone in town, great."

He thought for a few moments. "You can talk to them?"

"Yes."

“Wow. Awesome.”

“Would you like me to talk to someone about fixing your tyre?”

He thought for a few moments. “Ummm.”

“OK, follow me in your car.”

He followed me into town where we found a tyre shop. I quickly explained the problem and the mechanic, tyre fitter? what do you call these people?, said it would take a couple of hours. Judging by the ambience of the place he probably meant it would take a couple of hours just to wake someone up to do some work but who am I to criticise someone else's work ethic?

“He says it'll take a couple of hours to fix,” I told Clark.

“Wow, as long as that, huh.” He was looking at the workshop and nodding.

“They should install an AI system, computerise the whole operation. Cut the delivery time down to two, maybe three minutes. Tell them that.”

“No,” I said. “It's none of our business.”

“Oh,” said Clark. “Right.”

He looked at his watch and muttered “Two hours, right” then looked at the sky, then down the street, then up the street, then back at his watch. “One, fifty nine. Right.”

“Why don't you go and wait in that cafe over there?” I said. I could sense the tyre repair man getting a little irritated.

Clark looked at the cafe then back at me.

“Sweet,” he said.

He thought for a few moments.

“Ummm, would you, ummm, like, err, come with me?” he said. “Help me order?”

Ordinarily I would have avoided someone like this like a nest of angry bees but I was starved of company and he was amusing me immensely. Also I hadn't had a decent sugar hit for some time and, according to the sign, the cafe had free internet access too. Sweet, indeed.

“OK, come on then,” I said and headed for the cafe. He followed like a lost puppy.

We ordered some things that looked to be almost pure sugar with the barest minimum of pastry and some coffees.

“So are you on holiday?” I asked.

He came to life with enthusiasm.

“Oh yes,” he beamed. “I took three weeks leave from work in England to come to Azur Park to study the control systems for their animatronics. They're awesomely impressive. Did you know ...” and he spouted gobbledegook for at least ten minutes. He didn't seem to mind if I nodded or not. I looked around to see if there was an accountant or tax collector to liven up the conversation. Perhaps even a horse racing enthusiast.

Then it struck me, brazen opportunist that I can be, that he worked in IT. My iPad was playing up and doing strange things.

“Do you know anything about iPads?” I asked.

His eyes lit up even more.

“Cute little things, aren't they,” he said.

“I've got one but it's having problems. If I get some more coffees would you mind having a look at it for me?”

“Love to.” His eyes gleamed in anticipation.

He seemed grateful for the opportunity to stop talking to a woman and play with something really exciting so I went to the van and got it for him to look at.

Have you ever watched one of those science fiction movies where someone sits at a computer and all sorts of windows full of numbers and strange symbols pop up and disappear then someone says something unintelligible like “the positronic entanglement drive is warped beyond repair Captain and those pesky aliens are only two megaflops away!”? I always thought that was just Hollywood fantasy but it isn't. I discovered that day that my humble little iPad, in the hands of someone who knew and loved the things, could behave just like a supercomputer from the 24th century.

“I think the problem is something brown and involves a cigarette lighter,” said Clark, or something like that, and rabbited on for several minutes, pointing to things that made no sense to me as if I knew what he was talking about.

As far as I could gather, he thought that the problem lay in the adaptor that I plugged into the cigarette lighter in the van to recharge the iPad not being the right amperage or wattage or something-age and over time whatever it was was accumulating, or decumulating, something and causing “brown outs”, whatever they are.

“Wonderful,” I said, smiling my sweetest and most alluring smile. “What can I do about it?”

He didn't even notice my smile. His attention was focused on the gadget in front of him.

You just have to love computer geeks. He had, somewhere about his person, one of those penknives that have 256 different little tools on them and he applied it to the adaptor in a seemingly reckless fashion.

“After the next recharge it'll run as sweet as a wet dream,” he said after a few seconds.

I rather hoped it wouldn't but I appreciated the sentiment.

He looked at his watch and discovered he still had another hour to fill and realised I probably didn't have another iPad for him to fix and he sought desperately for another topic of conversation.

“So, erm, what do you, like, use it for, like, mainly, I mean most of the time?” he asked.

“I make videos of my travels,” I told him, “and transfer them to the iPad to upload to YouTube.”

I expected him to start asking me about my travels and what I did and why I shared the videos and fairly normal, human things like that.

“So, umm, like, what video editing software do you use? Adobe Premiere Pro? FinalCut? Corel VideoStudio?” he asked.

“I don't use any,” I told him. “I just record a video on the camera then copy it to the iPad then upload it.”

He nearly had a heart attack at my complete disregard for the wonders of technology.

“You can not be serious!”

The cafe proprietor looked over to see what the shouting was about.

I assured him I was serious.

“But, but, but,” he stuttered. “All that power, performance, wow, like, I dunno, jeez, what a waste.”

He thought for a few moments.

“No probs, gimme that.”

He grabbed the iPad back off me and did things on it then sat back to watch.

“What are you doing?” I asked, mildly curious. It was just an iPad after all. I could always get another one.

“I’m installing VideoPad for you. It’s open source and easy to use. Not as good as OpenShot but it runs on an iPad. Sweet as.”

While it was downloading and installing he asked me if I liked Klingons.

“What are they?” I asked, thinking they were some kind of sticky English sweets that had been introduced since I departed England.

I got an extended introduction to Star Trek, including several of the TV series and at least one movie before he realised the download had finished.

“Awesome,” he said excitedly. “This is how you use it,” and spent the next 30 seconds whizzing inexplicable things around the screen and flashing the iPad at me to make sure I understood.

“See? What do you think?”

I sat back and stared at him.

“Just one question,” I said. He looked disappointed.

“How to you start it, again?”

He looked at me in confusion. I don’t think he could conceive that I might not have grasped the advanced subtleties of the program in one brief run through. He looked at his watch and realised two hours had passed.

“Umm,” he said, leaping up.

He looked around wildly then went back to the tyre shop and found the puncture had been repaired and came back to tell me how absurdly and exploitatively expensive it had been.

“I’ve had a wonderful time,” he said. “Thank you so much for letting me play with your iPad.”

He looked lovingly at it and gave it a little caress then turned his back

determinedly and walked out of my life.

I, on the other hand, was feeling a distinct sugar high so I ordered some more coffee to replace it with a caffeine high and settled down to upload my latest videos.

I must have somehow managed to log into the wrong YouTube account as the one I got into had 3,183 subscribers so I logged out and tried again. It had gone up to 3,184 subscribers in the time it took to log out and back in again. Puzzled I had a look and this account had a channel called “Where’s Charlie” and the videos looked exactly like mine.

3,184 subscribers?

“What the hell did Clark do to my iPad?” I said aloud.

I checked again and I was wrong. There actually were 3,185 subscribers. How very strange.

I checked the comments and there were about 27 million. Well, a lot anyway. I skimmed them and there were the usual handful commenting, with the usual varying levels of appropriateness, on my bikinis, one asking for a “what are you doing” video and a lot commenting on my video about Farouk’s diving accident. At a rough estimate it seemed that about 2% thought I’d done the wrong thing and it was all my fault and the other 98% saying how lucky Farouk had been that I was there and what an incredible, amazing, awesome, wow!, and various other superlatives, job I’d done of rescuing him.

I wasn’t able to relish these comments though as they were swamped by comments on my “what I am doing” video which seemed strange since it wasn’t really much of a video. Just a short self-justifying speech. Then I noticed the playing time of the video. Forty three minutes.

“Oh god, what have I done?” I thought to myself and glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. As if anyone in that cafe cared.

I’d only gone and uploaded the wrong video! The one I thought I’d

deleted. I quickly checked and yes, it was still sitting there in the iPad. Presumably one of Clark's brown electronic things had interfered with the delete process.

"It made me cry," said one comment.

"You are so brave," said another. "So honest."

"Simply unbelievable."

"An inspiration."

"I'm going to get a divorce and follow in your footsteps."

And any number of variations on that theme.

One caught my eye but I disregarded it quickly.

"You should be ashamed of yourself for deserting your husband the man who should serve unquestioning you not fit to be a woman" and more of the same for several lines.

Unbelievable.

I logged off, unable to comprehend what was going on. I logged back in to find I now had 3201 subscribers and a little flag near the top saying I was "trending". I'd rather be called trendy to be honest but what the hell, trending will do.

"Well, I have no idea what's going on," I thought to myself, "and I have no idea what to do about it."

So I logged off and went and checked my email.

There was the usual spam telling me I could have as many Russian wives as I wanted, that I could cure my baldness simply by eating this particular, unspecified, amazing miracle food, that my worries over incontinence were a thing of the past and so on but there were four of interest. One from Zoe, one from Jean-Claude Pascal, one from the Abbeville Municipal Police and one from a manufacturer of diving

equipment.

Zoe sent me a message that was almost as long as her Honours thesis but which essentially boiled down to three points:

1. Shit happens and Farouk's accident wasn't my fault and I should stop feeling guilty about it.
2. I did an incredible job saving his life and I should be proud of that.
3. She'd persuaded Matt to bring her and the kids to France for a holiday because she wanted to meet up with me and get the low down face to face and asking where was I going to be around certain dates.

I sent her an email back saying I was pretty much over it, the diving here was superb, why did I have so many subscribers? and that on those dates I'd probably be in Italy.

Jean-Claude Pascal had sent a short message saying he felt privileged to have met me and making some allusion to "wonder woman". It was in French so I might have made an error in translation. I emailed back thanking him, in English, since I was feeling somewhat overwhelmed and felt the need to resort to my native tongue.

The Abbeville Municipal Police, or more specifically their Public Relations officer, told me they had been alerted to two references to them in my videos by a local citizen. This was almost certainly Jean-Claude. They wanted to know if I knew the name of the officer as they wanted to commend him in the interests of Anglo-French relations.

I emailed them back saying I didn't remember his name but I did remember that his collar number was a prime number so if they checked their rosters for that day they'd probably narrow it down to one or two, there being only 168 prime numbers under one thousand. I notice little things like that which is probably why I ended up doing a maths degree. In fact, one minor psychological problem I'd had pretty much ever since I first discovered numbers was counting silly things, like the number of footsteps from the bus stop to my school entrance (53, another prime number, coincidentally) or the number of times a particular teacher said "actually" (0.9 times per sentence on average). I hadn't realised it was a problem until my first year at uni when I was in bed with another student and found I wasn't enjoying it, not because he wasn't any good but because I was too busy counting

his thrusts to remember to enjoy myself. I realised then it was an absurd thing to do and consciously stopped myself counting every time I caught myself doing it. It took a month or so to break the habit and I managed to avoid counting the number of times I stopped myself counting, which I felt was an achievement in itself.

Anyway, a couple of days later they emailed back telling me the policeman's name and asking if I would mention it in a future video. I replied saying I'd be happy to.

The fourth email turned out to be from the company that had made the buoyancy jacket that Farouk had been wearing when the jet ski hit him. It seemed that the jacket was identifiable in earlier videos as I'd been seen a couple of times wearing it and their name was fairly prominent. Anyway, they proposed giving me, at no cost to myself, a replacement jacket of a new design made of a thicker, stronger material and also a not inconsiderable sum of money if I would post another video extolling the virtues of the new design.

I replied saying that I didn't wear buoyancy jackets anymore and that in view of what had happened a stronger material was a good idea. I also added that I didn't particularly want to test the new design, just in case this too wasn't strong enough. They replied saying they understood and offering an increased amount of money if I would wear the jacket in, say, one in three future videos and refrain from mentioning that I didn't wear it in the water. I replied saying OK, send me the jacket and if I liked it I'd mention it and be seen wearing it occasionally.

It was all very strange.

Chapter Twelve

The number of subscribers preyed on my mind even though the weather was improving almost every day and the diving was well beyond anything I'd done in the UK. I've watched any number of YouTube videos online over the years but I've never subscribed to any and I didn't understand why so many people were interested in me enough to want alerts of whenever I posted something new. OK I'm sure there are a few people with little to do but most people have families and jobs and hobbies and lead busy lives so following my little adventures seemed strange.

A couple of days after leaving Grinaud I was sitting on a nameless beach between dives contemplating why people might want to watch me when it occurred to me that some of them might be subscribing not because of what I've been doing but because of what I might be doing next. After all, as I generally had no idea of where I'd be going or what I'd be doing there might be a little suspense in it for the people watching me too. Having said that I was sure many also were interested in what I had done, which made things a little tricky. The problem with having more than a few friends watching was that I began to get the feeling that I had some sort of obligation to "do a good job".

Previously I'd just bashed out a little update saying I'd done something and left it at that but I started to feel I ought to do a little more to make the videos more interesting. It seemed to me that in the process I'd also be making my life more interesting too so the idea didn't have an obvious downside. So, when I rolled into Sainte-Maxime I went shopping.

Just to put things in perspective, Saint-Maxime is about eight miles from Grinaud on the D14 so it could be walked in half a day but it took me three days to drive it as there are endless places to go diving although the shipping lane from Sainte-Maxime stays quite close to the shore for a couple of miles. Anyway, my idea was to do some underwater photography.

Now I did have a tidy little sum sitting in my bank account with some more promised for the buoyancy jacket endorsement thingy so I could

afford some top notch equipment but realistically I'm no photographer and I'm not really that interested and I preferred to use the money to spend more time travelling. I wanted to give a little more to my subscribers but at no great cost to myself. So, I did a bit of an experiment. I bought myself a new camcorder with a couple of extra features and a better quality lens then rummaged around in a supermarket and a hardware store for some strong resealable clear plastic bags.

I went down to the beach at Sainte-Maxine and put some sheets of toilet paper inside one of the plastic bags and dumped it in the surf for twenty minutes while I had an ice cream then I checked the bag and found the toilet paper was still as dry as a dead dingo's donger. Encouraged I then added a decent sized stone and chucked the bag out into about a metre of water and decided that another ice cream would be just greedy. Instead I sat and watched a young woman with a couple of toddlers playing in the sand.

I'll never know, of course, if having children with George early on in our marriage would have made any difference. It's possible that with kids we'd have grown closer and happier but realistically it was also just as possible that we'd have grown apart and bitter anyway and the kids would have been an added burden and would have made this phase of my life very difficult. Logic has absolutely no impact on emotion so I ended up thinking wistfully about what might have been and forgot all about my plastic bag.

When I did remember it and went to look for it I couldn't find it anywhere so I mentally apologised to the Mediterranean for adding to its pollution and tried again with a bigger stone. An older boy, maybe six or seven years old, turned up at one point and asked me what I was doing and I told him I was taking my pet stone for a swim as it was a nice day and he was very impressed.

“What's his name?” he asked, closely watching the bag waving on the sea bed.

“Rocky,” I told him. He nodded thoughtfully then ran off to find a stone of his own.

He came back after a few minutes and wanted a plastic bag so I gave him one.

“What's the toilet paper for?” he wanted to know.

“In case Rocky gets wet when he's swimming,” I told him. “That way he can dry himself off and not catch a chill.”

I had to give him some sheets of toilet paper too and he carefully placed his bagged stone next to mine.

“What should I call him?” he asked.

There's only one obvious name for a stone and I'd already used it for mine so I was stumped.

“How about Basil?” I suggested after several moments of concentrated mental effort. Basalt was the only rock I could think of that could be contracted to a human name. I did think of Ignatius for igneous rocks in the middle of the night but it was far too late then. Anyway, after a few minutes of watching the rocks do nothing the boy's mother turned up and he excitedly told her what we were doing. She wasn't impressed and dragged him away although he did manage to retrieve Basil before they left. Maybe I would have been a bad mother. On the other hand, when that boy is old and in a nursing home his stone might well be the only treasured possession he has kept. Who knows?

Anyway, Rocky's toilet paper was dry too so the bags seemed to be waterproof, to around a metre anyway. Time for the big experiment. I fetched my mask and snorkel and put my old camcorder in a fresh bag and went for a swim. With a bit of experimenting with the position of the camera in the bag I found I could operate the controls moderately well and the little screen showed no sign of shorting out. There wasn't much of interest this shallow and close to the water's edge but there were a few smallish fish darting around here and there so I tried to film them.

OK the results weren't brilliant but they were around the same quality level as the only other time I'd done any underwater photography – on my Advanced training – and that was using some fancy borrowed

equipment. Not that I'm saying a cheap camera in a plastic bag is as good as a studio quality camera in a deep water rated housing. I'm saying that for someone with my skill level the cheapie version was sufficient.

Cool. All I needed now was a decent subject for my next YouTube video. I found that at Pointe des Sardinaux, further along the coast where there was a nice rocky outcrop with some sea urchins and shellfish clinging to the rock around three metres down. The shellfish had their shells open and were waving tentacles around to catch some food and I filmed them for a couple of minutes. Back on shore I found one tiny droplet of water in the bag so it looked as though three metres was about the practical limit. That doesn't sound much but there's a lot of life in the sea above three metres and hardly anyone without diving gear goes much below a metre and a half anyway. It did occur to me to try two plastic bags, one inside the other, to increase the depth but the extra thickness of the plastic made everything blurry and murky.

Did the underwater photography add to my diving experience? No not really. I preferred to go deeper and having to constantly watch out in case I tore the bag on a sharp rock was a pain but I persisted for a few days and got a few short sequences of tolerable quality. I also played around with the VideoPad software Clark had installed and though much of it was incomprehensible I did figure out, after a lot of trial and error, how to cut and splice video sequences. This meant I could cut out the long sequences of nothing much at all that I took surprisingly often when I thought I'd stopped recording and hadn't. I would have liked to put in some fancy fade out fade in type things to join sequences and even a voice over but that was beyond me so I left the underwater sequences silent and with nasty amateurish cuts to the next sequence although I was able to join on sections of me being enthusiastic which I hoped would satisfy my adoring fans. Charlie Thurston Superstar!

I rolled into Cannes on a gloriously sunny, warm but not too hot day. I actually had some business to attend to which was pretty cool. Most importantly, I needed to let a hairdresser loose with a razor on my head as I was starting to get a little shaggy around the back and sides and the top curls were beginning to get into my eyes. I don't know if

I've mentioned this before but the new hair style Jewels had given me was perfect for diving as it needed next to no attention beyond daily washing and conditioning to deal with the salt. The fact that I still felt like a million dollars in it was neither here nor there.

Irritatingly I also had to pick up the new buoyancy jacket from the company's dealership in Cannes. I was completely used to diving without one now and the thought of wearing the cumbersome thing was a bit of a downer but I'd foolishly signed a contract so I had to. I couldn't even talk about it in a video to my subscribers warning them of the danger of endorsements on personal freedom because the contract had a fairly explicit clause forbidding it. I also hadn't seen any sign of the money yet since I had yet to mention the new jacket in any bulletins.

Anyway, I drove around for a while and spotted a decent looking hairdressers then cruised some more to find a parking spot. The town seemed unusually busy, compared to the other towns I'd passed through recently but I did find a spot at the other end of the Boulevard de la Croisette, which is basically the beach promenade, and walked back to the hairdressers, marvelling at the array of extremely expensive cars parked along it. Astonishingly every other car was a Rolls Royce, usually a convertible, and sprinkled among them were Ferraris, Lamborghinis, a McLaren and god knows what else. There was a top of the range Lexus there too, looking downmarket and dowdy and I had a feeling that my cute little van might be towed away as a derelict eyesore.

At the hairdressers I explained what I wanted and the girl tried to talk me out of it and into doing something "très chic pour madame" and was bitterly disappointed when I refused to consider it. She got her revenge by charging me enough to buy a decent portion of one of the Rolls' on the Boulevard and I had to go and sit on the beach for twenty minutes to calm down. It was surprisingly difficult to find a spot to sit as there were so many people. Few of them, by the way, in swimming costumes.

Still, I calmed down after a while and made my way to the dive shop at the far end of the Boulevard and explained who I was then had to walk all the way back to the van to get my passport since they weren't

going to give away an expensive buoyancy jacket to any old stranger who happened to walk in. It was irritating but I told myself I was being paid for doing this and not to let it get to me.

On the opposite side of the road to the beach I spotted a smart looking cafe so I decided that a decent coffee and something to eat would be a good idea. It was busy, which is always a good sign, but a couple were just leaving as I arrived so I grabbed their table before anyone else did and basked in the pleasant sunshine.

I ordered some coffee and a hunk of disgustingly delicious looking chocolate gâteau and couldn't help noticing a middle aged couple at a table not very far away talking and glancing at me. Perhaps they knew that the downmarket and somewhat dirty van at the end of the Boulevard belonged to me or that my hair was not très chic. Anyway, I ignored them.

After a couple of minutes the woman got up and left and, to my surprise the man walked over.

“Sorry to bother you,” he said in fairly poor French, “but my wife and I were just talking about you.”

It occurred to me that perhaps they were subscribers to my channel. Maybe he wanted an autograph? Delusions of grandeur can do strange things to people's minds.

“Oh yes?” I said. He was medium height and deeply tanned.

“You have an air of contentment about you,” he said.

“Would you prefer English?” I asked. He was struggling with French.

“Yes please,” he said in English with an accent I couldn't place. “Can I join you for a minute or two? I'm meeting someone and they won't be long.”

I gestured to one of the spare chairs at my table and he fetched his drink from his table and sat down. His own table was immediately taken.

“We were people watching,” he said. “If you look around, this place is full of very wealthy people but if you look closely none of them seem to be happy whereas you are clearly not wealthy but your happiness radiates, if that makes sense. Are you English?”

“Yes,” I said. I was wondering whether to be pleased at looking happy or insulted for looking cheap.

“I’m Bill,” he said, holding out a hand, “from Australia.”

“Charlie.” I touched his hand and put mine back on my coffee mug handle. He showed no sign of recognising me so I figured he wasn’t a subscriber after all.

“Are you here for the festival?” he asked.

“What festival?” I answered. He looked at me like I was from Mars.

“The Film Festival,” he said then held out his arms sideways. “This is Cannes!”

I knew it was Cannes, but I’d completely lost track of the date. I had had every intention of avoiding Cannes during the festival but here I was slap in the middle of it. That explained the crowds and the fancy cars. At a rough guess, everyone around me in the cafe was probably worth \$100 million or more. Each. No wonder I looked cheap.

“Shit,” I said. “I was hoping to avoid it.”

“Why else would you be here?” he asked.

“I’m touring the coast,” I told him. “I spend all my time diving in isolated spots. I’ve lost track of the date.”

“Right,” he said. We both struggled to think of something to say.

“Are you in the movies?” I asked after a strained silence. I didn’t recognise him but I’ve never been much of a celebrity spotter. He could be Matt Damon for all I knew.

“God no, I'm just a retired travel agent.”

“Are you interested in movies then?”

“Not particularly,” he said. “I'm just here to catch up with some old friends who are in the movies.”

“Anyone I might have heard of?” I asked.

He smiled. “Maybe.”

Well if he didn't want to tell me it was no skin off my nose. I busied myself with my cake. It was even more delicious than it looked.

“Bill! There you are,” came a voice from the Boulevard and a tall, well built man made his way over. Bill stood up and they shook hands.

“Grab a seat,” Bill told the man, clearly forgetting that this was my table.

The man looked at me enquiringly.

“This is Charlie,” said Bill, “she's a diver. Charlie this is Gavin, he's into otters.”

His phone rang and he walked a few steps away to answer it. Gavin sat down.

“Diving eh, do a bit of that myself.”

He had a soft, gentle voice with a faint lilting Scots accent.

“Do you dive round here?” I asked, thinking he might have some suggestions for good diving spots.

“Oh god no,” he said. “In my lake.”

Oh goody, he was one of these rich layabouts. I have an aversion to rich layabouts as I am a poor layabout. I had some more cake. Why are the French so spectacularly good at making cakes?

He must have sensed I wasn't impressed.

“Bill said I was into otters,” he added. “I run an otter sanctuary and breeding and research centre in Greece. The centre is on the edge of a lake, it's not really mine.”

OK, this was more interesting. I was about to ask more about it when Bill came back.

“That was Kasey,” he said to Gavin. “She's running late.”

“Ahh,” said Gavin. “Usually happens, not to worry.”

“I'll order some drinks when she gets here,” said Bill.

They started talking some catch up talk and it seemed they'd known each other for a while. I slowly finished my cake then got stuck into my coffee.

I was speculating on whether Gavin looked the outdoors type because he ran an animal sanctuary or if he ran a sanctuary because he was the outdoors type. Either way he wasn't bad looking. With a sudden whirl of expensive fabric a slim blonde of around 25 materialised with a loud “Bill! Darling!” and much kissing of cheeks and distant hugging. She looked faintly familiar.

“Kasey, you're looking great as usual,” said Bill, standing up. Gavin stood up too.

Her name rang a bell.

“This is Gavin Maxwell, the man I was telling you about, Gavin, Kasey Kaley.”

Ping! Kasey Kaley, the Australian movie star. I'd seen a movie with her in but I couldn't remember what it was called.

She sat down and glanced at me. She clearly didn't recognise me. Unsurprisingly. I very much doubted 3000 YouTube subscribers would register on the radar of an Oscar winner. Or was it a Golden Globe?

Whatever.

Bill introduced me, as a diver again, since it was pretty much all he knew about me. Clearly I was no one of any significance so she turned back to Bill and started a long story of how she'd been delayed talking to some producer or other about something. I was picking up my buoyancy jacket in readiness to leave when Bill ordered some drinks and got me another coffee so I decided to hang around and drink it. Being worth considerably less than \$100 million I tended to accept free drinks whenever the opportunity arose.

“Kasey, you promised you'd talk to Gavin,” said Bill, gently admonishing her.

Kasey was clearly an accomplished actress as she managed to convey a deep, long, heartfelt sigh while smiling and looking radiant. She turned the full wattage of her smile onto Gavin who wilted slightly.

“I don't know if Bill has told you,” said Gavin, “but I run the Prespa Otter Sanctuary and Research Centre in Greece.”

“I'm afraid I only contribute to specific charities,” said Kasey instantly.

“Oh, I'm not here to ask you for money,” said Gavin cheerfully. “Just some time.”

“Time?” Kasey was clearly puzzled. “I have a very busy schedule ...”

“Perhaps I should say your time piece,” said Gavin, carefully. “Rather than your personal time. All I am asking is that you give me your watch.”

“For your otters?” Kasey was confused and she looked at the watch on her wrist.

“Yes,” said Gavin. “That's all,” and he sat back and waited. The silence stretched then Kasey laughed and undid her watch strap and handed it to him.

“Thank you very much,” said Gavin, beaming. He pulled a small printed card out of the inside pocket of his jacket and deftly removed the back of the watch cover and noted its serial number on the card.

“Would you please just sign this to say that you gave me the watch?” asked Gavin.

Kasey leaned forward and signed the card with his pen.

“I hope the otters find it very useful,” she said, laughing again.

She turned to Bill and they started talking about some movie or other than she was about to start making. Gavin put the watch and the card in a velvet bag and slipped it inside his jacket then smiled at me. Our drinks arrived and Kasey took one sip then announced she had another appointment and disappeared as quickly as she arrived, promising to see Bill again on his yacht later that night.

“Why did you want her watch?” I asked Gavin. I was intrigued.

Gavin laughed.

“I set up the sanctuary six years ago, mostly using my own money,” he said. “And I started doing the rounds trying to raise more money and didn’t really get anywhere so I talked to Bill here who helped me.”

“The problem is,” said Bill, “wealthy people get asked to contribute to charities or invest in projects all the time. They’re under a constant barrage of funding requests almost non stop, every day. Everyone they meet is trying to get money off them and they quickly learn to ignore virtually everything and if they do get interested in something they send in teams of accountants and analysts to work out every possible angle. Gavin didn’t stand a chance since he didn’t have a clue.”

“Bill put me on to a marketing consultant in London,” added Gavin. “He told me that if you ask someone for money they instantly get defensive. The more money they have the more defensive they get and he came up with the idea of asking celebrities for something unimportant to them which I could sell later. He suggested watches.”

“Why watches?” I asked.

“The kind of people I approach think nothing of paying \$30,000 or \$50,000 for a watch. Now if I asked them for \$30,000 I'll get shown the door but if I ask them for their watch, well it was something they bought a while ago and it's probably time they bought a new one anyway so usually they're happy to hand it over just to get rid of me.” said Gavin. “So I then sell it.”

“Is there much of a market for used watches?” My own watch was a practical but very unstylish dive computer.

“There is if they were owned by a celebrity,” he answered. “That why I got Kasey Kaley to sign the card. It gives the watch a provenance and makes it worth more than she paid for it in the first place.”

“Wow,” I said. “Who was the marketing consultant in London?”

It would be ironic if he were George, my ex husband. Gavin mentioned someone I'd never heard of.

“Do you only ask for watches?” I asked.

“Only when I meet someone for the first time,” he said. “If they agree to meet me a second time then it's usually for a straight cash donation but that doesn't happen very often.”

“Does it usually work? Asking for a watch I mean,” I asked.

“Yes, but I rarely get the opportunity to meet people at this level. Low level people like me simply don't get the introductions. That's where Bill comes in.”

I looked at Bill. “I thought you said you were a travel agent.”

“He is, but only for the extremely rich,” said Gavin.

“Wow,” I said. I didn't know what else to say.

“You have to remember that people like Kasey operate differently to

most,” said Bill. “On a typical day she’ll be at a film studio by five in the morning and sit through hours of make up and costuming and so on then do several hours of intensive rehearsing and acting then quite probably have to go to another studio to act in another movie later in the same day or to a TV studio for an interview or a publicity event. If she’s lucky they’ll both be in the same town but it doesn’t always happen. On top of that she has to meet people about upcoming movies and possible future movies and everything is constantly changing. A meeting arranged in the morning can be postponed or cancelled in the afternoon and a different meeting arranged in its place. It’s the same for most top celebrities. They have to be constantly on top of what they are doing and at the same time organising their future work. A typical High Street travel agent simply couldn’t cope with the constant changes in arrangements. Anyone can book a plane ticket or a hotel room. My role was more to smooth things, keep everything under control and eliminate problems.”

This was fascinating. I always thought big stars sat by their pools all day and only ventured out for swish parties. It never occurred to me that they actually had to do any work, or even go looking for jobs.

“Listen,” said Bill, looking at his watch. “Gavin and I have to meet Elaine in a few minutes and I’d love to talk to you about your touring and diving. I retired a couple of years ago and we’ve been touring ourselves and it’s much more interesting than talking business. Why don’t you join us for dinner? Gavin will be there too.”

“Will Kasey be there?” I’d found her intimidating.

“Oh no, she’s invited as she’s a friend but frankly there’s too much networking with people who can help her career to spend time with me. We’ll get together after the festival is over.”

“OK,” I said, bravely. The prospect was scary as this was a totally different world but I was also determined to embrace new experiences. I might even be able to get some video footage for my channel. “Where and when?”

“My yacht in the harbour.” said Bill. “Turn up anytime.”

He and Gavin stood up to go then Bill saw the look on my face.

“Don't be intimidated,” he added. “It's by far the smallest yacht there. Not much more than a rowing boat.”

“Oh, before you go,” I said. I'd just thought of something.

“Yes?”

“What's a donger?”

They both started laughing. Apparently it's Australian slang for a penis.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up in my van in the car park of Le Vieux Port the next morning with a splitting headache and a vague feeling I might have made a fool of myself.

After Bill and Gavin had left the cafe I'd gone out of Cannes to find a beach for a dive but found I was too preoccupied with the dinner invitation. Dinner with multi-millionaires wasn't part of my normal daily routine and I had nothing to wear so I drove back into Cannes to find something that was cheap but didn't look it.

My normal fairly logical mind had clearly deserted me. Anyone else would have realised within seconds that when the world's ultra wealthy hit town for the festival fortnight there would be absolutely nothing cheap anywhere and the prices were absolutely shocking. So I sat in the van for a while debating whether to send a note saying I couldn't make it or simply not turn up. After all, I'd never meet these people again so my rudeness would never be called to account.

Then it occurred to me that the invitation had been made by someone who knew damned well I wasn't even rich, let alone wealthy and I remembered that Gavin was basically a professional beggar so he couldn't be that well off either, especially if he had sunk all his own money into the sanctuary. It also occurred to me that if I took my camera I might be able to make a little video for my channel to add some variety for my audience.

I calmed down a bit and drove out of town again and found a beach and went through my wardrobe, which was essentially two suitcases wedged up against one side of the van behind the compressor. The sexy, vaguely fashionable skinny jeans were now a little baggy as I'd lost some weight and were no longer sexy or even vaguely fashionable, so I made do with a simple frock and my trusty, walnut cracking high heels which looked quite decent after being vigorously polished with a damp cloth. Some basic makeup applied in the rear view mirror completed my ensemble.

Bill had said to come around anytime and since it was almost five and I couldn't go diving now anyway because I was all dressed up I figured

I might as well go and get the thing over with. It was making me nervous and slightly irritable and there was no point in hanging round aimlessly and getting more nervous and irritable.

Bill had lied to me. His yacht wasn't a glorified row boat, it was a full on cabin cruiser with two guest bedrooms in addition to the main suite and the kitchen was bigger and better equipped than the one in my house in London. He hadn't lied about it being the smallest yacht there though, some were more than twice the size. More importantly, he and Gavin were both dressed informally in shorts and Elaine was in a simple frock as well.

I had remembered to bring my camcorder and I asked Bill and Elaine if it was OK to record a little tour of their boat and they graciously did just that and also gave me a very short segment on why they were in Cannes. I was too shy to ask Gavin for an interview about his otter sanctuary and he didn't offer.

Two couples turned up for dinner as well, from other boats moored nearby, and at dinner I was seated next to Gavin.

"I'm guessing from your accent you're from Scotland," I said to him.

"Och aye," he said in an exaggerated Scots accent, "I'm a highlander, y'ken."

"So how did a Scot end up running an otter sanctuary in Greece?"

"I'm a civil engineer," he replied. "I was part of a team building a dam in Greece and I fell in love with the place."

"But otters?"

"Ahh, that's a long story. The simple version is that I grew up on a farm in the highlands and we had a stream running through the property. A family of otters lived by that stream and since I was a shy, lonely little lad I used to go and talk to them for hours and they didn't seem to mind me too much."

"So why Greek otters and not Scottish otters?"

“They're endangered in Greece. And since I love Greece and I love otters, why not try to save them?”

We were interrupted at that point by Bill telling everyone that I was touring the French coastline and making diving videos which put the spotlight on me. Someone asked me what I did with them. Presumably this being Cannes during the Film Festival they expected me to say I made documentaries for National Geographic or something like that and they seemed a little disappointed when I told them they were just for friends and I had a YouTube channel.

That was a big mistake. Bill insisted on going to my YouTube channel and displaying some of my videos on a screen the size of my mattress for everyone to watch. I had a brief thrill when I saw that the number of subscribers had gone over nine thousand then I had half an hour of extreme embarrassment. It's one thing to play back your videos on a small screen when you're alone or to know that, in an abstract way, several thousand people have watched them but larger than life in front of a group of strangers sitting beside me? I resolved to wear makeup in future videos and concentrate on my diction. If there ever was another video, which I doubted.

Fortunately, Bill kept to the shorter videos and didn't broadcast my forty three minute one or the one about Farouk and after a few, polite comments, most of them went back to talking to Bill and Elaine about their travels around the Indian Ocean and celebrities and so on. When I stopped feeling excessively embarrassed I went back to talking to Gavin.

He told me a little more about his sanctuary, which was on the shore of Lake Prespa which is partly in northern Greece and Albania but mostly in Macedonia.

“I sunk most of my savings into buying about sixteen square kilometres of the coastline, right up against the Albanian border” he told me, “which included an old farmhouse, but there's still a mortgage on it. The problem is finding enough money to equip the place and keep it running and pay a pathetic salary to my assistant. Money's always a problem though.”

“Does your wife like otters too?” I’m not sure why I asked him that since, although he was a nice, genuine sort of man, I was not long divorced and definitely not looking for a relationship. Anyway, I’d be back on the road the next day and he’d be returning to Greece.

“I’m not married,” he told me. “I live alone with around fifty otters and Kristos comes in three days a week. In fact I hardly ever leave the place.”

I was going to ask him more about life on his lake as it sounded quite interesting when we heard a lot of footsteps on the main deck and Bill went to investigate. He came back with Kasey Kaley and two extremely large bodyguards with shaved heads, sunglasses, even though it was dark out, and shoulders that wouldn't fit through the doorway. Even sideways it was a tight fit. With twelve people in it, or sixteen if you allowed for the size of the two bodyguards, the lounge on this boat still didn't seem full. I could have parked my van in the main bathroom and there was a second bathroom for the two guest rooms to share. On the whole I think I preferred my van. It was cosy.

I grabbed my camera and started recording. Despite her having her back to me at that moment, as she was talking to Bill and Elaine, Kasey's superstar instincts sensed a camera on her and she turned with practised grace and superbly faked sincerity to find out where it was. God forbid she should be filmed unawares and unprepared. She unerringly honed in on me, as I had the camera, and the bodyguards tensed for action.

“Charlie, darling, how nice to see you again!” without the slightest trace of hesitation.

I was deeply impressed she remembered my name, or even recognised me come to that. She gave a slight flick of her hand which, when I watched the video later, I realised was the signal to the guys that this was an OK situation so they relaxed into watchfulness again rather than throwing me overboard with heavy chains around my ankles and destroying the camera.

“Hi there Kasey,” I said, camera still rolling, or whatever the technical term is, “could you say Hello to my YouTube subscribers?” I think I

was already a little tipsy at that point as ordinarily I wouldn't have had the courage.

Kasey showed why she was a superstar. She had no real idea who I was and absolutely no idea of what was happening but here was a chance to connect with some fans.

“Hello to all you fans of my dearest friend Charlie,” she gushed and unconsciously made sure her cleavage was at the perfect angle to the camera, “who's here at the Cannes Film Festival with me for the opening of Black Dog Days ...” and went on to give a 20 second promo for her latest movie then ended by blowing a couple of kisses to the camera.

After checking that I'd stopped recording she gave me a look that quite clearly said “don't ever do that again.” A few minutes later she apologised profusely to Bill and the rest of us and departed with her bodyguards.

“That was short and sweet,” commented Gavin.

“Don't be too hard on her,” said Bill. “She's got to attend seven parties tonight to promote the movie. I'm astounded she found time to get here at all.”

There was a brief general discussion of the rigours of life as a superstar then people started breaking up into smaller groups and Gavin and I gravitated back to each other. We spent much of the rest of the evening chatting as, despite him being “a shy, lonely little lad” who lived alone on a lake in the wilds of Greece he was remarkably easy to talk to. The wine flowed remarkably easily too. Hence the splitting headache in the morning.

Coffee and a couple of aspirin dealt with the headache after a while and I felt up to going back to Bill's boat to thank them and make my farewells and indirectly check I hadn't got too drunk and made a fool of myself. I hadn't apparently, although Gavin had walked me back to my van to make sure I didn't fall into the sea. I had a nagging suspicion that I might have kissed him goodnight but I could just as easily have dreamt it. Either way, it's not something you can actually

ask about. If I hadn't it would be embarrassing to ask and if I had it would be insulting to him for me to not quite remember it. I also asked Bill to apologise to Kasey for filming her but Bill dismissed it.

“Happens all the time,” he said. “She can't even relax at home since there'll be people on her staff making notes for their books about her after they leave and there's always paparazzi with long lenses around her houses in case she goes into the garden or stands too close to a window. Hell of a life, poor kid. I have no idea why people want to be major stars. I couldn't handle it.”

I was unsettled though and an urge grew within me to get away from France. I'd spent almost four months travelling and diving along three hundred miles of French coastline. So instead of stopping at every available opportunity to go diving I headed for the Italian border. The urge wasn't that demanding though so although I could get from Cannes to the border in probably a couple of hours I still spent a couple of days doing it and had a few dives at some of the more interesting spots but I didn't do my usual stopping at every beach.

I did stop at a cafe in Nice to upload my Cannes videos, the one of Bill and his boat and the one of Kasey. The first was a bit iffy as the camera didn't have a wide angle lens so the rooms didn't come out as well as they could have done but Kasey was superb. I agreed with Bill, I don't know how she handles it.

I also had an email from the company that made my wetsuit. They wanted to give me a new wetsuit since the old one had a couple of unsightly tears in it and they also wanted me to have the new one on display in every video, either on me or hanging up in view, and have their name and website address displayed for ten seconds in a banner at the bottom at the end of each video. They proposed a figure they considered adequate reimbursement.

I thought about it for the time it takes to drink an iced coffee and decided that the loss of my freedom wasn't worth it so I emailed back saying I wouldn't even consider the idea unless they quadrupled their offer and even then I'd only consider it. I figured that would get rid of them. I was also, I noted, two subscribers short of ten thousand. Pretty cool really.

I was a mile or so from the border with Italy when the heavens opened. There was a flash of lightening and a couple of seconds later a tremendous clap of thunder then it was almost as though I'd driven into the sea with all the rain. I slowed down dramatically as visibility dropped to almost nothing. The storm lasted no longer than half a minute then settled down to a thin drizzle but the road was awash with an inch or two of water.

I noticed a girl standing forlornly on the other side of the road. She looked soaked and I took pity on her. I don't pick up hitchhikers as a rule since I'm a woman on her own and you never know who you're giving a lift to or what their agenda might be but this girl looked so sad and pathetic it tore my heart and, as no one on her side of the road seemed to pay her any attention, I did a U turn and drove back to where she was.

I pulled up next to her and wound down the window. One of the few advantages of having a van from a left hand drive country in a right hand drive country was that I could easily talk to pedestrians without having to shout from the other side. Not that I did, of course, except a couple of times when I asked for directions to a laundromat. I offered her a lift and she just stared blankly at me then reached out to open my door and realised I was on the wrong side of the van and dropped her hand. She didn't say anything.

“Round the other side,” I said, “this is an English van.”

She silently walked around the front of the van and got in. She squelched since her jeans and thin sweater were completely sodden. She had a cheap plastic holdall with her. She looked about twelve and she was clearly pregnant. She clicked on her seat belt.

“Jesus,” I thought to myself.

“Where are you heading?” I asked.

“Monaco,” she said quietly, staring straight ahead.

The border with Monaco was maybe ten miles down the road and since the entire country was maybe a mile and a half long it wasn't

going to be any hassle taking her wherever she wanted to go there, so I pulled out and headed for Monaco.

Two hundred yards down the road she tried to jump out of the van.

I slammed on the brakes and swerved sharply to get onto the hard shoulder then leaned over to grab the door handle as it swung shut again.

“Jesus,” I shouted, “what the hell are you doing?”

She let go of the door and burst into tears, hunched over with both hands pressed into her face. Her entire body wracked with distress. She still had the seat belt on fortunately.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout at you,” I said. “Stop crying.”

She shook her head and carried on. “I can’t go home,” she muttered, “I can’t, I can’t.”

“Oh shit,” I thought to myself, “what the hell have I got myself into?”

Obviously I couldn't just let her get out of the van in her state so I put the van into gear again and slowly headed towards Menton which was just a little bit down the road, keeping a close eye on her in case she tried to jump out again.

I saw a motel on the edge of town and on impulse I turned in. I vaguely thought that it would be a good idea to get the girl dry and cleaned up a bit, as she was quite smelly, and try to find out what was going on. Either that or take her to the police but I had a gut feeling that wouldn't be helpful. I was beginning to suspect she was a runaway teenager and I didn't think the police would be too happy to find an adult with a runaway teenager in her van. It didn't occur to me until later that they would be considerably less happy to find an adult with a runaway teenager in a motel room.

“We need to get you dry and cleaned up,” I told her. “When did you last eat?”

“Yesterday,” she said. She'd stopped crying and was back to her blank self.

“OK, there's some food here,” I reached behind the passenger seat and pulled out my bag with my food in it. “Help yourself while I go and get a room to dry you off.”

I left her in the van munching on an apple while I got a twin room and asked if there was a laundromat nearby. They told me they had one at the back of the motel. She was still there when I got back, attacking a baguette.

“I'm Charlie,” I said, leading her in to the room, “what's your name?”

“Giselle,” she said, hanging on tightly to her holdall.

“How old are you?”

“Nearly sixteen,”

“Great,” I thought. “There's something seriously wrong going on here.”

“You run a bath and toss your clothes through the door and I'll take them to the laundry to be cleaned and dried.”

She stared at me for a few moments then went into the bathroom, still clutching her holdall and the baguette. A minute or so later the door opened a little and her sodden clothes came flying through. She shut the door instantly and I heard her lock it.

I got my bag of coins out of the van and took her clothes to the laundry and put them through a fast cycle then the drier. I sat there while the machines did their thing wondering what the hell to do. Then I took them back to the room and knocked on the bathroom door and called her name. I was half hoping she'd some spare clothes in the holdall and had done a runner while I was away. She hadn't. She opened the door a little and I passed her her clothes and she put them on and came out nervously.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked. She certainly looked a lot better now

she was clean and dry and she didn't smell any more.

“Why am I here?” she asked.

“You were a mess,” I said bluntly. “And you tried to jump out of my van into the middle of the road. Sit down, you need to tell me what's going on.”

I had my suspicions as eleven years in teaching gives you an idea of what goes on in some teenagers lives and now I'd been able to get a good look at her I estimated she was probably six or seven months pregnant. And not yet sixteen. This kid had problems beyond some tatty clothes.

Chapter Fourteen

“Madame Simoneaux?” I asked on the phone.

“Yes,” she replied, “who is this please?”

“I have news of Giselle, your daughter.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, a pause then a torrent of questions.

“Where is she? Is she well? Who are you? ...”

I waited until she paused for breath.

“She is safe and well. I need to talk to you and Monsieur Simoneaux.”

“How much to you want? We are not rich people.”

“No, this isn't about money.”

It should have occurred to me that I might sound like a kidnapper but I'm not experienced in these things.

“What is there to talk about then? Where is she? I will come and get her this instant.”

I didn't want to get into details over the phone, especially as I was ringing from a public pay phone. I wanted to talk to them both, face to face, and explain Giselle's side of the story before reintroducing them.

“She wants to come home but she is too scared,” I told her mother.

There was a long silence.

“Can we meet somewhere?” I asked after a few moments.

“Bring her home, we can talk there,” she said.

“No,” I said. “Somewhere public.”

She thought for a few moments then named a cafe in the Rue du Gabian and we agreed to meet there in an hour.

Giselle and I had sat on the separate beds in the motel room for much of the night. At first she was very suspicious and scared but slowly the warmth of the room and the food and my quiet, concerned persistence had worked and she'd started to open up. I knew that I was beginning to gain her trust when around midnight she opened her holdall and brought out a once fluffy, once blue stuffed toy cat and told me it's name was Miette. Miette was the only thing she had taken with her when she had climbed out of her bedroom window and run away from home.

I don't imagine for one moment she told me the full story. I'm pretty sure things happened that she'll never tell anyone but the essence was that her parents, who were both lecturers at the University of Monaco, put her under intense pressure to study and achieve academically and she simply wasn't up to it. Giselle was by no means a stupid girl but from my years as a teacher I could tell that she wasn't ever going to be an academic overachiever. Anyway, the further she progressed at school the weaker her grades had become and the more her parents had pressured her to study, study and more study. She'd heard that there were drugs you could take to make you smarter and she'd asked around at school and someone, she wouldn't say who and it didn't really matter, had sold her some. She didn't know what they were but she'd taken them and they seemed to work for a while since they relaxed her and made it easier to study harder and for longer and her grades improved.

But that hadn't lasted long and she'd progressed to other drugs which, inevitably, were more expensive and she'd run out of money to pay for them. She'd started stealing money from her parents when she could since there was no way she could tell them she needed money to buy drugs to make her as smart as they wanted her to be. Then the day had come when she needed to buy more but hadn't had enough money. So she paid the only way she could.

“It was only once,” she told me between sobs, “and I was a virgin.”

By this point I was sitting on the bed next to her with my arm around her. Parents have no idea what their children sometimes have to do to live up to their expectations.

Almost inevitably she had become pregnant and had spent weeks in agony, desperately worrying about what to do. Her grades had suffered and her parents had got angrier and angrier. She couldn't talk to anyone. No one could possibly understand, least of all her parents or her teachers. She'd thought of going to her doctor but figured that he'd only tell her parents. For them, everything was so simple, study and excel, nothing else mattered.

Except Miette. She could always talk to Miette. Miette was always there and always understood.

Then one day she saw herself in a mirror and realised people were going to start noticing very soon. She had no options left and did the only thing she could think of. She ran away to hopefully a better life. A life of freedom where no one would make her study and she'd be able to have her baby and raise him or her on her own. She climbed out of her bedroom window with Miette in her hand and the handful of euros she kept in a tin and walked to Italy.

“Why did you go to Italy?” I'd asked her.

“So the French police wouldn't be able to find me,” she'd said. It was a sensible answer, given the context.

She had got a ride from an old man who had been very nice to her. He'd been very gentle and sweet and had bought her a hot meal and listened as she poured out some of her troubles and he'd told her that she could stay at his house in Genoa. His wife was away and Giselle could stay for a few days while she sorted out her life and decided what to do.

“Matteo never touched me,” Giselle told me. “Not once, he was always so nice and a perfect gentleman.”

It occurred to me that because she spent so much time studying she had ended up quite naïve. She hadn't even been able to learn much of

the real world from television since she wasn't allowed to watch TV until she'd finished her homework and done the extra studying her parents had set her, which had only increased as her grades fell.

After a week or two of being looked after by Matteo he'd sat her down and had a gentle talk with her and had explained that he would like her to meet a friend of his.

“Just be nice to him,” he'd said.

“He told me that since he was looking after me and paying for everything he thought it was only fair that I helped him a little with his friends,” Giselle said. “He was so nice and I wanted to help him as a way of saying thank you, so I agreed.”

Anyway, the friend had turned up and Matteo had taken them both to her bedroom and left and things had turned nasty. She'd very quickly realised what “be nice” actually meant and when she refused the man had got angry and started to hit her and throw her around and had torn the nice new clothes Matteo had bought her.

She'd hit the man over the head with a bedside lamp and escaped out of the door, remembering to grab Miette on the way. Matteo had tried to chase her but apparently he was too old to catch her and she'd run for kilometres and got completely lost in a strange city and had slept in a park under some bushes.

Someone had seen her there in the morning, cold and hungry, and pointed her out to a policeman but when Giselle saw the policeman coming towards her she'd run away from him as well.

“But why didn't you tell the police what had happened?” I asked

“I thought he was going to arrest me for hitting that man,” she told me. “I thought Matteo had reported me and the police were looking for me.”

Needless to say she didn't speak Italian. She'd taken some clothes from a washing line so she didn't stand out in torn clothes and lived on the streets of Genoa for weeks, stealing food, begging on the

streets, sleeping in doorways and parks and surviving as best she could until she'd met a woman who was giving hot soup and pasta to the homeless. The woman, Bernadette, spoke French and they'd talked and Bernadette had pointed out that Giselle was going to have a baby and there was no way she could do that living on the streets and even if she did manage to give birth alone there was no way she'd be able to bring the child up on the streets.

They'd talked for several evenings while Bernadette was distributing food and after a while Giselle had come to understand that she really only had three options. She could tough it out on the streets, alone and more or less defenceless and seven months pregnant. She could go to the social services but, since she wasn't Italian and the social services were chronically underfunded, the best thing she could hope for was to be sent back to France for the French social services to deal with. Or she could go back home to her parents.

Giselle had thought about it and come to the conclusion that she really only had one option. So with great trepidation and fear she had started to make her way back to France and her parents.

"If it was just me I would have stayed on the streets," she told me, "but I had to think of my baby."

She'd walked part of the way and someone had given her a lift to Grimaldi which is right on the border and she'd walked across and got caught in the storm and been picked up by me.

It had taken all night and most of the next day, interspersed with some sleep, for Giselle to tell me all this. She didn't want to talk about what it had been like on the streets but she'd been cold and very hungry a lot of the time and because she didn't speak much Italian she'd been given a hard time by the homeless Italians. She did let slip that she'd been in a fight with an older woman over some food scraps she'd found in a refuse bin and lost but I guessed the time had been so traumatic she was suppressing the memories of it. I didn't see any point in pressing her.

Incredibly she was still in tolerably good health although she was very thin and she told me she could feel the baby move sometimes so that

was still progressing, presumably in reasonable health, as well although the sooner she saw a doctor the better.

What saddened me, in some ways more than her story, was that the weekend I was off diving when George had told me he wanted a divorce, Giselle was paying for drugs with sex and within a day or two of me leaving England to travel and have fun Giselle was climbing out of her window, too afraid and confused to talk to anyone and get help. All the time I was reinventing myself and having the time of my life this poor kid was going through hell. It saddened me and twisted on my conscience. Maybe Giselle was repaying the cosmos for my good fortune. Somehow I felt I was to blame even though, logically, I couldn't possibly be.

I'm not a religious person but I did feel that fate had intervened. When Giselle explained, in her soft, matter of fact but at the same time innocent and pleading, way that when she'd crossed the border she'd just given up I got a definite feeling that I had been sent to help her. Giselle knew exactly what she had to do, go back to her parents and hope that they would somehow understand and help, but she'd lost courage. Just past the border, in the rain, she simply couldn't summon up the strength and determination to do it, not even for her baby's sake. I'd been sent to carry her over that last, final, hurdle. To get her to actually talk to them.

Which is why I rang her mother.

While Giselle had slept I'd decided the best thing to do was for me to meet her parents and explain things from Giselle's point of view as she was too scared and intimidated by them to do it properly for herself. What happened after that would be down to the three of them but someone had to make that contact and start the ball rolling. Failing that, the only other thing I could do would be to dump Giselle on the police since I knew nothing of the French social services system and I was reluctant to do that. When Giselle woke up I explained my plan to her and she numbly accepted it. As I said, she wasn't a fool, she was just a very scared, lost, lonely, helpless child who needed someone to take her by the hand and lead her home.

I am far from being a trained social worker but my years of teaching

had left me with some understanding of children and their parents. It's well known among teachers that as soon as you meet the parents of a child who's having problems at school you see why the kids are that way and I had many a story of my own about certain kids and meeting their parents at Parents' Evenings. Perhaps simplistically, I felt that Giselle's parents were academics who hadn't connected with her enough to find out who she actually was and saw her as simply an extension of themselves. Since they were both clearly intelligent people I hoped they would be able to understand her once someone explained her to them.

To this end I decided it would be best if I met them, alone and unarmed, with just Miette to establish my credentials. It also seemed to me that if I had Miette with me, Giselle would be less likely to run away from the van while I was talking to her parents. She'd held on to Miette through thick and thin and I doubted she would abandon the cat now or, perhaps more significantly, let the cat abandon her. Then, after explaining the situation, I would bring Giselle in to meet them and there would be a happy reunion and everything would be peaches and cream and happy families.

When I did my teacher training I had to spend two weeks at a primary school before the teacher training course began. There were about twenty of us maths graduates that year and on our first day of the course we were told we had to do a fifteen minute presentation to the entire group on something we'd learned at the primary school. Not only did we have to do it in front of the entire group but we were going to be videoed at the same time. Throughout my presentation I was so nervous I was vibrating like a tuning fork and my voice was shaking. It was the scariest thing I've ever had to do. Until I went to the cafe to meet Giselle's parents.

I nearly threw up in the doorway and I badly needed a pee but I took a deep breath and marched in, Miette held in front of me like an Olympic torch.

The place was half empty and I heard a man say "There she is, that's the cat." and I turned in that direction to see a man sitting solidly at a table with a woman beside him, half standing.

I went over and introduced myself and asked if they were M. and Mme. Simoneaux.

“I am Victor Simoneaux and this is my wife Isobelle,” said Victor Simoneaux. “You’d better not be wasting our time. I was called out of a lecture for this.”

It wasn’t an auspicious start. They were both tall, thin and bespectacled. Academics to the very core of their beings.

Isobelle shushed him and wanted to know where Giselle was so I explained my reasons for not bringing her with me. She was in the van just down the road but I didn’t tell them that in case they rushed out to look for her without hearing what I had to say.

Victor scowled.

“We’re not fools,” he said. “We understand our own daughter. It is not your place to lecture us.”

I nearly made a tart remark to the effect that if they understood her so well why did she run away but I bit my tongue instead.

I started off by telling them what had happened to Giselle after she’d run away in the hope of gaining their sympathy. Isobelle was clearly concerned and needed me to reassure her that Giselle was all right but Victor was made of sterner stuff.

“It’s her own fault for running away from a loving home,” he said firmly. “She should have had more sense.”

“I don’t think she found home was a loving as you think it was,” I told them. I wasn’t nervous any more. I had a fair idea now of Giselle’s home life and I was going into Parents’ Evening mode.

“What on earth do you mean by that?” Victor demanded.

“You are both lecturers at the University?” I asked.

They nodded.

“With doctorates?”

“Yes, mine is in International Finance and Isobelle's is Management,” he replied.

“The basic issue,” I said “is that you are both high level academics and expect Giselle to be the same. But she isn't. She is not a fool by any means but she will never be an academic like yourselves.”

“Don't be absurd,” said Victor. “You can't possibly know that. All she needs to do is apply herself.”

Isobelle nodded her agreement with him.

“I'm not being absurd,” I said. “I am a mathematician and a teacher. She may well go far but she needs to do it at her own pace and stop at her own level. Forcing her to work constantly to achieve something she isn't capable of achieving is the root cause of her problems and why she ran away.”

“I refuse to accept that she ran away because of a little extra work,” Isobelle said.

“She didn't run away because of that,” I said. “She ran away because of other things, but the standards you set were the underlying cause.”

“What other things?” demanded Victor.

It was time to bite the bullet.

“She couldn't cope with your demands and she turned to drugs to try to make herself smarter,” I said.

“Oh my god,” said Isobelle, holding her hand to her mouth.

Victor stared at me.

“Then she is a fool,” he said, coldly. “She should have talked to us.”

“She couldn't,” I said calmly, although I was starting to get angry with

his attitude. "What you just said shows me very clearly that she could not have talked to you about it. You would simply have told her she was a fool and given her more work to do to overcome it. She is a young girl and scared to death of you."

"Why should she be scared of me?" Victor demanded. "We've never hit her."

"She's not afraid of you for that," I said. "She's afraid of you because you never take her feelings into account. She thinks you think of her as a little computer. Always studying and never doing enough. She afraid of getting things wrong and your contempt."

"She's right," said Isobelle. "You can be very sarcastic when she makes mistakes."

"Nonsense," said Victor. "How can she learn if no one corrects her?"

"You're not a fool, M Simoneaux," I told him. "Have you ever asked her what she wants or have you always told her what she wants?"

He started to speak but Isobelle put her hand on his arm to shut him up.

"It wasn't just drugs, was it?" she asked quietly. "There must have been something that triggered her." She was clearly quite astute.

"She's pregnant," I said bluntly.

They both stared at me uncomprehendingly then Victor slammed his fist on the table.

"C'est une salope," he said forcefully, "une pute!"

I wasn't familiar with those words but I guessed from his reaction and tone of voice he'd probably said "she's a whore, a slut" or something along those lines. He turned away and sat at right angles to me with his arms crossed, fuming.

I lost my temper at that point.

“You stupid stupid man,” I shouted. “She’s pregnant because she had no money to buy the drugs that she thought would make her smarter so you would approve of her!” and I threw Miette at him as hard as I could and the cat got him in the face and knocked his glasses off. He was shocked. Isabelle lurched backwards and nearly fell off her chair and I jumped to my feet.

“You’re so far up your own backside that you couldn’t see what you were doing to Giselle. Both of you!” I shouted.

They were staring at me, aghast. The other people in the café were watching closely and the place was completely silent.

“You made her take drugs and you made her get pregnant and you made her run away because you’re both too damned stupid to realise that she’s never going to be as clever as either of you and she took a damned stuffed toy with her because no one else loved her!”

So much for my carefully planned and persuasive rhetoric. I stormed out of the café and Giselle started to cry when she saw my face. I leaned against the side of the van for a couple of minutes until I’d calmed down a little then got in and explained what had happened. I apologised to Giselle for screwing everything up. I was deeply regretting my loss of control and my outburst. We sat there for quite a long time in silence. I had no real idea of what to do next.

“I suppose I’d better go back in and apologise,” I said. “If nothing else I have to get Miette back.”

Giselle didn’t react, she just stared blankly through the windscreen.

I went back in and saw that they were both still sitting at the table. Victor had his glasses on again and Miette was sitting on the table, facing them. Isabelle was stroking Miette’s head and Victor was staring at his hands. They weren’t talking.

“I want to apologise,” I said.

Isabelle ignored me and carried on stroking Miette. Victor looked up then nodded to the chair I’d been sitting in so I sat down, wondering

what to say next.

“I graduated in Economics,” he said slowly. “And ever since, I have devoted my professional career to understanding global finance. I did my doctoral thesis on multinational corporate financing. My life’s work is to find rational explanations and it is a mystery to me why so much of it is irrational.”

He leaned forward and looked at me intently.

“Tell me,” he said. “Why do stock markets crash, mmmm? It is irrational! Why do governments waste billions on foolish projects? It is irrational! So, I must accept that there are things that are not rational. We have spent many hours, many many hours, trying to explain why Giselle left home, so suddenly, so unexpectedly. We have not found any rational explanation.”

Isobelle stopped stroking Miette.

“You have given us a chain of cause and effect. Perhaps the decisions she made were not the most sensible, the most rational, but I can certainly see a consistency within the chain of cause and effect and, given no satisfactory alternative, I must therefore accept the original cause must be as you say. We, or at least I, must be at fault.”

He looked at Isobelle and she looked at him.

“It is hard for women in a man’s world. We only wanted the best for her, let her realise her potential,” he said sadly.

“What must we do now?” Isobelle asked quietly.

“You must forgive her,” I said. “Forgive her and let her know you love her.”

They both nodded.

“Oh, and by the way ...”

They both looked at me.

“She’s seven months pregnant,” I said. “You really ought to get her to a doctor to check she and the baby are well.”

I stood up.

“I’ll go and get her,” I said. “But there’s one last thing you need to know.”

I could see on their faces they were wondering what further horrors were about to be unveiled.

“She’s going to have your grandchild,” I said. “Don’t bother her with academic achievement anymore, let her enjoy her baby and give her all the love and support you can. Don’t leave it for Miette to do.”

I went out to get Giselle. I quickly explained what had happened since I’d gone back in and told her to come back with me and meet her parents. When I turned around they were just coming out of the cafe. Giselle got out of the van, terrified.

“Don’t worry” I said. “It’ll be just fine, you’ll see,” and I handed Miette back to her.

She hugged the cat closely to her chest and rubbed her cheek against its face as if drawing strength. Victor spotted Giselle and froze. Isabelle sensed him and turned to look and froze too, both hands against her cheeks.

I pushed Giselle in the small of her back and she stumbled then slowly walked towards them and stopped four or five yards away.

“Mama, Papa,” she said, her face white and strained. She glanced back at me and I gestured her forward.

“I ...” she said and took another half step.

Isabelle’s nerve broke first and she ran to embrace her only child. Victor followed more slowly and stood there as mother and daughter hugged and cried openly then he reached out and gently touched Giselle’s shoulder. She turned to look at him.

“You're home,” he said, his voice breaking, “my baby is home” and the three of them hugged tightly, all three with tears streaming down their faces. The last I saw of them was Victor holding the car door open, holding Miette, while Isobelle helped Giselle get into the back seat then they drove off.

I hoped fervently that all would be well for the three, no four, of them. I was exhausted, my brain fried by having to work at this level in a foreign language. I got my iPad out of the van and went back inside the cafe for a sugar hit and update.

I had over 30,000 subscribers.

And an email from Gavin.

Chapter Fifteen

Kasey Kaley was the reason I had so many subscribers. It was obvious from the comments that an awful lot of people had come to watch her and a fair number had stayed to watch my other videos and decided they liked them and started subscribing. What was cool was that more than a handful said that I had inspired them to go and learn to dive.

There was something else going on too though and I thought that was cool at first as well. A lot of people had come to see Kasey and had watched my forty five minute emotional video where I talked about the failure of my marriage and my career and had found it inspiring. But, when I thought about it, what was I inspiring them to do? If I was inspiring them to develop themselves and grow as individuals that was great but what if I was inspiring them to abandon relationships and careers that only needed a little tweaking to sort out?

It's one thing to walk out on a marriage that's long dead but was I inspiring some people to be simply dissatisfied with something that was really quite good? Were there people out there who were walking out on perfectly good relationships or jobs because they thought my grass was greener than theirs when in fact my grass was only green because it was my grass, not theirs?

Difficult thoughts were starting to enter my world. Responsibility being one of them.

And it was not helped by Gavin, I have to say. On the face of it his email was light and easy. He'd finished in Cannes and gone back home and just wanted to tell me how much he'd enjoyed my company. He even thanked me for being the highlight of his trip and sent a photo of himself standing next to a large sign that read

Πρέσπα Βίδρα Έρευνα Κέντρο και Ασφάλεια
Prespa Otter Research Centre and Sanctuary

It was a nice, friendly email, but for two tiny little details.

“If you find yourself in Greece on your travels,” he said in the email, “I'd love for you to come and stay at the Sanctuary for as long as you

wanted and go diving with me and the otters. The lake is 54m deep in places.”

Was he just being polite or was he hinting at something else? For as long as I wanted? He'd love it? I found it a little disturbing. In my reply I said I'd love to visit the sanctuary but I didn't have any plans to visit Greece in the foreseeable future. He'd also ended the email with:

“By the way, I hope you don't mind but I've subscribed to your channel. Fond regards, Gavin.”

“Fond” regards? What did that mean? And why would I mind yet another subscriber to the thousands I already had? I don't know but I did. For some reason it bothered me that he'd be watching my little adventures, almost like he was keeping an eye on me. I had never had this feeling with Zoe who was my best friend and first subscriber. I think it also bothered me that he'd almost certainly watched my emotional breakdown video too, or if he hadn't yet, he would soon.

Which was absurd. Well over a hundred and fifty thousand people had watched it – since a lot of people watch YouTube videos without subscribing to the channels they're in – and that didn't particularly bother me because they weren't people. They were just an abstraction, a number in the corner of the video. But Gavin?

I was resting between my first dives in Italy the next day when I remembered a line from my all time favourite drama, which is the BBC adaptation of *Pride And Prejudice* with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle. Elizabeth, who doesn't like Mr D'Arcy, says at one point something along the lines of “I hate to think that he is in the world and thinks ill of me.”

Now, I didn't not like Gavin. In fact I liked him a lot and it really did bother me that he might be somewhere in Greece, thinking ill of me because of that video. And, of course, some of the other videos where I hadn't bothered to get myself ready in any way, just stood there in a wet bikini with no make up, yakking some nonsense to the camera. It felt almost like waking up in the morning and letting him see me 'au naturel'. Definitely disturbing.

I'd also had a reply from the company that made my wetsuit. They'd accepted my quadrupling of their offer on the proviso that I ran their banner for the full length of every video rather than for the last ten seconds. I thought that was invasive, to be honest, and I emailed back telling them so and turned down the offer.

Anyway, after leaving Monaco I ran for Italy, determined to wash away the stresses of Giselle and her parents. It had been a very full on, intensive and deeply emotional time for me as well and left me questioning my own abilities as a parent, assuming I'd ever had any children, and also my parents' abilities as parents. It seemed to me that it was truly absurd that such an incredibly important thing was left to chance. People become parents and, with the best will in the world, are left to muddle through with next to no guidance. It's no wonder that so many people have psychological problems in later life when even highly intelligent, caring and well resourced parents such as the Simoneaux' manage to mess it up.

It was also a major learning experience for me because, despite the huge range of backgrounds of the kids I'd taught over the years, my perceptions of runaways had still been badly tainted by stereotypes. Kids run away from broken homes, don't they? Parents who don't love them or abusive step-parents or people who are just plain too stupid to deal with children. The Simoneaux' only crime, as far as I knew, was simply trying too hard. They'd been too focused on one thing, and of course that one thing was what had inspired them themselves so they just assumed it would work with Giselle too.

Then it occurred to me that abuse can take many forms. We always think of abuse in terms of sex or violence but I had never realised that pushing someone too hard to improve themselves could be a form of abuse in itself. What an incredibly difficult thing it must be to be a parent! Don't push your child and the child grows up with few of the skills necessary to survive but if you push too hard the child breaks and ends up with other problems.

Where and how do you draw the line and find a balance? Would I have been able to get it right? If I'd had children would any of them have run away from me, simply because I thought, say, maths was easy and that my child should be able to do it too? What hidden, unknown,

personality defects had my own parents foisted on me? Could it be that my marriage and career failed because I'd been traumatised by some chance remark my dad had made when I was four or five years old?

It was when I started wondering how many generations back some parenting error had created the crucible in which Adolf Hitler was forged that I decided diving alone wasn't going to clean my mind of the non productive philosophical rut it was getting in to. I knew what George, my ex, would have said "You just need a damned good shagging, Charlie. That'll clear your mind." Well, he may have been right but it had been a long time since I'd had a shag, good or otherwise, and I had no intention of picking up with some passing Italian just to try out his theories.

Ironically, in a way, that highlighted a cultural difference between the French and the Italians. Men of both nationalities kept me entertained in cafes, and helped me learn the language, but where the French were content with a good conversation the Italians were definitely more focused. It didn't take long for me to learn to twitch my bottom out of the way of roving Italian hands at the first hint of movement. I suppose they thought it was flattering in some way but in reality it was just sleezy to me and my English attitudes and repelled rather than attracted me. Perhaps Italian women are inured to it. I never got to know any Italian women well enough to ask since they tended to avoid me for some reason.

Anyway, that's neither here nor there. The point is that I decided to do something that was almost inconceivable at the start of my travels, which was to stop diving. I don't mean permanently, I just decided to give myself a break from diving and spend a week in the mountains well away from water. A change of scenery, I thought, might change my thoughts.

It was surprisingly good fun! Until my birthday, that is. I spent most of the week driving and camping in the most glorious late spring with the most incredible views. Admittedly I was still a long way from the high mountains of the Alps but even so, as someone who likes to be below sea level, it was a radical change.

On the fourth day, the day before my birthday, I chanced upon a tiny little village nestled on a hillside along a long, windy road. I had had no particular destination in mind, I was just driving for the sake of it and I was beginning to think that maybe it was time I started to look for a dirt road that disappeared nowhere in particular to spend the night. I came upon the village with no warning, there hadn't even been a name sign on the road leading up to it, and there were perhaps twenty houses, nestled together along one side of the road. I was enchanted by it for no more reason than its remoteness and quietness. There was not a soul to be seen.

I pulled over just past the last house and got out to walk around and simply experience the place. Walking back along the road the view out over the valley blew me away and, for the first time on my trip, I felt I had found somewhere I might like to settle down. It wouldn't even be hard to go diving since the west coast of Italy was barely seventy miles away and there were bound to be lakes not too far away as well. The sheer tranquillity and beauty of the place penetrated my soul.

I walked down the road, alternately looking at the view and the houses, trying to decide which of them I would most like to live in. A little over half way down I came across one house that was set further back than the others and it had a courtyard in front which, together with a high wall, separated it from the road. There was a gate in the wall which had been left open and I peered in, wanting to see what the house was like.

The courtyard was beautiful. It was lush with grass and blooming flowers and, to my surprise and delight, there was a stone bench next to the wall of the house with two life sized figures of Laurel and Hardy sitting on it, complete with bowler hats, apparently having one of their conversations. Laurel had his aimless grin and Hardy was looking irritated the way he always does when Laurel gets something wrong.

I just loved it. This was the house I wanted! I desperately, achingly wanted to be able to wake up each morning and have my breakfast in the company of these two gentlemen, in the privacy of a courtyard with just the grass and the flowers and the birds and the view through the open gate.

Why Laurel and Hardy were there I will never know. The house had a 'shut' look about it that suggested its owners were away and there was no one around to ask. It was just a magical moment and I clapped my hands and bounced on my feet and laughed with the sheer unexpected joy of it. Laurel and Hardy in the courtyard of a house in a remote village in Italy will always be one of those images that stays in my memory forever, particularly as I can never go back as I have no idea where it was.

Another place that will probably stay in my memory forever left a permanent reminder. The next day was my birthday and I turned thirty five, halfway through my three score years and ten. Since this was the first week of June it means I'm a Gemini which may account for the two distinct sides of my personality. To celebrate I decided to go to a decent restaurant and have a decent meal, rather than cook for myself as I usually did or a cafe snack. Being away from cities and large towns made my choice of cuisine easy; Italian.

I found a nice looking restaurant in another smallish town and perhaps ten miles further on was a clearing in the woods where I thought I'd be able to spend the night. It wasn't a large clearing but it was hidden from the road by some trees and didn't seem to belong to anyone. Certainly there were no fences or "No Trespassing" signs so I stayed there for a couple of hours, making another video about the general area, avoiding mentioning Laurel and Hardy, until it was late enough for the restaurant to open.

I changed into a frock, coincidentally the same one I'd worn to Bill's dinner party on his yacht, My clothing choices weren't that wide so the coincidence wasn't particularly great. I drove back to the town and parked a little way up from the restaurant. I went in and tried out my improving Italian on an elderly waiter who escorted me to a table for two by a window and poured me a glass of the local wine while I perused the menu. The restaurant wasn't busy and I was the only single person there so no roving Italian male decided to join me.

I had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand it was my birthday and it would have been nice to be with someone who would clink wine glasses with me and say "Happy Birthday Charlie!" but on the other hand it was nice to just sit, alone, in a small civilised part of the

world, not being on show to the rest of the passing world. The food was delightful and all too quickly it was gone and I lingered for a while over a second glass of wine.

I left the restaurant and started walking back to the van when there was a sudden rush of wind, a deep throated snarl and something the size of an Indian elephant sank its teeth into my right upper arm and knocked me hard to the ground and started to shake me like a rag doll. I screamed and tried to ward it off but it was too big and I felt myself starting to faint. Then there were a few heavy footfalls and someone started kicking the elephant viciously.

“Tu pezzo di merda, allontanati da lei!” (*“You piece of shit, get away from her”*)

The dog released me and ran off, whimpering, although, I have to confess, I didn't feel any sympathy for it.

“Tutto bene?” (*“Are you all right?”*) the man said, standing over me and peering down in the darkness.

“Sano stata maso!” (*“Healthy state farmstead!”*) I said, clutching my arm and desperately trying to think in Italian.

“Che cosa?” (*“What?”*) he said, confused.

“Sono stato morso!” (*“I was bitten!”*) I tried again, scrambling to pull my wits together. My arm was screaming agony and there was a lot of blood.

He helped me to my feet and guided me back to the restaurant where there were lights. My arm was dripping blood onto the floor and there was some confusion as the few diners wanted to know what had happened.

“I'll get the doctor,” said the man who'd attacked the dog that had attacked me and disappeared. The owner of the restaurant, who was also the elderly waiter, wrapped a spotless white napkin around my arm and sat me down in a chair and poured me a glass of red wine, no doubt intending to replace the blood I was losing.

I was feeling very light headed and weak, presumably from blood loss since I must have lost almost all my blood by that point.

“It was a dog,” I said, “a very very big dog!”

The owner of the restaurant tut tutted and started to wash the blood off my arm with red wine and the tablecloth was getting quite disgusting. The doctor turned up a couple of moments later and he and the man who'd attacked the dog took me to the doctor's house which was two doors down from the restaurant. The doctor's front room had been converted into a consulting room and he sat me down and examined my arm.

“Just a few scratches,” he said, or something like that and poured half a bottle of iodine over them. My arm felt like red hot skewers were being repeatedly thrust into it and I screamed in agony and passed out. When I came too my arm was swathed in bandages from my shoulder to my elbow.

“I have put some stitches in the bigger cuts,” said the doctor. “Now I need to give you a tetanus injection.” I'm not certain that that is what he said as my Italian wasn't up to medical terminology but it sounded like it (*“iniezione di tetano”*) and unceremoniously he pulled up my skirt so he could see my knickers and stabbed me viciously in my upper thigh and charged me one hundred and fifty euros.

Fortunately the man who attacked the dog was also its owner and he was mortified that his dog had bitten a lovely English woman (*“un'adorabile donna inglese”*). He argued with the doctor and knocked him down to fifty euros and a couple of chickens and introduced himself as Bruno Brassini and insisted that I spent the night with him.

I really wasn't up to spending the night with an Italian man and said two or three times that I had to get home to my husband. I don't think he believed me but I still had my wedding ring on and it worked its magic. A lot of men seem to have more respect for what they think is another man's property than they do for women and Bruno turned out to be one of them. The doctor came with us to my van and watched as Bruno helped me in to the passenger seat. I managed to slide myself across to the driver's seat, hoisting my skirt on the gear stick in the

process. They both stared at my legs in the van's interior light until I could pull my frock down again then continued to stare as I slipped off my high heeled shoes. I've never figured out how to drive in them.

I thanked the doctor profusely and gave Bruno a nasty look and started the engine and waited until they'd shut the door. I drove off into the night, struggling with the steering wheel because it hurt too much and found my way back to my little clearing. Fortunately there was no other traffic and no police around as the pain, my weakness and the wine bubbling away in my depleted blood supply made it difficult to drive to my usual standard. The pain killer the doctor had given me probably didn't help my driving much either. It didn't help a lot for the pain anyway.

I could barely move my arm in the morning and I drove more or less one handedly back to the coast. I needed the safety of the sea as the hill country had lost its appeal. By the following morning my right upper arm was feeling very hot and seemed to be getting more painful and when I took off the bandages the wounds looked to be more inflamed than they should so I did what every injured person should do in the circumstances. I went diving.

I didn't go deep diving, that would have been just silly. I wallowed around in the shallows with my mask and snorkel, doing nothing in particular and letting the sea soak its way into the wounds and after an hour or so the inflammation seemed to be subsiding and the sharp throbbing was fading so I drove into the nearby town and found a pharmacy and got some antiseptic cream and some more bandages. I sat on a bench, sadly without Laurel and Hardy, and liberally coated my arm with cream and wrapped it up in two rolls of the bandage and told myself it was healing.

The power of suggestion didn't work though and the following day I took off the bandages to check how the wounds were healing and a couple were going a bit pussy and my arm was very tender to touch and it was hot again so I went back to the pharmacy and asked them where there was a doctor. They gave me directions to one nearby and I went and showed my arm to the receptionist who checked her computer and found a slot for me an hour or so later. I sat listlessly in the waiting room, nursing my arm and wondering if it was going to

have to be amputated. I couldn't remember having come across any one armed divers before.

The doctor wanted to know what had bitten me so I told him it was a dog. He examined my arm and said something incomprehensible in Italian and printed out what looked like a prescription and handed it to me and sent me back to the receptionist who charged me a hundred and thirty euros. I, very humorously I thought, offered her twenty five euros and two chickens but she just sniffed and stared stonily at me until I handed over my credit card. Back at the pharmacy they handed over a bottle of tablets and painstakingly explained twice that I needed to take one tablet every morning and one tablet every evening until I had taken them all. They charged me forty five euros and I didn't attempt to offer them any chickens. I just paid up. It was easier.

To cut a long story short, the tablets did whatever they were supposed to do and the inflammation and pain died down surprisingly rapidly although the scabs seemed to take forever to heal. I didn't go in the sea at all for three days and for another two I just splashed around in the surf like any other tourist.

Still, I made a couple of videos, one about the dog attack, and uploaded them with the one I'd made in the hills. I'd been so taken with Laurel and Hardy that I had not thought to take any footage of them and I didn't mention them in any videos. They were kind of like Giselle's Miette, I hugged the memory of Laurel and Hardy to myself and didn't want to share them with anyone. They were somehow too personal. The scabs on my arm I showed to the world, however, and was delighted by the outpourings of wrath and sympathy. Several people posted comments offering to hunt the dog down and shoot it, or worse. Bless them.

More usefully though, my enforced rest meant frequent stops at cafes for blood strengthening sugar and allowed me to conduct spirited negotiations with the wet suit company. We settled on an agreement that involved no banner whatsoever, a free wet suit custom made for me and a video by video payment system which didn't lock me into any long term commitment. OK the money was considerably less but what the hell. I had forty seven thousand subscribers so the wet suit

company didn't need to barrage them constantly.

On the other hand, I also had an email from Tourisme en Occitanie asking me if I would do a video about the delights of diving in their area, which was basically from the Spanish border to Montpellier, which I was happy to do as I'd enjoyed the diving there a lot. Neither of us mentioned any money.

I was greatly amused by an email from an American company who wanted to produce "Where's Charlie?" tee shirts and jackets and sell them through my channel. I still couldn't really understand why anyone would want to subscribe to my videos but I couldn't believe anyone would actually wear a jacket with "Where's Charlie?" emblazoned all over it. It was just too surreal. I didn't bother to reply as I thought it would only encourage them to open negotiations.

The best news though was that Zoe, Matt and their kids had changed their plans and were going to descend on a distant relative of Matt's in Florence in mid July. Zoe said that so long as I was still in Italy she'd get a train from Florence to wherever I was. I emailed back saying that was great news and that I'd make sure I was in Florence at some point during their trip. I was intrigued as she told me there were a couple of things she wanted to talk to me about but wouldn't say what they were in an email.

Gavin also sent me an email with his condolences on my injuries and a photo of some newly born otter cubs which was nice of him and cheered me up immensely. So I relented and told him about Laurel and Hardy. After all, it's nice to share meaningful moments with someone sometimes.

Chapter Sixteen

104,628.

That's right, 104,628. One hundred and four thousand six hundred and twenty eight. And counting.

Holy shit.

Plus an email from Renault. We're not talking some tin pot little diving equipment company here, desperately hoping to sell another wetsuit or buoyancy jacket any way they can. We're talking the ninth biggest car manufacturer in the world. Global multinational. Pushing sixty billion euros a year in turnover. Wanting to sponsor me in my travels, not an endorsement but actual sponsorship. Paying me to drive and dive, so long as I didn't get rid of my Kangoo, or if I did, that I replace it with another Renault which would be free and customised any way I wanted. Apparently they'd been monitoring my channel since I hit 70,000 or so subscribers and decided to get involved when I hit the big six figures. Admittedly the proposed sponsorship wouldn't even be rated as a rounding error in their annual marketing budget but even so. Renault! Wow!

They also hinted at a Europe wide marketing campaign based around me with the slogan "Where's Charlie? Changing Her Life With Renault!" and, if successful, perhaps repeating it suitably modified in North and South America. It seemed a bit tacky to me but then I was married to a marketing consultant so I'm kind of biased against marketing on principle.

"Why me?" I asked. "There must be lots of people doing more interesting things in Renaults, why not pick one of them?"

I knew for a fact that one of my pupils back at school had got herself a lucrative modelling contract though liberal use of the backseat of a Renault Megane and consequently never bothered to turn up for her maths GCSE exams which hadn't helped my annual performance review. Her use of a Renault seemed a lot more interesting to me than a semi-reclusive, rapidly approaching middle age woman who likes diving and would very likely sell a lot more cars.

“You have style,” they said. “Your attitude, your hairstyle, your lifestyle, even the scars on your arm are perfectly and photogenically positioned. You are the epitome of the 21st century modern woman. Tough, independent, intelligent, resourceful yet beautiful, feminine and emotional. You are a symbol to women everywhere. Women want to be you and you choose Renault. The modern car for the modern woman!”

I nearly wet myself laughing over that email. If only they'd seen me the night I realised George really was going to divorce me, or when I was packing a tart's outfit in case I needed a man to change a wheel on the van for me. Who were they trying to kid? Pretty nice sentiments though, all the same. They made me blush a little and I posed in front of the mirror in the cafe toilet for a few minutes to see which was my best side. They both seemed much the same to me but someone else came in and I had to pretend I was looking for a dirt mark on my jeans before I could finally make up my mind. Maybe I should get silicone implants or botox?

Well, they were trying to kid everyone actually, since they were the marketing department. Marketing is all about selling a dream, a dream of what might be if you buy the product. I guess Renault thought they could sell a few cars or vans to women who wanted to ditch their deadbeat partners or quit their jobs and hoped a new car would do it for them. I was tempted to tell them that I'd bought my van several years before my husband divorced me so the cause and effect linkage wasn't technically correct. Certainly I was already bothered by the possibility that I might actually be wrecking a few lives with my irresponsible lifestyle. With a hundred thousand followers someone is bound to make a bad decision and I worried that it might be because of me.

I didn't need Zoe's analytical brain to realise that I was hiding fear behind cynicism of Renault and marketing generally. On the one hand I stood to get a lot of money out of them, and I mean a *lot* of money, particularly if the advertising campaign went ahead. On the other hand, any one of their legal people could chew me up and spit me out before breakfast and they didn't have just one legal person they had whole cafes full of them. Thin Ice Alert Charlie! Should I find myself an agent? It was all too difficult to think about so I left it for a while.

So much for being intelligent and resourceful, I was the symbol of 21st century women and could be found cowering behind a cappuccino mug in the ladies' loo.

On the bright side there was a lively fight going on in the comments section between some new subscribers who were convinced the scars on my arm were from a shark attack and some other subscribers who'd watched my video about the dog attack. Despite the evidence of the dog attack video the new subscribers were clinging desperately to their shark theory and, it has to be admitted, were putting up a spirited defence. I wanted to encourage them but felt I had a duty to remain impartial.

One of the many aspects of my life travelling around and more or less enjoying myself was that I had left behind all the things that impose time. Working hours, weekends, even TV schedules or dive trips with my barely remembered dive club. I lived from day to day, regulated only by the rising and setting of the sun. Several times I'd rolled into a small French or Italian village to get some supplies and found that it was Sunday and everything was shut. So, when I figured it was time to stop diving my way down the west coast of Italy and head for Florence to meet up with Zoe and her family I arrived a day too early. Probably because I was keen to see her again.

Florence is a fairly large city, which isn't of itself a problem since it's a wonderful city but it does mean that it's not that easy to make your way around then skip out quickly in the early evening to find a nearby field to sleep in. As I was there early I decided to get myself a cheap, relatively speaking, room somewhere for a couple of nights and enjoy the amenities. Like hot baths. Actually, I quickly discovered that a hot bath was the only amenity that I'd been lacking. I'm not a fan of inane TV at the best of times but inane TV in a foreign language didn't strike me as much of an amenity and I'd lost my freedom and fresh air and space.

Living in the back of a small van may seem cramped but it actually isn't. The van is just a small bedroom and the rest of my living space is the entire world. Watching the sun come up or go down with a hot cup of coffee in an empty space somewhere, with the birds singing and the breeze rustling the leaves, is still magic to me and the walls of

my motel room felt confining and claustrophobic. Still, the hot baths were almost worth it. Actually, I had a bath when I checked in, one first thing in the morning, one before meeting Zoe, one before bed the second night and intended to have another one before I left the next day so I would get my money's worth. I love diving but the water's never as hot as a decent bath. Maybe Renault would supply me with a trailer with a spa in it?

“Charlieeeeeeeeeee!”

The shriek could probably have been heard all across Florence but what the hell, she was pleased to see me.

“Zoeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

I was pleased to see her as well.

We'd arranged to meet at a cafe near my motel because, much as I liked Matt and the five kids, it was impossible to have a decent chat with them around. Zoe enveloped me in one of her usual warm, comforting, all encompassing hugs, except that something was wrong.

I stepped back and eyed her.

“Have you lost weight?” I asked.

“Yup,” she nodded. “Just over two stone since you saw me last.”

I was almost horrified. One of the most stable things in the world was the knowledge that each time you saw Zoe she'd put on weight. It was one of the cornerstones of her marriage, if nothing else, since tall, skinny Matt had a pronounced fondness for large women.

“How come?” I asked.

“I'll tell you later. First I want to hear all about you and what you've been up to, it's been so long!”

We caught up on all the news of the last six months or so. It only took a couple of hours, during which I had two respectable sized portions

of Schiacciata Alla Fiorentina cake, a speciality of Florence and, in my opinion, something well worth specialising in, and she had, astonishingly, had a green salad. Like who goes to Italy to eat salad? Come on.

I was on to my third cappuccino and Zoe her second diet coke (!) when she decided to feed me the first of the two pieces of news she'd refused to tell me via email.

“Try not to laugh too hard,” she said.

“OK.”

“George is getting a divorce.”

“What???”

“That's right, George is getting a divorce.”

He'd only got divorced from me five months before so he must have married Charlie 2.0 pretty quickly. I was flabbergasted.

“Jesus, what happened? I mean, why? Like, he must have only just married her.”

“They got married two weeks after your divorce hearing,” said Zoe, stifling her chuckles. “You remember she had his baby?”

“I remember she was pregnant so I guess she had the baby.”

“Well George got suspicious so he had a paternity test done.”

“Get out of here!” I shrieked.

“Oh yes he did,”

“And the baby ...?”

“Wasn't his!!” finished Zoe triumphantly.

“Oh my god!”

It seems that all the time George was cheating on Charlie 1.0 with Charlie 2.0, Charlie 2.0 was cheating on George with not one, not two but three other men. And George's sperm was still fragmented and at least one of the other men's wasn't. That wasn't all.

“Getting herself pregnant wasn't the only reason she wanted a quick wedding,” Zoe went on to tell me, in confidence of course.

“Oh my god, what was she up to?”

“It seems she had also managed to run up quite a few bills and the bailiffs were closing in. Not being a single parent wasn't her biggest motivator. She needed someone to pay off her debts.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, the day after they got married.”

Poor George. I really did feel sorry for him. He wasn't the best husband in the world but I did used to love him and I'd never wished him any harm. Still ... it also had it's funny, comeuppance side.

It took us a while to squeeze every last drop out of George's misfortunes then Zoe got serious.

“There's something important I need to tell you. I've talked it over with Matt and we both agree that you should know since you're my bestest friend.”

She was my bestest friend as well so I pushed George away, not for the first time.

“Last year,” she said, “back in January, I had to see the doctor because of some pains I was getting.”

This was sounding serious as, despite her weight, Zoe was the healthiest person I knew. She rarely went to the doctor for anything other than yet another pregnancy.

“Oh no,” I said, putting my hand to my mouth. “She's got cancer,” I thought.

“It turned out the pains were nothing much. But he told me I was diabetic.”

Which was a relief since diabetes isn't cancer.

“And he did some tests and called me back in and told me bluntly.”

“Told you what?” I asked. I wasn't sure I really wanted to know.

“That I wasn't going to live to see any grandchildren,” said Zoe quietly.

As her oldest was now eleven that didn't really give her a lot of time left.

“Apparently, along with the diabetes, I also had heart problems and it turned out that the problems I'd been having for the previous year or so sleeping were actually sleep apnea.”

I watched her wide eyed. I was stunned and couldn't think of anything to say.

“It's type two diabetes, which isn't as serious as type one diabetes,” she carried on remorselessly. “I don't need to take insulin and it can be managed. So can my heart condition. And the apnea has gone away now I've lost some weight.”

She had a sip of her diet coke and toyed with a celery stick, looking at the table.

“I'm five feet five and I was over twenty two stone. My body mass index was way off the scale in the morbidly obese range. I was eating myself to death. I knew I had to do something. I don't want to die before I'm forty. I can't leave the kids and Matt to look after themselves.”

I took her hand.

“So you went on a diet?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said sadly. “Yet another frigging diet. I seem to have spent most of my life on diets.”

“But it's working, isn't it. You've lost weight.”

“No, it didn't work,” she said, sitting back and looking grimly at me. “That's the part I need to tell you about.”

Something very nasty was on its way. Zoe doesn't normally beat about the bush. She's normally brutally direct.

“You remember how we talked about your life and options? When George wanted a divorce?”

“Yes, it was a major turning point in my life for me,” I told her.

“It was for me too. You know how I'd always prided myself on being honest with myself?”

“Yes.”

“I realised when we had that talk that I wasn't being honest with myself. If I was being honest with myself I should be able to start a diet and stick to it. But no matter how hard I tried, knowing I was killing myself, I still couldn't stick to anything. Three days maybe, a week once, then I'd stuff myself again and have to start all over again. So I went to see a hypnotist to see if he could help.”

“Did he?”

“No. He tried all sorts of things and nothing worked. He thought there was something underlying my eating beyond a simple love of food. Something that was blocking his hypnosis. So he sent me to see a psychiatrist.”

Oh
My
God

“So all the time I was planning my new life you were actually seeing a psychiatrist?” I was aghast. How could I have not seen that something was wrong? Was I really that self-centred?

“Don't blame yourself,” said Zoe. “You were going through one hell of a time what with the divorce and quitting work and everything. No way was I going to burden you with my problems then.”

“Nice try Zoe, but it doesn't wash,” I thought. “I wasn't there for my best friend in her time of need.” The thought horrified me. I suppressed the thought that I hadn't been there for George either in his time of need. Maybe we'd still be married if I had been.

“I've been seeing the psychiatrist every week since November,” said Zoe. “Her name's Bethany and it only took her six or seven sessions to get to the root but I'm still seeing her because, ..., well, because.”

“Oh Zoe,” I felt like I was going to burst into tears.

“The good news though is that it's working.” She smiled bravely. “I started a new diet when you left and I've stuck to it. I've lost over two stone and I'm almost down to the ordinarily obese range, not morbidly.”

“Can you tell me what the root of it was?” I was almost too scared to ask.

“That's why I'm telling you this,” she said. “I want you to know.”

I nodded encouragingly.

“Apparently, and Bethany says I've suppressed the memories all these years, when I was very young, around two or three years old, my parents took me to the zoo for a treat and I got lost. I have a vague memory of running off to look at something very tall so it was probably a giraffe or something. Anyway, with her help I now remember that two boys found me, they were probably nine or ten, and they took me off with them promising me that they'd help me find my parents.”

I could see what was coming.

“And they took me over to the lions' area. I have strong memories of the lions. And they kept pinching me and hurting me and telling me they were going to feed me to the lions and I was so scared and I was crying but they kept on hurting me.” She had become very intense, as though she was reliving the memory.

“Did they ...?”

“No,” she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“They just wanted to torment me and make me cry, they were probably too young for anything else. Anyway, someone very tall, probably an adult, came over and stopped them and took me away to a room somewhere where a nice lady sat me down and gave me some sweets and sent someone to find my parents and my mum was crying when they got there and I was so happy because I was back with mum and dad. I don't know what happened after that, I remember someone taking some pictures of me with my top off but I don't know if they found the boys or what happened. No one ever mentioned it to me again.”

“So was that when you started overeating?” I asked.

“No,” said Zoe. “I was happy to be back with mum and dad and life went back to normal. We never went to the zoo again but we went to lots of other places.”

“I don't understand,” I said.

“My eating problems began at school when I was thirteen,” said Zoe. “My old school had told my parents they couldn't cope with me anymore as I was just too clever for the others in my classes and dad found a school quite a long way away which catered for gifted children and they moved me there.”

“Why would that cause an eating problem?”

“There were two other girls there, a year ahead of me, who started to bully me. They were always making snide comments and pinching me and taking my lunch money and they lived on my way home so they’d start on the bus on the way to school and keep it going all day and carry on on the bus on the way home. I hated every minute of that school and I used to lie in bed every night wishing I was dead so I didn’t have to go to school the next day. It was horrible. It went on until I was seventeen, when they left school.”

“Is that why you started overeating?”

“Well, Bethany thinks that those girls got conflated in my mind with the boys at the zoo and since they were going to feed me to the lions to finish me off, my subconscious obsessed with the idea of eating as a way of finishing things.”

I wasn't too sure I followed the logic of that but then, I'm no psychiatrist.

“She also said that when I matured and started to get sexually interested in boys, my subconscious mixed all boys with the boys from the zoo. She thinks that's why, when I started at uni and lots of boys were readily available, I rejected them all and started eating freely.”

“So how does she explain Matt?”

“She says that because he's so tall he represents the adult who saved me at the zoo and makes it possible to eat what I want.”

“Do you think she's right?”

“Well, with her help I now remember the boys at the zoo and I've never forgotten those bitches but even if she's wrong, she's still helped me with being able change my eating habits. And I am losing weight.”

“What does Matt think?” Since Matt loved her ample curves I thought it could become a significant issue.

“He said it doesn't matter what weight I am so long as I'm alive,” she said. “He can't love me if I'm dead. Isn't that sweet? And maybe if I'm

as thin as you he'll stop getting me pregnant!" She roared heartily and thumped the table.

"Oh Zoe, you're not pregnant again are you?"

She nodded, beaming. "Sure am, number six, a girl. And I've promised her, just as I've promised Matt and I'm promising you, I will be around for her children too. And probably her grandchildren. I am absolutely determined."

I could see that. And in the fifteen years or so that I'd known her this was the first time she'd ever lost weight. The thing is, Zoe had always represented truth to me. The one certainty in life was that Zoe, with her IQ of somewhere around a thousand, would be totally, brutally, honest about everything, including herself. Especially herself. If Zoe had repressed childhood memories and consequent behavioural disorders that she didn't know of, if Zoe needed a psychiatrist, what hope was there for the rest of us mere mortals?

The conversation turned to babies and what to name the new one. In true Zoe style she'd named the first five in alphabetical order, Adam, Barbara, Catherine, Daniel and Emily, since it made it easier for everyone to remember. I jokingly suggested Farouk and to my surprise she gave it serious thought then decided Farouk was too much of a boy's name, so I suggested Francesca instead. Zoe didn't much go for Francesca. She and Matt were tossing Fiona and Felicity around so I put my vote down for Felicity.

Then I told her about the Renault offer. She was very impressed but told me to turn it down.

"Why?" I asked.

"You're not interested in money," she said. "If you were you'd have taken your mathematical brain into the stock market or something, not teaching, which is a mug's game. And you'd never have given up a job to go diving. It's not like you planned to make a fortune out of it, which would be different. They'll tie you up and make your life a misery."

She was right of course. Renault represented a serious commitment on my part, for something that didn't really interest me. When my money ran out I'd go back to teaching or maybe become a diving instructor or clean toilets or something.

Throughout the baby and Renault conversations I'd been turning over in my mind whether or not to tell Zoe something I'd not told anyone before. After all, she'd been very brave and open with me. So, when we ran out of baby talk and car talk, I told her about the death threats I'd been getting.

Chapter Seventeen

Anyone who's ever used any form of social media on the internet will know that there are people out there with issues. They could be as simple as people with poor social skills which lead them to say things that aren't entirely appropriate or people with a low tolerance for other people's views and opinions, or even facts a lot of the time, or people with fairly extreme views on, for example, the role of women in society. I'd had my fair share of all of them. And then there are the crazy people. The ones who deliberately set out to hurt and destroy but lack the courage to identify themselves and hide behind innocent and innocuous identities.

I suppose I had been fairly lucky since I didn't get any of the crazies until I uploaded the Kasey Kaley video and my subscribers started to take off. In the two months since then I'd had more or less one email a day, from a different email address each time, saying really vile and horrible things and after maybe a dozen or so of those they started to turn into death threats. Although each came from a different address, the style and phrasing were all very similar so it looked like it was just one person but someone with the IT skills to hide their details so they couldn't be traced.

I laughed them off to begin with, refusing to let them dampen my travels and fun. I tried to be upbeat and convince myself that there were actually positives to them. After all, why send death threats to a nobody who had no meaning in the life of the sender? I must therefore be someone moderately significant and had probably struck a nerve. Also, there was a good chance that, by sending them to me, someone who didn't care, it was very likely that they weren't going to someone else who might be seriously affected by them.

I didn't receive them every day, which probably helped. Because I only went on the net when I had a video to upload I got my emails in blocks every few days so I had several days to calm down before getting the next batch. I had managed to convince myself I didn't care for quite a while.

One night, in the middle of June, I camped in a field that was opposite a small row of shops on the outskirts of a small town. I didn't

normally spend the night so close to population centres but this row of shops had a laundromat that opened early in the morning so I stayed, planning to do my laundry and move on afterwards.

Around half past nine in the evening, as I was lying in bed beginning to drift off, I heard a car come along the road and stop at the row of shops. Someone got out and I heard some voices and I peeped out of the window. The shops had closed for the day a long time before and I still get a little nervous when people invade my little campsites in the middle of the night, especially as it so rarely happens.

Someone, a girl by the shape of her jeans although she was wearing a hoody, was walking up and down in front of the shops with a torch and occasionally stooping to pick something up. There was someone in the car and the car's engine stayed running and its lights stayed on. After four or five trips back and forth the girl went over to the car and I heard a man's voice say something although I couldn't hear what it was. The girl got in the car and they just sat there, engine running, lights on. for at least five minutes then suddenly the car roared away with a bit of wheel spin.

In itself, it was nothing. Maybe one of them had lost something important and they were retracing their steps. It doesn't matter. The thing is, I got scared. For the first time on my trip I was actually frightened. I lay in bed thinking about the death threats and how vulnerable I actually was. After all, anyone who watched my videos knew what I looked like, knew what the van looked like and its registration number and had a fair idea of where I was and, more importantly, where I was heading. It didn't take a genius to work out that I would be sticking to the coast. Someone with enough determination and time could probably track me down. Maybe even follow me to a lonely deserted spot where they'd have all night to do whatever their nasty little minds fancied. After a while I checked the van was locked, a habit I'd got out of, and soon afterwards dug out my carving knife which I used to chop up veggies and put it under my pillow.

I laughed it off the next morning but since then I had made a point of double checking the doors were locked and the windows only open a little and kept the knife to hand. It was irritating because there was a

heatwave at the time and I would have preferred to sleep outside in the open air. I also stabbed myself in the night once when I rolled over and slipped my hand under the pillow. It wasn't a deep stab but I bought a newspaper the next day and made myself a sheath for the knife since I didn't want to lose my pillow and cut my own throat.

I refused to consider whether I'd be able to actually use the knife if I was attacked.

Even though none of the emails ever got explicit – like “tomorrow you will die” – they started to get to me and my peace of mind was fading. I'd thought of going to the police but what would they do? Even if they could trace whoever it was the odds were that they weren't in Italy and I suspect the police don't take general threats that seriously unless the person concerned is powerful. I wasn't even an Italian.

I told Zoe and showed her some of the emails. I'd delete the first few but decided after they kept coming to save them, just in case. In case of what, I wasn't clear. Maybe in case I did decide to go to the police or maybe in case the police needed some evidence when they found my dismembered corpse. Best not to think about the 'in case' part in too much detail.

We talked about what kind of person would send emails like that then we talked about what to do. Zoe didn't see much point in going to the police either.

“They probably prefer real crimes with evidence,” she said, “not untraceable ghosts on the internet. You need someone like Bruce Willis or that guy in *The Equaliser*. An IT savvy protector of the defenceless. Hey what about that IT nerd you told me about? That one with the puncture.”

“He was a policeman,” I said.

“Nooooo, not him, the other one, where was it? St Tropez?”

“Ohh, you mean Clark?” I'd forgotten about him.

“Yes, he probably knows enough about IT to figure out how to send

the emails back or something so whoever it is stops sending them.”

“I have no idea how to contact him,” I said.

“Isn't he a subscriber?”

“I wouldn't have a clue. I doubt it but even if he was, unless his login is 'clark' I wouldn't know which one he was and I can't contact all of them.”

“You could put up a video asking him to contact you.”

“I guess. It's a long shot though, I'll think about it.”

I did think about it. In the bath after I'd got back to my room. And I remembered that Clark had given me his business card. I just couldn't remember what I'd done with it. In the morning I got up and checked the most likely place. Well, actually the most likely place was the table at the cafe where we'd gone since I almost certainly left it there. If I had kept it I would undoubtedly have left it in the glove box in the van. I hadn't. So I sat in the driver's seat for a couple of minutes trying to remember then I started looking in random places and, to my surprise, I found it, along with some other bits and pieces under some orange peel in the little cavity for the screen for the van's reversing camera. Perhaps more importantly I also found some nail clippers I'd lost a couple of weeks previously.

According to his card, Clark ran his own IT consulting business and seemed to have an excessive number of ways of contacting him. I thought about it and decided that email, any of his phones, Facebook and ICQ were fairly impersonal. If he remembered me and could actually see me he might be more inclined to help in some way. After all, it's easy to dismiss a block of text but someone's face in front of you is more difficult to dismiss. So around nine thirty I figured he'd be at work so I fired up Skype and rang him.

“What?” he said irritably, looking off to the right at something else. He looked to be wearing the same clothes as he had three months previously.

“Hello Clark, it's Charlie,” I said, perhaps a little nervously.

He turned to look at his screen and his eyes narrowed.

“iPad, Grimaud, France,” he said two seconds later. “Incorrect voltage on charger.”

I guess I must have made an impression on him.

“Is it still playing up?” he asked.

“No, it's fine,” I said.

He seemed to lose interest and looked back at the other computer he was doing something on.

“I've been getting some nasty emails and I was wondering if you could do something about it,” I said.

“I'm not sending you emails,” he replied.

For some reason it had never occurred to me that he might have. To send someone a death threat would imply he cared if they were alive and I suspected that he wasn't that interested in other people.

“No,” I said, “I didn't think you were. But someone is and I hoped you'd be clever enough to stop them.” I thought it was a nifty attempt to play on his ego.

“Depends,” he said, distractedly. “If they're backed by a foreign government then I probably can't.”

“Why would a foreign government be sending me death threats?” I wondered. Then it occurred to me to wonder how he knew he couldn't go up against a foreign government.

He seemed to finish whatever he was doing on the other computer and turned back to me.

“Send me three or four,” he said. “Use this email address, in case

they're infected.”

He gave me a different address to the one on his card and I sent him the most recent four. In the thirty seconds it took for them to arrive in his In box he started working on a third computer. Then he turned back to me and did some clicking.

“Uncool,” he said. “Rape is so nineties.” He curled his lip.

He got himself comfortable in his chair, all scrunched up with his legs underneath him and a keyboard balanced precariously on his knees. His fingers danced for a while and I hummed quietly to myself.

“Amateur,” he said suddenly. “They're from the same mail server. In Buenos Aires. I think that's in Argentina.”

Argentina?

“Oh,” I said. “Can we do anything about it?”

“I'll see what I can do,” he said. “I'll call you back in an hour or so.” He hung up.

I was supposed to be out of the room by ten but I figured it might take him a while and it would be easier if I stayed put rather than disappeared for a few days so I went down to reception and booked another night.

I'd just got back to the room when he rang on Skype.

“I need to access your iPad,” he said when I answered. “He might have put some malware on it.”

“How can you access my iPad from London?” I asked.

He didn't bother to answer, just took me through the process of enabling Remote Access in my iPad so he had full control, via the net.

“Don't touch it until I say so, OK, and leave Skype running.”

He did various uninteresting things for twenty minutes then pronounced it clean.

“Gimme an hour, OK,” He disappeared again.

For want of anything better to do I scanned the English news for a while. I'd been away six months and Brexit was no nearer resolution although I apparently had a new Prime Minister. Dull news as usual.

Fifty five minutes later he was back.

“I've got into the logs on the mail server,” he said. “I'm running a search to try to track down where the emails originated from.”

“How did you get into their logs?” I asked. He just gave me a half smile.

“By the look of it, it'll take twelve to fifteen hours. They've only got the last three months worth of logs, the rest must have been archived. When was your first email?”

“Couple of months ago.”

“Sweet as. Don't need to find their archives then. I'll call you back when it's done.”

I sat around for a while wondering what to do then I sent Gavin an email. I hadn't had one from him for a while and I was wondering what had happened to him. Then I went to explore Florence, and in particular the Cathedral, Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. They started building it in 1296 and judging by the scaffolding they still hadn't quite finished. I wanted to visit since I'd heard that you can climb to the top of the dome, which is famous for its views over the city but I decided not to bother when I saw the immense queues of tourists waiting to climb. The 463 steps put me off a little too. Still, the rest of the Cathedral was well worth visiting.

I spend the early evening waiting by my iPad for something to happen then gave up and went to bed. Just after midnight Clark phoned.

“Wha’,” I said sleepily.

“Done,” he said chirpily. “Seems your friend has been sending similar emails to twenty three other people as well. Whatever. I’ve traced them all back to the same originating server. He’s such a loser. Didn’t have the sense to even move them around on different servers. It’s an ISP in Caracas.”

“So what do we do now?” I asked, conscious that the ‘we’ was probably misplaced.

“It’s still early,” he said.

It was after eleven in London. Maybe he’d slept during the day.

“I’ll see if I can get the guy’s name and address. Even if I can’t ...” he gave a derisive snort suggesting that he thought it wouldn’t be much of a problem, “... at least we can put a block on him. Odds are he’s just full of shit, won’t be going to Italy from Caracas.”

“How did you know I’m in Italy” I asked.

“Geolocation on your iPad,” he said. He did something with his keyboard. “You’re at the Hotel Palazzo Firenze on Via Pier Capponi. I don’t know which room, I’d have to get into their bookings system for that and I can’t be bothered but you’re about seven metres or so from the street and fifteen from the west wall. Anyway, I thought you’d like to know. Call you tomorrow.”

That was really scary. I’d figured someone could find out roughly where I was from clues in my video but it had never occurred to me that my treacherous iPad would give them my actual physical location. It took me a while to get back to sleep.

When Clark hadn’t called by ten the following morning I booked a fourth night. This was turning out to be more expensive than I’d anticipated. I called Zoe and explained what Clark was doing, as far as I could, and she invited me to join them on their day’s sightseeing. It was kind of fun being part of a group again.

When I got back there was an email from Gavin, apologising for not emailing me.

“It's just that there isn't much to do here in the evenings so I've started a special project,” he said in the email. “I'll show you one day.”

Hmm.

After dinner Clark phoned me again. He was decidedly cheerful.

“I had a look around VcarMax's accounts,” he said, “and got the name, phone number and address of the guy.”

“Who's VcarMax?”

“The ISP he uses. Carlos Escobar, he's 53, divorced and unemployed.”

“Oh come on, how do you know all that?” I asked.

“I checked his tax returns,” said Clark offhandedly. “Do you want to see his photo?”

“How did you get his photo?” I was curious.

“Umm, I got on to a friend in Caracas,” said Clark, a little guardedly, “we're in the same, errm, group and I asked him to find out so he sent a drone with a camera to watch the house and got some pictures of him taking out his garbage.”

Jesus. Modern technology, scary.

“So what do we do now?”

“Nothing, it's all over,” said Clark.

“What do you mean?”

“He, umm, won't be sending you any more emails,” he said.

“How come?”

“I sent him an email,” said Clark. I'd never seen him grin before. “I gave him a list of all the people he'd sent emails to in the last three months, a couple of the photos we took, his name, address, phone number, his carnet de la patria card number which is like an ID card or something and copies of his last three tax returns. I figured the Venezuelan police wouldn't be interested unless we had all this information and I said we'd be monitoring him and would contact the police and everyone he'd been mailing if he ever did it again.”

I didn't know what to say.

“Oh yeah,” added Clark, “I also put a rule on his mail account that will send him a copy of my email every time he sends an email to anyone. He'd have to start up with another ISP if he wants to continue but he's too dumb to think of that. He'll just freak out. Let me know if you get another.”

“How long have you spent on this?” I asked. It must have been at least forty eight hours.

“Oh about an hour, maybe an hour and a half.”

“But it's been two days,” I protested.

“Yeah but most of that has been my computers searching logs, I was doing other things. You want to know what really makes him dumb? Most of the people he's been emailing wouldn't even have got the emails.”

“How come?”

“They're too famous. They have secretaries who screen their emails. Like Bill Gates, he gets about twenty thousand emails a day. He probably only sees ten of them.”

“Well, thank you very much,” I said. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh don't worry about it,” said Clark. “You helped me with my tyre.”

“But this was a lot more difficult than changing a wheel,” I said.

“You've got to be joking,” he said. “That had me baffled.”

He paused for a moment.

“Although if you really want to do something for me, I'd really like some pictures, just a sec.”

“Oh god,” I thought, “he probably wants nude pictures of me. Now what do I do?”

He did something on another computer for a minute then turned back to me.

“You're in Florence, right?”

I nodded.

“That's like ninety kilometres from Siena.”

“What's in Siena?” I asked.

“A steam train called Treno Natura. I'd love some pictures of it.”

Which wasn't a problem. The next day I drove to Siena and had a lovely time rolling through the countryside and impossibly beautiful little villages at a snail's pace in a 1920s steam locomotive and I videoed the whole thing for him. All three hours of it. Forty euros was a small price to pay for peace of mind.

I refused to let myself be curious about what it was that Gavin was going to show me.

Chapter Eighteen

The next few weeks were mostly filled with negatives.

I didn't get any more death threats so Clark seemed to have sorted that guy out for me. I turned down the Renault deal as the more I thought about it the more curtailing I thought it would be and Zoe was absolutely right, I really didn't give a damn about the money. It seemed to me, after a while, I was considering it because it would massage my ego more than anything. I turned down the wetsuit deal for much the same reason, even though we'd agreed all the details. They weren't overly impressed and thought it was a ploy on my part to get more money. I even sent the contract I'd signed with the buoyancy jacket company to Farouk to see if there was any way I could get out of it.

“Having read it,” he said in his reply, “there are three ways for you to end the contract without being sued for breach.

1. Die.

2. Make your subscribers drop below a small number, say, 100 so the company decides it isn't worth continuing. Be warned they may continue anyway.

3. Shut down the channel and never open another on diving.

I really wish you had shown it to me before you signed it.”

Dying wasn't really an option, at least not at this stage. With around two hundred thousand subscribers and climbing every day it seemed unlikely that they would drop below a hundred in the foreseeable future so that was out too. Which left closing the channel.

Well, I thought about it. On the negative side there were, apart from the contract, the risk of someone else getting nasty about it and Clark not being able to sort them out, the effort of having to keep making videos even when I was feeling a little down and my awareness of my responsibility to people using me as a guide to making big mistakes in their lives.

On the other hand, I was still continuing my travels and diving and most of the time I enjoyed making the videos. Most of the comments and emails were positive and supportive and I was also aware of my

responsibility to people using me as a guide to making significant and positive changes in their lives.

It was a difficult decision and I even went so far as to make a little video telling everyone I was closing down the channel but I deleted it. I even double checked I deleted it, just in case I uploaded it by accident.

I guess all my negativity stemmed from the negatives of my trip. Farouk's accident, Giselle, the dog attack and the shocking news from Zoe and my feeling that I wasn't much of a friend, wasn't even much of a human being for not being around when she needed me.

Gavin was pissing me off as well. We'd been exchanging emails and getting to know each other but whenever I asked him about his 'special project' he'd ignore it and email me back about other things. Once he said "wait and see" but that was it. It was very annoying.

All this negativity inside me was also impacting my travels. After Florence and Siena I went back to the coast and slowly made my way south but I wasn't diving as much. Instead of three and sometimes four dives a day I was down to two and occasionally one. My enthusiasm seemed to be slowly draining away, although I did spend a fascinating day at Pompei and found some of the mummified bodies quite confronting.

The sheer speed with which the town was engulfed by volcanic ash makes you question the seeming stability and permanence of life. Even though my life wasn't stable by many people's standards, being of 'no fixed abode', it had its routines and there was stability in what I did. But it could all so easily change. A volcanic eruption, a chance visit to a doctor and an unexpected diagnosis, even a simple accident or a drunk driver. Zoe and Pompei together made me very aware of the fragility of existence, and not just my existence. Even poor old George with his dreams of a family with his pregnant girlfriend, dashed to pieces by a printout.

So I wasn't in the most positive frame of mind when I camped on a beach in the toe of Italy, not far from Riace Capo.

The sun was low in the sky and small waves rolled lazily in to the shore. I was thinking about organising some dinner when I became aware of a man coming along the beach towards me. He was quite old and only had one leg and was hobbling along through the sand, which is quite an achievement when you've got crutches.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said, nodding to the rocky outcrop that ran into the sea. "But I come here every evening to watch the sun go down. Do you mind?"

Being a nice person I apologised for intruding on his space and he made his way along the outcrop and sat facing the sea.

After the sun had sunk below the horizon he made his way back and, impulsively, I offered him some coffee. He had a gentle face and, to be honest, I was feeling lonely and some company would be nice.

We briefly chatted about the beauty of the area and he asked if I would be more comfortable in English than Italian.

"I'm Australian," he told me with a cheeky grin, "so my English is passable. Although I can also speak Japanese and Latin if you'd prefer."

"I can't speak either," I said, in English.

"Excellent," he said with another smile. "Latin isn't a practical language in the modern world and I know enough Japanese for philosophical debate but please never ask me to order a sushi."

I didn't quite know what to make of that comment so I let it lie.

"So, what's an Australian doing in the remote wilds of Italy?" I asked. It did seem a little incongruous.

"I live here," he said.

He could tell that I found this an unsatisfactory answer.

"I've been in Italy twenty years or so, off and on," he continued.

“When my wife died I was left without meaning in my life and I studied theology and became a priest, back in Sydney. After a few years I started to have doubts and came to Italy, to Rome, to study further and assuage my doubts. It didn't work and eventually I left the priesthood and started to travel, much like you. Before my wife died, you see, I had read a book by a man who drove around the world on a motorbike and when I lost my faith I decided to follow his example and do the same. I was hoping to find some meaning in my life.”

I was very interested at this. Here was someone who had found inspiration in someone else's travels. Maybe he would have some advice for me on how to deal with people who wanted to follow me.

“Did you find meaning?” I asked.

“I thought so,” he said. “In the East I discovered Buddhism and studied that for several years' in Japan. I sold my bike and joined a Zen monastery.”

Hence his comment about not being able to order sushi. He sighed.

“I question too much,” he said, after a pause. “I began to question the fundamentals of Buddhism, much as I had with Catholicism. For example, the goal of Buddhism is to find enlightenment and the key to that is meditation and mindfulness. I meditated diligently for years but I kept coming back to, what was for me, a central issue. Meditation is uniquely personal and separating and I could never quite grasp how cutting yourself off from the rest of the world while meditating can bring enlightenment to me as a social being.”

“So you left Buddhism as well?”

“I left the monastery, yes, much as I left the priesthood. Whether I have left Buddhism or even Christianity is another matter and one I haven't yet decided upon. The fault is neither with Christianity nor Buddhism, it is with me.”

It was dark by this stage, although the moon was quite bright, so I invited him to join me for dinner. Fortunately he was a vegetarian.

“How did you lose your leg?” I asked over dinner.

“I got another bike after leaving Japan and drove back to Italy. Coming through Turkey I was hit by a car and my leg had to be amputated. I left it in Istanbul.”

He seemed to find that very amusing.

“Why do you find that funny?” I asked.

“It's so symbolic,” he answered. “Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople then made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire.”

Even in the darkness he could tell I didn't know what he was talking about.

“Constantinople was later renamed Istanbul,” he pointed out. “So my leaving my leg there is symbolic of my abandonment of Christianity. In fact, as Istanbul is widely seen as the gateway between East and West it could also symbolise my abandonment of Buddhism. I have left a part of myself, literally and figuratively, in both religions and in both cultures.”

Perhaps it would make more sense if he explained it in Japanese.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I came back to Italy. My home town of Sydney was too brash, too unspiritual for me, so I came here to find peace and quiet. I live in the village, just down the road and I've been here for eleven years now.”

“Did you find it more meaningful?” I asked.

“I think so,” he said. “Certainly after a few years here and watching the sunsets every night I realised that the fault was definitely within me. I sought meaning in the voices of others and that is why I failed to find it. Their voices spoke their meaning for them. For myself I realised that I had to find my own meaning, not someone else's. No

doubt the Buddha found enlightenment for himself but it was his enlightenment. My own enlightenment, as it were, must come from within me not from someone else. Meditation was wonderful for the Buddha on his path but it is not for me.”

“Surely though when you watch the sunset you are meditating, in a way?” I asked.

“Ahh you are a philosopher,” he replied. “You knock the very crutch of my beliefs from under me. Yes, you are right and all I can say in reply is that it isn't Buddhist or Christian meditation and I continue to be in the world while I watch the sunset. Perhaps if you are still here tomorrow evening you would like to join me? We can talk and experience the sunset and not meditate in any way.”

“Speaking of crutches,” I said, “how do you manage to walk in the sand with them? Don't they sink in?”

“Yes,” he said. “Which is why I made feet for them.”

He passed one over to me and I put on the van light to look at it. He had fitted a sleeve over the bottom of the crutch with a rectangle of wood on it to spread the load on the sand. It was held in place by a simple hook so it didn't fall off when he lifted it but which let him take the sleeve off for when he was on solid ground. It was quite ingenious.

We moved on to why I was here so I told him about my travels around France and Italy and he seemed quite interested.

“And now Charlie, I shall say goodnight. I am an old man and need to go to bed early. I wish you safe travelling in all aspects of your life.”

I woke in the middle of the night and wondered if he had been real or merely a dream. After all, you don't come across seventy year old, one legged, Australian, ex Catholic Buddhist priests called Greg every day. At least not on a beach in Italy.

I went for a dive the next day and stayed on the beach. For the first time I was uncertain where to go next and I thought, if Greg came back, he might be able to give me a suggestion as he had an unusual

perspective on things.

Sure enough he came along the beach again, perhaps a little earlier than he had the day before.

“I saw you were still here when I went for a walk this afternoon, so I brought you a gift,” he said.

He had a plastic bag with some fresh fruit in it. We made our way out to the outcrop and sat, watching the sun go down and eating apricots and cherries.

“I wanted to ask you something,” I said. “I’ve been travelling along the coast of France and Italy for seven months and for the first time I don’t know where to go next.”

“What are your options?” he asked.

“Well, since I’m here,” I said, “one option is to cross over into Sicily.”

Sicily was just over the horizon.

“And from there maybe go on to Malta but then it’s a dead end unless I continue to North Africa and I’m a bit nervous about going there as I’m a woman on my own.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he said.

“Alternatively, I can go back the way I’ve come but I’ve been there and I don’t see much point in doing it again. Or I can carry on round the coast of Italy and head north again and stay with the Adriatic Sea but that means I’d end up having to go through places like Slovenia and Croatia and I’m a bit wary of those too.”

“Yes, awkward.”

“I was wondering if you have any ideas?”

“Well, you could always cross to the other side of Italy and go to Brindisi,” he said, “and take the ferry to Greece and carry on then to

Turkey if you're still in the mood for travelling.”

Greece? Why hadn't that occurred to me? That way I could dive in the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea and a few freshwater lakes as well. That would be pretty cool. It had been a while since I'd dived in fresh water.

“That's a great idea,” I said, “thanks,” and I gave him a hug which quite tickled him, especially as the sun was just setting. I think he found it spiritually uplifting. We went back to my van and I cooked us some stir fried veggies. I handed him a fork to eat them with from the frying pan and he held it up to the moon.

“Look at this fork,” he said. “Has it ever occurred to you that it symbolises the fundamental folly of humanity?”

I had to confess that, up until now, it hadn't.

“Well think about it,” said Greg. “Hundreds of thousands of years ago our ancestors found that sharp stones could be used for all sorts of useful things like killing animals, scraping earth to get at roots, cutting and so on and from that we now have knives. In the same way shells, tree bark, things like that made it easier to hold liquids so we now have spoons. Forks probably came along much later and probably because if you hold something in a fire with a knife it swivels as you twist the knife so it burns on one side and it's still raw on the other. Use something with two or three prongs and you can rotate it a lot more easily.”

“OK,” I said. “That seems pretty sensible to me, not folly.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Tools are wonderful things. But what have we done with them?”

“Made them into weapons of war?” I said tentatively. I had a feeling I was back at school.

“Well, yes,” he admitted, “although we don't use forks and spoons much in modern warfare, as far as I know.”

“Well what then?”

“Have you ever been to a fancy dinner party or a restaurant?” he asked.

“Of course I have. I haven't always been a homeless drifter.”

“The wealthy have lots of types of forks,” he said. “Specialised forks for fish, for oysters, for fruit, for salads. There's even a specialised fork for ice cream. The poor just have a single fork and the very poor use their fingers. It's the same with knives and spoons.”

“So?”

“So that's the fundamental folly of humanity. We invent incredibly useful tools and end up using them as a means of discrimination. Rather than serving humanity by providing everyone with a knife, fork and spoon to make it easier to prepare and eat food we instead use them to discriminate between rich and poor, to laugh at someone who doesn't know which is the 'correct' fork to use for which dish. Isn't that absurd?”

Now that he pointed it out I could see what he meant. And yes, I had been guilty of not knowing which utensils to use for which courses in the past. And I'd had a funny look or two.

“I went to visit my friend this morning,” said Greg, spearing a piece of aubergine. “He knows how to use the internet. We watched your videos.”

“OK, did they inspire you to take up diving?”

“No, but they did inspire me to talk about forks,” he said.

I barely know Greg but already I could tell that he could be very weird sometimes.

“What do you mean?” I speared a particularly sumptuous looking piece of carrot that had picked up more than its fair share of basil in the pan.

“You've changed a lot since you left England,” he said. “I can see it in the videos. In fact, from watching that video where you talked about your divorce and leaving your teaching job, I think you'd changed a lot before you even left England.”

“Changed? In what way?” I still felt much the same.

“You've learnt to rely on yourself, for one thing,” he said. “To trust yourself and your own judgement. More than that I think you've learned to like yourself and you've learned to stop judging yourself by other people. You have found yourself a set of values and you live by them and have cast off the old values, the ones that other people put on you.”

“Give me an example,” I said. I wasn't clear on what he was talking about.

“OK,” he said. “Gays and Muslims, to start with. Runaway teenagers, marriage, jobs, even talking to strangers like me. Could you, for example, have talked to someone like me even a year ago? Back in England?”

I thought back and had to admit that, no, I tended to avoid strangers, especially men and now I was pretty much happy to talk to anyone, anytime.

“You see,” said Greg, “you've learnt what knives and forks are really for. They're for helping people, not discriminating against them.”

I had to admit that he did have a point.

“There's something I've been worrying about for a while now,” I said. “I started posting videos so I could let my friends back in England know what I was doing and that I was OK and having fun and now I've got thousands of people watching them. A lot of them have told me that I'm inspiring them to change their lives but I'm worried that some of them may end up being worse off than before and that it's all my fault. I've even thought of closing down the channel and stopping posting the videos.”

“Yes, I understand,” said Greg. “Tell me, was Ted Simon responsible for me losing my leg?”

“Who's Ted Simon?”

“He's the man who rode round the world in a bike and wrote the book that inspired me to do the same,” said Greg.

“Ahh, well of course not,” I said. “How could he be responsible for an accident you had in Turkey?”

Greg just gazed serenely at me in the moonlight. There was a faint smell of garlic coming from the restaurant in the village.

I stared back then it hit me. Ted Simon wasn't responsible for Greg's accident. He inspired Greg but Greg was responsible for himself and his own actions.

“Right,” I said after a minute or so. “You were inspired by him but how you chose to use that inspiration was down to you. What happened in Turkey was nothing directly to do with it. You could even have rejected everything that man had to say and still been in Turkey that day.”

“Just as the Buddha inspires us but cannot be responsible for the paths we take,” said Greg.

I lay back on the sand and thought about it for a while. It was a relief, actually, not to be responsible for the rest of the world.

“But what about my friend Zoe?” I asked after a while. I briefly outlined what had happened to her and how I wasn't there when she needed me. I hadn't made a video about it as it was no one else's business.

“I really do hate to tell people they're wrong,” said Greg. “I prefer to guide not confront.”

I laughed.

“So you think I'm wrong?” I said. “Generally or about something in particular?”

Greg laughed as well. He was a happy chappie despite his weirdness. Or perhaps because of it.

“You were there when she needed you,” he said.

“No, I wasn't,” I replied, a little sharply. “I was gallivanting around France.”

“Didn't you say she confronted her past and found the determination to lose weight while you were away?”

“Yes.”

“Then obviously she didn't need you.”

Bam. That was a slap in the face.

“Of course she needed me, I am her best friend!”

“If she needed you and you weren't there how could she have succeeded?” said Greg. “When she needed you, you were there. In Florence. For whatever reasons, that was when she decided she needed you. And you were there a day early, just to be sure!”

I tried to argue with his logic but it was a struggle.

“You see,” he went on remorselessly, “you still have a trace of the old thinking left. You are blaming yourself for not being there because you are judging yourself and the situation on what you think other people expect of you, not on the reality of it. You are still thinking that to be a good friend you had to be there when that friend first encountered a problem. With Zoe she needed a psychiatrist to help her in the beginning. Could you have done that?”

“No.”

“That's right. But to keep it going now that the psychiatrist has

identified the problem, she needs your belief in her. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"So why beat yourself up over something you couldn't do and weren't asked to do? She's asked you to do something you are able to do and that's what you're doing. Is it possible to be a better friend than that?"

There's a flaw in his argument, I'm sure, but I wasn't able to see it. I still can't, come to that.

We both sat silently for quite a long time. I was thinking about what Greg had been saying. God knows what Greg was thinking. Or maybe the Buddha knows.

"So if I'm so self reliant now, so into the real use of forks," I said quite suddenly, surprising myself. "Why did I need to ask you which way to go next?"

"Oh Charlie," he said sadly. "It's obvious. I have no idea why but you want to go to Greece and you won't admit it to yourself."

Chapter Nineteen

I confess I was more than a little irritated by what Greg said. I didn't particularly want to go to Greece, I just hadn't thought of that as an option. After all, it wasn't as though there was anything particularly special in Greece. It occurred to me later, after he'd gone, that perhaps he meant Gavin but why would he think there was anything going on there?

Greg also annoyed me with his parting shot about diving. Perhaps he was irritated with me for not being wildly enthusiastic about his pronouncements but as he got up to leave he said

“Of course you realise, don't you, that diving is as much passive voyeurism as someone going to a strip club.”

He was swallowed up in the darkness before I calmed down enough to try to think of a scathing reply. How dare he say something as vicious as that? I moved on the next day so I wouldn't be there when he came back for the next sunset. He hadn't turned out to be as nice as I'd first thought.

Although I do have to concede that the fault wasn't entirely Greg's. Since meeting up with Zoe in Florence I'd become almost, well, lonely. I'd been on the road for seven months and, apart from brief encounters in cafes, I hadn't really had much to do with anyone other than Zoe since I'd left England. As I moved further south I'd noticed men were tending to leave me alone in cafes rather than join me. I put it down to them becoming more taciturn in the South of Italy. So when I met Greg I was perhaps a little more desperate for company than I would normally have been.

I started heading across the foot of Italy and, after a couple of days, I stopped in Bovalino to get supplies. As I was walking along what looked like the main street back to where I'd seen a food store I caught sight of myself in a reflective shop window and I was quite shocked. I was by no means ragged but I was distinctly shoddy. My hair definitely needed attention and my clothes were no longer fashionably casual. They were scruffy. Thoughtfully I did my shopping and went back to the van.

I opened all the doors to the van and looked critically at it. It was becoming quite a mess. Normally I kept everything neat and tidy, including myself, as I was convinced the little trouble I'd had with the police was because I looked perfectly respectable. Recently I'd been becoming lazy and chucking things in the van rather than stowing them away. As if to drive home the message I nearly killed myself the next morning.

I'd gone into the hills to camp for the night and in the morning I'd started driving back to the coast along the steep windy road I'd driven up the night before. Part way down the steering went, or at least the power assisted side of it went and the steering suddenly got very heavy and I overshot a curve because I wasn't able to turn the steering wheel quickly enough. I slammed on the brakes and stopped just in time with one of the rear wheels half on and half off the edge of the road, above a sharp drop into the valley below.

Fortunately the Kangoo is front wheel drive so I was able to drive back onto the road and away from the edge but I sat there, white faced and shaking for several minutes. As luck would have it, only one car came down while I sat there and the driver beeped angrily at me for blocking our side of the road but didn't bother to stop. Had I been going faster I would have gone over the edge and probably become another road accident statistic but I am not by nature an aggressive driver. I calmed down after a while and very slowly made my way back to Bovalino, fighting the steering all the way.

I found a mechanic in town and explained the problem and he was very concerned and sympathetic until he got in the car to drive it into his workshop. He turned on the ignition then sat there for at least a minute.

"How long has this light been on?" he asked, pointing to a glowing symbol in the van's display.

I honestly couldn't remember. I'd noticed it some time before but had got used to it since the feel of the van hadn't changed.

"That's the power steering warning light," he told me. "It's supposed to go off after a few seconds when you start the engine. When it

stayed on you should have got it dealt with immediately, not left it. You were very lucky.”

As I walked away to find a cafe to wait at, I half heard him saying something to the other mechanic about women drivers but I wasn't sure what he said exactly. I had the feeling though that he thought it was my own fault.

In the cafe I didn't go on the net as I usually did. I sat at a corner and gazed out of the window. I didn't know what the little symbol in the light had meant but that was no excuse. The handbook for the van was in the glove compartment and it would have been only a matter of a minute or two to look it up when the light first started coming on. God knows I have enough spare time to do that. Why hadn't I checked the handbook and got the van fixed before nearly killing myself?

Well, the answer was simple. I couldn't be bothered. And only the day before I had seen myself in the shop window and the disarray inside the van. I hadn't been bothering about myself or the van for some time. I hadn't even been diving as much. Which, on reflection, was probably a good thing since there aren't warning lights on diving gear. You have to be vigilant and I was no longer as vigilant as I had been.

I dug a pen out of my bag and started to make some notes on a paper napkin. How long had it been since I'd done any washing? I thought back to the last laundromat I'd used which was in Cosenza. I worked out it was seventeen days previously. Jesus. When had I last been to a hairdresser? I couldn't remember exactly but it was a week or so before I met Zoe in Florence so that would be around eight weeks. When had I last tidied up the van and swept it out and had a cleanup? Probably three weeks, maybe more. I'd certainly done it after leaving Florence, I was sure of that. When had I last dismantled and checked my regulator? I couldn't remember doing it in Italy so that meant nearly four months. Jesus, what was wrong with me?

I'd known I wasn't as enthusiastic as I had been but I hadn't realised how slack I'd been getting. No wonder people didn't want to be with me in cafes any more. The aura Bill had commented on must be quite pathetic now. I really needed to get a grip on myself or the next accident would be more serious. So, I asked the woman who ran the

cafe where there was a hairdresser and I got my hair done then went and bought some new clothes, including a new bikini which was in the latest Italian style. Which meant there wasn't a whole lot of it but I definitely felt pretty good when I tried it on.

When I got the van back I chucked out a lot of my old clothes and gave the inside a thorough clean and tidy up. I made a mental note to buy a new foam mattress as soon as I could since my old one was looking decidedly tatty and I figured I'd also treat myself to a new frying pan. First thing in the morning I laid a towel, could probably use a new towel too, on the sand and stripped my regulator and carefully inspected it. I added a set of O rings to my shopping list for when I came across a town big enough to have a dive shop. Finally I drove the van as far down the beach as I dared and gave it a good wash with sea water.

It's amazing how a good makeover and clean out can boost your spirits. As did being bought dinner by a rather hunky Italian that evening. He casually mentioned that his wife was away for a couple of days at some sort of conference if I happened to be looking to spend the night somewhere. I declined but, boy, was it good to be invited again. Where's Charlie? Back with a vengeance!

I also decided where to go next. I'd spent sixteen weeks in France and fifteen weeks in Italy. That was long enough. Going back up north would take a while and I was suddenly keen to move on to another country and another culture. Maybe that's what Greg had meant about wanting to go to Greece, maybe he'd picked up that I'd simply had enough of Italy. I decided to forget about diving for a bit and headed for Brindisi and a ferry. I was a little wary of the steering though so I took my time.

I booked myself and the van on the night ferry to Igoumenitsa in Greece. Partly because it was about half the price and partly because the day ferry arrived at 9:30 at night and I didn't want to have to find somewhere to camp in a strange country immediately. The night ferry would let me sleep and didn't arrive until 8 in the morning so I'd have the whole day to start to get a feel for the place. I found a dive shop and got some O rings and a place that had some foam mattresses and I got some new long tee shirts to sleep in as well. I tried to find a

Greek-English dictionary and a phrase book but, I suppose inevitably, they were all Greek-Italian. I figured in Greece they'd have some Greek-English ones. It seemed pretty futile to try to translate things from English to Italian to Greek and back.

Of course, things never go quite to plan. I'd only been on the ferry for twenty minutes or so when I was adopted by a group of seven Greek freight truck drivers who competed amongst themselves to entertain me as much as possible. We sat on the deck in the dark, leaning against the rails with the stars glimmering overhead and the bow waves shimmering in the moonlight, and talked and ate and drank. When I rolled off the ferry the next morning having had, at best, three hours sleep on the eleven hour voyage, I had a grasp of the basic principles of the language and had acquired a taste for tsipouro which is an alcohol made in Greece from the grapes rejected by the wine makers and flavoured with aniseed. Strange but really quite nice after the second swig. I drove off the ferry at Igoumenitsa with seven scraps of paper with scribbled addresses and invitations to visit whenever I was in those areas and the tingle of seven stubbled kisses on my cheeks and from several hands on my backside but what the hell, I was in a good mood.

As luck would have it I found a phrasebook and a dictionary in a book shop in Igoumenitsa as well as a road map of Greece. I followed the coast road south out of town and stopped at a delightful beach maybe thirty miles away and caught up on my sleep. It was mid afternoon when I woke and I stripped my regulator and replaced the O rings and tested it in the shallows. It seemed to draw a little more easily but that could also be because I was simply feeling more positive. I didn't go for a dive though as I still felt a little out of balance. I decided to have my first Greek dive in the morning.

I went to bed quite early and lay on my new, thicker and more comfortable mattress with my new pillow in my new tee shirt nightie and studied my new map while having a nightcap of some tsipouro, given to me by Estevan, from my new souvenir mug, given to me by Nicos. It had MV PRINCE, EUROPEAN FERRIES emblazoned on it with a picture of the boat. They'd all bought me something, sweet lads that they were.

I had to get out my iPad at one point to check Gavin's emails since I'd spotted a lake on the map where Greece, Albania and Macedonia met. I wanted to check it was the same lake as I wasn't sure of how to spell it since all the place names on the map were in Greek characters, not the Roman alphabet that is used for English, French and Italian. Learning Greek was going to be a lot harder because of that, although I knew most of the characters from maths, like π and Σ

Interestingly, Gavin's lake was only about three hundred and fifty kilometres, say two hundred and twenty miles, from where I was camping. I could do that in three or four hours. Despite the fun of the truckers on the boat, it would be nice to see a friendly, familiar face again. And maybe talk in my native tongue, even though he had a Scots variant.

"Oh sod it," I thought. "He invited me anytime and since he's already said he doesn't go away much he's bound to be there. I'll find somewhere tomorrow with internet access and email him."

Decision made, I finished my tsipouro, put my souvenir mug out of harm's way and turned out the light.

"I wonder if he'll be pleased to see me," I thought. "He keeps saying he doesn't do much and doesn't get many visitors. Maybe he'll tell me what that special project of his is."

I drifted off to sleep happily, wondering what it would be like to meet a real otter. Part way through the night I woke up again briefly.

"Why don't I just turn up instead of farting around looking for internet access. That way he'll be surprised and I'll know if he really is pleased to see me. If I warn him I'm coming he might just be putting up with me. If he's got company I can leave straight away."

I went back to sleep hoping he'd be pleased to see me. After all, no one likes to be an unwelcome guest. I woke up before dawn and realised to my disappointment that I wouldn't be able to see the dawn from the beach since it faced west and to the east were mountains. I fixed myself some breakfast and decided not to bother with diving. I had a long drive ahead of me. I set off with a light heart and a CD of

Greek pop music playing. A gift from Spiro.

I drove up through some of the most spectacularly beautiful mountains I've ever seen. I arrived at the village of Antartiko, on the edge of Prespa National Park, around lunchtime and pulled over and had a panic attack.

“Oh god this is stupid,” I moaned to myself. “He only invited you to be polite. He really doesn't want you disturbing him. Jesus, you're just being stupid.”

I turned the van around and started to drive back down to the coast again but after a couple of miles I changed my mind.

“He did say that he'd show me that project one day,” I told myself firmly. “Obviously if he didn't want me to visit he'd have not mentioned it or told me what the project is and not teased me with it.”

Hoping that was true, I turned the van around again and went back. I followed the signs to Lake Prespa out of Antartiko and went over the ridge and down into the valley below. At the little village of Mileonas the main road turned sharply to the right and away from the lake but there was a minor road off to the left so I followed that. There were no signs for the Otter Research Centre but it was a nice day and if I didn't find it I'd camp somewhere and make my way back to the village in the morning and try to find someone who spoke English.

I followed the road down to a narrow strip of land barely a hundred yards wide with what I guessed must be Lake Prespa on one side and Little Prespa on the other side. As lakes go they were both delightful and there was no other traffic, just me, my van and the lakes and birds. The road started to rise again on the other side of the narrow strip and split into two. I guessed that the dirt road going off to the right went to the main lake so I took it. I rounded a bend almost immediately and there it was, the sign that Gavin had sent me a photo of. Only he wasn't leaning against it this time.

Πρέσπα Βίδρα Έρευνα Κέντρο και Ασφάλεια
Prespa Otter Research Centre and Sanctuary

I pulled the van over and got out and went up to the sign and touched it. I was here. It was real. I was nervous. In fact my hand was trembling.

“This is a stupid idea,” I said out loud. “Go back to a town and send an email. This is just going to be embarrassing.”

So much for being a strong independent woman. I sat down on the grass at the foot of the sign and leaned my back against the post. I told myself it was to enjoy the incredible peace and quiet and absorb some of the ambience but really it was to let my heart slow down. It had started racing when I saw the sign. It was real, not just some bullshit done with Photoshop.

“OK Charlie, get a grip,” I told myself. “He's just a guy, it's no big deal. Worst case scenario you go away and stop emailing with him. It's really not a problem!”

It's amazing how pep talks don't really work. You'd think after all the pep talks people have given themselves and each other over the however many centuries people have been doing pep talks that we'd have become quite good at them but we haven't. I probably sat there for ten minutes before I made myself get up and get back in the van and not turn round and go away.

I rounded another corner and the full view of the lake opened up before me. In the foreground was a rambling old house not far from the lake but the lake itself was huge and seemed to be mostly surrounded by craggy tops. On the far side, in either Albania or Macedonia, I hadn't got my bearings, the mountain tops had snow on them. In September.

“Still, this must be where Gavin lives,” I thought. I drove the van along the last of the dirt track and pulled up in front of the house. The front door opened and someone who clearly wasn't Gavin came out. He looked to be about twelve.

He smiled and came over to the van. I got out and smiled back. I was sure Gavin had said he wasn't married but this looked to be his son so maybe I'd got it wrong. Totally wrong.

The boy said something to me in Greek so I asked him, in English, if he spoke English.

“Welcome to Lake Prespa, how can I help you?” he said.

“Hello, my name is Charlie Thurston,” I replied. He nodded as if he knew the name. “Umm, is Gavin here?”

For the life of me I couldn't remember his surname. Still, there couldn't be many Gavins in this part of the world.

“No,” said the lad. “He's in Albania.”

Chapter Twenty

“When will Gavin be back?” I asked after a few moments of internal confusion. It had never occurred to me that he might not be there.

“Tomorrow afternoon perhaps, or perhaps the next morning. It depends how late the meetings run.”

Well at least he wasn't away for weeks or gone back to Scotland forever.

“You are that English lady, yes?” he said.

“Well I'm English,” I said, “and I like to think I'm a lady.”

“The one he met in Cannes? You make diving videos?”

“Yes, that's me.”

“Gavin talks about you a lot. I am Kristos, the vet here,” said Kristos.

Maybe he wasn't twelve after all.

“Is there somewhere round here I can camp?” I asked, making up my mind whether to leave or stay for a bit.

Kristos slowly waved his arm around, encompassing the entire lake surroundings.

“Anywhere you like,” he said. “But we have a guest room you are welcome to use.”

“Oh that would be too much trouble,” I replied. I'd actually feel a lot more comfortable in my van, at least until I had a better understanding of what was going on here. Gavin talks about me a lot?

“It's no trouble,” said Kristos. “But I've seen some of your videos myself and I know you like to camp in your auto. But please, no lighting a fire. We do not want any bushfires. You are free to use the kitchen if you want to cook anything. Come, I will show you where it

is.

He took me round the side of the house to a side door that opened directly into a kitchen. It was a perfectly normal kitchen with a cooker, fridge, freezer and so on. I didn't know why I felt a little surprised. I did note, not wholly subconsciously, that it was a man's kitchen, not a woman's kitchen. There were no chintzy little curtains over the windows, for example.

“And here,” said Kristos, taking me into the corridor and opening another door, “is the bathroom and toilet.”

It was indeed a bathroom and toilet. Totally unsurprising. With no cosmetics or makeup or cute little face flannels in sight. Just a bottle of shower gel, leaking slightly around the cap, and a roll of toilet paper sitting on the window sill with a half empty packet of disposable razors.

“We never lock the house,” said Kristos, “so come in any time.”

“Do you live here with Gavin and his family?” I asked, trying to look as though I was asking innocently.

“Gavin has no family,” said Kristos, “I live in Kastoria. One hour to the south.”

Apparently Kristos came in three days a week and was about to leave for the day. I would be alone here until the day after next when he came back, unless Gavin did come back the next day. This was fine with me as I had some thinking to do.

I moved the van so it was sideways to the lake on a flat patch of ground twenty or thirty metres from the house and waved goodbye to Kristos as he left in a battered old Fiat Panda. I heard it backfire a couple of times in the distance then there was silence.

There was a gentle breeze coming in off the lake and the water lapped peacefully at the shore and it looked fairly clear. In fact, I was pretty sure that the occasional ripples that appeared in circles away from the shore were fish catching insects on the surface. Looking around there

were lots of trees. I'm no tree expert but it looked like there were a lot of oaks and beech trees and general wilderness and thick patches of reeds in the water. And birds, a lot of birds. It was a lovely place. It was getting a little chilly in the late afternoon so I dug out a sweater from one of the suitcases and took my coffee mug and coffee to the kitchen.

I was sorely tempted to investigate the rest of the house and got up from the kitchen table at one point to do just that then changed my mind. Since the place wasn't locked it looked as though Gavin wasn't overly worried about security but it was just possible that there were cameras and I really, really didn't want to be caught on film snooping around so I contained my curiosity. Gavin would probably give me a tour when he came back.

“So he talks about me a lot, does he?” I thought to myself. “That could just mean he doesn't have much else to think about. Maybe he's a lot more boring than I thought. Or maybe he doesn't get out much and he's living life vicariously through my videos. Well, don't get your hopes up girl.”

What?

I put my mug down rather hard on the table and splashed some coffee. There was a dishcloth hanging from the oven door handle so I got it and mopped up the mess and hung it back up.

Why would I be getting my hopes up? I had no idea why I'd warned myself about that since my plan was only to visit Gavin, see how he was and maybe stay a night or two then be on my way. That wasn't much to hope for and if it didn't happen it wasn't a big deal. Was it?

I finished my coffee with my mind in a mild state of confusion so I went for a walk along the water's edge. For some reason I stayed the van side of the house. It didn't feel right to cross between the house and the lake. Like I was somehow trespassing and might get seen, even though there was no one to see me and even if there was, I had Kristos' permission to be there. I tried to engage my logical left brain (or was it the right?) and analyse myself. It didn't work. Consciously I was sure I was only paying a polite visit to an acquaintance while I

was in the neighbourhood but occasional little half-thoughts kept popping up from my subconscious.

Like 'don't get your hopes up'. Like 'what if he doesn't turn up in the next day or two?' Like 'why does he talk about me *a lot!*' Like 'no cosmetics in the bathroom'.

It was after sunset when I got back to the van so I made myself some dinner and went to bed with my Greek pop music CD and another mug of tsipouro. I was getting quite familiar with the pop music although I still had no idea what the words meant.

I woke around dawn and stumbled over to the kitchen for morning coffee and a pee. It was definitely nice to sit on a proper toilet and pee rather than go behind some bushes. I took my coffee back to the van and sat on my mattress with my sleeping bag draped around me and watched the lake wake up. Scores of birds were settling on its surface then lifting off again and something very large sounding moved around in the bushes off to the right but I couldn't see what it was. Then I became aware of something coming out of the water almost directly in front of me and I caught my breath. It was an otter!

I had never seen a real one before. I'd seen them on TV back in the UK but I generally had only gone into the wilds to go diving and wildlife tends to stay away from places where there are a fair number of people. It was quite small and brown and it had a fish in its mouth. It moved a couple of feet onto the shore then calmly sat there holding the fish with its front feet, paws?, while it ate the fish. Every now and then it darted a glance at me but didn't seem overly bothered by my presence.

A couple of minutes later another otter joined it, also with a fish, and watched me suspiciously for half a minute or so then started to eat its fish as well. Then they gave themselves a good clean and silently slid back into the water. I was fascinated and somewhat awed. On the rare occasions I'd come across wild creatures they disappeared almost immediately. Although I'd been camping fairly rough for the last few months, the coastlines of both France and Italy are quite densely populated so there wasn't much in the way of wildlife, although I had seen a couple of deer. I felt quite privileged that these otters were

happy to have breakfast so close to where I was.

I went down to the water's edge and stuck my foot in and found the water was pretty cold so I decided to go for a dive wearing my wetsuit. I hadn't worn it for quite a while since the Mediterranean was quite warm in summer and it wasn't quite as tight as it used to be but it would have to do. I fired up the compressor to fill my tank and was instantly ashamed of the noise it made, shattering the peace of the lake. I shut it off then started it again.

"It's no louder than a car engine," I told myself firmly.

I found a reasonable spot to dive from. It sloped down so I could wade in but got quite deep fairly quickly and there were no nasty obstacles, like jagged rocks, to snag myself on. I pulled down my mask and put my mouthpiece in my mouth and launched myself and sank straight to the bottom. I'd forgotten it was fresh water and my weight belt was weighted for salt water so I got out again and took off a couple of weights and tried again. That was about right and I had a glorious time exploring the lake around the house. I even caught a glimpse of the otters, or some other ones, gliding underwater.

Back on shore I was surprised to see on my dive computer that I had gone as deep as twenty metres. Mind you, it can be quite deceptive following a downward sloping bed so it was quite possible. I remembered Gavin had said that the lake was fifty four metres deep in places. I was going to have to keep an eye on my depth if I was going to dive here often.

"Why would I be diving here often?" I said aloud when I realised what I'd just thought. "I'm only going to be here for a day or two."

I had another coffee and some figs I'd bought the day before and pulled my mattress out of the van to have a lie down in the sun. I was feeling a little achy. I must have dozed off as the sun was quite high when I woke up again, so I went for another dive, since that's what I do. I felt more achy afterwards so I went for another walk to try to exercise it off. I had been remarkably healthy on my travels and hadn't even caught a cold so I was feeling a little irritable that I seemed to be coming down with something. Maybe the Greeks had viruses I wasn't

immune to.

I was still quite achy and a little stiff when Gavin turned up in the mid afternoon but that didn't stop me grinning stupidly like a teenager with a crush. I had to force myself to play it cool but my heart was beating faster than usual. He drove down and parked near the van and got out.

“Hello,” he said shyly. “Kristos texted me that you were here.”

He didn't seem to quite know whether to shake my hand or kiss my cheek or stay a couple of yards away so I did what I had learned to do in France. I kissed him on both cheeks.

“He said you were in Albania,” I said.

“Yes, come on up to the house. There was a conference on ways Albania, Macedonia and Greece could develop the lake for tourism,” he explained. “I was there to represent the environmental aspect.”

We sat in the kitchen and had coffee and he talked a bit about the environmental issues of the lake and he wanted to know how I'd been and what had happened recently. He asked about my arm and I took off my sweater to show him how well the scars had healed and he showed me a nasty scar he had on his leg from some accident when building the dam a few years previously.

“How long are you staying?” he asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “It's really up to you but I was thinking of maybe a day or two, but it's just so lovely and peaceful up here.”

I expected him to say I could stay as long as I wanted but he didn't. I was a little hurt by that.

“Would you like to see around the house?” he asked and gave me a tour.

It was an old single story five bedroomed farmhouse and sprawled. It looked like extra rooms had been added at different times in its

history.

“I converted one bedroom into a surgery,” he said, unlocking a door and showing me inside. It was a fairly typical veterinary surgery with gleaming equipment.

“This is the only room I bother to lock because of all the equipment and drugs. This is Kristos' domain really. I'm lucky to have him since vets are pretty expensive. But he tried three times to pass his final exams to be a vet and failed each time so he gave up. He comes here three days a week to deal with any injured or sick animals.”

One bedroom was Gavin's and was pretty stark. He also had a guest bedroom which he offered to me to use if I didn't want to stay in my van, a bedroom for use by researchers who stayed there and the other was an office come storeroom.

“I don't get many researchers staying here,” he said, “but when they do they usually stay for a couple of months.”

I didn't know how long I was going to be there so I made no comment about using the guest bedroom. If it was just the one night I saw no point in mussing it up and he hadn't hinted at staying longer. I left it as I didn't have to make a decision until bed time and I might have a better idea by then.

“Are you feeling all right?” he asked as we made our way into his simple, uncluttered lounge.

“I'm fine,” I said, “just a little achy. Probably picked up something on the ferry.”

“Is it your joints?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, sitting on the couch which was surprisingly comfortable.

“Kristos said you arrived yesterday,” said Gavin. “Have you been diving in the lake?”

I admitted I had.

“That's probably why,” he said. “You've probably got decompression sickness.”

“But I haven't been below twenty metres,” I protested.

“It's the altitude,” Gavin replied. “We're about nine hundred metres above sea level and the air's only about thirteen and a third psi not the fourteen and a half psi at sea level. You need to be more careful decompressing and stay out longer.

I felt like an idiot. I am a very experienced diver and even though I had driven uphill most of the way to get here I had forgotten all about the altitude. Not even the snow capped mountains around the lake had made me think of it. I vaguely remembered there was a setting somewhere inside my dive computer for altitude.

We talked for a while about diving in the lake and he said he would love to take me diving and show me some of the underwater sights but he still made no mention of how long I could stay.

Over a simple dinner, cooked by Gavin, I told him about the otters I'd seen that morning and he got very enthusiastic.

“I set up this centre nearly seven years ago,” he told me. “There are at least fifteen families of otters living around here and since they only live ten years or so in the wild we're now having the third generation growing up here who know this area is safe. They're getting quite tame.”

After a while he apologised for going on about otters which I thought was quite sweet of him. He was as easy to talk to as he had been in Cannes and I was quite relaxed sitting with him on the sofa, listening to him going on about otters.

“So when are you going to tell me about this special project you've been working on?” I asked.

He went quiet and I cursed myself for not being more diplomatic about it. Obviously he'd messed it up and didn't want to look silly in front of me.

“Umm,” he said, and looked at me shyly. “Umm, how about tomorrow?”

“Are you going to give me a clue or am I going to have a sleepless night worrying about it?” I asked jokingly.

“Actually, I would be happier if you slept in the guest room,” he said, changing the subject. “There are brown bears and wolves in the woods so it's probably better to sleep indoors until you are used to them.”

Until I'm used to them? The significance of the bears and wolves prowling around the van in the middle of the night didn't hit me for a few moments. How long would it take for me to get used to them?

I decided to stay in the guest room. Much as I like animals I didn't want a bear in bed with me. Gavin came out to the van to help me bring my toothbrush and nightie inside. I let him carry my toothbrush as my nightie was a little intimate.

He lit a fire and we drank ouzo and laughed a lot. We stayed up quite late and I slept very well in the guest room, despite a couple of bears prowling through my dreams.

“When can I see your project?” I asked over breakfast the next morning.

“Why don't I take you diving?” he said, avoiding the subject. “Kristos will be here soon.”

“I want to see your project,” I said firmly. Frankly I was getting a bit irritated. If he'd messed it up why didn't he just say so?

He was visibly nervous but stood up and told me to follow him. So I did. He took me along the water's edge for about a couple of hundred metres or so, the other side of the house to the one I had explored. The shore curved so that it was facing west. There was a clearing in the trees and when we went around the last of the trees so I could see into the clearing unobstructed I froze and gaped. It wasn't ladylike.

There was a very small, white house there. With a bench outside it,

facing over the lake. With two life sized carved wooden figures sitting on it. They weren't lifelike but they clearly resembled Laurel and Hardy.

“What the ...?” I said and walked slowly over to the figures and ran my hands over them. They were smooth in places and still a little rough in others.

“Oh my god,” I said and turned to look at him.

“Do you like them?” he asked, not looking at me. “I made them for you.”

My heart swelled up and I felt my chest was going to burst.

“You made them?” I said. “For me? You made them for me?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “The house too.”

I sagged against the side of the house and started to cry.

“Oh god,” he said and turned away. “You don't like them.” He looked shattered.

“You made them for me?” I said, again. So much for being a resourceful modern woman. I sounded more like a cracked record. “You made them for me?”

“I'm sorry you don't like them,” he said, sheepishly. “I haven't done any wood carving since I left school. Come on, let's go back to the house.” He started walking back the way we'd come.

“Gavin, no, stop,” I said. “They're wonderful, incredible, I'm just so stunned, I never expected, oh my god, come back, I love them, oh god.”

I couldn't stop crying.

“It's only a little summer house,” he said, walking slowly back. “I made it out of straw bales and coated it with plaster but it faces west.

I thought you'd like to sit here and watch the sunsets over the lake.”

I ran over to him and hugged him tightly. I think I heard a rib cracking but it may have been a twig.

“But Laurel and Hardy ...” I said, my voice muffled by his chest.

“You told me in an email about the Laurel and Hardy in that village and how much you loved them,” he said. “So I decided to build you a house and I got a picture off the internet of them so I've spent the last three months working on them.”

“But why ...” I said, standing back and looking intently at his face. “You didn't even know I was going to come here. Why on earth would you do this knowing I might never ever see them?”

“I saw a movie, many years ago,” he said, slowly. “A guy built a baseball stadium on his farm because a mystic had told him 'if you build it he will come'. I don't remember who was going to come but whoever it was did come. And I was thinking about how I could get you to come here and I got your email and it came to me, just like that. If I build it she will come.”

I was staring at him. My mind a whirl of confused emotions. He put his hands in his pockets and started twisting a foot in the ground.

“If I build it she will come,” he muttered then looked at me and grinned.

“I built it and you came,” he said. My heart broke.

“They're not quite finished yet,” he said. “I'm only part way through polishing them and then I need to paint them so they've got their suits and hats on. It'll only take another couple of days.”

“Don't you dare,” I said. “I love them exactly as they are.”

“OK,” he said. We stood there, face to face, not quite touching. Neither of us quite knew what to do next.

“So you like them?” he said, seeking reassurance.

“Yes,” I said. “No one's ever done anything ...” I started to cry again. He got embarrassed again.

“But why?” I said through my tears, “why did you do all this?”

“So you would come here,” he said.

“But why did you want me to come here so badly?”

He went quiet, the ways guys do when asked to talk about their emotions. He looked out across the lake.

“When I met you in Cannes,” he said quietly, “I was very taken with you, very impressed. The way you were turning your life around. Then you kissed me.”

“When did I kiss you?”

“You don't remember?” He looked stricken.

“Was it when you walked me back to my van?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, looking a little relieved.

“I thought I'd dreamt that,” I said.

“Well anyway,” he said, getting very embarrassed. “That's when I fell in love with you. I've not stopped thinking about you ever since.”

He thought about it for a couple of moments then broke out into smiles.

“You dreamed about me? How wonderful!”

I just stared at him. He loved me? Oh my god.

I went into my little house. It was empty inside and was just a single room but it was the bestest house I'd ever seen. I ran back outside and

hugged Laurel and Hardy.

“There’s just one problem,” said Gavin.

“What’s that?” I asked, trying to sit on the bench beside Stan Laurel.

“I did this to get you to come here,” he said. “But I have no idea what to do to get you to stay.”

We slowly walked back to the main house and spent the rest of the day sitting beside the lake and talking about things that people falling in love talk about. Periodically we went inside to get food and drinks and so on.

We were watching the sun going down, out of talk finally, for now at least.

“Oh Jesus,” I cried and sat up straight.

“What’s the matter?” said Gavin in alarm.

“I’ve just realised what Greg meant.”

“Who’s Greg,” he asked.

I told Gavin about Greg and his parting remark about diving being like watching a strip show.

“That’s a strange thing to say,” said Gavin. “I’ve been diving for years and it never seemed like a strip show to me. Not that I’ve ever been to a strip club.”

“I didn’t understand it myself,” I said. “I just thought he was being nasty. But I get it now. When I’m diving I’m in the water watching what’s going on but that’s all. Like a man in a strip club, watching the girls taking their clothes off. But he’s not doing anything, he’s not contributing anything, he’s not making the world a better place. Just like when I’m diving. I’m not contributing, just watching, like a voyeur, and that’s what makes you so special.”

“I’m special because I don’t watch strippers?” said Gavin.

“Noooo, well yes, but that’s not what I mean. I mean you’re special because you’re doing something, you’re trying to make the world a better place by trying to save the otters.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “You have to do something, don’t you.”

* * *

That’s where this story of my travels ends.

That night I didn’t sleep in the guest room or in my van. I just followed Gavin into his bedroom. I discovered a few weeks later that Gavin’s sperm wasn’t fragmented. Not in the least little bit. Our daughter, Natalie, was born in that house, and I haven’t left the place since, apart from going on a few fund raising trips with Gavin and a visit to the immigration authorities in Athens. I still have my van though and we made my little house into a diving base and I sit with Laurel and Hardy every day and watch the sunsets and the otters.

I made a final video for my channel telling all three hundred and twenty thousand subscribers what had happened. I wished them all well with their own lives and was astounded by the reactions I got. A lot of people were shocked and saddened that I was abandoning them but as Greg said, this was my path and they had to follow their own. In the end I decided to leave the channel open in case some other people found inspiration in it.

Gavin and I never bothered to get married. After all, what was the point when it boiled down to it. Love transcends bureaucracy.

I wrote a letter to Greg explaining what had happened and how I now understood what he’d been trying to tell me about going to Greece and strip shows. I didn’t know his address or even his surname but Gavin told me to address it to “Greg the one legged Australian in Riace Capo, 89065 Province of Reggio Calabria, Italy”.

“There won’t be that many one legged Australians there,” he said. “It’ll find him.”

I didn't expect a reply but a few weeks later a postcard turned up from Italy. "No worries" was all it said.

No worries indeed.