

Miranda

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the
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Chapter One

“Hey babe, look, a rainbow, over there,” I nudged her and pointed to the west.

We were sitting on the back verandah of our rented house south of London and had been watching the rain falling. It had started quite heavily with a thunder crack that had rattled the windows but had subsided quickly into soft droplets. Miranda liked to watch storms and rain as it helped her feel more in touch with nature since our lives were surrounded by brick and concrete. I went along with it as I liked to touch Miranda and be surrounded by her. Sometimes she would run out into the rain and stand there in the garden, face lifted to the sky and arms outstretched, slowly rotating and getting soaked. If it wasn't for the neighbours she would probably do that naked.

We'd been living together for over a year and a couple of weeks before Miranda had suggested we go away on holiday together. We'd never done that and she felt it would be exciting and Miranda's excitement was contagious. So we ummed and ahed and talked about where to go. The usual places for British holiday makers like Majorca filled us with horror since they had a reputation for endless drunken clubbing. Miranda got all excited about India and all the opportunities for spiritual exploration until I ruined it by pointing out we both hated curries. She also suggested America, more I think to get the idea out of the way than because she wanted to go as I can't go there. Some years back when I was a budding rock musician expecting stardom to arrive at any moment I was caught practising my anticipated new lifestyle and had a conviction for drug offences. The American immigration people don't like that. Africa was out as neither of us fancied it really although it would have been nice to look at the animals in the wild. Some diving in the Red Sea? Maybe. Prague, Vienna? Miranda thought they'd be better for when we were older. We weren't going anywhere, literally.

Miranda looked at the rainbow and went still. She did that sometimes when she came across things that were in tune with her. She'd go still and somehow absorb them, take them within and experience them totally. She stood up and leaned over the verandah and inhaled deeply. I heard her softly whisper “Richard Of York Gained Battle In

Vain” as she ticked off the colours on her fingers. That's Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet if you don't know the mnemonic. “I can't see the Indigo, ..., ohh there it is.” Then she whirled round, her long hair flying. Her face was shining with excitement as she said, with emphasis on every word

“We must go to the end of the rainbow. It's a sign. We-Must-Go-To-The-End-Of-The-Rainbow.”

So it was decided then. Cool.

I'm Mr Practical in our relationship. OK, I couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery but I was better at seeing possible problems than Miranda who was one of those glorious people who can never see any downsides and for whom other people fix problems without them even being aware of it. I exaggerate but Miranda did have a magnificent innocence which was one of the many things I loved about her. I didn't particularly like the way she kept trying to teach me tantric sex as I kind of preferred the old fashioned way but I can live with that. Tantric sex is way better than no sex at all in my book. So I went inside and found my old schoolboy atlas and brought it out to the verandah.

“So which end of the rainbow?” asked Mr Practical. She was back leaning over the verandah balustrade – which sounds a lot more ornate than it actually was – and pointed firmly to the end right in front of her. That was roughly north so I opened my atlas to where it had a double page spread of the UK and surrounds and looked to see what was north of London. “Anywhere in particular?” I asked. She jumped over and stabbed her finger blindly at the page. I looked where her finger had landed and heaved a sigh of relief. I really hadn't wanted to go to the North Pole or the middle of the Arctic Ocean. Fortunately she'd landed on Scotland. I could handle that. I looked more closely and found she'd pointed just south of Scotland, somewhere around the Lake District.

When I'd finally come to terms with not even being a minor rock personality let alone a megastar I became a session musician so taking a holiday was easy. I just phoned my agent and told her the dates and she said “no problem, have fun”. It was more complicated for Miranda

as she was a Holistic Guidance Counsellor. Don't ask me what that is. She tried to explain once but it made as much sense to me as changing chord sequences in a minor key did to her. Not that I've ever tried to explain that, come to think of it. Anyway, she had to phone her website nerd so that the website wouldn't make any bookings for when she wouldn't be around. From where I sat I could only hear her speaking. I sat back and wondered at her patience.

"Hi Clark, It's Miranda."

"Miranda Dennison."

"The Holistic Guidance Counsellor."

"Yes, that's me."

"Hi."

"Yes, look, I need you to update my website, I'm taking a holiday."

"Yes, a holiday."

"Because I fancy a break."

"No, a popup's not enough."

"Yes, I'm sure I want a holiday."

"No, you can't come too."

"You need to stop it taking bookings for when I'm away."

"No, I still want it to take bookings when I'm away, just not book anything for when I won't be there."

"It's not that complicated Clark. I need it to take bookings anytime just not to schedule anything for when I'm not there."

"OK, I'm glad about that."

"14th September to 12th October."

"No, I won't be around anytime between those dates."

"No, not even in the mornings."

"The 14th, it's a Saturday."

"Better make that the 14th too because the 12th is a Saturday."

"Yes, I'll be there on the 14th."

"The 14th of October, I won't be there on the 14th of September."

"Good."

Then there was a long pause.

"I have no idea what that means but I'm sure you can do it."

"The 14th."

"Well make it the 16th of September then."

"OK, I'll send you an email."

"Yes, I'll send you a postcard too."

"OK, bye now."

"I'll leave that up to you."

"OK."

"So we're all good?"

Another long pause.

"That's so sweet of you Clarke."

"Byeee."

"I'm going with my boyfriend."

"I've never watched Star Trek so I don't know if they took holidays."

"Yes, I do like him otherwise I wouldn't be going with him."

"That's right."

"Yes, bye."

"Yes."

"I know you do."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"Oh Clark, Facebook too."

"I gave you the login details last time."

"OK, I'll email them again."

"I'm sure we'll get some nice photos to post."

"Thank you sweetie."

"Bye."

"Mmm, bye."

"Byeee."

The patience of an angel, my Miranda.

Even though our holiday was still a couple of months away, Miranda started visiting clothes shops and browsing online. She had a romantic image in her head of what the house and the area would be like and wanted to dress like Kate Bush did for her song Wuthering Heights. You know the one "Heathcliffe, it's me your Cathy, I've come home now" although I don't think the Lake District has any "wiley windy moors". I've never read the book, not being much of a reader. Lots of long, billowy dresses and flat ankle boots and broad-brimmed hats. Mind you she looked gorgeous in them, Miranda I mean not Kate Bush although Kate was nice too. But then Miranda looked gorgeous in anything. Hell, she looked gorgeous in nothing. Being me, I just bought a new pair of jeans and a fleece jacket in case it turned out to be cold. Every now and then she'd start singing lines from "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" and "I'm Gonna Be A Country Girl

Again". She seemed pretty excited.

We drove up on the Saturday, taking the motorway to bypass Preston. I'd grown up in Preston so I bypassed it at every opportunity as I had no great fondness for the place. We spent the night in Kendal, which is on the edge of the Lake District, in an old pub which had quirky plumbing and the noisiest beds I'd ever slept in. The walls and ceiling in the low bar were a rich light brown from a hundred years or more of tobacco smoke and the whole place reeked of history and atmosphere. We could have driven straight to the house but Miranda wanted to see it in daylight before going inside. She said that if we arrived in the dark we'd already be occupants when we saw the outside and that would feel wrong. It would be like an anonymous hotel room and she wanted to experience the place completely so when she went inside she'd already know its face and how it fitted in with the landscape. I'd found the house through a friend of a friend of a drummer whose gran had been born near Lake Windermere so we knew very little about it other than it had 4 bedrooms, electricity from a generator, cooking from gas cylinders, a fireplace and a "view". A view of what I didn't know. Hopefully it wasn't a neighbouring farmer's cowsheds. The friend of a ... called it a villa, which seemed a little out of place for the Lake District. To me villas were in the South of France or Greece. Still, at a grand a week it should be pretty cool.

The house, I didn't like calling it a villa, was on Buttermere, a lake on the other side of the Lake District from Kendal. The map said it was about 40 miles and we had to stop off on the way in Ambleside to pick up the keys so I figured it would take an hour or maybe an hour and a half to get there. It ended up taking almost 6 hours because we were forever stopping to admire the scenery around Lakes Windermere, Thirlmere and Derwentwater and high up on the hills between them. Miranda was in awe and she kept saying she'd never felt so close to nature. Even I, Mr Practical City Boy, had to admit the scenery was beyond incredible. The owner gave us the keys and directions to the house. Apparently it was the only house around Buttermere and we could get there easily down a dirt track about 2 miles south of the village of Buttermere. We bought some food and some odds and ends in Ambleside to last a few days.

We pulled off the road onto a dirt track we found roughly 2 miles out

of Buttermere village. The road was in a valley between crags so the dirt track wound up and over the crag before descending to the valley where the lake was. As we rounded a corner, the whole vista opened up and we could see almost the whole lake, grey and dramatic under the cloud cover, surrounded by high crags rolling around the lake, all green with grasses and trees. The rocky tops of the crags towered over the lake and made it seem secure and protected. I stopped the car and we got out, breathless from the sheer beauty of wildness, untouched by humanity, raw and vital since time began. Miranda hugged herself with sheer excitement and wanted to touch everything. She settled for hugging me and said something about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and here it was.

After a while we got back in the car and continued driving slowly over its rutted uneven surface. Rounding a couple more corners, Miranda squealed with excitement and delight when we saw the house for the first time. It was on a flat piece of land at the head of the lake and had a timeless solidity about it. It was so beautifully an integral part of the landscape, as though created by nature herself, not the hand of mortal man. It was built from solid blocks of grey stone and ivy dripped liberally from every wall. From where we were we could see the squat, rectangular windows surrounding the front door. There was a dry stone wall, maybe 3 or 4 feet high, running around it and the front yard was filled with roses and a vivid array of brightly coloured flowers. There was a break in the clouds and the early autumn sun highlighted the house against the background of the lake and the crags and glinted off the tiled roof.

We drove up to the house and stood by the gate in the stone wall looking at it. Miranda said it was smiling, it was a happy house, safe and happy knowing its place in the world. I knew what she meant. It had "Welcome" written all over it. Undoubtedly people had lived and died in the generations that had lived there but there was no sense of catastrophe, no angst or anger or pain stored in those walls. Opening the front door I could see the stone was at least a foot thick, solid and secure, hand carved and built to last; unlike the mass produced and cheaply made "Executive Lifestyle" house we were currently living in. We slowly toured the house, Miranda touching everything, admiring the charm and ambience. The walls were covered with very thick plaster, cracking with age but you could still see the marks where it

had been applied by hand.

The main living room blew our minds. Unlike the front which had smallish rectangular windows, the living room was the full width of the house. The wall overlooking the lake was almost entirely one huge window. How they got the glass there I couldn't begin to imagine but it was simply stunning. Beyond the window was the back garden, filled with flowers and nooks and crannies and beyond the stone wall was a patch of grassland and the lake, laid out in its full glory, stretching its full length with the woodlands and towering crags on either side. Magnificent doesn't begin to describe it.

The four bedrooms were upstairs, two at the front and two at the back with the staircase and a corridor between them. Miranda went from room to room feeling their character and ambience and selected the one we would sleep in. It had a narrow double bed, a solid wardrobe which creaked when you opened it and the windows looked over the lake. Over the bed was a crucifix made from straw stalks. It looked pagan despite being a crucifix. I found some instructions on a sheet of paper in the kitchen and went out to start the generator. It was in a small outhouse separated from the house by a covered log pile. The generator started surprisingly easily and I carried in an armful of logs for the fireplace in the living room. That didn't start so easily even though I'd been a boy scout back in Preston but I got it going. We didn't leave the house for three days, except to explore the garden. There was something about the place that softly murmured "you are home, relax" and we spent our time relaxing and making love with a gentle unhurried pace and simply 'being'. There was a large stone table in the garden, cracked and stained with age and had moss growing up its supporting legs. It was off to one side so you could get a clear view of the lake around a tree.

It was on the Tuesday that we ventured out to find food, that being one of the prerequisites of a fulfilling life. We went into the village of Buttermere and found a small store which had a reasonable selection of the basics. If we wanted anything fancy like wine or fresh garlic or sweet potatoes we'd have to go to Ambleside or even Kendal but we didn't want anything fancy. We were going back to basics and basic but good food was sheer delight.

We walked around the village after shopping and that took all of 2 minutes. It was not at all touristy as few tourists ever got this far and they spent most of their time at Windermere, which is the most famous, or Coniston, where Donald Campbell died trying to break the water speed record. There's a museum dedicated to him there which we visited the last weekend of our holiday. I know it's a bit of a slur but the village really was 'quaint'. There is no other word to describe it although quaint has such an artificial styled-for-tourists taint these days. Apart from the shop there was a car mechanic, a pub and a small church and perhaps 15 houses. We decided to go to the pub for a pub lunch before going home. It was called The Crag Inn and was basically a large two storey cottage with whitewashed walls and a thatched roof. It was empty when we went in except for the barman who was reading a book of poetry. We exchanged views on the weather and he asked if we were tourists.

"We're renting the Grange," I told him, "over the hill, in the next valley"

He conceded that he knew the place and that the owner, "a damned nice fella", used to come in to "this very pub" to drink "the best damned beer in the Lakes" before he took ill and went down south. He made "going down south" seem like a more serious affliction than the illness. Having been there a few days we were inclined to agree with him. Miranda kept giggling and seemed unusually shy. Perhaps she didn't feel the barman, whose name was Ted, would benefit from Holistic Guidance Counselling. After a while we were permitted to order something and I had a chicken salad and Miranda went for the cheese version. We both had some of "the best damned beer in the Lakes" which was made, apparently, not that far away by a brewery in the bay at Whitehaven.

We'd started munching our salads when the door opened and one of the regulars came in and stomped up to the bar. He was wearing dirty dungarees, a thick sweater and some heavy wellington boots. The barman poured him a beer and he paid with neither of them saying a word. The man looked to be in his sixties or even seventies and he leaned on the bar and regarded us with interest.

"Tourists are you?" he called over quietly.

“We're renting the Grange” I told him.

“Oh aye” he said and gazed thoughtfully at us. Miranda got another fit of the giggles and nearly choked on a slice of tomato.

“Used to know old man Darrowby” he said after a while then slurped his beer. “Knew the 'ole family one time.”

I smiled but didn't say anything. He prised himself away from the bar and plonked himself down heavily on a seat at our table and introduced himself.

“Name's Ned, how'd you do”

Without waiting to hear our names he proceeded to give us the entire history of the Darrowby family from the Boer War onwards. It was pretty obvious he was the local villain, it was something in his eyes, but as he regaled us with his tales it was also obvious that he was a character, a stereotypical lovable old rogue. We ended up spending much of the afternoon there, buying him endless drinks as his stories got wilder and wilder. More regulars dropped in from time to time, some for a quick drink, others more leisurely and he disregarded all of them although judging by the occasional head nodding in his direction and the short laughs that followed he was well known for playing the tourists. Miranda barely spoke, she just leaned against me, peaceful and relaxed, and absorbed the experience. I'd never felt so close to anyone before and she filled my heart and mind even though I was listening to Ned.

The following morning I woke up alone in bed. The early sun was streaming in through the window and I went downstairs hoping Miranda had made some coffee. She hadn't so I made myself some and wandered through to the living room to see where she was. She was sitting on the stone table, wearing nothing but one of my t-shirts with her legs folded and her hands outstretched on her knees meditating. She sometimes did this back in London. She liked to experience the dawn. Frankly I was surprised it had taken her this long to start seeing as how we were so embedded in the natural world up here. I just sat and watched her, serene and beautiful in the early light, barely moving with each breath, waiting patiently until she

returned to me.

I made some more coffee for us both when she came off the table. My t-shirt was big enough for her to use as a short dress but the early morning chill had made her nipples deliciously prominent. She was totally relaxed. In fact I'd never seen her so relaxed, and she had a glow that she'd never had in suburban London. She radiated serenity. It was almost like an aura that surrounded her.

"I feel so grounded here" she said after a few sips of coffee. "So in touch with the world. Its so peaceful I can hear the flowers growing and the trees singing. I'm becoming so aware of things."

I smiled. She was happy which was all I cared about.

"What sort of things?" I asked. I knew a little about mindfulness but she was something of an expert which is probably what had led her into Holistic Guidance.

"Ohh, the sounds, the smells" she said. "The taste of the wind, things like that."

She paused for a moment.

"And the stillness, the solitude and peace, I can feel within myself, within my mind and my body."

She stopped and looked at me reflectively. She seemed about to say something then changed her mind.

"What would you like to do today?" she asked, "go talk to Ned again?"

We shared a laugh. Ned was a character but you felt he would be best in small doses. An occasional treat rather than a daily staple.

"Why don't we explore around here? We haven't really left the house since we got here."

"Yes, but it's such a lovely house, I don't ever want to leave."

We decided to walk down to the lake and take a picnic with us to have on the shore. There was a vast grandeur to the place that captured us both. Over the next few days this became our general pattern. Miranda would meditate on the stone table then join me for breakfast and we would decide where we were going to go that day, which part of heaven we would experience next. Then we'd come home after a day of climbing crags or wandering through woods or simply listening to the wind blowing small waves against the shore of the lake.

A couple of times I found myself wondering if we could afford to move up here forever. Unfortunately it was impossible. As a session musician I had to be where the bands were and although it was a good enough living as I was quite in demand it wasn't possible to be forever going to London or Manchester from here. Miranda was in the same position. With such elemental countryside as this, no one round here could possibly want her services. She was as much trapped by the city as I was. Only in a city, cut off from reality, did people need the healing power of music or holistic guidance.

We'd been there a week and a half or thereabouts when Miranda came in from her meditation and said we needed to talk. Yeah. I've had the 'we need to talk' talks before. They're never good. I braced myself. The first and only girl I'd ever fallen totally in love with and 'we need to talk'. She could at least have waited until we got back to the concrete again.

She sat cross-legged on the couch beside me, damp from the mist that had rolled in from the lake during the night. I twisted around so that we faced each other. She hesitated, seeming to not know how to start.

“You know I've been meditating in the mornings.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“You remember I said I was becoming more alive, more aware?”

Yes, I remembered her saying that.

“I've been looking deep within myself. I could feel something had changed and I've been looking for it.”

“And now you've found it?” I asked with a slight choke in my voice. Obviously she had found that she didn't love me anymore.

“Yes,” she said. She reached out and took my hands in hers.

“I'll need to check with a doctor but I'm convinced I'm pregnant,” she said softly.

Why would she need to check with a doctor to leave me? Then it sunk in. She was pregnant. Oh boy.

Well, that explained the glow I'd noticed. I'd thought it was just the fresh air.

We sat in silence for a while. Holding hands.

She broke the silence. “Are you pleased?”

Being a guy I'd never really thought about the consequences of all the sex we'd been having, tantric or otherwise but it slowly dawned on me. She was having a baby. My baby. She wasn't dumping me after all. In fact she wanted to have my baby. She loved me.

I won't tell you how sappy I got then. Please, leave me some shred of dignity. Us guys get embarrassed by exposing our feelings. Let's just say that by lunchtime we'd phoned a doctor in Kendal and made an appointment to confirm her pregnancy and had decided to get married. It suddenly seemed to be something we both wanted to do. There were tears on both sides, mostly mine I'm ashamed to say. But we added deep love to the memories stored in the walls of the house.

Later that week we saw the doctor and he took some blood and urine to do the various tests. Miranda was certain but we have to go through formalities in this modern world of ours. We made an appointment to go back a week later to get the results. We even went back to the pub in Buttermere to see Ned and we decided he'd be the first we'd tell when it was confirmed. That was a silly decision since we'd already decided that Miranda's mother would be the first we'd tell as well as Miranda's sister, my mum and my agent. Ned was now the 5th person we'd be the first to tell. Really, we just wanted to tell everyone. Except perhaps Miranda's website nerd.

We went back the following week to see the doctor. I'd spent the week on tenterhooks but Miranda was quite, quite certain. Dr Mason was a nice man, going grey but a clear advertisement for the benefits of healthy rural living, and he was delighted to confirm that the test results were positive. Miranda was clearly deeply aware of her body and its rhythms. She wasn't due for her next period for another few days which, I'm told, is usually the first sign. We celebrated at a restaurant in Kendal and spent the night at a local motel as I'd had a few drinks and there was no way I was risking her and the baby, my baby, by driving under the influence. It's irrelevant but that Saturday was the day we visited the Donald Campbell museum on the way back to Buttermere.

We were due to go back to London the following Saturday and resume our interrupted careers. I sent a text message to my agent to remind her as I was going to need to stay in work for a few more years. We decided not to tell anyone about the baby, our baby, until we got back so we could do it in person rather than over the phone. After all, we had plenty of time. Babies don't appear in just a few days. We spent our time talking about weddings and baby names, you know how it is. Even wannabee rock stars have their softer side now and then. Miranda continued her morning meditations, watching our baby slowly grow, one step at a time. We continued our excursions and walks and picnics and joyful appreciation of the lake and the crags and the trees and the birds and animals and the occasional rain. We were very much on love and totally absorbed with each other.

It was on the Tuesday that we were walking back to the house. We'd been exploring the high ground round Robinson's Peak although we were too lazy to climb all the way to the top. It's difficult too to climb a mountain when you're holding hands. We were crossing Honnister Pass, which was the road that goes down the side of Buttermere Lake, just about where the dirt track to the house was when a car came round the bend a little too fast. Miranda was a step or so ahead of me and I felt the rush of air as the car flew by as her hand was wrenched from mine. The next thing I saw was the car skidding to a halt and Miranda, my lovely angel Miranda, lying in a heap on the other side of the road. I rushed over but she was unconscious, her long blond hair in disarray and already turning red. I screamed at the gods, swearing eternal hatred of them as I dropped to my knees and gently,

oh so gently, reached out to touch her face. The man in the car had come to a halt and was running up the road towards us, his face contorted with panic and repeating “Oh god Oh god” with every ragged breath. With tears streaming down my face I screamed at him to phone for an ambulance and eventually he did.

The next twenty minutes were a living hell. I knew she was dead and my heart and soul writhed. My wife to be, my soulmate, my love, my spirit, my angel, my life, my Miranda, lying there in a bloody heap. Then an ambulance arrived, its siren ripping the air and echoing off the crags. An ambulanceman ran to her and checked her. He looked up at me.

“She’s alive, we’ll take care of her” he said then yelled at his partner for a stretcher.

They manhandled the stretcher into the ambulance and pushed me inside before slamming the door. One of the ambulance men fussed over her as the drove to a hospital. She was alive! For minutes my mind clung on to that, hope slowly forcing some semblance of sense into my head. Then I remembered.

“She’s pregnant,” I said to the ambulanceman

He tensed, his eyes going to Miranda’s midriff.

“How far along?”

“A couple of weeks, maybe three. It was only confirmed a few days ago.”

“OK” he said. “I’ll make sure the hospital knows.”

Many years later a doctor came to see me in the hospital waiting room. He looked tired.

“Miranda has a broken femur, that’s the thigh, and extensive contusions, that is to say bruising, to the upper torso. She also has a minor laceration or cut on her head which is what caused all the bleeding. Scalp wounds always bleed a lot but this one wasn’t serious.

It only needed a couple of stitches. She'll be fine. We'll keep her in for a few days to be sure but there were no complications. She was lucky."

"And the baby?"

"Oh, the baby will be fine. No problems there at all."

A policeman gave me a lift back to the house. He told me the driver of the car was going to be charged with careless driving. The house smiled at me. "You are home," it said, "relax."

Chapter Two

I collected Miranda from the hospital the day before we were due to go back to London. She was over the worst of it and her leg was stiff and straight in a cast. She'd had three stitches in the gash on her head and wore a white crepe bandage around her head like a crown, like a princess. The hospital had given her a pair of crutches but for the moment she wasn't up to using them. I'd pushed her in a wheelchair to the car and half carried her into the passenger seat. The hospital wouldn't let me keep the wheelchair which I guess wasn't unreasonable. Small rural hospitals don't get the NHS funding that large city ones do.

She'd been dozing when I arrived and I stood there beside her bed just marvelling that she was alive. I was close to tears when she opened her eyes and looked at me and said "Hey hon, where've you been? I missed you." and held out her arms for a hug.

Back at the house, I'd carried her over the threshold, which felt very symbolic for both of us, and settled her on the couch in the living room so she could see over the garden and down to the lake. She was tired and still aching all over. The painkillers for her leg didn't help with her stiffness. I propped the crutches in a corner. When she was ready she'd use them.

"I didn't know if you'd be up to getting up the stairs" I said, "so I brought one of the single beds downstairs and made it up in that little room by the kitchen."

She smiled at me. "I do love you."

She glanced over at the crutches. "I guess I'd better get used to them before trying the stairs."

"Can I get you anything?" I asked.

She shook her head and gazed out of the huge window. Then she said she'd love to sit in the garden for a while if I felt up to helping her out there.

“Your wish is my command Oh Moon Of My Desires,” I said, bowing from the waist and making twirling motions with my arm. She laughed and looked better than she had. The accident and days in hospital had given her a pallor and robbed her of some of her vitality. I opened the sliding door and dragged one of the garden reclining seats to a sunny spot in the garden where she'd have a good view of the lake. Then I went back inside and lifted her bodily from the couch. She tightly locked her arms around my neck and gave me a long, loving kiss. Fortunately it didn't go on too long. I don't mean the kiss wasn't wonderful, it was, it's just that I'm not Arnold Schwarzerthingy and every second I was holding her I was weakening. No way was I going to drop her but it would be a close thing.

I carried her out to the chair but she shook her head.

“I need to feel the earth,” she said. “I need to draw on its strength.”

She gestured to the ground beside the chair. It was midday or thereabouts and the sun had dried the morning dew so I summoned my reserves and half squatted and half knelt to deposit her on the ground. OK, not as gently as Superman did with Lois Lane but at least I didn't drop her on her broken leg. She lay back on the grass with her arms outstretched, her hands grasping the grass and her eyes closed. I took advantage of that and dropped rapidly into the recliner myself. We stayed like that, not speaking, as she visibly regained her natural colouring and the lines of strain around her eyes disappeared. It was as though she was getting a transfusion of nature's balm from the land.

After a while a cloud passed overhead and obscured the sun. She let out a deep sigh and struggled to sit upright, leaning back on one arm.

“Could you get me something to drink, hon,” she asked.

“What would you like?” I replied. “Can I get you something to eat too?”

She settled on a glass of milk and some toast with honey. I went inside and put some toast on and brought back the milk. I also brought back a thick marker pen I'd bought in Ambleside the day before. I told you

I'd been a boy scout.

As she drank the milk I knelt beside her and wrote my name and the date on her cast then wrote "You are my life" underneath. I paused and then wrote "Both of you" underneath that and drew a fancy flourish all around it. I still wasn't used to the idea of her carrying my baby.

That evening she remembered we were supposed to go back to London the next day. She had no memory of the accident and not much of her time in hospital so she was a little time disorientated.

"I phoned James Darrowby, the landlord, a couple of days ago," I told her. "He was very upset you'd been in a car accident. He said he'd been writing to the Council about how dangerous that bend is for years but they never did anything. But the important thing is that it's the off-season and he has no bookings for this house until Christmas, so I've arranged another two weeks definitely and maybe longer if you need it."

Her eyes lit up.

"And he's reducing the rent. He said any income is better than none at this time of year so he's probably hoping we'll stay till Christmas." I laughed cynically. "He's also going to get someone to come and replenish the firewood. He said when the weather gets colder we'll be needing a lot. I think he's ordering two tons."

"That is just so awesome." She looked relieved. "I'll heal much faster here."

Then her face fell and she groaned. "I'll need to get my internet guy to change the website again."

"All taken care of babe" I said proudly.

"You talked to Clark?" she said admiringly.

I had to admit I hadn't. I'd thought about it and couldn't face it so I'd phoned my agent and asked her to do it. She was a very efficient, no

nonsense kind of lady.

“Natasha also said that if you authorise your IT guy to give her the details of any bookings you have in the next two weeks she'll get one of her assistants to phone them and rearrange things.”

She smiled and leaned back on the couch, holding my hand. She was used to this happening. Miranda was one of those people who other people fixed things for quite naturally and without being asked or expecting reward. It makes me very envious sometimes but I'm no killjoy. I want to do things for her all the time. What I didn't tell her was that my agent said I'd had only one booking for the next two weeks and that would probably only be an afternoon. Things were not looking good on the music front. Maybe I'd been away too long already.

Miranda slept on the single bed in the room next to the kitchen that night. We didn't know what the room was intended to be. It certainly wasn't a pantry as it didn't open into the kitchen and had no shelves or anything. It might have been a study or something like that. But there was no furniture in it when we arrived so maybe it was just a spare room nowadays. As far as I could remember from Den, at one time 8 or 9 people had lived in the house so it had probably been useful then. I slept on the couch so I could be within reach if she needed anything.

She hadn't. When I woke up, a little stiff from the uncomfortable position – my days of living on friend's couches had ended some years ago, roundabout the time my expectations of stardom had died – I saw her out on the stone table, meditating in the dawn light in the half lotus position with her leg in its cast stuck straight out in front of her. I took some photos of her there. It seemed she'd been able to go to the lavvy on her own and had hopped out to the table on one leg. She was definitely on the road to recovery. I insisted on helping her to get changed into fresh clothes though. I hadn't touched her body for what seemed like years and it was part of my recovery program. Tantric no-sex-for-several-weeks. I was shocked by the bruising around her right shoulder and the upper part of her body where she'd hit the road. But you know what bruises are like. They look their worst when nearly over. She didn't want any photos of those.

Later that day she asked me about the accident so I told her all about our walk to Robinson's Peak and how the car came round the corner and hit her and how I wept my little heart out when I thought she was dead. She just sat and held my hands as I told her and stroked my cheek and kissed me when I said I thought she was dead. I also showed her the letter I'd had from Edward Fawcett, the man who'd been driving the car. He explained how desperately sorry he was and how much he hoped Miranda would have a speedy recovery. He'd also asked if he could come to see Miranda when she was feeling better and apologise to her in person. I hadn't replied yet as I wanted to show Miranda his letter and ask what she wanted to do.

"I have no memory of what happened." she told me. "None at all. I thought about it in the hospital but it's like I came down the hill and woke up in a hospital bed. I don't know if I want to meet Edward Forrest. I'll think about it."

"Fawcett", I said, "Not Forrest. He lives at Thackthwait."

She wasn't really listening.

"I need to go back to the road. I need to see it again"

I protested but she insisted. We reached a compromise. I'd drive her to the road when she'd learnt to handle her crutches. I had protested because I didn't think it would be a good idea to focus on the memories as it might cause her some pain but she thought I was challenging her to start using the crutches. So she hopped over to the corner where I'd left the crutches and tried to use them but they were too tall for her. They came to just above her shoulders and they're supposed to go under your armpits. So she hopped back with both of them in her hands and made me adjust the height so they'd fit. Then she started lurching around the room on three legs, one human and two wooden. I was afraid she'd slip or trip but she's an agile graceful little thing and she didn't. Perhaps her mindfulness made her mindful of the crutches or maybe she had a good sense of balance. Either way, half an hour later we drove to the end of the dirt track, to where it joined Honnister Pass. I helped her out of the car and she grabbed the crutches. Laboriously she made her way across the road to where we'd been when it happened. I could only hear the breeze in the trees - my

ears were straining to catch any sound of an engine. Then she crutched – if there is such a word for someone walking on crutches – her way back again to where she had landed then over to the spot by the side of the road where I had piled some rocks to mark the spot. She studied each of them intently but silently. I never told her but I had prayed each day she was in hospital at my little rock altar. I thought it might seem a little macabre but I needed to give thanks she was still alive. I think in the back of my mind I needed to apologise for abusing the gods as well. They might have changed their minds.

Back at the house we sat in the garden watching the sunset.

“I had to do that,” she said, looking very serious and watching a bird flying through the air. “I had to go and face my fears or I’d never be able to cross a road again. I’m good now. I’m whole again. I’m ready meet Edward Forrest.”

“Fawcett,” I said and sent him a text message.

“Next Tuesday,” he replied, “around 7 if that’s OK.”

“See you then,” I texted back.

On Sunday afternoon, Miranda faced another fear and phoned Clark about the bookings for the next fortnight. It was surprisingly easy, it seemed he’d liked Natasha. Maybe she had a Star Trek Uhura outfit. I’d have to ask next time I spoke to her.

When Tuesday came, Miranda started fussing about what to wear. I’ve no idea why as pretty much all she had brought were Kate Bush outfits so it was either one of those or one of my t-shirts. She didn’t think that was funny.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “whatever you wear you’ll turn Mr Fawcett on like a tap.”

She didn’t think that was funny either. Oh well.

When Edward Fawcett arrived he looked nothing like I remembered him. He must have left his devil’s horns at home. Unusually for a Lake

Districter he wasn't wearing gumboots. He was in a neat suit and subdued black lace up shoes. He came inside and I introduced him to Miranda. She'd decided on a simple pale green dress and had her hair in a pony tail. She'd not been able to wash it properly because of the bandage and was a little self conscious about it. Fawcett stood formally in front of her and recited a little speech about how sorry he was for causing her all this grief. He then presented her with a large, very impressively coloured orchid in a pot which came from his own garden.

"Growing orchids is my hobby," he told her and apologised for the pot.

"I hate giving cut flowers," he said. "Why should they die just because they are beautiful?"

That seriously impressed her.

I'd discovered Miranda had the same attitude when I gave her a bunch of flowers on our second or third date. She started to warm to Fawcett then and invited him to have some tea with us. While I was making the tea he asked if he could write something on her cast. She glanced at me to see how I reacted and I gave a tiny nod. He seemed genuinely remorseful and his shoes appeared to hide his cloven hooves nicely. I fetched the marker pen and he wrote:-

*When beauty is broken
The cause must atone
To hell I'll be taken
For the break in your bone!*

We both laughed.

He stayed for much of the evening. He was an educated man and frankly, after the horrors of the last week it was nice to have some intelligent company. Apparently he was an agent for quite a few craft potters throughout Cumbria and Galloway and even a couple on the Isle of Man. They produced a variety of pottery vases, bowls and objects d'art and he sold them, for a commission, to fashionable shops and galleries in places like London and New York. Miranda approved

of this sort of thing and I was quite interested myself as I'd done a course in pottery after I'd been thrown out of College as a spotty youth and had to do something "educationally worthwhile" so I could claim benefits. For some unaccountable reason pottery was more "educationally worthwhile" than rock music. After making a slightly misshapen vase - which my mum still has - I kind of got hooked on doing things with clay and had fantasised about having my own kiln. As a Rock MegaGod I'd have been able to afford a kiln or two in my Swiss Mansion. As a session musician I'd never had a rental with a kiln so hadn't developed that talent.

Miranda grew accustomed to her crutches as time went by although she did fret about her loss of mobility. We went back to the hospital a week after she'd left it for x-rays to check it was healing properly and to have her head bandage removed. The stitches were some special kind that disappeared on their own and didn't need to be removed. Whoever had stitched her head had cut away a lock of her hair but it wasn't noticeable. Well, not to me. Miranda fretted about there not being a decent hairdresser in the area so I promised to take her into Kendal.

"We'd be back in London in a week anyway," I said.

This made Miranda go quiet.

"Do you want to go back to London?" she said to me unexpectedly as we ate our Sunday lunch.

"Not really," I replied, "but I guess we have to. We've no money coming in and even with the discount this house is expensive."

"I've been thinking," she said, eyeing me to gauge my level of sympathy. "I don't want the baby to grow up in a concrete slum. I want it to grow up here, where it's real."

Despite Miranda's empathy with the child she still couldn't 'feel' whether it was a boy or girl.

"What do we do for money?" I said.

“I’ve had an idea. The people down south are so neurotic because of the unnatural lives they live and they pay a lot to see me and have me find natural solutions to their problems. Why can’t I run holistic and homeopathic courses up here? People could stay for, oh I don’t know, say a week and I can do the same as I do in London but up here in this wonderful, restorative natural environment. I mean, look what it’s done for us, for me.”

I looked at her as I chewed a tough local sausage. It was an interesting idea. I decided to tell her the truth.

“I phoned Natasha yesterday.” I said, “while you were talking to your mum.”

She nodded, unsure where I was going with this.

“She’s managed to reschedule the one and only booking I’ve had in the last four weeks and got me another for the week after next. The music biz is a shocker, if you’re not there when they want you they get someone else. When I do get back I’m going to have to more or less start over again.”

She was watching me closely, still unsure of where I was going.

“What I’m saying is I’m buggered anyway. I’m kinda sick of playing on all these tracks for other people and never getting any credit. I’m just a nobody in the background and to have to start again is just a frigging pain. Maybe it’s time I reinvented myself.”

“Sooooo,” she said, “what are you saying?”

“I’m saying we can’t stay here, it’s way too expensive, but if you really think you can get the courses up and running we can find somewhere round here we can afford and go for it.”

She flung her arms around my neck and my dinner landed on the floor.

“Ohhhhhhhh, it’ll be so awesome,” she cried, “thank you, thank you, thank you.”

A few minutes later things had calmed down and I disentangled myself.

“No idea what I'm gonna do though,” I said thoughtfully. “They don't need a saxophonist round here. They look at rocks all day, they don't want to hear it as well.”

“We'll think of something,” she said. “I can feel it. It's right.”

Chapter Three

As you can imagine, we spent the rest of that day talking over ideas, trying to avoid the nasty little problem of money. Miranda has a much better head for business than I do – she is a lot more intelligent than me for a start. She has a degree in Homeopathy whereas I only just managed to get through school and she had managed to build up a fairly successful practice on her own. She knows things like “business plan” and “professional services indemnity insurance”. She was bubbling with ideas though, thinking we ought to find somewhere to live that could accommodate clients. Local hotels wouldn't be good for their wellness and mindfulness especially during the tourist seasons when they'd be full of noisy holiday makers. She was full of ideas on what to feed them and what should be included on the program and what the program should be called and so on.

“How about a Retreat?” I suggested.

“Maybe,” she said thoughtfully, “but it sounds too much like Buddhist meditation and that will put most people off.”

Like I said, I didn't really understand what holistic guidance was.

One thing we did settle was that we both had to go back to London. Miranda had a number of clients booked which Natasha had rescheduled and she didn't want to abandon them. Partly because they'd generate some money and some might even be interested in her courses but mostly because she genuinely worried about their welfare. I had my two recording sessions. Not much I admit but they would cover a week's rental of The Grange. So, we had to go back but only for a while then we would come back to the Lakes and start a new life. The three of us. Somewhere we also had to fit in getting married. And having a baby. Life was getting complicated.

We also figured that everything would hinge on finding somewhere to live up here. Ideally with room for guests but if not we'd have to figure out where they would stay. It's difficult to run residential things without residences. We decided to go into Kendal the next day so Miranda could find a hairdresser. We'd look at some estate agents to see if we could afford to buy and if not, what rentals were available.

The Grange would be perfect but was totally out of reach.

We both went to bed that night happy and excited. Miranda couldn't comfortably manage the stairs yet so she slept in the room by the kitchen and I stayed on the couch again. I know it was selfish of me but I couldn't help wishing for the day, or rather night, when we'd be able to sleep together again. I'm not talking about sex, which is unusual for me ha ha, just the companionship and the warmth of your loved one beside you and cuddles and touches in the night. It was also getting chilly at night as autumn was in full swing and couches are not the best place to sleep on chilly nights. At the back of my mind there was also the nagging concern about what I was going to do. I didn't want to end up being a spare wheel, dragged along and maybe even being resented.

The next day we drove to Kendal. Surprisingly there were several hairdressers and Miranda hopped into some of the more sophisticated-looking ones for a chat and see how they felt. She dismissed a couple, ummed and erred about a couple more and finally decided on one in the road leading to the bridge. It was a grey stone building like everywhere else in town but it had a nice glass frontage with silver ball things hanging in the window with bottles of shampoos and stuff in them. They weren't cheap, even by London standards, but she felt comfortable.

"It's not about price," she told me, "it's about trust. I have to trust them because my hair is important."

I don't have that problem. I shave my head myself every three or four days as it makes life a whole lot easier but I could see Miranda's point. If I had hair like Miranda's I'd probably take great care of it too. But then I'd probably be taken for a transvestite so swings and roundabouts. Anyway, Miranda made an appointment after Estelle, the lady in the hairdresser, had fussed over her leg and exclaimed in dismay at the removal of a lock of hair for something so trivial as stitches for a head wound. Estelle also promised she'd use some special herbal something or other of her own recipe to counteract the effects of the medications Miranda had absorbed into her body and the stress of the accident which would have "serious long term implications for your hair especially as baby is robbing your hair of

vital nutrients”. Estelle also commented that she had another potion that would work wonders at restoring the vitality of my beard if I'd care to make an appointment. I told her I wasn't sure of my schedule yet.

We went for coffees and cake at a little cafe nearby after that. Miranda's leg was aching and she was feeling a little tired. She carefully examined the little appointment card Estelle had given her on both sides and pronounced herself happy with how Estelle had felt.

“She was totally genuine. Totally focused and real. Not like that guy back in that street over there. He was just a poser.”

There was an estate agent over the road and down a bit from the hairdresser and when we'd had our restoratives we wandered over slowly. At the moment Miranda couldn't go anywhere fast but it was great that she showed no signs of stress crossing the road.

“Hey look at this one, it'd be perfect,” she said, pointing to a listing in the agent's window.

“Yeah, but look at the price,” I said.

“Oh shit,” she responded. “I hadn't seen that. Wow. I wonder if they'll come down for a cash buyer?”

“I guess, but even at half the price we'd be struggling.”

There were a couple of others but in the same general price range.

Further on down there was another agent which had a rental that looked possible. Miranda hopped in and hopped out again fairly quickly, looking glum.

“They won't touch anyone without at least three years employment history and when I said we were going to set up a business she just laughed and shook her head.”

We looked at a couple more agents but the story was much the same. Houses up here were a lot more expensive than we thought and there

wasn't much trust of prospective tenants.

We drove home quietly, deep in thought.

“Maybe when I'm back in London I could see about maybe getting a mortgage,” Miranda said after a while. “After all, my practice has been going well and I've a good credit history.”

“It would have to be all in your name,” I said.

I'd tried to get a mortgage a few years ago. Banks viewed rock musicians as being on the same credit-worthiness level as, well I couldn't think of any other occupation low enough. Unless, of course, you had enough cash from hit records to buy a multi-million dollar mansion in Hollywood. But then you wouldn't be wanting a mortgage if you could do that. Banks weren't good for my self-esteem. On the positive side we both had savings. I'd been living cheaply for years, well ever since I'd given up the Rock Mega Star lifestyle, and Miranda was no spendthrift. Between us we could probably buy a small apartment in London but neither of us wanted a small apartment, or to be in London.

It was a bit of a bugger really. We couldn't wind down our stuff in London until we found somewhere up here and we wouldn't be able to stay up here unless we wound down our stuff in London. Things weren't looking as bright and positive as they had been the night before.

“Hey, I've had an idea,” said Miranda as we drove down the dirt road to the house. “Why don't you phone Mr Darrowby, the guy who owns this place. He knows the area and he was broad-minded enough to let you rent his house.”

“Yeah, I guess. I need to phone him anyway, let him know we're going at the end of the week. He just might have some ideas.”

When we got to the house, Miranda went upstairs to change without thinking.

“Hey babe”, she shouted down to me. “Guess what, I got upstairs all

on my own!”

I ran up the stairs to show my appreciation with a hug and a kiss and in case she needed help getting to our bedroom. Hey, no more nights on the couch!

“Take it very easy coming back down,” I said. “If you fall, you’ll fall forward down the stairs.”

“I think I’ll go down backwards for a while,” she said.

“And never go up or down the stairs if I’m not around. I don’t want to come back and find you in a heap, unconscious.”

Miranda could see the concern in my face and promised solemnly that she wouldn’t. We both knew she would anyway, but the point was made. She jumped one-leggedly onto the bed and bounced a couple of times. “It’s so nice to be home again,” she said without thinking, then burst into tears.

I got on the bed beside her and cuddled her, trying to sooth her and asking, no doubt as every man has since the first woman cried, “What’s wrong hon, why’re you crying?”

She just shook her head at me. Actually I suspected I knew why. The way things looked we were probably going to end up in a small apartment in one of the less pleasant parts of London. I held her until her tears turned to sniffles and then died away completely. She got off the bed and started to change. I watched her from the bed. Watching her take off her clothes was one of the many delights she brought to my life. I wondered how long it would be before the baby began to show. so I asked her.

She turned to face me, wearing nothing but her panties and a plaster cast, with one of her Kate Bush dresses in her hands.

“Ohhhh, I’m not sure. I think my mum said it would be at least three months and maybe longer. Some women never show at all.”

“I can’t believe someone as slim as you could hide a big thing like a

baby,” I moved to the end of the bed and ran my fingertips over the bruises on her upper body. She shivered and things began to get a little exciting.

“Hold back sweetie, I'm not ready for that yet,” she said pushing me back down on the bed. She laughed at the expression on my face. “Go break a leg,” she said and pulled the dress on.

I stomped back downstairs while she sorted herself out. I found my phone and went into the living room to call James Darrowby.

The phone had just started ringing when I heard Miranda coming downstairs so I hung up and went to the bottom of the stairs to watch her and try to catch her if she fell. She was coming down backwards, carefully hopping her good leg to the step below then bringing the crutches down one at a time. She was concentrating and didn't see me until my hands around her waist startled her. There was no getting away from it, she could be determined and stubborn when she wanted to be. She disappeared into the bathroom. I rang James Darrowby again.

I'd finished when she reappeared and went to make some coffee while she settled herself on the couch.

“So how'd it go?” she asked.

“I rang him and told him we had to go back at the end of the week. He asked how you were.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him you were a lousy patient and you were driving me mad with all you endless demands and bitching.”

Miranda walloped me with a cushion. “Bastard.” I laughed.

“I told him we both loved it here and we were hoping to move up here but we were having trouble trying to find anything we could afford and if he had any advice.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He thought the best thing to do was to ask around the locals. He reckoned all the properties with the agents are aimed at the rich tourists who want holiday homes. Seems the locals do it by word-of-mouth.”

“OK, so shall we go to the pub in the village tomorrow and see what the word on the street is? Maybe Ned will be there. I bet he'd know everything that goes on round here.”

“Yeah, OK. We could also talk to Edward Fawcett. I'm pretty sure he'd love to help you though I doubt he'd give a toss about me.”

“Yeah, no one really gives a toss about you, baldy.”

I used the same cushion on her.

“He also asked what we were going to do for money. He said that anyone local probably wouldn't even talk to us unless they were pretty sure we could afford it, being strangers. So I told him about our plans. Was that OK?”

Miranda thought for a few moments.

“Yeah, sure. We have to get it out there sooner or later and once it's out there the cosmos can get involved. If we keep it quiet nothing and no-one can help us. I always tell my clients that. Decide what you want to achieve then say it aloud. Makes it more likely to happen.”

It was nice sleeping next to Miranda that night. It had been too long and I'd missed her warmth and the smell of her. I rested my hand on her belly and imagined the life growing inside her. I was sure I felt it kick and told Miranda and she laughed. “Oh, it'll be a few more months before that happens sweetie.” I decided when we were back in London I'd do one of those courses for expectant dads. I figured I should have some idea what was going to happen. Despite that I slept very well.

We went for a drive the next day, despite the rain, around the villages

the other side of Buttermere. Although each of the villages and towns in the Lake District had their own characters there was a general pattern of glorious tranquillity. The western side was no exception. As we drove into Buttermere village from the other side Miranda noticed a disused bakery. It looked like it had closed down years before because the signage out the front was cracked and virtually unreadable. We pulled over and had a look at it because Miranda wanted to, which is a good enough reason for me. The bakery was on the edge of the village and a narrow lane ran beside it which seemed to run past a derelict barn and into a farmyard. Miranda pointed out the date carved into a stone, just below the peak of the tiled roof. The place had been built in 1847. So it was pretty old.

In the pub, Ted the barman was very pleased to see Miranda and told us how he'd heard all about the accident. He seemed on the verge of giving us drinks on the house but pulled himself together in time. I told him we were looking to move into the area but we couldn't afford to stay at The Grange anymore.

“Oh aye,” he said, “bit of a big old place for just the two of you, I'd say.”

I was about to tell him a third would be joining us but Miranda gave me a look telling me not to. So I asked him if he knew of anyone thinking of selling. He sucked his teeth for a while.

“There's the old Lampsted place, downalong,” he muttered. “Reckon it needs a bit of work though. Kenny Lampsted's getting on and hasn't looked after the place for years.”

He thought for a bit.

“And old mother Tredle isn't going to last much longer and I'm thinking her son, Lennie, will be looking to sell up and move to the excitement of Morcombe. 'E likes to see the ladies on the beach he does, now 'es getting on in years.”

It seemed Lennie Tredle was in his 70s and still unmarried, much to his mother's disappointment. She'd been wanting grandchildren for nigh on 50 years.

“Oh aye and Reggie Beaumont's looking to sell his farm. His grand-da came over and bought the land ohhh back around the Boer war and he reckons he's had enough of farming. Wants to join his daughter in 'merica. She married a yank and left 'im high and dry. No one else to leave it to see. Was you thinking of taking up farming?”

I had to confess we weren't.

“Shame” he said. “Farm land's good round these parts. It's the rain. ”

We asked him if he could let us know if he heard anything. He said to ask around in other villages as he only heard what was going on locally. “Folks round here don't like to go too far for their ale.”

We did but with no joy. There were places but they were either farms or badly run down and would need a lot of work to make them suitable for running holistic guidance courses. We also checked out estate agents in other towns but they weren't appreciably different to those in Kendal.

By the end of the week we were getting quite depressed. What had seemed an awesome idea last Sunday was, by Friday, becoming a hopeless waste of time. Once back in London it would be difficult to get up here again to even look at properties even if anything affordable came along. I'd phoned Edward Fawcett but he hadn't heard of anywhere. He told me that the problem was the tourists. “Makes life difficult for the locals, what with the high prices and all.”

On Friday Miranda was having a nap on the couch when my phone rang. The disappointments of the week and the prospect of going back to London the next day had made her lethargic and sleepy. Even Estelle's magical concoction, which had worked superbly and left Miranda's hair in glowing health, hadn't improved her declining mood for more than a day or so. Her leg was probably a bit sore as well since we'd done a fair amount of walking that week. I answered it and James Darrowby was on the line, checking that we were leaving the next day and wondering when his man could come in to check the inventory and everything so he could return our deposit. I told him we'd be out by 10ish at the latest.

“Just leave the keys under a stone by the front door,” he said. “There’s no need to stop in Ambleside since Cliff’s coming out there anyway.”

I thanked him and told him how much we’d loved staying there, despite the accident and Miranda’s injuries.

“Yes,” he said. “I was also ringing to see how you were getting along with finding somewhere for when you move up there.”

I told him about our efforts and that we’d got nowhere.

“I had to move south because of my health,” he went on to say. “The weather up there was taking its toll. Doesn’t affect my brain though and I’ve been quite successful in business down here.”

“Oh yes,” I thought to myself. I wasn’t really that interested. I was a little depressed and lethargic myself and Miranda wouldn’t be able to share the driving on the way back. My old estate car is not the most comfortable car but it had been good for hauling band equipment around. Even though it had power steering it was still heavy on the arms.

“I’ve been asking round some of my acquaintances,” he continued, “and I have a proposal for you.”

We talked on the phone for quite a while and I said I’d need to run it by Miranda before making any decision. He said there was no rush and that he’d put the fine details in an email and if we were interested he’d get contracts drawn up for our solicitors to look at. After we’d exchanged email addresses and said our goodbyes I sat on the arm of the couch watching Miranda sleeping. She was so perfect and every fibre of my being reached out to embrace her.

She slowly woke up and saw me watching her. She sat up suddenly with wide eyes when she saw my face.

“What’s happened, babe? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, gorgeous,” I said. “I’ve made you some tea. You’re going to need a drink.”

I then told her that James Darrowby rented The Grange out as a holiday rental but that it was empty for at least half of the year and so he was willing to let us live in the house for the next six months rent free while we set up the holistic guidance courses on condition we guaranteed to rent the house at a commercial rate for the next three years with options for three year renewals thereafter.

“So what do you think, hon?”

Miranda just stared at me. The tea mug stayed untouched.

Chapter Four

We spent the rest of the day and the drive back to London the next day alternately coming up with ideas and sitting in silence. We were both afraid that the email would contain some nasty little details that would blow this whole thing out of the water. Although neither of us thought James Darrowby would try to pull a fast one we thought he was probably an astute businessman and the proposed terms would benefit him rather than us. Well, Miranda thought that as she had some head for business. I tended just to sign whatever contracts were put in front of me. The music industry is notorious for one sided contracts but on the other hand there wasn't a lot of choice. Unless you had the clout of, say Madonna, you more or less had to accept what was offered or vanish into thin air.

Our rented house just outside London was much as we'd left it. No break-ins, no squatters, no vandalism although the front and back gardens looked a little untended. It didn't welcome us but it wasn't the house's fault it had no soul. It had been thrown together by tradesmen under contract to build an entire estate as quickly and cheaply as possible with a veneer of style rather than crafted organically from the landscape and stylelessly genuine from the foundations up. We'd grabbed some pizzas from the take-away round the corner. After I'd downloaded and printed James' email we sat side by side on the two seater couch and read it while munching. It didn't look too bad, more or less what James had said over the phone although with a few more details and we both felt relieved. There was certainly no reason for an instant rejection and we decided not to discuss it that night as we were both tired. "Let's sleep on it and talk about it in the morning when we're fresh." We left the pizza-grease stained printouts on the couch and went to bed.

When I woke up Miranda was still sound asleep, whistling slightly with every intake of breath, her hair in a mess around her head and a little frown on her face. Down in the lounge with my morning coffee I saw she'd pencilled some notes on one copy of the email. Obviously she'd been up in the night re-reading and thinking. Deciphering them as they trailed around grease marks I made out

"6mths nt lng enuf 2 setup"

“rent 2 high, 20pc over hol rent”

“no maint!!!!”

“us liable 3 yrs up frnt?”

“whopper rats?”

The last one bothered me.

Miranda got up an hour or so later and sat on the verandah drinking her tea and coming to terms with the absence of nature in our back garden. She's a morning person but it takes her a while to be able to communicate with us mere mortals. I'd learned to wait patiently. Well, I'd learned to wait at any rate, it didn't matter how impatient I was. I wasn't going to get any reactions until she was good and ready. She tossed her tea leaves into the garden.

“See you found my notes.”

“Mmm. How long were you up?”

“Hour, maybe an hour and a half. Couldn't sleep.” She yawned and nodded at the printouts. “Was on my mind.”

“What are 'whopper rats'?”

She laughed and grabbed her notes. “That's 'who pays rates' not 'whopper rats', silly. Can't you read?”

“I can read music but not your handwriting. How did you manage to get through uni?”

“I did my essays on a computer. I'm not stupid. At least I went to uni.”

She explained her thoughts. She didn't think we could set everything up in 6 months, especially with winter about to arrive and we didn't know how the Lake district fared in winter. She also thought the commercial rental was unfair at 20% more than the rental as a holiday home, especially as Darrowby was proposing that we would be up for maintenance of the property not him and she wanted to know if we had to pay the three years rent in a lump sum up front or what. Oh, and who pays the local rates?

I'm dragging this out too long. The sordid details were interesting to us but no one else cares. It's enough to say that I rang James Darrowby that afternoon and negotiated some better terms, which sounds pretty good. In reality, I was the voice and Miranda pushed little notes at me which I relayed. We ended up with nine months free rental, four years rental guaranteed, paid quarterly and with three yearly options after that. The rent stayed at Darrowby's figure but he agreed to pay for the maintenance and he would pay the rates. Darrowby said he'd get contracts drawn up and out to us by the end of the week.

After I'd hung up we yelled at each other, then I danced around a bit and Miranda hopped and banged her crutches on the floor. We were both pretty excited. We kept looking at each other and grinning like lunatics. We spent the rest of the day talking and bouncing ideas around but the only real things we decided was that I would ask Natasha if she knew a good lawyer and that they wouldn't be called 'courses', we'd called them 'curatives', Immersive Holistic Curatives.

“Has a bit of a ring,” I thought, “bit of class.”

Nagging at the back of my mind though was that all the talk was about Miranda and her business. What was I going to do?

The next day when Miranda was at work I phoned Natasha about a lawyer. She said she knew several good ones and did I need a straight one or a bent one? I explained that Miranda was setting up a business and needed someone to sort out the contracts. She thought for a few moments then decided Miranda would probably be better off with a straight one. I figured I wouldn't tell her we were moving to the Lake District until we'd sorted out the contracts. I didn't want her to give up on me just yet in case it still all fell through and, anyway, unless I thought of something else to do it would be useful to get some sessions even if I had to travel back now and then to fulfil them.

I called up Miranda's schedule online and phoned the lawyer Natasha had recommended and arranged an appointment for early the following week. Hopefully the contracts would have arrived by then but even if they hadn't, we could explain the background to him. I was also available as I only had three sessions lined up – Natasha had told

me about the third when I rang her. I then browsed online for a while and found a book encouragingly titled *Pregnancy For Men* which I ordered. I knew a lot more about how to avoid pregnancy than I did about what happened when it wasn't avoided. I even knew some brand names for morning-after pills just in case, back in the day before I met Miranda, of course.

I spent the rest of the day practising. 90% of playing a saxophone is lip and tongue technique and time off loses the edge very quickly. Fortunately it comes back fairly quickly but after six weeks without blowing a note I'd be thrown out of any sessions I went to that day. I also had to practice on all three saxes as each is played a little differently. The soprano, for example, needs tighter lip grip than the tenor as it is a smaller mouth piece and produces a higher pitch. If any neighbours were around they'd know I was back.

I picked Miranda up from work. When Natasha's lacky had rescheduled Miranda's clients after the car accident he or she had used his or her brain and made the first couple of days back pretty light. Just two regulars today and a regular and two new clients the next day. This had given her time to think and start planning a little. She'd even phoned Clark and persuaded him to design her a brand new website and find a suitable domain name. I'd once asked her why she put up with his extreme nerdiness and she said, and I quote, "he's an awesome web guru, the best." I could relate to that. Way back there was a jazz sax player called Lester Young who called everyone "Lady" which must have pissed off a lot of men but he was a brilliant player which is why his recordings still sell, even though he died in the 1950s. Clark texted her on the way home; the domains www.immersivecuratives.co.uk and www.holisticcuratives.co.uk were available and did she want either of them. She texted back saying she'd let him know.

Over dinner we talked about a few things.

"Are we still getting married?" she wanted to know.

"Absolutely," I replied.

"Any thoughts on when?"

“How about tomorrow?” That made her laugh.

“Love to but you know what my mum’s like. We’ll have to put on a show for the rellies.”

What did I care about the relatives? It was us getting married not them.

“Yeah I s’pose. I know my mum and dad will want to be there.” My mum would because she loved a good cry and dad was like most men and just wanted to be around Miranda.

“Should we get married down here or up there?”

I had already decided, subject to Miranda’s approval of course.

“Up there,” I said decisively. “We’re starting a new life up there so we should start by getting married up there not end things down here by getting married.”

Miranda liked that. She had a new exercise book with her on the table. Whenever she saw exercise books going cheap anywhere she always bought some as she liked to make notes on things. She had an exercise book for all sorts of different things and had lugged a plastic crate full of them with her when we moved into this house together. She neatly labelled this one New Beginnings and opened it to the first page. Not long after we’d moved in together I skimmed through them while she was at work. They were mostly from her time at uni and I didn’t find one with my name on it. I hadn’t known whether to feel good or bad about that so later that evening with my heart in my mouth I’d asked her about it.

“I, erm, knocked over that crate of your note books today, looking for my book on jazz riffs” I said cautiously, worried she might fly off the handle and accuse me of spying on her.

“Hope you didn’t hurt yourself” she replied, reading her book. “That thing’s heavy”

“No, it missed my foot. When I was tidying up I, like, you know, didn’t

ummm, see one about me.”

Miranda didn't even look up from her book at that but she laughed and turned the page. “I knew you were the one and I didn't need to make a note of that.”

I'd felt good ever since.

“Before or after the baby is born?”

“I've worked hard at not producing any bastards since I was a teenager and I don't want to start now.”

I thought that was quite witty but she didn't, although she agreed with the principle. It's probably not a good idea to use the word 'bastard' when talking to a pregnant woman. Live and learn.

“When is it due?” I asked. The doctor in Kendal had said some dates but I'd forgotten.

“Towards the end of June. It'll most likely be a Gemini.”

“So when shall we formally open the business? Before or after the baby is born?” For some reason I feel embarrassed when people say things like “and what is baby's name”. I prefer “the baby”. Hopefully my book will talk about “the baby” and not “baby”.

“I was thinking in the early spring. Everything comes alive then so it seems auspicious for our curatives to come alive then too.”

“So how about we get married in late February and open on the spring equinox?”

She liked that idea. Two out of three – I was having a good day. She checked on the net what day the spring equinox would be next year. It would fall on a Friday.

“That's so cool. We can start the first curative on the Monday so it covers the equinox. Awesome.”

Miranda calculated on her fingers. "That'll be Monday 16th."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

She made a note in an exercise book. Then she looked at the calendar on her phone.

"Hey babe, next year's a leap year. Neat, let's get married on Feb 29th."

I didn't like that idea.

"Nah, I don't like that. That's means after forty years we'll only be on our tenth wedding anniversary. I want every year to count."

She smiled that glorious smile at me and I tickled the toes of her broken leg which was lying across my lap.

"So what date shall we set for the divorce?" she asked.

I stopped tickling her toes.

"Since we're getting married up there," I said thoughtfully, "it'll have to be over a weekend so people who work can come up."

She consulted her phone again.

"How about 15th Feb. It's a Saturday and it'll give us a month before the first curative and my leg should be fully healed by then."

"Deal," I said.

She made a note.

"I was looking at my schedule today. I've got a couple of clients already scheduled for December but I was thinking, if we are going to move up to the Grange, the first week of December would be good. Then we can start things rolling up there and my parents can stay with us for Christmas. I can move the bookings to November or pass them over to someone else."

I thought about it and it seemed a good idea. Although ...

“Maybe we should wait until your leg is sorted before we move up?” I said.

“Can't really see what difference it makes. You'll be doing all the hard work packing and moving stuff anyway and my leg will help me not feel guilty.”

“OK babe.”

She made another note.

I decided to say what had been bothering me.

“So, umm, since we're moving ahead with this and it's beginning to come together, umm, have you had any thoughts about where I fit in? What I can do, like?”

She looked at me with a horrified expression.

“Oh, shit babe! I'm so sorry. I got all caught up in the idea and you were just in the background, solid and reliable as ever. I need you there but I never thought about what you'd do.”

She took my hand and kissed it.

“I was just thinking about you being my husband and going off to play your sax somewhere. It never occurred to me you'd feel left out.”

“I was thinking maybe Natasha could get me some work in Manchester or Liverpool but it wouldn't be much. London's where it's at,” I said. “Maybe I could do the background stuff while you're running the curatives. You know, cooking, cleaning, driving people around, paperwork, that sort of thing. Sorting problems.”

“You know, I hadn't thought of that stuff,” she admitted. “My head's been full of outdoor meditations and discussion groups and mindfulness training in the woods. Someone has to feed them or they won't leave good reviews. And, we won't be giving them fancy food.”

Simple nourishing food that's good and healthy, like fresh unleavened bread not that garbage from the supermarket that's full of chemicals to stop it going stale.” She laughed ruefully.

OK it wasn't much, but at least I'd have something to do while my house was full of strangers working out their issues. Besides, I enjoyed cooking although I could only do simple straightforward things. It was nice to know Duck a l'Orange was off the menu. I didn't like duck anyway, too greasy.

“What do you reckon to the domain names? Do you prefer either of them or should we try to think of something else?”

I wrote them both down on a scrap of paper and thought about it.

“Holisticcuratives has a nasty double c in the middle which will confuse people and cause typos,” I said after a while.

“What about the other one?”

I gazed at it and tried to think of something better.

“No, I can't think of anything better. Let's register it now and we can always get another if we think of something.”

She made another note.

The contracts arrived in Friday's post and we scanned them but there was a lot of legalese we didn't understand so we put them aside to give to the lawyer. Hopefully he spoke legalese. Natasha said his speciality was entertainment industry contracts so he should be experienced in cop-outs and screw-overs. I'm not cynical, just experienced.

We figured James Darrowby was on the level so that weekend we went to visit Miranda's parents in Horsham. Miranda wanted to tell them of our wedding plans and the rest. Her mum, Jenny, was a clerk at Horsham General Hospital and Robert, her father, was an engineer. I don't think he liked me very much but what the hell, I was marrying his daughter not him. We were going to visit my parents the following

weekend. They wouldn't be bothered about us moving permanently up north since they'd had very little idea of where I was for much of the last decade. They'd just be happy I was settling down at last.

Jenny and Robert knew Miranda was pregnant since she'd phoned them when the doctor had confirmed it – inevitably her mum had been the first we'd told. So the first couple of hours was spent talking about babies. My book hadn't arrived so I listened carefully. Hopefully the book would clarify things. Miranda told them we were moving to the Lake District over dinner. They weren't overly pleased as their one and only was a half hour drive away and now it was going to be a whole day's drive. Miranda knew them well – it's always good when children know their parents – and had planned accordingly. At the height of their disapproval, displayed through comments like “Well I don't know” followed by a short sigh, she told them of our plans to get married which led to another conversation almost as long as the one about babies. I didn't find this one as interesting as I wanted to marry Miranda not discuss endless wedding arrangements so I let my attention wander.

On one of the side tables in their living room was a vase with some cut flowers in it. What caught my eye was that it was shaped like an elongated cube balanced on one corner with the neck at the opposite corner. On each of the faces there was an Aztecy kind of design in bright colours, blues and reds and gold against a pale sand coloured background. Having done a pottery course a few years back, I was intrigued by this and found it quite unusual and fascinating. I asked Robert where they'd got it – he wasn't overly interested in the wedding arrangements either. Like me he'd just turn up where and when he'd been told to.

“That old piece of crap?” he said. And there was me thinking he liked it.

“Jenny bought it from a gallery in London when we went to see that exhibition of Victorian civil engineering at the British Museum. It terrible isn't it. Cost a bloody fortune but she never told me until I saw it on the credit card bill.”

I asked how much it was and I worked out that it would have taken

me six days of sessions to make that much. I sympathised with him.

On the whole the weekend had gone well. Especially after Miranda had enthused about how delightful Christmas by the Lake would be. And everyone likes weddings. Robert cheered up when we told him that they'd be staying at The Grange rather than in a hotel. It was bad enough that I was stealing his daughter. For some reason it never occurred to him that he'd be gaining a son. Or perhaps it did because when we were about to leave he shook my hand.

The lawyer glanced through the contracts after we'd explained the basic concept to him and said he would read them closely and get back to us. We made another appointment for two days later and I was quite impressed to find he had actually read them carefully. No wonder Natasha recommended him. He pointed out a few items he didn't like and clarified a few more things. That very afternoon - I could tell he was going to be expensive - he resolved his issues with Darrowby's lawyer and on Friday, with great nervousness on my part and great certainty on Miranda's, we committed ourselves and signed four copies of the contract in five different places. Our new life, for better or for worse, had begun.

That night I dreamed of the derelict old bakery in Buttermere Village for some reason. In the morning I hoped it wasn't a portent of what was to come.

Chapter Five

We'd been back at The Grange for several days when Miranda calmly walked into the living room in her track suit pants and jumper after her dawn meditation on the stone table and announced that our baby is a girl. The weather was significantly cooler which is why she wasn't stealing my t-shirts anymore. Not that I minded, she looked far better in my clothes than I did.

I stared at her in astonishment. According to my book on *Pregnancy For Men* they couldn't tell the sex of a baby until it was around four months old. That book was an eye opener all right. No wonder women don't sleep around like men do. The implications for them are huge; hormonal changes, sore bits and pieces, throwing up everywhere and losing the body they'd worked so hard to achieve. And, all the while this thing is growing inside them like something out of *Alien*. It really doesn't seem worth it for a quick bit of fun after a few beers. I was glad I hadn't read this book earlier, it might have cramped my style.

"I thought you couldn't tell 'til four or five months," I said.

"The doctors can't," she replied, making some tea. She was off her crutches now and wearing a sturdier cast that allowed her to walk stiff-legged like the star of *Blood From The Mummy's Tomb*. When she first started walking on it I'd sung some of Rolf Harris' *I'm Jake the Peg*, until I remembered he had been convicted of doing things with kids and it probably wasn't appropriate.

"They have to wait until they can see if she's got a willie or not in the ultrasound, but I can tell now. I can feel she's a she."

Miranda had been working at being in touch with her inner self since her early teens and now had a very good feel for what went on inside her skin. Once, not long after we'd met, she told me she'd caught a cold two days before any symptoms appeared. When Miranda meditated, she went beyond focusing on her breathing and picked up the tiny little signals her organs were sending to each other. So, when she said she 'felt' the baby was a girl, I believed her.

She wandered back into the lounge with her tea, if wandered is the

right word for someone forced to move forward in little semi-circles as she stepped around her cast then threw it forward. She'd spilt a lot of tea before getting the knack.

I confess to a feeling of relief. I'd been worried that the baby would be a boy and I would have to kick a ball around or take up fishing. At least with a girl I'd be able to make use of my limited skills and teach her all the things guys do and say to persuade girls to sleep with them.

"I was thinking Chalchiuhtlicue would be a good name. She was the Aztec goddess of lakes, rivers and oceans and saves the life essence of people. The name seems rather appropriate since she was conceived beside a lake and I work with their life essences. It means 'She of the Jade Skirt' and her festival is in February, when we're getting married."

I sighed and cringed, poor kid, people would think she was Chinese with a name that sounded like Chow-Chi-Wet-Le-Queue.

"That's a great name," I said, "but I'm wondering how people will shorten it. Chi-Chi maybe or Chew-On-You or Wet-The-Loo. How about Jennifer instead?"

She crinkled her nose.

"Guess you're right, people will make fun of her." She leaned back in the armchair and thought for a while. "How about Freya, the Norse goddess of beauty, love, magic and divination?"

"Freya, yes I like that. And I can't think of any way it could be turned into something nasty."

"Or maybe Emma," she said a moment later.

"There was a goddess called Emma?" I wasn't well up on divine names, but I knew better than to suggest Beyoncé or Lady Gaga. I was more at home with pop stars.

"Emma comes from the German/Norse word meaning universal or 'the one' or whole."

I was impressed. She clearly knew a lot about these things.

“Where does Miranda come from?” I asked.

“From the Latin for wonderful,” she said.

“Cool, your parents got something right then.”

She stuck her tongue out at me then said “Your name is from the old English word for evil fat bastard.”

I chose to ignore that and said “Freya Emma sounds pretty good to me. Why not both of them?”

“No, it's clumsy. A bit of a mouthful.”

Anything was better than Chalchiuhtlicue, although having a jade skirt when she starts to grow up would make me sleep better at night.

“How about Emma Freya then? It sounds like it could be a single name, Emmafreya, like a goddess. Why does she have to have a recycled goddess name when she can have her own original one?”

Miranda liked that idea.

“Yes,” she said, slowly repeating Emmafreya a couple of times. “Bit like Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of wisdom.”

Fortunately my surname doesn't begin with “T” so her initials wouldn't be a problem. EFT – get it? Never mind. A while back I'd asked Miranda if she wanted to keep her surname after we got married.

“I'm even willing to change mine to yours if you want,” I had said.

She had given me a not too faint look of contempt and said, “The female principle is far beyond the symbolism of language. The female principle is of a state of 'being' whereas the male principle is of a state of 'doing'. I will 'be' your wife and will take your name to 'do' what I am here to do. The 'self' that is me needs no name and my identity as

'self' will stay unchanged.”

I had no idea what she meant but I did tell you she is clever. Her frontal lobe must be at least twice the size of mine. I don't know why she took up with me. Maybe it's the way I play the blues or eat spaghetti.

We'd found a celebrant to do the wedding. Miranda didn't think a Christian wedding would be appropriate especially as she wanted to get married next to a rocky creek she'd found that fed into Lake Buttermere and one side of it had been cleared at some point and was fairly flat. To me it was much like any of the many rocky creeks around the lake but Miranda felt there was something ancient and spiritual about it. The creek was only two or three hundred yards round the shore from the house so no one would have any real trouble getting to the site, except possibly my aunt Becky who had rather nasty arthritis in her hip but someone could carry a chair for her. We'd found Danielle Nadar through the classifieds in a copy of the *Kendal & District Advertiser* we'd found in the back of the car when we were in London and she'd been interested when we told her about the creek.

“I'm from Scotland,” she said to Miranda over the phone, “and Nadar is Gaelic for nature so you have come to the right person,” so Miranda had booked her on the spot. When we met her I was quite surprised as my mental image of celebrants had come from movies and they're always dumpy and middle aged. Danielle was, admittedly, no spring chicken but she was lithe and tall with long straight dark reddish black hair and wore the same sort of Kate Bush dresses as Miranda. The meeting had been fairly short and we'd left with a leaflet about general wedding procedures, a form for the necessary details for the legal requirements of marriage and a favourable impression of Danielle. We'd posted the form back after certifying neither of us had been married before and enclosing copies of two forms of identity each. The wedding date was now official and all we had to do was send out the invites and find somewhere for a reception afterwards. Miranda thought we should only invite relatives and a few close friends, whereas I wanted to invite everyone I'd ever known in my life so I could show off Miranda. We agreed to compromise on relatives and a few close friends and Natasha. I wanted to invite Natasha as

we'd been through a lot together over the years and I also wanted to invite Clark as I thought it was time he saw something of life but Miranda didn't like that idea. She could imagine him trying to be sociable with strangers and the thought made her distinctly nervous, especially with her parents. Clark had a very strange sense of humour and a total inability to see that lines should be drawn let alone conceive of where.

The end result was a list of about thirty people which was too big for the house to cope with so we'd decided to book a function room in a pub somewhere big enough to be able to accommodate twenty or so people overnight. The other ten would be staying at the house and we'd have a celebratory breakfast for them on the Sunday before they all went back home. The Crag Inn in Buttermere Village was out as it only had three rooms but Ted, the barman who, as it turned out was also the owner, suggested a couple of places. The one in Kendal we didn't like at all. The place had a nice ambience but the sleazy man we dealt with couldn't take his eyes off Miranda's chest and nearly got a black eye, or worse, from me. Miranda, of course, had been managing people like him for years and hit him where it hurt the most – in his wallet, as thirty people at a function and twenty overnight guests out of season was not to be sneezed at. The one in Ambleside was much better as Amos was cordial but not sleazy and knew someone who could weave place mats with people's names out of straw stalks which Miranda thought would be nice. I just worried that straw mats and lit candles might end up burning the whole place down. His function room was just big enough and was old and atmospheric. It had a huge smoke-blackened fireplace and dark wooden beams holding up the ceiling. The pub frontage was quaint and inviting. He said there was a ghost there too but, “not to worry, she doesn't like crowds.”

“You think we should hold a séance to explain that she's invited too?” Miranda asked me.

“Probably best not to, your father mightn't like it. He doesn't like things that can't be scientifically explained.” I said.

“She wouldn't come anyway,” said Amos. “Old Mary was lynched for witchcraft by a mob in this very room in 1783 and still hasn't got over it, poor dear.”

Our lawyer back in London had advised us to check with the local council before signing the contracts just in case there was a problem with running a business from The Grange. We'd never gotten around to it though so when we went to the Council Offices in Kendal to make enquiries we were a little apprehensive.

We explained the concept to the Deputy Head of Planning and Environment who was plainly captivated by Miranda, who can turn on the charm when she needs to. Well, to be honest, her charm is on all the time but she can boost it to megawattage when she needs to.

“I don't see any problem,” he said. “You'll need to submit the paperwork to Council of course but I'd be very surprised if they turn it down. There are no neighbours so noise isn't an issue and there are no environmental issues. It's not like you are planning to set up an abattoir or a quarry or even change the frontal aspect of the property with signage. Realistically the numbers of people who'll be there at any one time would not be unreasonable as house guests and by the sound of it there is no risk of drunken behaviour or any form of public nuisance. The Council is always in favour of bringing tourism to the district and this proposal will in no way be detrimental to that. I think I can safely suggest you go ahead with your plans although I would advise you not to sign any contracts until Council formally approves this proposal.”

“Unfortunately we have already signed a contract with the owner of the house,” I told him.

“Who is the owner?” he asked.

“James Darrowby.”

“Ahhh, old Jim Darrowby, eh. I thought The Grange sounded familiar. I haven't seen Jim for, ohh, must be four years now. Doesn't time fly. So Jim Darrowby had agreed to let you use his house for this proposed business?”

“Yes,” said Miranda.

He made a note on a piece of paper then looked up.

“Well, if Jim has approved it I think we can safely say the Council will not disagree with him. Jim Darrowby is a well respected man and a stalwart of the community. Yes, you can expect formal approval after the next Council meeting which is, mmmm ...”

He checked his desk calendar.

“... mmm, on Tuesday 21st of January. You can expect the documents and registration within two weeks of that. January is not a busy time of the year. You are, of course, free to attend Council on that date although only as observing members of the public. You won't have any speaking rights.”

Miranda beamed at him and he coughed and adjusted his necktie then straightened his pen on his desk. With a slightly pink expression he wished us well and ushered us from his office.

We'd decided quite early on to use the furniture that came with the house. Although it was fairly old, the beds and wardrobes and so on perfectly fitted the atmosphere. In fact, they contributed to it. Our pieces of cheap, slightly tacky furniture would definitely detract so we gave a lot of it to a folk violinist I knew from the music world. I had once tried to bed her, with no success, before I met Miranda but held her no grudges. There is very little call for folk violins commercially and she struggled to make ends meet as a single parent. She was very grateful for the furniture and promised to spread the word of our Immersive Guidance Curatives throughout the folk world. We didn't hold out much hope as folk music people are, on the whole, fairly poor, but surprisingly well adjusted. Given the size of The Grange we could realistically take no more than three sets of clients at a time, either couples or individuals, as it wouldn't be good to have people sharing double beds if they hadn't been properly introduced first. Miranda had set prices accordingly. There was also a business logic to it, she explained to me.

“If something is cheap, people don't value it. If it is expensive they may bitch about the cost but they'll pay gladly in the end because they are impressed by it. Part of the goal of holistic guidance is to make people feel good about themselves and having something that is fairly

expensive and exclusive makes them feel good. If the curatives are cheap then they'll think they are being conned and feel bad about themselves.”

I suppose it made a certain kind of sense. Certainly most of the rock stars I'd backed over the years had a strong need to be valued, for something if not for their singing abilities.

We'd decided to keep the bedroom we'd used when we stayed there before for ourselves and use the other three for clients. We hadn't yet come up with a good word for our clients. 'Clients' sounded too commercial and 'patients' too dramatic. We toyed with 'seekers' but Miranda felt that was “too Harry Potter”. Clark had got around the problem on the website he had created by doing everything in the second person. “Your curative will be part of nature”, “you will dine on natural, wholesome local foods unsullied by chemicals or preservatives.” That sort of thing. It was really quite impressive. Clark had a relationship with his computer that he could never hope to find with a human being. When I read the bit about natural, wholesome foods I went online and bought some healthy eating recipe books. I'd been experimenting with some recipes from a book called *Wholefood Soups Nature's Way* and they were surprisingly good. Some red meat now and then wouldn't hurt but still, not bad at all. I wasn't entirely sure we'd be able to get lentils or bok choy in the general store in Buttermere Village but Amazon has a good delivery service. The website had been online for several days but as yet there had only been a handful of hits and no enquiries or bookings.

We'd also decided that the living room with its magnificent view over the lake would be perfect for the indoor side of things and as a general communal room. Miranda wanted to use the small room beside the kitchen as a Quiet Room where clients could go to be alone with their thoughts as and when they needed to but I felt we needed to use it as an office. We needed somewhere to hold all the paperwork and stocks of whatever we ended up needing to stock and, to be honest, I needed somewhere to go myself when clients were around. I didn't want to spend all my days loitering in the kitchen. Miranda understood my predicament but was adamant she needed a quiet room.

“Many of our clients will find some of what we do disturbing as it challenges their worldviews and preconceptions,” she explained. “As they will be here for days at a time they absolutely need somewhere to go to get away from the rest of us and work through these things alone, in peace and quiet.”

Fortunately we managed to solve the problem without falling out. At the bottom of the garden, over to the right and half hidden by a large yew tree was a grey stone shed, the hand carved stones being considerably smaller than those used for the house. We'd never paid much attention to it before when we were just holidaying here but as we were now officially in residence we prised off the padlock and investigated. There were a few rusty old tools and general junk in there but the structure itself was sound.

“Why don't we get rid of the junk and give it a facelift inside and use it as another room?” I suggested.

Miranda thought that was an excellent idea and immediately appropriated it for her Quiet Room.

“It's away from the house” she said. “It will be both quieter and symbolically distant.”

It made sense to me, and I could probably use it for sax practice when no one was there. You never know, I might get some bookings so I needed to stay reasonably in tune.

I phoned James Darrowby and he said it wouldn't be a problem and he'd get Cliff round to do the work.

“Just make it clear exactly what you want,” he said. “Cliff's a good worker but doesn't always make the best decisions on his own.”

Cliff lived in Ambleside and was James' 'man on the spot'. He looked after the keys when the house was being let and did general repairs, checked the inventory, replenished the firewood and so on. He turned up one day in a battered old van and seemed to always have a roll-up dangling from his lip. He was perhaps in his sixties but was wiry and fit and didn't have a whole lot to say. We'd met his wife when we'd

picked up the keys and she was a matronly soul who seemed to dedicate her life to cooking things to fatten Cliff up, without any visible success.

I helped him load all the garbage from the shed into his van and give the place a thorough clean. While he fitted an electric light and a power outlet from the generator and a simple lock inside the door I went over the mortar between the stone with gold paint. Miranda had been off looking for sites around the lake which she could use with clients and was delighted when she returned.

“The gold gives the place a restful elegance” she said. “It doesn't jar the mind and distract, it generates a restful sense of comfort.”

The power point was for a small heater when the weather was chilly. Cold doesn't make for restfulness. It's hard to focus within when without is shivering. We were also going to put a single chair in there and a small table to hold incense and candles and other odds and ends. Miranda was looking for something suitable but hadn't yet found anything as the chair and table had to be in keeping with the general concept whereas most furniture places these days seem to specialise in a mass produced superficial style. Miranda also phoned Amos to see if his friend could make a sign for the Quiet Room to show when someone was using it. It seems his friend also did wood-burning and would be delighted to make something appropriate.

Everything was going extremely well. That made me worried, along with the state of the bathroom which really wasn't up to scratch. I wasn't used to nothing going wrong, although Miranda regarded it as the natural state of things. Although I was over the moon at being married to Miranda soon and being the father of the goddess Emma Freya, it still niggled in my mind that I'd really just be another Cliff. Not that there was anything 'just' about Cliff, he'd done a damned good job with the Quiet Room and we'd probably get him to work on the plumbing as well. I just felt I wanted to be more, more, I don't know, more than just someone lurking in the background whipping up wholefood soups and picking up people from the station. Surely I wasn't becoming discontent with our new life before it had even really begun?

Chapter Six

I had dreamt about the old Bakery back in London when we were discussing and planning our new life in the Lakes but now I was up here I had dreamt about it several more times. I was sure it was a bad dream and the internet didn't convince me otherwise. "The destruction of buildings in a dream can indicate that something is likely to be confiscated in the future," said one dream interpretation site. Did that mean I was expecting Miranda's new business to take her away from me? Perhaps if she immersed herself in it she wouldn't want to keep me around? Maybe she would get totally absorbed with Emma and lose interest in me? I'd heard of such things happening.

"Dreaming of an old dilapidated building can indicate that you want to remove something in your life," said another site. Maybe I was, deep down, jealous of her business or the baby? Maybe I wasn't ready yet for the responsibilities of marriage and children?

"To dream of a building collapsing represents feeling that a situation in your life is coming to an end on its own. A situation is 'falling apart'. An unstoppable loss. It may also reflect feelings about the ending of a situation being inevitable," said yet another. I was seeing a pattern here. OK, maybe this interpretation could mean the ending of my old life of bachelorhood and professional music, but putting it with the others made me pretty sure that I was going to lose Miranda.

A few days before Christmas the snow thickly blanketed the valley in a carpet of pure white. What little noise there was, birds, the occasional car, became muffled. The peace of the valley turned into silence. "The silence of the grave?" I thought to myself. I wasn't depressed, after all a maxim I'd followed for many years - which I'd picked up from a movie on TV but that doesn't make it any less valid - was "hang on tightly, give up lightly". In other words fight like crazy but when the result becomes inevitable, just let it go and move on. I wasn't giving up but I was sure if things did go wrong between me and Miranda I could go back to London and re-establish myself as a session musician. Who knows, maybe saxophones were about to stage a comeback.

Because of the weather Miranda was now doing her dawn meditations

in the living room, sitting on the edge of an arm chair with a small side table next to her with burning incense and a picture she found spiritually uplifting. Miranda had told me it was a copy of a six stroke ink brush drawing by Daishin Gito, a Japanese Buddhist monk from around 1700, of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism. When I pointed out that there were a lot more than six brush strokes she told me that the Bodhidharma was done with six strokes and the mat he was sitting on didn't count for some reason. Apparently Bodhidharma was a big fan of sitting in front of a blank wall and did it for years at a time. Well, they didn't have the internet then.

Miranda drew spiritual encouragement and insight from the drawing so when the dawn sun wasn't available she kept it beside her. I have to admit I had great difficulty seeing this monk in the drawing. To me it looked like a big nose with a moustache. I didn't tell Miranda that though. She doesn't always find my remarks funny.



When she had finished her meditating and checking up on the health and welfare of our little Emma to be she made some tea and joined me on the couch and let me have it right between the eyes, at point blank range.

“I've decided it would be much better for the wellness and holistic development of our clients if they did their own cooking. We can get together in the kitchen and share the processes with each doing what they feel most suited for and then we can all eat together of the food we have prepared. It would help develop a stronger sense of self and of community.”

Oh great. My only significant input into the enterprise was now being taken away from me.

“Is there something wrong with my cooking?” I said.

“Oh nothing major,” she replied, “nothing we can't fix. You seem to have got the idea that holistic development is about vegetarianism but

it isn't. It's about eating healthily, eating good, untainted foods and unprocessed meat is just as good and untainted as vegetables. Those cook books you got are fine for the recipes but they're off in the wrong direction. Our clients can eat whatever they want but it must be unprocessed. Just because a recipe is vegetarian it doesn't mean it's healthy."

I watched her face, trying to understand.

"Take fruit for example," she continued, "some are treated with sulphur to increase their shelf life in the shops but while that's good for the sellers it's bad for us the eaters. Or trans fats which are also added to some foods to preserve them even though trans fats are known to be carcinogenic. Or all that extra salt and sugar. Like breakfast cereals are marketed as healthy but have so much sugar in them it's unbelievable. It's essential if our curatives are going to be of any benefit at all that we educate our clients that any food is fine so long as it is fresh and unadulterated. No meat from animals injected with hormones for example. No amount of spiritual or life counselling can possibly do any good if they're poisoning themselves with rubbish."

"I get what you're saying," I responded, "and it's no trouble for me to change what I'm cooking."

Actually this bit was good news as I wasn't overly fond of lentil soup.

"And there are loads of farms around here where we can get stuff direct, including meat."

"Oh babe," she said, taking my hands in hers as she could see I wasn't too happy with this. "It's not that I don't want you doing the cooking and of course you can do the cooking when there are no clients but I truly believe that it would be much much better for them if they were involved in their own food preparation."

"So are you going to get them to make their own beds and scrub the floors then?" I said a little sarcastically.

"Yes," she said seriously. "Well, make their beds anyway. There

shouldn't be much mess so we can clean up at the end of each curative but the idea is to help develop their sense of self and their realisation that although they may not be able to control what happens to them they have total freedom and control over how they react and respond to what happens.”

I knew I was beaten. Although she's generally a reasonable person when Miranda starts to invoke 'the self' it means the thing is decided. My recurring dream seemed to be even more a forecast of impending disaster for me. I hadn't mentioned the dream to Miranda since the first time I'd had it and she'd dismissed it then as a prophecy of good fortune not bad. I generally came off worse in these types of discussions.

So, no cooking. That left me with a little bit of housework now and then, taxiing people to and from the station and a little bit of minor handyman stuff. Anything major we'd get Cliff to deal with. Oh yes, mustn't forget the paperwork. If there are problems that might take up as much as half an hour a week.

“Cheer up, hon,” she said, seeing my crestfallen face. “Maybe you could start a band or something round here and you'll be able to spend lots of time with Emma. Don't ever forget that I need you far more than I ever needed those things,” waving her hand in the general direction of her crutches which she rarely used now.

Her leg was healing very nicely and Doctor Mason was confident that the next set of x-rays in about four weeks time would show her femur had fully re-bonded and the cast could come off. It would be a great relief to her since she liked to go walking in the hills around the lake and the cast made that difficult. Now there was snow it had become almost impossible and she was feeling a little trapped in the house.

“You are my rock, my stability. I couldn't do without you.”

Did that mean she had already been thinking about doing without me? I wondered to myself. I supposed I could try to set up a band. After all, it wasn't so much that I needed to be a part of her business, it was more that I needed something to occupy my time. We'd been perfectly happy, at least with each other, back in London when we'd

each had our own careers. Maybe the problem here was simply the isolation. Unless I took up farming – god forbid – there wasn't a whole lot else I could get involved with.

Later that day Miranda had an email from Danielle Nadar, the celebrant. She had made some enquiries and the creek where Miranda wanted to have our wedding service was known locally as “Buttermere Hairlick”, and that the word 'Hairlick' had come from the 11th century old English word 'halig' which meant 'sacred place'. She'd heard that there was some history of pagan rites at the creek but she was going to try to find out more from some locals and from people she knew in the pagan community but she thought we'd like to know the name at least. Miranda was very excited by this as she'd chosen the spot because she had felt there was a deep spirituality about it. I tried to be excited too.

Miranda's parents came up the day before Christmas Eve. They came by train because her father didn't like driving in the snow. Being an engineer he had probably calculated to a fine tolerance the precise loss of traction, quantified the risk and determined that it wasn't worth it. My parents were due to arrive on Christmas Eve by car. My dad, being a truck driver, wasn't going to be put off by “a fucking bit of old snow”.

We picked up Jenny and Robert from Oxenholme Station, on the edge of Kendal. On the advice of some locals, basically Ted at the pub, we'd decided to buy a Range Rover because winter in the Lake District meant you needed a four-wheel drive vehicle and we'd also decided that our clients who arrived by train would expect something a little classier than my battered old estate car. Our accountant had also crunched the numbers. He'd worked out that as the car was “wholly and necessarily for the purposes of the business as laid down in the Companies Act (Consolidation) 2006” and was therefore a good tax saver. He was also delighted to tell us that that Act was the longest Act in British Parliamentary History at something-or-other sections and way too many pages. At least that's what I think he'd said. I'd fallen asleep before the end of the sentence. We decided to keep my estate car for emergencies because it wouldn't fetch much more than scrap value if we tried to sell it.

Jenny and Miranda hugged and kissed and started talking baby talk while Robert came over to approve the car.

“Good piece of work these” he said, kicking the tyres for some reason. “Engineered to last. Is this the twin turbo v6 diesel version or the straight 4 petrol version?”

I admitted I put diesel in it because that's what the man in the showroom had said to do.

“Good decision” said Robert, thumping me on the shoulder. “Diesel is far better for these sorts of conditions despite the higher emissions.”

I nodded in agreement. Cars were something of a mystery to me. Compared to me Miranda was an expert with cars as she knew how to change the spark plugs. I told Robert this and he laughed and said

“Diesels don't have spark plugs.”

Miranda would be pleased to hear that.

We loaded their baggage into the back and set off home. It's strange but The Grange had felt like home the moment we walked in whereas our home in London had never felt like home, even as we walked out of it, never looking back. We took the scenic route because every route in the Lake District is scenic even when covered by snow. I was getting the hang of driving it in four wheel drive mode and we never skidded once, well not seriously.

Back at the house we took Miranda's parents on a tour of the house so they knew where things were and how to flush the toilet without upsetting it. It could be temperamental and Cliff was planning to get serious with the bathroom in the New Year. Jenny commented that the cooking range in the kitchen was “delightfully quaint”. The garden and the view of the Lakes and the Craggs would have to wait until the next day as it was dark and the clouds were threatening another fall of snow. While Miranda and Jenny got on with dinner I put some more logs on the fire in the living room and lit a fire in their bedroom so it would be nice and warm when they went to bed. Back in Horsham their house was fully equipped with energy efficient central heating so

they'd feel the chill up here.

“So where's the TV?” asked Robert.

“We don't have one. The reception's too bad because of all the hills round here.” I told him.

To be honest we didn't have a TV because neither of us watched TV. I stayed fairly up to date with the music scene through various websites and YouTube and someone had told us that TV signal repeaters had been installed on top of most of the hills so people could get their daily fix of soap operas.

“I'm surprised they haven't installed signal repeaters on top of the hills,” said Robert, realising he was going to have to get involved in conversations rather than watch political discussion shows. He didn't look too happy.

The evening passed quite happily though. Miranda updated Jenny on the wedding arrangements and Jenny hoped that we wouldn't have to get a snow plough to clear the way to Buttermere Hairlick for the ceremony. Miranda then updated Jenny and Robert on the state of the business and Robert asked if we'd had any bookings yet.

“Not yet”, I replied, pleased to have something to say at last. “We've had a couple of enquires which may turn into something in the New Year.”

“Were these email enquiries?” asked Robert.

“Yes, why?”

“I'm surprised you have wireless internet access but no TV reception,” he said. “I'd have thought it most likely the other way around.”

The next day Jenny and Robert oohed and ahed at the view from the panoramic window in the living room and we took Jenny for a tour of the garden and showed her the Quiet Room. Robert stayed inside to check the news on my laptop.

“Forecast is for more snow,” he informed us when we came back inside.

A while after dark had fallen I got a call on my phone from my mum saying they were on Honnister Pass but couldn't find the turn-off to the house even though they'd been to Buttermere and back. I drove along the snow covered dirt track to the main road and waited with the headlights on until they appeared and they followed me back to the house.

“Well fuck me, this is a bit of all right,” said my dad when he walked into the house.

Jenny looked a trifle nervous but Robert took things in his stride.

“How do,” he said “I'm Robert, Miranda's dad and this is Jenny, my wife.”

“Dave,” said my dad “ 'is dad and me wife Cath” and enveloped Miranda in a bear hug. Mum shook hands with Jenny and they went off to the couch to talk about babies and weddings.

When Miranda managed to extricate herself from the human bear trap she fetched a couple of beers for my dad and Robert who retired to a couple of armchairs to get to know each other by discussing their route from Crawly to The Grange. Miranda passed me a coffee and took two teas and a coffee over to Jenny and Cath and joined the discussion.

Confident in my new role as minor dogsbody I went upstairs to the room my parents were going to sleep in to light them a fire. While I was up there I added a log to Jenny and Robert's fire too.

Back in the living room the baby/marriage talk showed no sign of drawing to a close and my dad and Robert were deeply engrossed in the engineering designs of various makes of truck. I dozed off in an armchair and Miranda woke me to cook dinner.

That night I dreamt of the old bakery again, although this time there seemed to be faint murmuring coming from inside.

The next morning both sets of parents emerged late because no one wanted to be the first to go downstairs. Miranda had prepared a Christmas Breakfast of pancakes with sultanas and currents which everyone enjoyed. Later in the morning we all went for a slow walk, because of Miranda's leg, in the crisp snow to inspect the creek where the wedding would take place. My mum and Jenny both exclaimed at how delightful it was and how perfect a setting it would be, especially if the snow had melted and all the wildflowers were budding. Robert agreed it was nice but commented that if the snow had melted then it would probably be very muddy and wandered off to inspect some ice that had formed on a pool beside the creek, next to a copse of trees. My dad complained that his shoes were sodden and that he wished he hadn't forgotten to bring his boots. Miranda held my hand and kissed me when no one was looking and whispered "It won't be long now, I'm so looking forward to marrying you. And Emma is happy too." Then we stood for a while, Miranda in front of me and me with my hands round her and Emma, just looking over the lake. Our parents, being our parents and knowing what it's like to be young and in love, minded their own businesses for a while. Even my dad.

Back at the house Robert asked if anyone else had noticed the dolls in the trees.

"The ones in that copse beside that little pool. Looked like they were made of straw and mistletoe and were sitting on the branches. I reckon there were four or five of them, all facing out over the lake."

No one else had noticed.

"Danielle, that's our celebrant, said there was some sort of pagan sacred tradition at the creek. She said its name came from the old English word for sacred and she's trying to find out more. Maybe someone put those dolls there because it's Christmas and that's a really old pagan celebration of the solstice," said Miranda. "I wonder who did it. I'd love to talk to them."

"You really shouldn't get mixed up in those sorts of things," said Jenny. "You never know what it might lead to."

Miranda smiled tolerantly. She and her mother had had many ...

discussions, to put it diplomatically ... over religious beliefs.

“It's all just superstitious nonsense,” said Robert.

“ere 'ere,” chimed in my dad. “Mind you, I used to know a witch ...” he started to reminisce but my mum stopped him quickly.

“No one wants to know 'bout that now, love. It's all 'istory under the bridge.”

My dad subsided. Mum didn't often interject but when she did, he did what he was told. I probably take after my dad a bit.

Miranda had pronounced that we would have Christmas dinner proper in the early evening and we'd open our presents then. We did the cooking together, with a turkey from a local farm that had been killed and plucked only the day before. It was, if I may say so myself, a fine meal and everyone enjoyed it. Afterwards we sat around feeling overly full as you are supposed to do at Christmas and Miranda started passing around the presents. We didn't have a Christmas tree but I'd dug up a medium sized bush from the garden and planted it in an earthenware pot for the festivities and was going to replant it in the garden when it was all over and Miranda has festooned it with bits of coloured wool and shiny odds and ends from around the house. A couple of spare saxophone keys had found their way onto the tree but that was cool. They're brass and not easily damaged.

Miranda passed around the presents and we all unwrapped them one by one and looked delighted with whatever was inside and my mum said it was the best Christmas ever and we all agreed with her and then Robert called for three cheers for Miranda and me and we took a graceful bow as though we were performing at the Royal Albert Hall. It was fun.

Stuffed and happy we sat around like elephant seals talking fairly empty nonsense as you do when families come together at festive times. I'd put a couple too many logs on the fire so I wouldn't have to get up again and was lounging on the couch trying not to squash my distended stomach and admiring the gift Jenny and Robert had given us.

“We saw how much you liked our Aztec vase,” Jenny had said as Miranda unwrapped it, “so we thought you'd like this too.”

It was a vase made to look like a circle of trees. The base was flat and uneven like the ground and tree trunks grew up from the ground and their branches intertwined and merged at the top to form a solid ring. The trunks were coloured brown and the solid ring green so that from a small distance it looked like a living clump of trees. Obviously you'd need to put some sort of container inside if you were going to have water in it for flowers but the vase was very tastefully done. I was impressed with it and could see that it was more of a sculpture than a straightforward thrown pot on a wheel. The maker had gone to some trouble to make the trunks rough like real trees rather than simply paint smooth clay. I thought, with a little practice, that I could make a vase like that. The only trouble was I didn't have a kiln and it was unlikely that James Darrowby would allow one at The Grange. We'd probably need planning permission too.

Jenny went to the unheated bathroom for a while and when she came back in the living room she exclaimed “Oh my, its like an oven in here”

An oven.

It's strange how your mind wanders and distorts things when you're so stuffed with food you think you're going to throw up or die or both.

An oven is a kind of kiln.

And bakeries have ovens to bake the bread.

Even old disused bakeries.

Like the old bakery in Buttermere Village.

Now, that's an interesting thought.

Chapter Seven

My parents were staying until Sunday but Miranda's had to leave on Friday because Jenny was needed over the weekend at her hospital as part of the skeleton office cover needed over the Christmas and New Year period.

“Can't they get anyone from the x-ray department?” Dad said.

“I've heard all the jokes before,” said Jenny a little primly. “Laugh all you like.”

My dad and I did.

On Boxing Day, after dinner, we were all sitting around the fire playing silly words games.

“Here's one,” I said. “And it'll be useful as well. We need a name to call people who are coming for our curatives. Miranda thinks 'clients' is too commercial and we don't like “patients' or 'seekers'. Anyone got any ideas?”

“Inmates,” “victims,” said my dad and Robert immediately and laughed at each other.

“How about 'pioneers' or 'evolvers'?” said Jenny, “since they're trying to find a new life.”

“Or 'retrievers’,” suggested my mum, “since they're trying to retrieve a life out of the dog's mess they've made of their own.”

“Or 'restorers’,” added my dad, “then they can fix the chairs when they break 'em.”

“I suppose 'attendees' or 'guests' is too dull,” said Robert, “makes it sound like a conference. How about 'disciples' or 'followers'?”

Miranda laughed at that. “I'm not setting up a new religion.”

“Or 'strivers'?” Jenny came up with that.

“How about something more classical?” said Robert, who’d done Latin at school. “How about 'quaestor' which is Latin for 'search' or 'sui', Latin for 'self'.”

It looked like we were going to have to use “clients” after all so we moved on to movie titles beginning with a random letter chosen from the scrabble bag.

I kept my idea about the old bakery to myself. It needed thinking about, especially as I had no idea if it was available or what state it was in and I didn't want to tell Miranda about my big ideas then have it all fall through because the oven had gone. Something I had learnt from Miranda was just to let a new idea grown of its own free will. Trying to force it doesn't work so just let it simmer quietly in the back of your mind and let it blossom naturally.

I wasn't really sure what I had in mind anyway. Yes, I had enjoyed that pottery course a few years ago and there was the faintest of possibilities that a kiln or something like it might be available but so what? Just dabble with making some pots or as a serious hobby or even try to make a business out of it? It was too big an idea to get my head around yet.

So once the house was clear of distracting people and we were back to our routine of me watching Miranda developing her plans and the odd bit of sax practice now and then, I just let the idea sit.

Sitting on the couch one day, I noticed Miranda try to get the poker from the fire down inside her cast. It was too big and awkward so she went to the coat rack in the hall and straightened one of the wire coat hangers and used that instead.

“I thought you learned to ignore things like itches when you meditate,” I teased.

“Yes,” she replied with a sigh of relief as the clothes hanger reached the spot. “Ordinary itches and other distractions like you farting don't bother me at all but this damned thing,” she smacked the cast with her other hand, “makes itches so bad a Zen Master would kill to scratch.”

I offered to do things to other parts of her body to move her focus away from her leg but she slapped my hand away and continued scratching. I wondered if she'd have any leg left when the cast came off. I hoped so as she had delightful legs.

Occasionally an odd idea would hit me and I'd look it up on the net. Like, for example, would a bakery oven be hot enough to turn clay into pottery? That depends, it turned out. Wood fires aren't hot enough but charcoal is, although you have to fire the clay for longer because even charcoal isn't quite as hot as a kiln would ideally be.

We decided to spend New Year's Eve at the Crag Inn as they were doing a meal and promised live music to see in the New Year. We hadn't been out anywhere since before we'd come up here on holiday and we thought it would make a nice change. It seemed most of the Village had the same idea as there were ten or twelve families there as well as a German couple who were staying at the holiday house the other side of the village. As I was ordering some drinks at the bar, there being only one choice for the food, roast beef and veg or nothing, I found myself asking Ted the barman about the old bakery.

"How long's the old bakery up on the corner been empty?" I said.

"Ohh, reckon it must be going on fifteen year," he said, pulling me a pint.

"Why did it go out of business?"

"Old Harry fell over and did sommat to his shoulder, put him out of action for a few weeks. Business was going down the pan anyway after that there supermarket opened up in Ambleside and folk started buying the bread there instead, so he just shut up shop."

"What happened to him? Why didn't he sell the bakery?"

Ted served another customer and came back to me.

"I don't rightly know," he said thoughtfully. I imagined he was puzzled that there may have been some village gossip he hadn't heard about. He called over to Ned who was propped against the bar eyeing the

German tourists.

“ere, Ned, 'member old Harry at the bakery?”

“Aye,” said Ned, turning round to face us, “died, ohhh, gotta be ten year ago now.”

“I heard he went over to Whitehaven wi' his missus, got a cottage by the sea,” said Tom, a local dairy farmer.

“Nah,” said Ned. “Old Harry hated water, was why no one bought 'is bread. Never washed his 'ands, see.” They laughed.

“Or maybe it was 'is missus that died,” Ned added. “ere Alf, was it old 'arry wot died or was it 'is missus?”

Alf was someone I'd never seen before but he turned round from his plateful of roast beef and veg and scratched his head under his cap.

“Can't say as I rightly remember,” he said. “Ain't seen neither of 'em for, ohhh, I dunno. Was just sayin' to Margie t'other day, 'Ain't seen old Harry for a while', wasn't I, luv?” and he nudged the large lady next to him so hard a lump of parsnip fell off her fork. “Wasn't I saying just t'other day we ain't seen old Harry for a while, his missus neither?”

“Aye, that you were man, that you were,” she said retrieving the piece of parsnip and pushing it into her mouth.

“Davy, 'member old Harry?” said Ned to Davy, who was walking past on his way back from the toilet.

“Old 'arry? Him wot had the bakery? He's dead like. Went to 'is funeral and that,” he stopped and sucked his teeth. “Seven, eight year ago. Pissed down all week an' his grave was full o' water. Aye, were a right good laff that was.” He chuckled at the memory.

“What 'appened to 'is missus?” said Ted.

“Oh she died way back. In't that right, Vera?” he shouted across the

room.

“What's that Davy?” she shouted back.

“Old 'arry's missus. She died way back didn't she?”

“Old 'arry what 'ad the bakery? Aye, thirty year or more.”

“Aye thought so,” said Davy, turning back to Ted. “e only kept bakery going for sommat to do.”

“Who owns it now?” I asked.

This caused a fair amount of debate but the upshot was that the owner was probably his son Albert who was now living in retirement in Kendal.

When I got back to the table with the drinks Miranda had nearly finished her meal and mine was quietly congealing in the thin gravy.

“Thought I was going to die of thirst,” she said. “What was all that about?”

“I just asked Ted how long the old bakery in the village had been empty,” I replied. “I thought it was a simple question.”

She laughed. “Not a lot seems to happen around here. Everything becomes a talking point for everyone.”

I tucked into my dinner and she eyed me thoughtfully for a while.

“Why did you want to know?” she said.

“Oh I was just curious,” I answered round half a roast potato.

She kept eyeing me.

“No,” she said after a while. “You weren't 'just' curious. You don't get curious about things like that. I know you. And you've had dreams about the bakery. What's going on in that head of yours?”

I forked a piece of beef into my mouth and grinned as I chewed it.

“Come on, don't be shy. You know I'll get it out of you sooner or later.”

That was true. She was very good at getting information out of people and reading their body language. I decided to tell her.

“OK. You remember I told you I did that course a few years ago on pottery, when I was on benefit?”

She nodded. “You showed me that vase you made at your mum's.”

“That's the one. Well, I was thinking, and don't laugh at me 'cos I know its a stupid idea, but I was thinking now we're up here and you've got your courses to run and I've got nothing to do ...”

“You'd take up pottery again,” she interrupted. “That's a good idea but you haven't got a kiln.” She paused and froze for a moment, withdrawing from the world as she did when she was thinking.

“Ohhhh, I get it. The old bakery oven. That's why you were asking. Turn the bakery into a pottery.”

I nodded. She leaned over and wiped some gravy off my beard with a paper napkin. Then she took my hand in hers and pressed it to her cheek with her eyes closed.

“Do you think I'd be any good making pots and stuff?” I asked. “I know I enjoyed the course but it was only ten weeks. I'm sure I'd need a lot of practice.”

She smiled quietly to herself then opened her eyes.

“You are an artist, babe. OK, it's been music so far but you are an artist and you have the soul of an artist. All you are doing is changing your instrument, you're not changing anything fundamental about yourself. You'll be at least as good as a potter as you are as a musician, if not better since you won't be wasting yourself trying to become a pottery mega god.”

Damn I loved this woman. Where had she been when I was starting out as a musician? With her at my side I could have been bigger than David Bowie – who also started out playing sax.

So I told her how impressed I'd been with her mum's Aztec vase and the Trees vase she'd given us and how I thought I could do things like that too, with a little practice. And how a charcoal burning kiln could be used to fire the clay, only for a little longer. And how I'd been dreaming about the old bakery. And how I'd found a 20 inch electric potter's wheel on eBay. And how I didn't want to mass produce plates and cups but that I wanted to make one-off pieces of art. And how when she was old enough I could teach Emma.

She just sat and watched me and listened as I rambled, the remains of her dinner forgotten. When I ground to a halt she just said, quite calmly and matter of factly,

“This is so right, babe. I can feel it. I felt it when we stopped at the bakery but I didn't know what it meant then. I do now.”

She finished her drink.

“Let's go home and put in a bid on that wheel right now.”

“But what about the bakery? Shouldn't we sort that out first?”

“No,” she said emphatically. “The wheel is a sign. Its on eBay now because you need it now. It's symbolic. Buying it means you are committing yourself to the cosmos on this and the cosmos will help you. It doesn't matter about the bakery. If it falls through or doesn't have an oven it doesn't matter because you will have committed and the cosmos will help you find another alternative, but you won't need an alternative because the cosmos has already sorted the bakery for you and has been trying to tell you for ages in your dreams.”

“But what about the band for New Year's? They'll be on soon.”

“Forget about the band,” she said quietly, leaning forward and taking my hands in hers, her eyes staring deeply into mine. “You play better than all of them put together and they're not worth your time. We're

going home and you can play me Auld Lang Syne in the garden in the moonlight. After you've bought the wheel.”

She stood up. We left. I bid for the wheel. She leaned against the stone table as I played Auld Lang Syne in the garden at midnight. The snow clad trees against the moonlit crags giving the simple tune a depth of emotion no pub band could ever hope to produce. Then I played Glen Miller's old swing tune Moonlight Serenade before my hands got too cold to finger the sax and she pretended to play the trombone parts. Then we danced slowly in the snow while I hummed The Adoration Waltz.

Miranda can be quite an elemental force when the spirit moves her, and the spirit does move her. Although its not the spirit of the universe, it's the spirit of Miranda. And my universe revolves around her.

Needless to say I won the bidding on the wheel. There was no other bidder. We also found out Albert's address in Kendal by asking around. It took a while but there was plenty of time. We dropped by his house when we went into Kendal a week or so later to sign another form Danielle the Celebrant had found and without which it seemed that the Government could not function.

Albert lived in a neat little cottage on the edge of Kendal, not far from the railway line. The snow on the path to the front door was undisturbed so either he was away or he didn't get many visitors. It turned out to be the latter. He opened the front door and listened politely while Miranda asked if he was the Albert Rowe who owned the old bakery in Buttermere. He didn't say anything, just stood there for a few heartbeats then gestured for us to come inside. He nodded towards a couple of upright chairs in the kitchen while he rummaged through the pile of bits and pieces on the table and triumphantly pulled out a hearing aid which he plugged into his ear and then asked us who we were. Miranda repeated her enquiry and he confirmed he was that Albert Rowe.

I explained that we were interested in using the bakery if it still had its oven.

“Aye, well it were there when I last looked an’ that were when da died. Shouldn’t think any old bugger stole it. Was you wanting to make bread then?”

I explained that we were thinking of using the bakery as a pottery and the oven as a kiln.

“Oh aye,” he said, “Well there’s a thing.”

I asked if he would agree to letting me rent the place.

“Tried to sell the damned old place years ago. No call for a bakery in a little village like that anymore. No bloody use to me. Can’t use it an’ can’t sell it. How much was you thinking of paying?”

We named a monthly figure and he cackled.

“What? For that ole dump? You must be Americans.”

We assured him we weren’t and that we needed to check the oven before we could finalise things to make sure it was still serviceable. He saw the sense in that.

“Assuming everything is OK,” I said, “I’ll get my lawyer to sort out a contract with your lawyer.”

He cackled again and shook his head.

“Don’t need no damned lawyers wasting our money, boy,” he said. “We do it the proper way, on a handshake.”

I was surprised. In these days of litigation a handshake seemed very risky.

“How do you know you can trust us?” I asked.

He nodded his head at Miranda.

“Any man with a missus like that has already earned my trust,” he said. “She won’t let you do nothing wrong by me.”

So he spat on his hand and we shook on it. It seemed the right thing to do.

Back in the car with the key to the bakery in my pocket Miranda said, "I told you it was right" and hummed gently all the way to Ambleside where we stopped off to have a chat with Cliff. I explained about the bakery over mugs of steaming tea and a deliciously moist chocolate cake his wife had made.

"The brick oven'll be fine so long as none of the bricks have fallen out or cracked," he said.

"Biggest problem will be the mortar between the bricks. I'll bring a chisel to check it's still sound. Mind you they built 'em to last in those days. And worst case we just rip her out and build a new one. My cousin works at the brickworks in Carlisle so we'd get 'em cheaper like."

"Any idea where we can get charcoal?" I asked him.

"Oh, you don't need to buy any of that," he said. "Make your own. We've got plenty of wood round these parts so just burn the wood in the oven and make your own charcoal. Maybe make your own bread too while you're doing that," he laughed.

I also told him that I'd bought a potters wheel but it was American so it ran on 110 volts not the usual British 240 volts.

"That's no problem," he said. "Just get a little step-up transformer, they're cheap as dirt."

Cliff was a useful person to know. He also came up with a way of using the wood burning while making charcoal to heat water to drive a steam generator to make electricity which could be stored in batteries to drive the wheel but it all sounded complicated to me and expensive.

"Wouldn't a cheap little diesel generator do the job?" I asked. "The wheel is only 300 watts or so."

“Aye,” he said, “but not half as much fun!”

His wife got a fit of the giggles and busied herself rolling the pastry for a pie.

Chapter Eight

Miranda let out a cry of horror and started moaning. I rushed into the room ready to defend her to the death against any foe. Sadly this was a foe I could not attack. Her cast was in two long pieces propped against a trolley and Miranda was sitting, hunched over, in the padded hospital chair gazing at her leg in anguish and despair.

Miranda normally had legs that made most men, and not a few women, stop and stare. But this leg was thin and wasted, barely thicker than her arm. It was coated in matted hair and the skin was dry, very scaly and a dirty off-white in colour. It also smelt faintly unpleasant.

“You've had a cast for three months,” said the technician. “The muscles of your leg have wasted and the dead skin which normally sloughs off and becomes house dust has been trapped. Whatever you do, don't try to rub or scrape the dead skin off. You'll only damage the healthy skin underneath. Let your leg soak in a bath for half an hour a day for a few days and it'll all soak off. Use a good quality moisturiser as well. Oh and don't shave your leg for a few days either. Wait until the healthy skin comes through.”

He looked at Miranda's case notes and extracted a document which he handed to Miranda and she passed to me without a glance.

“Your consultant has arranged a course of physiotherapy to develop your leg. Here are the details.”

He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Don't tell anyone I said this, but just between you and me your leg will return to normal faster if you just take plenty of walks. Don't over-tire your leg but give it plenty of exercise and it will soon be as good as new.”

He dropped his professional detachment for a moment and said “perhaps even nicer than the other one.” Then the shutter came up again as he briskly tidied up and left Miranda to absorb the full horror of her leg.

When he was done he went and stood beside Miranda.

“Right, time you started to use it. Come along now, try to stand. It healed perfectly and you won't hurt it. Gently does it. I've got you.”

He had his hands under her armpits and gently guided Miranda off the chair so she was standing. On one leg, the formerly damaged leg held slightly off the ground.

“It'll feel very strange for an hour or so. You have to get used to not having the weight of the cast anymore. Try to put your foot on the floor. It won't hurt.”

Miranda gingerly dropped her foot the last inch and ever so slowly transferred some of her weight from the other foot. She looked down and another gasp of horror filled the room as her foot was angled off to the side, pointing outwards. I guessed by 25 or 30 degrees.

“What's wrong with my foot?” she exclaimed in a strangled voice. “Did they set it at the wrong angle or something?” She looked at me with mute anguish in her eyes.

“Oh, don't worry about that,” the technician said lightheartedly. “As your calf muscles regain their strength your foot will realign again. It's only twisted round like that because there's nothing pulling it into place. Try to take a step.”

Gingerly Miranda lifted her leg and moved it forward. Frankly it looked grotesque. She shifted her weight onto the leg ready to step forward. She lurched and fell. The technician, though, had been doing his job for a number of years and did it well. She had barely begun to fall before he had caught her and was soothing and encouraging her.

“The cast has been supporting you for months,” he said. “You've got to learn to support yourself now and to regain your balance. Come on, let's give it another go.”

I moved forward to help but he gestured me away.

“That's right, my dear, baby steps, and another one, oh that's so so

good. Now try to turn around and get back to the chair on your own. I'm here, I'll catch you."

Miranda shuffled across the floor, her arms jerking as she fought to keep her balance. She collapsed in the chair with a sigh of relief.

"You did brilliantly," said the technician brightly, patting her shoulder. "Now let's try that again shall we?"

Within five minutes Miranda could walk the circuit of the room, half dragging her leg and maintaining contact with the wall for support and lurching with every step as her non-existent thigh tried to cope. Perhaps it was my imagination but it looked as though her foot had already angled a toe's width back to normal.

"You should find that your foot is properly aligned in a day or two" said the technician briskly. "Let's get your shoes on and try that again."

As instructed we'd brought flat shoes. This would have been a nightmare in high heels. After another circuit of the room, in shoes, Miranda was allowed to sit while the technician completed his paperwork.

"My leg hurts," she muttered to me. "It aches and it's shaking."

"That's quite normal," said the technician. "It's just got to get used to doing some work again. Now if you could just sign here to say you've returned the crutches."

He looked at me and said "You have a car here?" I nodded.

"Make sure she walks to the car on her own. Don't try to walk for her, but don't let her fall either. We don't want Miranda back with another broken leg, do we."

He completed his paperwork and closed the file.

"Now, over the next week or two your muscles will grow stronger and return to normal," he said. "You may get some stiffness in your knee

or ankle and your tendons will probably feel a little sore as they start to stretch again. A little massage would help. But if you get any abnormal swelling, particularly around the joints, or if any part of your leg feels hotter than the rest talk to your GP as soon as you can.”

He walked us to the door, his mind already on the next patient waiting outside.

Miranda rested in the car while we drove home and insisted that I let her out at the end of the dirt track so she could walk the rest of the way to the house. I walked beside her then walked back to get the car. She stumbled a lot because the snow hid the unevenness of the track but made it home in one piece. She fell asleep on the couch while I made dinner and I could see the tiredness in her face.

I watched over her and fussed like an old mother hen for the next few days. She didn't really need it but it was my therapy too. With her typical determination and her deep understanding of the limits of her body we went on long walks around the lake and she worked her thigh by repeatedly standing up and sitting down again on one of the kitchen chairs. Her leg was looking like a human leg within a week and she used three of my disposable razors getting rid of the hair so her leg was silky smooth again.

With the dead skin washed away her leg started to regain its normal healthy colour. The surgeon had attached a small plate across the fracture to keep it straight as it healed and the scar was neat and barely visible. Miranda pooh-poohed any suggestion of cosmetic surgery to hide it, saying it was an honourable wound and would fade almost completely in time and she wasn't going to stop wearing a bikini when it was sunny which cheered me up. It was nice to have her back whole again, especially in bed.

She did take me completely by surprise though when she got out of the bath having spent nearly an hour in it shaving her leg.

“I want to invite that chap around for dinner,” she said, unwrapping the towel wrapped around her and putting on her dressing gown.

Distracted by the sight, I was slow on the uptake.

“What chap?”

“Edward Fawcett, the man who ran me over.”

“What the hell for? I’d have thought you’d never want to see him again.”

“I want to talk to him and show him that I’m now fully recovered and better than ever.”

She sat on my lap and I gently stroked her leg.

“I want you to pick his brains about art pottery. After all, he does sell that sort of thing to galleries. Maybe he even handled those pieces my mum bought. I’m sure he can give you some pointers about what direction to head in at least and maybe put you in touch with some other local potters.”

Actually that made sense to me so I sent him an email inviting him to dinner whenever it suited him.

Miranda and I had been to the old bakery to have a look around a couple of weeks earlier. Cliff hadn’t been able to come with us because he was in bed with the flu, something he got regularly every ten years or so. The key Albert had given us opened the back door and we’d gone in full of anticipation and curiosity. It was a mess. The back door opened into what must have been old ‘arry’s store room for flour and he’d pretty much abandoned the place after his shoulder injury. There was no flour left of course but there were some mouldy old flour sacks and the place was rife with rodent droppings, cobwebs and some weeds growing out of the remains of the sacks. The rats and mice must have eaten well until the flour ran out. There was also a leak in the roof so over time the droppings, ancient and new, had been repeatedly soaked and left to ripen. It was a bit smelly, to say the least. Next to the store room was a small office which still had the paperwork of fifteen years previously strewn over the desk, now yellow with age and chewed around the edges. Beside that was a small toilet, stained, full of cobwebs and crusted with droppings. Everything was covered with dust.

The front of the shop had a room that had clearly been used to display and sell the bread and had been thoroughly ransacked by the resident rodent life too. There was still a key in the front door lock, although it and the lock had rusted so badly it was immobile. The important part lay between the front shop and the back rooms. There was a big wooden table, worm-eaten and looking tired, where old 'arry had presumably mixed and kneaded the dough. Off to one side was a large brick oven. It, too, was riddled with rodent dropping and cobwebs. The front was a large semi-circular cast iron plate with a hinged door inscribed with "McDonald & Sons, Dumfries, 1863" and looked as solid and reliable as the day it rolled out of the ironworks. There was no sign of how to make a fire underneath the oven though so we went out again and investigated round the side. There was a sloping shelf-like thing attached to the wall which presumably had given shelter to the firewood but the wood itself was long gone and another cast iron plate, this time rectangular set into the wall, just above ground level. It was also inscribed "McDonald & Sons, Dumfries, 1863". Opening it I could see the cold ashes of long dead fires. Neither of us wanted to scramble inside to inspect it so we left it to Cliff for when he felt better.

Miranda said she hadn't notice any lights inside so we went back and had a look. Old 'arry must have worked by oil lamp since that's all we could find. Nine of them in all, eight piled in a corner and one hanging over the table. I daresay after you've been kneading bread all your life you didn't need a lot of light to see what you were doing. There were some long handled shovel-like tools, probably for getting the bread in and out of the oven, leaning against a wall and a couple of rancid wooden tubs and that was pretty much it. Not much to show for a life really.

"Can you feel the vibrations? The atmosphere?" asked Miranda, slowly rotating. "It's perfect. It's waiting for you. It wants to start over."

To be honest, although it was dirty and smelly, I could feel something. My disgust at the state of it was more a disgust at how something familiar had deteriorated rather than that of something strange and disgusting, if that makes sense. Like a filthy old toy, half remembered from distant childhood, bringing back a feeling of comfort. I was sad it had been allowed to get into this state.

Cliff would sort out any problems with the oven and install a generator and some decent lighting so we sent Albert a letter with some cash for three months rent saying we'd take the place. I'd been slowly working my way round with a shovel filling bags full of rat shit. Once that was done and the place thoroughly scrubbed down and disinfected twenty seven times it would be habitable. The wheel would probably arrive from America in mid-February so there was no great rush. I was able to let the anticipation build and savour it at my leisure, which is something that was impossible to do in London. Life there was too frantic, too desperate to make a buck to enjoy the build-up. You'll probably think I'm totally weird for saying this but I found a sense of ritual, almost reverence, shovelling rat shit. Miranda didn't think it was weird though. She just wondered why it had taken me so long to discover this. She'd told me several times that it's not the task that matters but the attitude you have when you do it but I was only now beginning to understand that.

* * *

When Edward Fawcett arrived the stew had been simmering for well over an hour and was just about perfect. I'd also made an apple cake with some left over apples which we'd have with cream from Tom's dairy farm.

"I've been wanting to drop round to see how Miranda was for a while," he said when he came in. "But I didn't want to intrude. I was pleased to get your email. Where is the lovely lady?"

I showed him in to the living room where Miranda was. She got up as he came in and came over to shake his hand.

"Oh good," he said. "You've got rid of the cast. Are you all well again? Fit and healthy?"

Miranda pirouetted to show she was fit and healthy. I wondered if she'd pull up her skirt to show Edward her scar but fortunately she didn't. Miranda's bare legs could have powerful effects on people and I didn't know if Edward would be up to it.

Miranda and Edward chatted for a while about the cast and how long

she'd had it on and how she'd managed with the itching and how she'd coped with the snow and that sort of thing while I made a few last minute adjustments to the stew.

As I was ladling it out at the kitchen table, Edward once more apologised profusely for hitting her with his car.

“Actually, I wanted to thank you,” said Miranda.

“What on earth for?” Edward replied, looking at me in puzzlement, as though I could explain what went on in Miranda's mind.

“For being my teacher,” she said.

Edward's look of complete bafflement made Miranda laugh.

“I can see I need to explain this,” she said. She paused to eat a little stew.

“I believe in myself,” she resumed. “But not just myself, I mean 'my 'self', the 'self' that is me or you or even that caveman over there,” pointing at me with her spoon.

Edward nodded. I knew how he felt. I'd been down several Miranda paths myself.

“And it has nothing to do with any particular religion. I don't follow any religion as most are based around some deity. But I do learn from religions and take those bits that fit in with me and myself.”

She had some more stew and Edward started to eat as well.

“And in Zen Buddhism there is a practice which is 100% based on truth. Actually it isn't really Zen, it an old Hindu thing that Zen absorbed to become Zen called Tantra. The basic point is that things happen to you that you can't avoid that you have no choice about. So, like you might have someone cancel a big purchase from you.”

“Yes, that certainly happened a few times,” he said. “It's annoying but what can you do?”

“Exactly my point,” said Miranda, then to me “This is lovely stew babe. You did good.”

“Yes,” she continued, “my point is that although the thing happened and you have no control over it, you do have control over what you do about it. So someone cancels a purchase and you might choose to get angry about it, which has consequences. You might take your anger out on someone else, causing them suffering, which leads them to say or do something that causes more suffering still, like ripples of bad karma spreading out across the world.”

I was getting interested myself. She'd talked like this with me before but I hadn't quite grasped it yet. I watched her passionately express her thoughts, her beautiful skin glowing with her life force.

“Now, that is standard Buddhist thinking. Where the tantra comes in is that you should look at that person who cancelled as your teacher, not as an enemy but as a guru. He or she is giving you an opportunity to learn something about yourself and to not only improve things for yourself but for the world.”

This is where I usually get lost. Edward seemed to be handling himself well, probably fortified by my stew.

“OK, so you are saying that when someone cancels an order I should choose to think positively about it?”

“Yes, exactly,” said Miranda. “You see, we all have fears and insecurities, paranoias even, because we're just humans at the end of the day and we are riddled with the things. Over time, though, we build up callouses over those soft delicate little insecurities to protect ourselves and it's those callouses, those shields, that cause the anger, the urge to lash out in some way and to fight back.”

I offered some more stew to Edward and he distractedly pushed his bowl over, engrossed in what Miranda was saying.

“So according to tantra, when someone cancels an order with you, you should look inside yourself to understand why you are angered, to see which soft spot is being stamped on and to understand yourself better.

And then, when you've done that, respond in a way that the ripples that spread to other people are good karma, not bad karma.”

“How do I do that with a cancelled order?” said Edward.

“I don't really know,” replied Miranda, “as I don't know what fears or insecurities of yours have been hurt. You could, for example, be pleased that they've cancelled because whatever it was that was cancelled wasn't right for them at that time and that will help them feel better about having cancelled and so they'll treat their next interaction differently and that will spread.”

“I see,” said Edward thoughtfully. Maybe it was because I was no longer in a permanent headspace of fighting music companies over contracts, but I could see what she was getting at as well. Like shovelling rat shit for pleasure.

“So why do you want to thank me?” he said.

“Most of my life has been fairly easy,” Miranda admitted. “I've had problems, of course, but nothing that major. So, when I've been applying the tantra it hasn't been that hard. However, when you ran into me that was the hardest thing I've had to deal with. I don't mean the pain, I mean the fear. When sweetiepie here brought me home from the hospital I was afraid to walk on a road again. Afraid to get near cars, even a little afraid of strange men. But through the tantra I saw that you were sent to teach me. I could see my fears and why they were there and why I was afraid to face them. And through you and because of you I was able to deal with them. I chose to deal with them because you were there as my teacher to teach me the truth about the tantra.”

She paused for a moment to think.

“And because I faced those fears and insecurities rather than getting angry with you and fearful of you I have become better able to help my man here. And, because I have now had to handle this with a major event where you nearly killed me, I am way way better able now to help my clients to dealing with their own fears and securities. I'm pretty sure I won't solve all their problems but I'll now be able to help

them solve more of them and help them better. And that in turn will spread out through them to others and so on, rippling around the world.”

Miranda smiled that smile and reached out to touch Edward's hand.

“So thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for teaching me a real lesson in how to overcome my fears and how to better help people overcome theirs.”

Now I understood why Miranda had had to go back to the road to touch the place when Edward's car had hit her and why she had agreed to see him even though she didn't want to.

I'm sure that Edward's evening wasn't turning out to be quite how he expected it so I fed him apple cake and cream and changed the conversation to tell him briefly of my plans and ask him for any tips or suggestions he might have. I also showed him the tree vase Miranda's mother had given us and asked if he'd handled it.

He was, as you'd expect, cautiously optimistic. He certainly didn't want to tie himself to a potential loser, not even for Miranda. His main advice was to get plenty of practice and let him know when I thought I had made something worthwhile and he'd tell me what he thought. He also suggested offering some of my work at the local fairs and markets when the summer came, to get a feel for what customers liked and didn't like. And no, he hadn't handled the vase but thought it was a good example of contemporary French pottery.

Later that evening I was sitting in an armchair with Miranda sitting on the floor leaning against my legs and gazing into the fire.

“I got what you were saying earlier. It's all about choosing how you are going to respond to things. But I was wondering what you meant when you said the accident had helped you to help me.”

Miranda twisted round to look me in the eyes.

“Babe,” she said quietly. “I could see all your doubts and fears about getting married and having a baby and having no real role in the

business. You were so scared by your dreams and what you thought they meant and losing your music and the only real life you've ever known. I could feel your fears in bed and when you dreamed I could feel you trembling. I so desperately wanted to help you, to guide you and to tell you what to do so you'd be happy. But I couldn't. If I told you what to do then it wouldn't be you doing it, it would be me and that would be so very very bad for both of us.”

She kissed my hands.

“That was so so difficult for me to do. Far more difficult than facing my fears after the accident. I had to hold myself back and hope you would find yourself but all the time knowing that you might end up leaving me because you were afraid and had no purpose in your life, that you'd run back to London to be safe. That's why I decided to stop you doing the cooking. To cut the last strand holding you here so you could be free to find your self, your destiny.”

She started to cry.

“That was so hard, so terribly hard to do and I could see how much it hurt you. But I had to set you free. To risk losing you but I had to. Do you see that? I had to so you could be what you truly are not some parody of what you think I want you to be. Because I love you so much. So much.”

I started to cry too.

Chapter Nine

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

As Danielle the Celebrant said these words I felt a wave of realisation that the day was the best day of my life. There was an underlying happiness inside me that made everything sparkle. It was even better than the day of my first public concert, when as an eight year old I hesitantly played Three Blind Mice to my parents in the lounge on a battered old sax rented from school and received my first, and last, standing ovation.

Miranda's parents had come up a few days before as her mother felt she needed to be there to help and her father knew he'd get no peace otherwise. Early the day before the wedding there had been a storm and the fresh snow lay two or three feet deep, even deeper in places where it had drifted. My own parents had missed the storm by hours, arriving in the middle of the night. A touch of panic settled over The Grange as Miranda, her parents and I sat in the living room agonising over the snow and wondering if people would still be able to get to the creek for the ceremony or if we would have to postpone it or move the ceremony to another location at the last minute, and if so where? The only other places Miranda felt would be remotely suitable were just that – remote – and had had the same snow fall. It was a problem and we discussed it nervously, back and forth and going round in circles, although Miranda says there's no such thing as a problem, it's just a situation with an attitude that needs changing.

My dad saved the day though, well the next day really. When he got up and came down he asked what the problem was as he could see our stricken faces. He just grunted, swallowed half a cup of coffee and disappeared. We dismissed him from our minds because we needed to discuss all the options again and make a couple more phone calls and see if any more ideas came along. A while later he turned up, looking bedraggled and stuck his head round the living room door.

“Sorted,” he said. “I need some friggin coffee,” and stomped into the kitchen.

I followed him into the kitchen to find out what he was talking about

and he told me to go outside and have a look. He'd only gone to his car and got some rope and tied two pieces of wood he'd found to his feet and stamped down a path in the snow all the way to the creek so people could walk there rather than wade through knee-deep snow. I was stunned. Never had I been so proud of my old dad as I was at that moment and I told him so. Miranda hugged him and thanked him from the bottom of her heart. He just went red and concentrated on his coffee.

Anyone who's ever organised a wedding will know how awkward the guests make things, even with only thirty of them. A few weren't able to make it, some came the day before and stayed either with us at the house or in Ambleside at the pub. Only one, an old school friend of mine, got completely lost and ended up in Liverpool before giving up and going home. Others arrived on the day but stayed that night. Some came by car, some by train. We were fortunate to have picked Amos and his pub for our reception as he had alerted a couple of taxi drivers so they were primed and ready for confused wedding travellers at the station and for the day of the wedding he'd organised a couple of mini-vans to ferry everyone staying at his pub down to the Grange and back.

My best man, George, was a drummer I'd known for years and he stayed at the Grange with us. Miranda had only one bridesmaid, her best friend Beth. As everyone was gathering at the house and handing over presents and exclaiming at how beautiful everything and everyone was, Miranda grabbed me and whispered that she and Beth were going down to the creek to get things ready and we were all to come down in an hour or so. That was easier said than done but again my dad took charge and herded everyone like cattle.

When we got to the clearing beside the creek, Miranda and Beth had laid out a semi circle of rocks where the creek joined the lake. Miranda was standing in the middle of the rocks, wearing a long, simple russetty earthy brown coloured dress with green streaks woven into it. The dress was clingy and her five month belly stood out defiantly. She wore a headband of mistletoe and held a bunch of snow-drops in her hands. She looked like an elf queen, albeit a pregnant one, and radiated solemnity and happiness. As the guests arrived at the creek, her tangible presence stilled all conversation and

a silence fell, broken only by the rushing and gurgling of the icy water in the creek. She held out one hand for me to join her and as I stepped over the line of rocks a feeling of complete and absolute love washed over me. Danielle joined us to carry out the formalities.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

It was done. The law now recognised what our hearts and minds had embraced. We were both grinning at each other like idiots and I wanted to go dancing and splashing through the creek. Our guests milled around shaking my hand and clapping my shoulder until it was sore and kissing Miranda as many times as possible.

Back at the pub for the reception dinner, Amos had done us proud. The small room was filled with nicely decorated tables and each place had a placemat woven from straw with each person's name woven within, by Amos' friend who turned out to be his teenaged daughter. Everyone was impressed by them although Natasha's surname was spelled wrong. She married a Pole and her surname is about 30 letters long and only seems to have one vowel in it so Amos' daughter did well to get as close as she did. The big surprise of the evening, and frankly no one really wants surprises at their wedding, turned out to be Robert.

“Well, here we are” he said when it came time for his speech. “My little girl has gone and got married. It seems only a few days ago that we were changing her nappies and it won't be long now before she's changing her own daughter's nappies.”

There was applause and a couple of slightly lewd comments.

“I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome David and Catherine, the groom's parents, and to thank Bethany and George for their efforts, Amos for the excellent meal and Danielle for her superb ceremony. I'd also like to thank my wife Jenny for everything, including helping to produce this wonderful girl who got married today.”

More applause.

“When I was getting ready for this speech I was told I should include

a humorous anecdote or two about Miranda, something from her past that will cause her deep and lasting embarrassment.”

Some cheers and laughter.

“There was the time for example when we got a phone call from Miranda's primary school. It seemed Miranda has escaped through a window and had gone to talk to some trees and refused to come back because the trees were more interesting than the teacher.”

Laughter and a cry of “She was right, I had the same teacher,” from the back.

“Or the time when she was thirteen and decided she wanted to be a hairdresser and experimented by cutting Bethany's hair. Apparently she was trying to give Bethany a mohican. Her first attempt was not straight, it wavered a bit so Miranda cut off some more and tried again, then again until poor Bethany was nearly as bald as our groom here. I heard Bethany cried for hours afterwards but it says a lot for Miranda's charm that Bethany not only stayed her best friend but agreed to be Miranda's bridesmaid and has not, so far anyway, sabotaged today.”

“The day's not over yet,” called out Beth.

“Or the time when she was sixteen and went for a sleepover with a friend of hers called Janine. Who isn't with us today I'm afraid. I got a phone call late that evening from Janine's mother asking me to come and take Miranda home. When I asked why, Janine's mother told me Miranda had been growling at Janine and trying to bite her ankles and Janine was now too upset for Miranda to stay.”

Loud laughter at this.

“When I brought Miranda home and asked her why, she looked at me with those big, innocent blue eyes and 'It wasn't me doing that Daddy, it was Benji'. Benji, it turned out, was a particularly bad tempered pekingese that was helping Miranda explore the spirit realm while she tried to open her third eye.”

Miranda called out “Yes, Benji did have a temper.”

More laughter and applause.

“Miranda looks embarrassed enough,” he continued. “So I'd like to get serious for a moment.”

“Like any father I had dreams and expectations of my daughter as she grew up. Miranda is beautiful and intelligent and she could have any man she wanted so I assumed that she would marry an important and influential man, a surgeon maybe, or the CEO of a large corporation, perhaps even a minor Royal.”

There were cries of “God Save The Queen” and “Harry's taken” to that, which he quickly crushed with a stony look.

“So you can imagine my dismay when she brought home a bearded, tattooed, leather clad, skinhead musician and told me she was moving in with him. I was not impressed.”

The room was silent and my bowels turned to water. I'd always known he didn't like me but was he going to ruin my wedding day? Miranda was staring at the table, not daring to look up at her father.

“Now I'm an engineer, have been all my working life. And I know that it doesn't matter how scratched or oil coated the outside of an engine is, it's what's inside the engine that matters. You can polish the outside all you want but if there's damage on the inside it'll never run properly. But it took this girl, this woman I should say,” he gestured towards Miranda “to make me understand a simple but profound truth. This beautiful, talented, clever, wonderful girl who growls at people showed me that the same is as true of people as it is of engines. It took me some time but I saw what she could see straight away. Strip away the shaved head and the beard, ignore all that raucous music and look at what is there behind the surface. Miranda is marrying the best man I could ever hope to meet and I am proud to know him and welcome him into my family.”

With that he came around the table and said “Stand up, son” and hugged me and shook my hand. Then Miranda jumped up and

hugged us both. Yeah, not a bad speech at all.

Later that night, when everyone else had gone to bed Miranda and I stayed up, just watching the fire, very tired and marvelling that we were now married. Miranda's cousin had given us a set of brass singing bowls, eight of them, tuned to the eight natural notes of the scale – that's A B C D E F and G, no sharps or flats. I'd had a little play with them when we'd opened the box but a sudden thought made me set them up in a row in front of the fire.

“Do you recognise this?” I asked Miranda, and played “Somewhere over the rainbow way up high,” on the bowls. It's a nice, simple tune but very distinctive because of the unusual full octave jump between the first and second notes, between the “some” and the “where” of the first word.

She looked at me contentedly.

“Of course I do babe. It's 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow'. And that somewhere is here, where the rainbow brought us.”

We went upstairs and I carried my wife into the bedroom. My wife. Cool.

* * *

By Monday afternoon everyone had left and we had the place to ourselves again. We'd both forgotten just how much we loved the peace and quiet. I still hadn't got over Robert's public acceptance of me and I'd been quite shy with him all day Sunday.

“It takes a while to settle into a changed relationship with someone,” Miranda had said when I quietly confessed this to her.

“I knew it would happen, How could anyone I love not love you as much as I do?”

She also managed to blow me away again that day. I don't understand how she manages to do this so often. I know her abilities and how special she is but every now and then she comes out with something

that reminds me just how incredible she is. Like when she'd annoyed the radiologist at the hospital when she'd asked if we wanted to know the sex of our baby while she was doing an ultrasound. I guess the radiologist enjoys telling people whether their baby is a boy or a girl and maybe even enjoys knowing something they don't when they say they don't want to know. I've never understood that attitude by parents to be, since it's something they're going to find out very soon regardless, but I appreciate not everyone has the same views I do. Anyway, Miranda just smugly said "She's a girl, she told me," and the radiologist got quite huffy. Maybe it's a power thing for them. If we already know then the radiologist is somehow weakened. I don't know.

Today, Miranda calmly told me that she could feel the beginnings of an awareness, of an independent sentient life rather than just a something growing inside her. My book *Pregnancy For Men* had warned me that around this time Miranda would probably start to get food cravings and leg cramps and so on but it never mentioned that babies would be aware of their surroundings. I'd assumed that didn't start until they were born.

"So will you be able to talk to Emma soon?" I asked.

"I've been talking to her since I discovered she was here," Miranda told me. "But I don't expect her to reply for a year or two. At least not in words because her brain has to develop enough to understand language but I can feel some basic feelings already. I know when she's asleep or awake for example."

I found this hard to get my head around. But then men have absolutely nothing to relate this to. At best we can really only think of the growing child as something like a growth or a tumour, something growing but otherwise inert. For it to be something with its own mind, its own consciousness is beyond our ability to imagine.

"Is she aware of you?" I asked.

"I don't know," admitted Miranda. "I know she is becoming aware of her surroundings but I doubt she is aware of me as something like she is. From her point of view I am the universe and it's very difficult to think of the universe as something in its own right. The universe is

just everything else put together in a big blob.”

Like I said, it's difficult to get your head around, but I was beginning to see that mothers would inevitably have a different relationship with their children than the fathers. I'd never thought about it in that way before and I began to wonder what sort of relationship I would have with Emma. My life was certainly changing in quite profound ways.

We also had our first booking that week. I'd been at the bakery that day, helping Cliff replace some cracked bricks he'd found in the oven and scraping out some rotted mortar and replacing it. I'd finished cleaning and scrubbing and the place was beginning to look good again, especially with the new generator which meant we could actually see how it looked, although it still smelt of disinfectant. It was hard work for Cliff as he had to work lying on his back, half in and half out of the oven getting mortar and brick dust in his eyes. I just stood beside him passing things in when he needed them. There was still no sign of the potters wheel. According to the tracking information it was tied up somewhere in customs. I was getting itchy fingers waiting.

Miranda told me about the booking when I got home, a bank in Liverpool wanted to send four of its executives along and that she'd turned it down.

“How come?” I asked. “We've had nothing coming in for months and the Range Rover and our wedding have made a big dent in our savings.”

“I know,” she said, “but they were the wrong type of people. We're not running Outward-Bound type team-building courses to help corporate executives find new ways of ripping people off. We're running courses that help people look at their lives in perspective and find healthier ways to cope and progress. If any of them come to us as individuals needing that kind of help then of course we'll do everything we can but a group of executives trying to prove things to each other? No way.” She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“The bank is probably facing a scandal anyway, and is looking for a way to claim they're changing their corporate culture before the shit

hits the fan,” she snorted as an afterthought.

“They’ll just be bad karma for us. No amount of money would make me take them on.”

“Did you tell them that?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I should have but I didn’t. I just kept it polite and said we weren’t able to meet their needs at the present time. I chickened out. Their bad karma got to me.”

I knew what she meant. I’d played in a band a few years ago and it was disheartening to find that usually we were just a background to something else. Like in a pub, the band is usually just something going on while the audience carries on drinking and talking and largely ignoring us. It’s so much better when you get to play for an audience that’s come to listen to the music and is involved with it. I missed the making of music but not the playing of it, if that makes sense.

Chapter Ten

With two weeks to go until the start of the first curative we still hadn't had a booking so it was looking pretty likely that it wouldn't run. We'd had a number of enquiries though and some of those looked promising. A decent salesman could probably have talked these people into signing up but a hard sell approach is a waste of time. For the curatives to be any use the client had to be in a receptive headspace and that'll never happen if you've been browbeaten into it. It's like that old joke, "How many counsellors does it take to change a light bulb? Only one but the light bulb must really want to change." You can't change someone's attitudes or beliefs if they aren't open to change and just because someone has handed over a lot of money, it doesn't necessarily mean they are open to change. This is why Miranda talked to everyone personally and tried to gauge their readiness. If she didn't feel they were ready she wouldn't take them as clients.

My wheel was still held up in customs. Maybe they suspected it was being used to smuggle drugs or gun parts. Cliff had finished repairing the oven and we'd tested it with a decent wood fire to see if it survived. Hardly surprisingly it worked just fine. However, the temperature of a straight wood fire, although fine for bread, isn't high enough to make pottery unless you stick to simple earthenware, which had been baked over open fires for thousands of years. To get a much higher temperature I was going to need to use charcoal and charcoal is very expensive to buy, although it's easy to make - you just bake wood so all the moisture goes without letting it catch fire. So Cliff, being an innovative kind of chap made me some charcoal cookers out of two 55 gallon oil drums he happened to have lying around his back yard. He cut them in half and put loose fitting lids on all four halves. The idea was that I would pack small lumps of wood into the oil drums and slide them inside the oven furnace then burn wood around them to bake the lumps. After a little experimenting we found that three hours or so of baking produced pretty decent charcoal.

Miranda and I had talked about what kind of lighting to use. The cheapest was simple fluorescent lighting but that gives off a bluish light compared to natural sunlight. The human brain is a pretty cool piece of equipment because it knows what colours it's expecting to see and adjusts them to fit which is excellent for a caveman finding

something in a dim cave but not so good when you are producing decorated pottery. If I glaze something under fluorescent light to a certain colour it will look a little different to someone looking at it in daylight. To further complicate things, most ordinary light bulbs are yellower than daylight. So, if I glaze a piece so it looks blue under fluorescent lights it will have a greenish tinge in daylight and be even greener in a normally lit room.

Miranda's view was very simple. If I wanted to sell my pottery it had to look good where the customer would see it most of the time, at their home or wherever. Of course, being Miranda and skilled at understanding me she didn't put it that way since she knew it would scare me. Setting out with no real experience to sell art pottery is a big ask after all.

“You should use the same lighting at the bakery as we have here,” she said. “That way when you make something that we want to put on display it will look how you intended.”

This was a fair point. I didn't want to have things around the house that were a different colour to how I'd made them.

“And if any of our clients like some of them,” she continued, “they'll want to have them the right colour too.”

This was another fair point, which made me wonder if maybe we could give some of my stuff away to clients when they finished their course. Bit like a parting gift.

“And since you know how people love to show off their new art purchases, their friends will want the right colours when they ring you to order something to show they're art lovers just as much.”

This was a third good point and the idea of people wanting to buy my work because they'd already seen it was pretty cool. What was impressive was that she hadn't even mentioned Edward's idea of hawking them around the local tourist markets and exposing myself to direct ridicule as people came to my stall to see what was there and walked away laughing and shaking their heads. She'd managed to get me into the idea of making and selling the stuff without being scary at

all. So Cliff set up normal household lights all over the place, did the maths and decided a 750 watt generator would let me have everything running and boil an electric kettle, which seemed unnecessary as I'd have a big wood fire to make coffee. Miranda pointed out that it seemed wasteful to light a big wood fire just to boil a kettle so we bought a 750 watt generator. Who knows, I may need to expand one day, or maybe use an electric chainsaw to cut wood.

Since everything was ready and I was just waiting for the wheel to arrive, I decided to get into practice with some basic pottery making, the kind of stuff I'd done in the first week of my course. I sat at my table rolling lumps of clay into thin sausages and bending them into circles and piling them one on top of the other to make some simple vases and jugs and flattened the insides smooth with wet fingers. It felt good and the results weren't too bad although the first few were distinctly not round and a couple bulged a bit around the middle. If it's going to be oval, it's best if that was the intention. Still, the nice thing about working with clay is that you can just mash up your mistakes and try again, which you can't do with, say, woodwork.

When Emma is two or three she'll have hours of fun making clay sausages but I was a long way off being three years old and it got a little tedious after a while. It would have been better if I could have fired them then played around with different coloured glazes and acrylic paints but even I wasn't going to fire up a huge oven for just one or two little vases so I started experimenting with rolling out the clay with a rolling pin into flat sheets and cutting out shapes and joining them into boxes and flat-sided objects. That was pretty straightforward once I figured out that the easiest way to get an even thickness was to put the clay between two strips of wood so the rolling pin didn't go too low anywhere.

So with growing confidence I ventured out into the wonderful world of wheel based pottery without a wheel. Instead of having the clay on a spinning wheel and shaping it with sliding hands I put the lump of clay on the table and shaped it by squeezing and pinching it. I have quite strong and agile fingers from playing the sax for so many years and after a few disasters I found I could make quite tolerable vases and the like but with unusual and quirky distortions. After a while I was able to get surprisingly surreal results – think of a vase from the

mind of Salvador Dali. What the hell, I was practising and having fun. And, as Miranda said, “you’re preparing your mind,” which was cool. It’s always good to be mentally prepared.

We finally got a booking! OK it wasn’t for the first curative but for the one after, which started 2 weeks later. We’d decided to run the week long curatives every fortnight rather than every week so that we’d have plenty of home and family time as Miranda was potentially on-call 24 hours a day while they ran. After all, if someone has a panic attack or spiritual crisis in the middle of the night you can’t just leave them to suffer until when it’s convenient in the morning, especially as changing someone’s worldview can be deeply traumatic.

Once Emma was born, Miranda was going to have her with her when she ran the curatives as children are an integral part of life and it was highly likely that many of our clients would have children so learning to work their holistic development around children couldn’t start too soon. Only when Emma was sick would I step in and care for her so we both felt it was important to have a week between curatives for a normal family life.

“The difficulty is,” Miranda said to me after a long phone conversation with someone making a general enquiry, “that what I do seems trivial to a lot of people. That lady I was just talking to was wondering if I could help with her daughter who’d been attacked and nearly raped and was having big problems as a result. As I tried to explain to her, her daughter needs full on psychiatric counselling, not holistic wellbeing guidance and I’m not a qualified experienced psychiatrist.”

“Probably the police as well” I said.

“Yes, quite possibly.” replied Miranda. “The legal system and psychiatric services are there for major things, things which destroy peoples’ lives and because I deal with what seem to be little things my work seems trivial. Like no one disputes that rape is very traumatic and someone who’s been raped needs a lot of care and the police will get involved and the courts and so on. But someone, a woman say, who hasn’t been treated badly,” and she made quotes with her hands around the word badly “can be just as traumatised, if not more so.”

“How do you mean?”

She thought for a moment. “Well, for instance, let's say a woman has been married to the same man for twenty years and he has never taken her seriously, or maybe she's never taken him seriously, it works both ways. It's not a crime so there's no way the police would touch it and few psychiatrists would bother either. But she, or he, could be deeply traumatised without even realising it. She will probably have no confidence and low self-esteem, have difficulty relating to other people, including her children, may have problems at work and be depressed and moody all the time. Or too scared to say anything or even have an opinion or voice it and may live in constant fear of being ridiculed. And if she ever says to anyone “he doesn't take me seriously” do you really think anyone else will? They'll just laugh at her and say “toughen up, it's nothing.” People will just assume it's her nature to be a mousy little thing.”

She paused for a moment.

“People think only big things can be traumatic but the endless drip of little tiny things can be just as damaging, like cutting a tunnel through a mountain is a big job but water can do the exact same thing given enough time. It can even destroy the mountain entirely eventually.”

She poured herself some apple juice and leaned back, putting her feet in my lap.

“Actually, what I do can be seen as even more trivial. Back in London I've had people ask me why they can't get a promotion or they keep meeting people they like who leave them within a few weeks or months and nothing long lasting ever develops. The thing is that person might not get a promotion because they're not the right person for the job or the person they met isn't the right person for a long term relationship but it starts a pattern of negative thinking so when they next meet someone or try for a promotion there's a little bit of negativity there that holds them back so it fails and the next time there's more negativity and so on. Ohh that feels good babe, mmm.”

I was massaging her feet.

“So where I come in is I work with them to try to step back, to reappraise their attitudes, to find out who and what they really are, to learn how to be positive and not negative.”

“The thing is,” she said after a while, “no matter how good an actor you are, those little tiny negativities show up in your body language. You might touch your face too often or laugh for a moment too long and people pick up on that and become negative themselves. And they have no conscious idea why, it's just that this person isn't quite “right”, and they'll justify it to themselves by saying this candidate lacks ambition or that person is unwilling to commit.”

“So how does this tie in with clapping with one hand?” I asked. I'd never understood that since to me it was obvious. To clap you need two things to bang together so if you've only got one thing you can't clap. End of story.

She looked puzzled for a moment then laughed.

“Ohhh, you mean 'what is the sound of one hand clapping?’”

“Yes, something like that.”

“It doesn't really, or at least not directly. Oh, don't stop hon, I was enjoying that.”

I started on her feet again, and her ankles and calves. Maybe if this was a long explanation I'd go higher.

“What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ isn't a real question. It's a fake, a ruse. Meaningless.”

This was far too short an answer, I was still on her lower calves.

“That doesn't answer my question.”

She stretched her legs like a cat, her toes curling.

“In Japanese they call them 'koans', questions with no answer which you can focus on and while you are focusing other thoughts come

along and after a time you'll think of something new and maybe that something new generates something else new and after a while you learn something about yourself. Maybe not even about the new ideas but about how you relate to the new ideas or how you linked them or maybe nothing to do with it at all.”

I was up to her knees.

“There's another famous one, 'what did you look like before your parents were born?' Thinking about that you would probably say to yourself 'how could I look like anything before I was born, let alone before my parents were born?' Then after a while it might occur to you that what you look like comes from your parents and what they looked like comes from their parents in turn and back through countless generations and then you might think about continuity over time and what brings about change, then what may have changed you, and then how you are different now to how you were when you were born and how you might bring about change to change yourself in the future and how you might want or need to change and so on and so on.”

She pulled her legs away from me and turned round so her head was in my lap.

“Or maybe how, if your parents had been different, you would be different and that might lead you into how you've been influenced by your background. Or your thoughts might go in a spiritual direction, or you might think about how others think about the question. Everyone will think about it in a different way, a way that is unique to them and in a way that is revealing about themselves and how they can become somehow better, although asking 'what is better?' is almost a koan in itself.”

“I think I get that.” I said. “Why've you never explained it to me that way before?”

“Because I'm always thinking about you and how I can change so you love me even more.”

“So you don't think I love you enough?” I was slightly miffed since it was she who'd taken her legs away not me who stopped.

“I love you so much I don't think it's possible that I could ever have enough of you loving me,” she said with her eyes closed. Things changed at that point from the philosophical to the practical and conversation simply got in the way.

* * *

The wheel arrived in the week the first course didn't run. I'd accumulated a fair number of practice pieces by then and had started experimenting with the kiln to find out how long different sizes and shapes would take, where the hot spots were and most importantly how to make sure the kiln didn't heat up or cool down too quickly. Miranda had stayed away deliberately as she wanted to experience the pottery as a whole, rather than in stages. She been up a few times to visit on her walks to exercise her leg but each time she'd called out from outside and we'd either gone for a walk or visited the pub. She hadn't seen any of what I'd made so far since clay is too fragile to move much until it's been fired.

When the wheel had been set up and found to be working Miranda declared we needed to have an opening ceremony to welcome the pottery and to let it accept us into its world as well as accepting it into ours. It's bit like meeting someone new, we wanted to start off on the right foot and avoid any early misunderstandings and antagonisms.

We invited Albert down since he owned the place but he couldn't make it which probably wasn't a bad thing since he'd more or less disowned the building anyway. He's a nice old chap but maybe he'd have antagonised the spirit of the old bakery and somehow block its transformation into a pottery. Cliff was there, of course, in his role as the transformational widwife and because he never missed an opportunity to be with Miranda. This amused his wife no end as she thought the idea of Cliff with Miranda absolutely hilarious and would sometimes send him over with a cake or something else she'd made just for the devilishness of it.

Dan's oldest granddaughter was also there, with her new baby. She was about 20 and just happened to be walking past when Miranda flung open the front door of the pottery to let the wind blow through to cleanse the building of its past and scared the living daylight out of

her. Somehow the village gossip had not kept her up to date and she still thought the building was disused.

“Didn't half give me a turn,” she said after apologising for screaming. “I thought it were a ghost, so I did.”

Miranda invited Jesse in to see what we'd done and took the opportunity to talk about children and update the girl on her own pregnancy for a few minutes while Cliff and I counted the lumps of charcoal and checked to see if any new cobwebs had appeared and generally passed the time.

Miranda went from room to room, standing silent and feeling the atmosphere in each. She told me not to leave anything important in the far corner of the office as there was a weak badness there while Jesse admired the raw clay artefacts I'd made. Miranda then returned to the main room and asked me what I was going to name it.

“How can you welcome something into your heart if it doesn't have a name?” she said.

“You were in my heart before I knew your name,” I replied, “and that hasn't worked out too badly.”

“Pffft, don't play word games with me,” was her only response, although I could tell she was secretly pleased by what I'd said.

“Come on, the building needs a name. It doesn't like being anonymous.”

So I thought for a bit and looked at Cliff who just shrugged his shoulders. He much preferred playing with things than ideas.

“How about 'The Pottery',” I said, “or 'Clay Play'?”

Miranda ignored me.

“Warra bout 'The Old Flour Pot'?” suggested Jesse, “'cos its an old bakery wot used to use flour.”

Miranda liked that, and more importantly felt the building liked it too so we stood in a circle, holding hands while Miranda welcomed The Old Flour Pot to our family and asked that it welcome us. Cliff made sure he was next to Miranda when this happened. He didn't want to hold hands with Jesse and me.

Chapter Eleven

Around the time of the naming of the Old Flour Pot we had an email from Danielle. She had been asking around among her pagan acquaintances about Buttermere Hairlick, the creek where we got married. It seems that although there were quite a few pagans and wiccans in and around the Lake District few went to Buttermere because of its comparative remoteness. There was, however, a small group who liked to call themselves a coven who did occasionally go there. Danielle went on to explain that they weren't technically a coven because a coven must have thirteen members and this group had never had as many as thirteen members, let alone current, active members. She was of the opinion that it was them who had left the straw and mistletoe dolls that Miranda's father had found at Christmas. Apparently the Winter Solstice or Yule is the most important of the pagan festivals because it marks the rebirth of the sun. To wiccans, it also marks the rebirth of the Great Horned Hunter God who is one of their two deities, the other being the Moon Goddess. If they had been a fully functioning coven they would have had a big fire and ritually sacrificed a goat to the Great Horned Hunter God and feasted on it. This was a little worrying as I didn't particularly like the idea of a bunch of witches operating next door.

“Oh, they're not like that at all,” Miranda told me. “Wiccans are mostly about natural lore and the few that go for witchcraft and spells do it to do good. They're not satanists or anything bad like that. They were invented in the 1950s and became popular because of all that civil rights and environmental angst in the 60s and they're had to invent a lot of things based on what they think the ancients did because there's virtually no information around.”

“I didn't know that. I just assumed that they were the modern day version of some ancient tradition,” I said.

“Nah. The real pagans were, of course, and the Christians stole their Yule festival and turned it into Christmas. The old druids were too. They were very powerful and some of them had magical powers but they got wiped out by the Romans before Christianity ever got to Britain. We're not actually that far from their base which was that island just off the top of Wales. It was maybe a hundred miles or so

over there,” and she waved in the general direction of Africa.

“I thought all druids were magicians, like that one in Asterix The Gaul.”

Miranda laughed. “Noooooo, the druids were priests mostly. Pagan priests. Some specialised in magic but most just kept the oral traditions going since they didn't write anything down. You know that rock concert you sometimes go to up in Dumfries, the Wickerman Festival?”

I nodded. I hadn't been for several years since it was a long way from London but since Dumfries was only just the other side of the Solway Firth from here I was hoping to start going again. Not this year though as the festival would be just after Emma was born.

“That's named after how the druids sacrificed their human victims. They built a large wicker figure, put the sacrificial people inside and burnt them alive,” she told me.

“Wow, I always thought the wicker man they burnt at the end of the festival was just a tacky rock stunt, like what Alice Cooper did at his gigs. So that really happened? Were they virgins?” That always seemed like a waste to me, sacrificing virgins. I could think of much better things to do with them.

“No one knows, babe. No one knows and anyone who says they do you can ignore. The druids never wrote anything down and there's absolutely no evidence for anything about them other than what a couple of Roman historians wrote about them and that was probably anti-druid propaganda. One of the early emperors banned them and they ended up being wiped out, I forget which one.”

She checked the date on her phone then looked up.

“The wiccans have eight important festivals in the year which are the solstices and equinoxes and the mid-points in between them. The Spring Equinox is on Friday, why don't we go down to the creek and talk to them?”

“Are you sure they won't put a spell on us or a hex or something, you know like voodoo?”

“Oh, of course not. If it was Voodoo they might but wiccans go for harmony and natural empathy. And besides, this isn't the Caribbean.”

That it most definitely wasn't. It hadn't been much above freezing round here for months and the snow was still quite deep in places.

“Why do you want to talk to them? You seem to know more about it than they do.”

“I'm always interested in other people's beliefs. Like where does this Great Horned Hunter God come from? And how do they reconcile their beliefs and practices with their individual lives in our modern consumer society? As far as I can remember they dedicate the Spring Equinox to Ostara who was the ancient British goddess of light that the Christians stole to make Easter.”

“You don't like Christians, do you.”

“I don't have a problem with Christianity, it's as good a religion as any and it's got some pretty decent standards to live by. What I don't like is the way some Christians distort their supposed beliefs for their own purposes but that happens in all religions, even pagan ones I'm sure. Anyway, the early Christians were very clever to exploit existing festivals and rituals. Its much easier to subvert something people are already doing than it is to make them do something new.”

“You're sure they won't get angry with us for interrupting them? I don't want anything to happen to you or Emma.”

She smiled and blew me a kiss. “If they're like most modern spiritual esoterics they'll be self conscious and a little embarrassed and if Danielle is right we'll probably outnumber them anyway. Hey maybe we could join them.” Her face lit up with amusement. “You could be their High Priest.”

I had no ambitions to be a High Priest. Rock God once maybe but that had long since faded away.

We kept an ear open for any activity that Friday evening but didn't hear anything or see any fires, but around midnight we wandered down to the creek anyway, carrying torches. I took the walking stick I'd made for Miranda out of a branch from an oak tree for when her cast came off but she hadn't needed it. Not that I needed it for walking either but if there was any trouble I wanted to be prepared. There wasn't any trouble. The creek was deserted, with just a few animal tracks in the snow. Miranda was a little disappointed but it was very romantic visiting the place of our wedding in the dark with the snow-clad trees and the moonlight glimmering off the lake.

I'd shown some of my early experiments with pottery to Miranda once I'd made enough pieces to be worth firing up the kiln for. They weren't particularly good but Miranda was encouraging. She did like my surreal vases, despite them being accidental rather than deliberate and asked if she could have one that I'd partially decorated with a blue glaze. She said the colours looked like the earth and sky - the earth being the natural colour of the clay, I'd only glazed the top part - and that the vase looked like the sky was bowing down to kiss the earth. She put it in the centre of the window ledge in our bedroom.

"I'm not putting it in the living room because I don't want any of our clients wanting to have it," she told me. "It's special because its one of the first you made so I want it safe where no one will see it except us."

Later that week I also made an important discovery that had never occurred to me. When you are learning to make pottery on your own it's nowhere near as easy as it is when you're doing a course. On a course, when you do something wrong the teacher tells you what you're doing wrong, shows you how to do it and then it turns out perfectly. When you're doing it on your own and it goes wrong, you sit and stare at it wondering what the hell to do next and feel like an idiot.

When the wheel arrived I was full of big ideas like re-enacting that scene from the movie *Ghost* when Demi Moore is making a vase and Patrick Swayze comes up behind her and she guides his hands over the smooth wet clay and the Righteous Brothers are singing "Oh, my love, my darling I've hungered for your touch," and it all gets very sensual, only with Miranda instead of Demi Moore.

The trouble is you have to have a vase nearly complete already for that scene and I just couldn't get the hang of it. The wheel either rotated too slowly or too fast, the clay was either too wet or too dry, I made it too thin or too thick or too tall or too squat or it was off centre and just went all over the place. I don't know how many takes they had to shoot for the movie but I spent days fiddling with different combinations and trying things and I'd have been tearing my hair out if I hadn't already shaved it off. Incidentally, a bit of free advice. If you ever get wet clay in your beard, wash it out quickly before it sets or leave it and soak it off later in the bath. If you try to pull it off after its set it has the same effect as waxing and faces are more sensitive than legs.

Still, I got the hang of it after a while and because I'd made so many mistakes I figured I'd probably learnt a lot more than I would have on a course. Generally on a course you learn how to do something right but as I knew so many ways to do it wrong I had become pretty skilled at troubleshooting when something came out wrong. I guess it's like what they say in the music world – don't rehearse until you get it right, rehearse until you can't get it wrong. It took over a week to produce a well proportioned vase that didn't collapse under its own weight and once I'd mastered that I could move on and play with decorative effects like spirals up the side and so on. I made a jug – just a vase with a spout and a handle – for Miranda as a bit of a joke. I'd cut a spiral slice out of it, about half an inch wide, leaving small sections in place so the thing didn't collapse, and glazed it in blue and orange to give a marble effect. It was purely for decoration as it could never be used as a jug. She loved it and suggested I showed it to Edward Fawcett but I didn't think it was anywhere near good enough.

Miranda was also beginning to get a little stir-crazy. I went out most days to the Old Flour Pot to play but because of all the snow and her pregnancy Miranda wasn't able to get out in the wilds as much as she wanted and she had to do her meditation inside because of the cold. Part of the problem is that the Lake District pretty much shuts down until the weather improves and the tourists come back and there was also the anti-climax of the first curative not running. OK we had a booking for the next one but Miranda had psyched herself up and had had high expectations and then had to let go again so she was getting a little stale. There's only so much introspection you can do and

Miranda had a pretty good understanding of herself to begin with.

We went to a folk concert over in Whitehaven just to get out of the house for a while. It's a fair drive but the thaw was beginning and the main roads at least were pretty decent. Whitehaven is a small coastal town that used to be important as a port and a coal mining centre but that's all gone now and so it doesn't attract the big names of the music world. I'd vaguely heard of the Fureys and looked them up. They had a couple of chart hits in the 70s, before I was born, and Miranda had never heard of them at all. Anyway, we decided to go and we'd grab something to eat in town before the concert.

It turned out to be a great night! Admittedly folk music isn't my scene – and I've never heard of a folk band with a sax – but I'd forgotten just how good live music is when its played for the love of the music and not just for the big bucks. They're a five piece band with a banjo and a fiddle and most of the audience seemed to be avid followers. But here's the thing. There were just the five of them with no fancy stage sets or gimmicks, just playing the music they love and everyone, including us, just got into the groove and had a great time. I even, and I generally don't do this, bought one of their CDs which we played in the car on the way home to keep the mood going.

We also had fish and chips for the first time in a long time. I grumbled a bit at the price since it was even more expensive than in London but it was superb. Maybe because the fish was fresh off a local trawler rather than frozen and defrosted. And the chips were real chips, hand cut from local potatoes, thick and crispy not like the little brown bags of something nothing like potato that you usually get. And because it was all local produce there were no additives. No boosting of Omega 3 as a marketing ploy or trans fats to preserve shelf life. Simple, natural and delicious. The way fast food should be. Not that it was that fast as they prepared and cooked it when we ordered it, unlike a lot of places which partially cook the food in advance and just finish it off when you order to speed up the delivery.

Speaking of food, we were also invited to dinner by Cliff's wife. Maybe she was also getting a little stir crazy and wanted to wind Cliff up by having Miranda in the house with him. It was a good opportunity too to find out her name. Cliff always referred to her as “the missus” and

we'd never been formally introduced. Her name was Marie and she was, to our surprise, French.

“How on earth did you end up here in the Lakes?” I asked her.

“My father was a fisherman from Brest. He ran a trawler with I think five crewmen and he also smuggled wine into Ireland. I can tell you this because he is dead now.”

“Why did he smuggle wine?” asked Miranda. “The Irish don't ban alcohol.”

“No, but they tax it heavily, or they did then anyway. This was in the early 1980's. And sometimes I would go with them as I was young and loved to travel and I was, you know, seeing one of the fishermen. He was my boyfriend, so I went along to keep him company.”

Miranda and I exchanged glances. Marie looked to be a typical Lake District wife, short and fat with a hearty appetite. It was hard to imagine her as a 17 year old shacking up with a man on a fishing trawler.

“One day we had an accident on board the trawler. One of the cables holding a fishing net broke when it was being hauled in because a storm was about to hit and whipped back and broke the legs of one of the fishermen. My father had to get him to a hospital but there was one tiny little problem.”

She paused for effect so Miranda asked the obvious “What was that?”

“We had 15,000 litres of French wine in the hold, illegal wine that we were going to move to another trawler out of Belfast. So we couldn't land at any ports because the customs people would find the wine and we couldn't offload Jules away from a port as we had no way to get him to a hospital. He couldn't go on his own because both his legs were smashed and we had no painkillers so he was completely drunk.”

Miranda and I exchanged more glances. Wine smuggling? In a sleepy little Lake District town? Awesome!

“So my father made a decision and called on the radio asking for nearby ships to come to our aid. He said we had a badly injured man and our engines were failing and we could only make way slowly. Could someone come to take the man to a hospital?”

“Did it work?” I asked, intrigued.

“Yes. There was another ship not far away which radioed acknowledgement. When it met us we moved Jules to the other ship and because they were a fisherman short I went with him as I couldn't handle the nets so I could be spared. Anyway, he was too drunk to explain anything so I would do that.”

“So the other ship took you to England?” I asked.

“Yes, it went into Whitehaven and Jules was taken to the hospital where they fixed him up and a few days later he was transferred to a French hospital in Brest.”

“And you stayed in England?”

She looked over at Cliff and laughed happily at her memories.

“The English ship was a salvage ship. It was based in Whitehaven and they recovered scrap metal from sunken ships in the Solway Firth and the Irish Sea. There are a lot of wrecks there.”

“Whitehaven has been a port since the 1500's,” interjected Cliff. “A lot of stuff imported from the American colonies went through Whitehaven and a lot of coal going out too.”

“Yes and they had two divers to bring up the metal when they found a wreck. And one of the divers was young and very handsome,” she giggled.

“And the other one was me” laughed Cliff.

She slapped his arm and said

“No, no, no, he was the handsome one. And so when Jules went back to Brest I stayed in England with my handsome diver.”

So Cliff has a past did he? He'd never even hinted at being anything other than a farmer turned Mr Fixit.

“My father was furious. He said I should stay in France and marry a Frenchman. I said 'Père non, je vais rester en Angleterre et épouser un Anglais!', Papa no, I shall stay in England and marry an Englishman!”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“Pffft”, she dismissed him with a contemptuous wave of her hand. “I think he liked the fishes better than he liked the girls. I was going to leave him anyway,” and she roared with laughter.

“When did you get married?”

Marie almost fell off the chair laughing at that one.

“I am not married! After 38 years he has still not asked me to marry him!”

Cliff looked faintly embarrassed.

“Didn't much see the point, like,” he said. “’er weren't going nowhere so why bother with all the fussicking. I were on the boat for 'nother four year so if she was goin' to scarper no bit of paper going to make any diff'rence.”

“Lots of men talked to me and wanted me to go out with them. I always said 'my diverman will kill you if I tell him what you said. He fights sharks!’”

“I didn't never fight no sharks,” said Cliff. “Ain't no sharks in the Irish Sea. Biggest fish I seen was a five foot cod an' I didn't fight it.”

“So what did you do when Cliff was at sea?” asked Miranda.

“I got a job cooking in a restaurant. My mother taught me to cook and even a bad French cook is better than the best English cook!”

Well that explained why her food was so good.

“Then Cliff got decompression sickness after a dive and could have died.”

“It wasn't that bad but it hurt like old buggery,” interjected Cliff.

“So I said 'Get a job on land or I'll go back to France. I do not want to be an English widow', so he got a job stripping wrecked cars for parts.”

“How did you end up here in Ambleside?”

“Me ma died and left me the house, so we moved up here an' we bin 'ere ever since, ain't we girl. Ain't no rent or mortgage an' we don't need much so I just do odd jobs like.”

“Did you have any children?” asked Miranda.

“We had four daughters,” said Marie proudly. “They have all grown up and married and we have nine grandchildren so far.”

She disappeared into their lounge and returned carrying three large photo albums.

“Come and look at the pictures.”

Chapter Twelve

I know it seems that Miranda rules the roost and gets her way with everything and by and large that's true because my needs are simple and dominated by one overpowering need which is to make Miranda happy. I really don't have a problem with that. Before I met her, I thought that my life was full and happy but really I didn't know what happiness meant. Happiness, I thought, was making music and having one night stands, two nights if the girl was willing, and generally bumming around. But since Miranda everything changed. Love, of course, is a game changer but there's also being loved and sharing and all that stuff the poets probably write about but which, since I don't read poetry, or even song lyrics, I hadn't realised was missing.

When she told me she was planning to have a natural birth at home I flatly refused.

“Don't waste your time even thinking about it,” I told her. “If there is the slightest chance of anything going wrong I want you at a hospital with people who know what they're doing and all the medications that technology can provide.”

“But it will be such a meaningful experience,” she started to argue then stopped when she saw the look on my face.

“And what exactly will it mean if you haemorrhage and we can't stop you bleeding here?” I said grimly. “You will be in a hospital where they've got fifty gallons of spare blood just in case and if you don't go voluntarily I'll frigging well throw a sack over your head and drag you to the car myself. Do not kid yourself otherwise, sunshine.” I was, perhaps, a touch more emphatic than usual.

She made the necessary arrangements at the hospital since she knew I was deadly serious and her natural vanity wouldn't let her arrive in a sack.

Miranda's first course had gone very well, with only a few teething problems. Her one client was a lady by the name of Karen who she'd had as a client for a number of sessions back in London.

“Karen is married with a couple of teenagers, she’s 36,” Miranda told me when Karen confirmed the booking. Probably unethically but it’s not like I was going to tell anyone the sordid details.

“She first came to me because she’d spent almost half her life being a wife and mother and had lost track of what it was to be herself. She told me she was starting to think about her kids leaving home for university or whatever and had no idea who or what she was outside of being their mother and it was beginning to scare her.”

“Were you able to help her?” I asked, fairly confident that Miranda could.

“Well, it took a couple of sessions just finding out what the root problem was. She wasn’t able to identify it and say it the way I did to you hon.”

Like I said, Miranda was good at finding out things from people.

“So how did you help Karen?” I asked.

“Well, I figured the first thing to do was to stop her living on autopilot so I made her spend three days noting down everything she did, every single thing, and then when she came back with the list we went through it and talked about why she did these things. And a fair amount was just habit. OK, most women do the washing and cleaning so that wasn’t a biggie but why was she still putting out her kids clothes ready for school, for example, and after a while she admitted it was because it was just part of the routine she’d got into and she did it without thinking.”

“Really? I would have thought she’d stop doing that as soon as she could.”

“Well, it went deeper of course. She’d had some issues at home as a child herself and it looked like she had a need to be needed. A lot of women have that problem. I do too babe, it’s important to me that you need me. I think I’ll need a therapist myself if you ever stop needing me.”

I gave her a kiss. I like it when Miranda says things like that.

“So how did you go about helping her?” I was finding this quite interesting.

“After we went through the list I suggested to her that she pick three items on the list she did frequently and simply stop doing them. Like breaking a few self-imposed rules. I felt more than three would be too many as I didn't want her to have a crisis but three seemed a reasonable number. And I taught her how to keep a journal so that she wrote down whatever her thoughts and feelings were, particularly after she broke one of her rules and also how the kids and her hubby reacted.”

“How did it go?”

“She chose to stop picking up her husband's dirty clothes in the bedroom and getting her kids' clothes ready and I can't remember the third one. I could look up my notes if you really want to know.”

I shook my head.

“What was interesting was that her journal was full, absolutely packed with guilt and self recriminations but that the family didn't really seem to mind. After a few days her husband started putting his dirty undies in the laundry himself rather than dropping them on the floor and the kids bitched about not having any clothes ready the first couple of times but since they had to go to school they got themselves ready and just started doing it everyday.”

“So what happened next?”

“We spent I think three sessions working through her guilt, then when she was coming to terms with that I got her to stop doing one more item in the list each day. The biggest problem was that we were cutting down on the things she was doing for them and creating a vacuum in her life and we had to fill that or she'd simply go back to doing the old stuff again. So, I got her to keep the journal going but to add to it anything she felt she wanted to write down and gave her a talk on automatic writing and intro ...”

“What's automatic writing?”

“Oh that's when you switch your mind off and just let your hand do the writing. You try not to look at the page and you definitely don't read what you're writing as you write it. After a while the subconscious starts to talk directly to the page rather than to the conscious mind. I also got her started with some basic meditation but she couldn't handle just sitting there doing nothing. With the automatic writing she was at least writing. So I gave her an mp3 of some chanting to do instead.”

“What sort of things was her subconscious saying?”

“I really can't tell you that hon, it's way too private. If Karen wants to tell you while she's here that's fine but it's not for me to say.”

“Must have been really juicy then,” I laughed. “So why is she coming for the week?”

“She found when she was chanting certain thoughts kept popping into her mind and when she gave me her writings to read those thoughts were there too. She hadn't read them herself you see, she was too scared of what might be revealed. So we talked about those thoughts for a while and how they represented her inner self's desire to follow a certain path and how she could actualise that.”

“So, what? She secretly wanted to be a stripper or something?”

Miranda laughed. “No, it was nothing like that. You're sex mad you are.”

“Only when you're around, you drive me mad with desire,” and I let my hands wander.

“Well, I'm not going to tell you what her subconscious was saying but don't stop doing that, it's nice. Where was I? Oh, she's become convinced that meditation and contemplation are going to help her find her identity and stop living life through her husband and kids. She's coming for a week because she wants to learn to meditate properly.” Miranda fingered quotes around the “properly”.

Miranda had once explained to me that meditation was one of the easiest things in the world. If you're not doing or thinking anything you're doing it properly, at least as a beginner.

“Since she's the only one on the curative I'm going to spend some time on that side of course but with other stuff thrown in because she also has to discover that there's more to life than endlessly focusing inwards. Her subconscious may well be telling her she really wants to do this thing so she needs to get out there and do it rather than use meditation as a substitute or an excuse for not doing it. It's not like she's going to join a monastery. So we're going to spend some time doing things not just talking about doing things.”

She thought for a moment.

“Like, would it be OK if I brought her up to the Old Flour Pot to play with some clay?”

“Sure no problem. Just let me know in advance if you want the kiln going.”

We'd had a long talk early on about how involved I should be with the curatives. I had expected to be completely uninvolved as I thought I would be something of an intruder. I'd also suggested that I live at the pottery while the curatives were running but Miranda thought that was absurd. “It's your house too,” she'd said “You live here and you sleep with me, not in the pottery. If the clients don't like it they can leave. After all, the idea is to help them live better in the real world, not in a cotton wool fantasy land.”

“Besides,” she added a little later, “some of them may want to talk to you after they've had a gutsful of me all day. After all, your perspective is very different to mine and could help them to find balance in their lives.”

Later that evening she added another thought-provoking little titbit.

“A lot of clients will find the curatives very intense and challenge their perceived sense of self and as they come to terms with that some may try to seduce you as a way of confirming their old sense of self as a

desirable sexual object. So don't be surprised if some try to seduce you. Maybe some of the men too.”

I grinned at that so she added in a very firm voice “but if you let them you'll be singing soprano for the rest of your very short grubby little life, understand?” prodding me hard in the chest a few times by way of emphasis.

Being seduced was not something I'd ever tried to avoid before so we had a chat about strategies to handle it if it should happen. It's a surprisingly difficult thing to do to reject someone's advances while keeping them positive about what's happening and why. Miranda had had a few of her clients in London try but it would be more difficult for me because the general expectation is for a woman to resist seduction but for a man to embrace it. She felt that if I said something about how flattered I was but then brought it back to the way they were successfully handling the curative and that I'd talk to her (Miranda) about it so she (Miranda) could discuss it with them would probably do the trick but you never know until it happens.

Anyway, since we weren't due to start paying the commercial rent for The Grange for another couple of months, we went into Carlisle when we got the curative money to buy baby things. My book on Parenting For Men had told me we needed to have a bag packed and ready so when the time came I could just grab the bag on the way to the car without having to panic grab stuff. The book gave a list of useful stuff such as a dressing gown, socks, nighties and so on which are fairly obvious for someone going into hospital. What I found disconcerting is that the book also added things like nappies for newborn babies, a bodysuit for the baby, booties, hat

I knew I was going to be a father but I hadn't quite connected that to the idea of Miranda going into hospital and coming out again *with a baby*. I was thinking I guess as though she was going in to have something fixed – like a broken leg – and would come out fit and healthy afterwards *on her own*. Wow. So we bought bodysuits and nappies and a cot and a car seat for Emma with a fancy special insert for newborns that could be removed when she got a bit bigger and some toys and ... after a while Miranda stopped me. “Emma's going to be around for maybe 20 years or more. We don't have to get

everything now.” Sensible girl my Miranda, Emma won't need exercise books and a geometry set for at least six months.

Emma was due around the end of June so Miranda didn't schedule any curatives after the middle of May as her gynaecologist had told her that first time babies are more likely to be early or late than subsequent ones but that things were looking good so he'd be surprised if Emma arrived earlier than week 37. I may have miscalculated but I had the car seat fitted and the baby bag packed, with a spare pillow and a big fluffy towel as hospital pillows and towels are really quite sad, and ready around week 28 or 29. Just in case.

My book had warned me that Miranda would probably suffer a lot of backache, her ankles would swell and she'd need to pee a lot in the last few weeks. We went through all that. I spent a fair amount of time massaging her back and ankles and reassuring her that I'd still love her if she never got her figure back although there wasn't much I could do to help her with peeing, beyond making sure we had plenty of toilet paper.

The book also warned me that Miranda might get irritable. “Impossible,” I thought. Miranda never gets irritable. Yes she did get angry occasionally, and I'd seen many a book go flying through the window because it said something she thought was nonsense, but if someone was being annoying or just plain crass she would switch into counsellor mode and patiently explain to them why their behaviour or attitude was bad for their psyche which usually shut them up. Miranda simply never got irritated. So when she started getting irritated I found it very disconcerting.

For example, one evening I was sitting on the couch and Miranda had got up to get something and when she came back she reached for her tea on the table beside the couch but couldn't reach down that far because her tummy was in the way and she burst into tears. “I am so sick of being pregnant,” she sobbed. “It's all your fault,” and half ran into the kitchen to get away from me. The book hadn't said what to do in that situation so I improvised and followed her in and gave her a big hug then started to spoon feed her with tea until she laughed.

“It was great for ages” she explained after I'd cleaned up the tea from the floor. “I've loved feeling Emma grow and become aware and its just been awesome and magical but she's stopped growing.”

I froze, unable to ask if Miranda meant that Emma was dead in her womb.

“She can't grow anymore until she comes out” Miranda continued without noticing, which was also unlike her. Normally she read me like a cheap paperback. “And she's getting frustrated and I'm getting frustrated and I'm so sick of being fat and ugly and clumsy and I can't even bend over to pick things up and I can't do anything about it. Not a damned thing. I just have to lie around like a beached whale waiting until my useless body decides it can be bothered to give birth.”

Not being a trained counsellor I had no idea what to say or do. Saxophone practice doesn't prepare you for this. So I said “I love you. I'll help you be strong,” which seemed to work, at least until the next time.

My book also explained to me about “the ejection of the mucus plug” – why does everyone say childbirth is beautiful when in fact it's truly incredibly gross? Do men really need to know about these things? And also about false contractions which are apparently the woman's body practising and can be easily distinguished from real contractions because they're all over the place instead of getting stronger and more frequent.

What the book doesn't say is that when the mucus plug is ejected or the false contractions begin the father, that is to say me, rushes out to the car with the baby bag in his hand screaming “we've got to go to the hospital, NOW,” while the mother-to-be lies back on the couch talking to her mother on the phone.

So when Miranda phoned me when I was playing with some clay – very symbolic if you think about it – to say she thought the real contractions had begun I was very blasé and decided to play it cool by waiting for nearly two minutes before rushing down to the house to get the baby bag. I burst through the door trying to scream about getting to the hospital but I was out of breath and it sounded more

like an indecent proposition. Miranda had got over her irritation and was physically, mentally and spiritually prepared.

“They’re about fifteen minutes apart,” she said, using her phone as a stopwatch. “The midwife said not to leave for the hospital until they’re five minutes apart.”

I knew that. I was there when she said it. It’s just that sometimes you forget things.

My book also didn’t warn me about the screaming. It had said that the process of giving birth is painful but didn’t warn me that when the love of your life is screaming her heart out the sound rips through you like a red hot bolt of lightening and turns your brain to mush so your primitive instincts want to jump on the midwife with a scalpel at her throat to make her end it. Or how difficult it is to restrain yourself and hold her hand and say comforting things instead. To the love of your life I mean.

And then it was over. This nasty little purple slimy wrinkly thing with a funny shaped head was held up and for some strange reason I thought “Oh, it was a tumour after all,” before I realised that this was a baby.

Not my baby though. My baby would be beautiful and have long blonde hair like her mother and would be young not old and wrinkled like a witch. She would be calm and sweet tempered like her mother not screaming in anger at the world.

Nah, this wasn’t my baby. Then the midwife asked if I wanted to cut the umbilical cord.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m not going near that thing,” I thought.

Then it stopped screaming and opened its eyes. Bluer and wider than I thought were possible. And they stared straight into mine and she waggled her fingers at me. And the cosmos stopped.

“Hello Emma,” I whispered. “Daddy’s here.”

Chapter Thirteen

I won't say too much about our first few months with a newborn. If you've been there yourself then you know what it's like and if you haven't, then it's best you don't know, otherwise the human race would become extinct. We were very fortunate, though, because I had no fixed hours for playing with my pottery. After a few days I basically became the night shift for the next couple of months while Miranda stayed on as the day shift. That wasn't too difficult for me as musicians as a breed tend to be night people – no one wants to go to a concert at 8 in the morning. Well I suppose some people would prefer it but to me it seems wrong. The mood just isn't there. Music is best in the evening or late at night and recording studios work around that too – an early recording session might start around 1pm.

Miranda inevitably bore the brunt of it as everyone raved about the incredible bonding of breast feeding but for some reason no one mentioned that Emma would want to be fed fifteen times a day. There were times in those early months when I would creep into the bedroom and pull back the covers a little so Emma could feed while Miranda slept although she usually woke up and drowsily continued until Emma was done then she'd fall straight back to sleep while I tidied up and sorted Emma out. She may not have inherited my eyes but she certainly inherited my ability to belch and fart!

For me the best times were when Emma was beginning to get the hang of sleeping at night and I'd push her pram up to my workshop on mild autumn nights and mess around with clay designs while she sighed and gurgled in her sleep or I'd look up and see those big blue eyes watching me at my wheel and I'd talk to her and tell her what I was making and maybe sing to her a little then she'd fall asleep again.

I didn't get a whole lot of work done in the Old Flour Pot in those months. I was still learning and experimenting with clay but my main role had become that of roadie to Miranda and Emma. Miranda ran her curatives of course but I made sure she got plenty of sleep and I did much of my own sleeping during the day. My other primary role was to reassure Miranda that she was getting her figure back. She's not overly vain and rarely bothers with makeup but she felt uncomfortable with her just-after-birth body and fretted that I would

lose interest in her, as if that were possible. Although, I do confess I was a little saddened when, in the end, her boobs went back to their original size.

Probably the biggest change in our relationship was that we didn't get to talk as much as we used to and a lot of our conversations revolved around Emma. That would probably change as we became used to Emma and stopped worrying about every little detail, but I did miss those long evenings on the couch just talking about nothing in particular and cuddling.

One late autumn morning over breakfast Miranda brought up an issue that we kept coming back to without much success. We were having a week off between curatives so we had the house to ourselves.

“Emma's going to need a room of her own soon. She'll sleep better when she's on her own and as she grows up she'll need her own space and privacy.”

She gave me a sly glance and continued “And we need our space and privacy too. After all, having a baby in the room is inhibiting.”

She was definitely getting back to her old self.

“If we use one of the other bedrooms we'll have to cut back on clients,” I said reflectively, “which means we'd have to increase what we charge or run curatives more often since two a fortnight would barely cover our costs.”

“I could run two every three weeks, I suppose,” said Miranda.

I was against that idea as Miranda found the curatives emotionally draining and I didn't want her to become exhausted just for money, not even in the short term. We'd abandoned London to get away from all that.

“How about I ring Jim Darrowby and ask about building an extension?”

Miranda thought about it.

“He might be willing to build some sort of outhouse but that wouldn't be any good. I'm not going to let Emma be that far away from us and we couldn't have a client out there as they'd be segregated from the others and that wouldn't be good for them.”

Which was a fair point. If you had to go somewhere different from the others after a group session you'd probably not feel too good about it.

“So it would need to be integral with the rest of the house. And that would be expensive and there isn't really anywhere to put it without ruining the house's atmosphere and appearance. I don't think he'd go for it at all. Can you imagine the cost of building these days with these hand-carved stone blocks?”

We kept coming back to the problem over the next few days but we didn't come up with any new ideas.

A couple of weeks later I had my first sale.

The tourist season was coming to an end and I'd decided to take my courage in both hands and get a stall at the last market of the year at Keswick. As well as the stall fee I paid over a small surcharge to be covered by the market's own public liability insurance. It didn't seem worth the hassle to get Miranda's liability insurance changed as that only covered the house and its surrounds and the organisers wouldn't let me be there without insurance. I spent several days agonising over which pieces to take but eventually decided on a nice round dozen of them. I wrapped them in old pieces of sacking and loaded them like gold-plated eggs into the back of the car.

Emma was in a happy mood that day and she and Miranda came along for an outing. When we arrived at the market it was a bustle of stall holders setting up their fancy gazebos and trestle tables and laying out their wares and I felt out of place as I unrolled a tarpaulin in the ground and tried to tastefully arrange my offerings. We had arrived before dawn as the market was due to open to the public at 8am and Miranda sat cross legged on the bonnet of the Range Rover communing with the gods while the early sun bathed her in gold. Emma had a nap on the back seat.

On one side was a stall selling nick-nacks and memorabilia of the Lakes and on the other side was one selling old brassware. Opposite was a bouncy castle for the kids. Miranda thought we were well placed since my pottery looked good in comparison and parents would be bored while their kids were bouncing. She browsed the brassware but didn't find anything she liked that wasn't damaged.

We'd spent a while discussing what prices to ask for my pottery. In terms of materials they don't cost a huge amount to make but they take quite a while. It's not like I have a machine turning out a thousand plain white dinner plates an hour. Each piece is hand made and hand decorated and no two are the same. I felt I should keep the prices low but Miranda gave me her talk about how people don't value cheap things.

"You're not selling mass produced necessities," she said. "You're selling unique works of art. People won't think they're any good if they're cheap."

I ummed and ahed but she eventually convinced me by saying "Never undervalue yourself. If you don't think you are worth it no one will take you seriously."

She was right. I'd seen it in the music world. Any number of bands starting out ask too little for gigs and don't get booked while other bands, not as good but asking a lot more, get the gigs in their place.

With trepidation I suggested an exorbitant figure to Miranda which she promptly trebled.

"And if they want to bargain with you don't drop by more than 10%," she said. "If they really like it they'll pay what you ask in the end, even if they walk away. If they like it they'll come back. Believe in yourself, and when you sell a piece maybe it'll give you the confidence to show your work to Edward Fawcett."

Now that was a big ask. A small country tourist market was one thing but an international art dealer was way, way different.

So we sat there cross legged on the tarp behind the pottery watching

people milling around and buying lots of things from the nick-nack stall and rubbing the brassware in the hope a genie would appear. Some people stopped to look at my pottery and a few even said nice things. Miranda nudged me after a while,

“Stand up,” she whispered, “and when someone does more than glance at something pick it up and put it in their hands. Pottery is tactile as well as visual. Let them feel it and get to know it.”

So I got up and loitered and sure enough, after a while a chap stopped and looked over the pieces and his eyes kept coming back to one of them. It was based on the Aztec vase that Jenny had bought only mine was based around triangles rather than squares and was glazed in strong earthy colours. Miranda hissed at me and nodded towards the man so I approached him and picked up the vase and handed it to him saying “Why don't you take a closer look?”.

It's difficult when someone hands you something to avoid taking it so he took it and was surprised by its weight and how solid it felt.

“I didn't think it would be so heavy,” he said. “It looks so light and airy.”

He slowly turned it around, absorbing the colours and tracing one of the outlines with his finger. His face softened a little as I told him how the colours represented the rising sun over the Andes.

“That's nice, really nice.”

Then he asked how much it was and rapidly put it on the ground.

“Thanks for that,” he said, “I'd better find my wife.” and marched off.

I turned to Miranda with a half shrug and she calmly said “Just wait hon, give him time.”

Sure enough, half an hour later he was back and paid the asking price without question. Fortunately I had set up a basic credit card facility through Ebay on the off-chance someone might buy something. After all, people don't carry that kind of cash around.

Damn it felt good! The money was irrelevant, it was the affirmation. Someone had liked one of my vases enough to actually buy it and take it home with them, and maybe even proudly say to their friends “Have a look at what I found at a market on holiday. It was expensive but worth every penny,” And his friends would admire it. I basked in the imagined radiance of that moment. Sweet as.

I actually sold three pieces that day for about what I would have made in a week as a session musician. One was one of my melting Salvadore Dali-type vases and the third was a small square cross section vase I'd made one night when Emma was watching me and I'd glazed it the same bright blue as her eyes. I was quite downcast after this one as the lady who bought it said “I have just the place for this. On the window sill in my toilet at home,” before she walked off.

I told Miranda that I felt a little insulted.

“Surely my work is better than just a toilet decoration.”

She laughed.

“You really don't get it do you babe. The toilet is the most important room in the house. It's the one room everybody goes to sooner or later, whether they live there or are visiting. Just think how many people will sit on that toilet and admire your work. If she put it in her bedroom probably no one would ever see it again. She's putting it in the lavvy because she's proud of it, not because it's worthless. She'll probably leave the price sticker on the bottom too so people will see it if they pick it up.”

As usual Miranda was right. But still, a toilet?

Things quietened down after that as it was getting on and there weren't so many people around. Miranda took Emma off to find a toilet to sort out her nappies and to have a wander looking at the other stalls. Bouncy castles lose their appeal after a few hours.

While she was gone I had another visitor to my stall and I thought I might be getting another sale as she peered intently at every piece and picked up a few to have a close look. But it was not to be. After three

sales I was getting over-confident.

“I’m just browsing,” she said. “I’ve got my own pottery stall the other side of the market and I wanted to check you out. I’m Chloe by the way. You’ve got some nice stuff here.”

She was a nice lady, around my own age with short black hair that curved around her face like a frame. She was dressed much the same as me as well, in jeans and a thin jumper. She wore no makeup or jewellery and her nails were thick with dirt. A true artisan.

We chatted for a while then she disappeared back to her own stall, after suggesting I visit to have a look at her work. When Miranda came back, having bought some fresh vegetables and bread rolls, a cloth covered with fire breathing dragons and a cute mobile with butterflies to hang over Emma cot, I told her about Chloe and that she’d liked my stuff and I went off to visit her stall.

Chloe offered me some coffee from her thermos and explained that she had her studio in Cockermouth and that she regularly went to markets all around the area where she did a reasonable business in pottery fairies and ballerinas and little woodland animals. Her style was very different to mine as I prefer the abstract with bold colours but it was clear she was a very good potter. I asked if I could visit her studio some time and talk about her techniques and she gave me her phone number.

It had got very quiet by then and a number of stall holders had already packed up and left so I packed my remaining pieces away and we drove home. The sun that had been with us most of the day had gone and the cloud was thick and building. Still, three sales. I was over the moon. I still wasn’t ready to talk to Edward although I thought maybe I could learn some new techniques from Chloe. The wings on some of her fairies were surprisingly fine and intricate and it could be useful to know how to do that.

That night I woke to find I’d wet the bed.

On further investigation I discovered I hadn’t wet the bed – I’d stopped doing that when I was five. There was a storm blowing itself

out and water was dripping from the ceiling overhead and there were wet patches in the bedding. We pushed the bed against the wall out of the way and propped the mattress on its side to help it dry and Miranda found a bucket to catch the leaking water. We decided not to bother going back to bed but as she was still tired I put her to bed in one of the client's rooms - we didn't have a curative running that week, fortunately. I checked the other rooms but ours seemed to be the only one with a leak. It was an old house so I guess leaks were inevitable sooner or later.

Cliff was an early riser so I called him around sevenish and he said he'd come over after he'd finished fixing a local farmer's compressor. When he turned up the three of us went outside to have a look at the roof from the bottom of the garden. From the outside it looked like just a tile or two was missing but Cliff said he'd need to get into the roof to see how bad the damage was as the tiles might have been missing for a while and rainwater could have been quietly rotting a large part of the ceiling. He asked where the hatch to the roof was but I didn't have a clue so we went from room to room looking for a hatch in the ceiling but couldn't find one. Miranda went off to play with Emma.

Cliff found a broom and started tapping the ceilings in case the hatch had been covered over in the past and he reckoned he'd be able to tell by the sound if he found it. I went to make him some coffee and when he joined me he was looking puzzled.

"There's sommat strange about your rooms up there," he said.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you know your bedroom is a little bigger than the room opposite 'cos of the staircase?"

The staircase went up the wall at the end of the house and ended in the corridor which ran down the centre of the house and the bedroom doors opened off it, two on each side. Obviously the staircase took some space at that end so the bedroom that end, at the front of the house, was smaller than the one at the back, overlooking the garden.

“Well, the one at the front at the other end is smaller too. Both the back rooms are wider than the front rooms.”

We went upstairs and paced them out and sure enough the front bedroom at the other end was a couple of feet shorter than the one opposite.

Back in the corridor we investigated to find out why. The end of the house itself was a straight wall so the size difference wasn't because of a kink in the wall. The far end of the corridor was taken up by a set of old wooden shelves mounted on the wall with doors that basically made it a cupboard and we used it to store linen. Cliff paced out the distance from the edge of the door to the wall inside the room and found it was more or less the same as the distance from the edge to the wardrobe in the corridor, allowing for the depth of the shelves.

He opened the cupboard doors and started tapping with the broom handle, pushing it between the layers of linen.

“That ain't no wall at the back,” he said, “sounds hollow like.”

We pulled out some of the linen and he hit the wooden back with his fist then hit the stone wall beside him. Even I could hear the difference. We went downstairs to talk to Miranda. Not that she was fussy about the linen, far from it, but we didn't quite know what to do. Cliff wanted to dismantle the cupboard to find out what was behind but I was a bit wary of that since he wasn't paying the rent.

Miranda, of course, had to come and hear for herself.

“I reckon there's nothing behind the cupboard. It doesn't sound like a piece of wood against a stone wall.” said Cliff.

“I wonder what's behind it,” said Miranda. “Isn't it exciting.”

“Could be where they walled up an insane relative,” I said. I've seen too many horror movies I think.

Miranda pulled some linen out and threw it on the floor. She pressed both hands against the back of the cupboard and concentrated.

“No,” she said a moment or two later. “I can't feel anything bad. Can you dismantle it so it can be reassembled undamaged?” she asked Cliff.

“Aye,” he said, giving it the eye. “Reckon I can. Doors are easy enough cos they got hinges an' ...”

He stuck his head under a shelf.

“... 'an shelves seem to be on angle brackets, prob'ly screws but even if them's nailed I can take 'em out easy enough.”

He disappeared to his pickup truck for his toolbox while we waited impatiently, piling the linen haphazardly in the corridor.

“Shouldn't take too long like,” he said and set to with his screwdriver.

It took him about half an hour to strip off the doors and remove the shelves leaving the wooden back of the cupboard exposed. It filled the corridor, side to side and floor to ceiling.

Cliff pointed out some nails driven into the wood. If there was nothing behind the panel the nails would serve no purpose. He used his screwdriver to prise the nails out a little then the claw end of a hammer to remove them completely. The panel didn't move. It was a tight fit.

“If you grab a couple o' them brackets on that side and I grab a couple this side, I reckon we could shift the bugger,” he said to me so we did. It worked. With a screeching noise the panel shifted a couple of inches, then a couple more until we managed to tilt it and drag it free. We propped it on its side against the corridor wall.

There was a stone wall behind the panel. Only it was a couple of feet further back than where the panel had been, and there were some wooden blocks mounted onto the walls into which the panel's nails had gone.

Cliff stepped forward. “There be stairs here,” he said, “going up into the roof. You got a torch?”

I fetched him a torch from the kitchen and he turned it on and went up the staircase. Obviously he hadn't watched as many horror movies as I had. Even Miranda looked a little apprehensive.

“There's a trapdoor up 'ere,” he said. “Wonder if it's locked.”

There was a long screechy creak then “No it ain't.”

A pause.

“Well, bugger me 'till next Tuesday,” he said. “Come and have a look at this.”

Chapter Fourteen

The staircase was barely two feet wide and narrower than the main stairs at the other end of the corridor. They were made from stone so there was no creaking or echoing as we went up, me first, followed by Miranda. Now that I come to think of it this was a little unusual as Miranda invariably jumped in front of me whenever she thought I was in some sort of danger but at the time I thought nothing of it.

We went through the trapdoor and stepped onto the wooden floor of what was presumably an attic. A little light came in the two windows, one at each end of the attic, but they were both filthy and partially overgrown with ivy. The attic stretched the full length of the house and as Cliff moved the torch around we could see some of what was there. To one side the torch picked out a table with what looked to be a couple of old fashioned bellows-style cameras and an assortment of other things. Beside it was a large contraption on wheels. As he moved the torch we could make out the chimney stack which went up through the centre of the house, connecting all the rooms, and on the other side was a system of pulleys and rods on a frame festooned with tattered strips of cloth. The whole place was filled with dust and cobwebs and there was a faint musty dankness in the air.

We must have stood there for several minutes, taking in what we could see. The torch showed no signs of fading out but it was only a low powered torch we kept in the kitchen for occasional minor emergencies such as finding matches for the stove when the generator was off for the night. The powerful heavy duty torch we kept by the back door for when someone had to go outside when it was dark. The room somehow absorbed the light from the torch and gave everything an eerie feel. I think we were all a bit afraid to go too far into the room. Underlying this was the unanswered question of why the attic had been blocked off. What was it hiding?

We went back down again and looked at each other in silence. Miranda suggested some tea and we trooped into the kitchen where I put the kettle on.

“Do you think those were cameras on the table?” said Miranda.

“They certainly looked like old-fashioned cameras. I’ve seen pictures of them,” I replied thoughtfully. “I remember going to an exhibition in London a few years ago of some old-time photographer’s pictures. I’ve forgotten his name but there was a picture of him with a big old camera like the ones up there and a big heavy tripod over his shoulder.”

“Maybe that’s what that thing on wheels was,” said Miranda, “like, a tripod for the cameras.”

There was some silence for a few moments.

“What do you think we should do?” I asked.

More silence.

“Ansell Adams,” I said. Miranda looked at me.

“That was the name of the photographer at the exhibition, Ansell Adams. He was famous for landscapes.”

“What, you think he lived here?”

“Nooo, of course not. I was just saying the cameras on the table looked like what he used.”

I plonked tea mugs down just as Cliff stood up.

“Back in a minute,” he said, and left the room.

“I suppose we ought to tell Jim Darrowby,” I said. “He never told us anything about an attic so maybe he doesn’t know.”

“How could he not know?” said Miranda. “He lived here for most of his life. He grew up here.”

I pondered. “We’ve been here a year and never noticed any attic windows. When you grow up somewhere you probably tend to take things for granted. Everything’s so familiar you don’t wonder about things. Come on, let’s have a look.”

We went outside and round the side of the house. Sure enough, half covered in ivy was a window, high up in the side of the wall, up near the pointy part of the roof. I've no idea what the technical names for these things are. We never went round the sides. We went in and out through the front or back and the sides weren't particularly visible from either garden.

We went back inside and Cliff was there with a pile of electrical cable and a couple of light sockets.

“Have you any light bulbs?” he asked.

I fetched a couple from our small stock in one of the kitchen cupboards. He grunted and shook his head.

“Them's bayonet, you got any screw-ins?”

Miranda went to get some screw-bulbs from the office. We weren't overly organised and things often stayed where they'd been left. The office light and some of the table lamps were screw-in whereas most of the ceiling lights were bayonet.

“What do you call the side of the house?” I asked him.

“The wall,” he replied.

“No, I mean the end of the house up under the pointy part of the roof?”

“Ohh, the gables,” he said.

“Right,” I said. “We just had a look and there are windows in the gables.”

“And the pointy bit is the ridge,” he said.

Miranda came back with some light bulbs just in time to save me from a lecture on introductory architecture.

“Thought I'd rig up some lights,” he said, “so we can have us a decent

look.”

So we trooped back up and Cliff plugged a cable into a socket in the corridor then we climbed the stair again and he used the torch to find a convenient nail in one of the joists and hung a light from it. This time everything was much clearer. The table was pushed up against the slope of the roof and had on it what were now quite obviously old cameras, an assortment of lenses, bits of cable and glass and so on. The thing on wheels had a mechanism that looked as though something could be attached to it and be swivelled and tilted as well as being rolled around on its wheels.

Under the thick dirt was what looked to be some sort of carpet or thick cloth but it was rat-chewed and looked pretty decrepit. The rollers on the other side mystified us until Miranda held up some tatters of cloth and we could see part of an alpine scene still faintly visible.

“These must have been backdrops,” she said. “I think this was a photographic studio.”

Cliff had busied himself with more cable and rigged up another light further on, past the chimney block. At the far end was another table with an assortment of trays and a shelf with bottles of some kind, next to a couple of wardrobes. Some tin trunks and some very tatty looking furniture had been pushed as far as they would go into the angle where the roof met the floor.

“So this was probably where whoever did this developed their photographs,” I said. “Those bottles are probably the chemicals used for developing.”

“Wouldn't it be enclosed or something if it were a dark room?” said Miranda. “So the light doesn't get onto the pictures?”

“Ain't no lights in 'ere,” said Cliff. “I reckon he used oil lamps.”

We looked around. The only electric light fittings were those Cliff had put up, but there were a lot of nails sticking out of the beams of the roof.

“So whoever it was just turned out all the lamps to do his developing and did it in the dark. Makes sense.”

Miranda picked up an oil lamp lying on its side on the floor under the developing table and wiped it with her hand.

“This one looks to have red glass,” she said. “Don't they use red lights in dark rooms?”

I had been investigating the wardrobes. Both of them were filled with what looked like small sheets of thin glass, neatly arranged in rows. I pulled one out at random and held it up to the light. On it was an image of an old village street. There was a parked car that looked a bit like a boat on wheels and a man standing beside it in a three piece suit and top hat. I pulled out another and it had an image of what looked to be Buttermere Lake. I called to the others and they came over and peered at them themselves.

“Aye, that un looks familiar,” said Cliff. “Reckon it might be Keswick High Street.”

Miranda went to the other wardrobe and pulled out a glass sheet at random and half giggled. The picture was of a young woman with long hair piled carelessly on her head and wearing nothing but a long pair of frilly bloomers down to her knees and a far-away expression in her eyes.

“So that's why he needed a studio as well,” she said. “He liked taking naughty pictures too.”

After Cliff had located the hole in the roof and decided there was no particular damage I phoned Jim Darrowby. The water had come in through the hole left by a missing tile and seeped between the floorboards and soaked the plaster of the bedroom ceiling below. All that needed doing was replacing the tile and repairing a section of the ceiling plaster.

“A morning's work,” said Cliff.

I told Jim about the leak and he said he'd tell Cliff to get on with it.

Then I told him about the attic and what we'd found in it. He had no idea it existed. As far as he could remember there had always been the cupboard at the end of the corridor and it had never occurred to him to think there was anything behind it. He vaguely knew there were windows in the gables but hadn't thought anything of them.

"I'll ask around some of my surviving relatives," he said, "see what I can find out."

* * *

I went to visit Chloe in Cockermouth the next day and had a fascinating time in her studio. Apparently she created the very fine intricate wings of her fairies with a particular type of white clay which is considerably finer than normal clays and is very brittle and difficult to work with. She had developed her own technique of mixing finely powdered pine resin with the clay before shaping it and when the clay is fired the resin melts and mixes with the clay so when it cools its a lot stronger. I was very impressed with this and she agreed to teach me how to work with this white clay and to use the resin. We agreed a small tuition fee and that I'd go over on Fridays for lessons.

When I got home I told Miranda about Chloe and the white clay while she listened politely and then told me her idea.

"Why don't we ask Jim if he'll get the attic cleared out and converted into two rooms? We can use one for our bedroom and Emma can have the other for her room and we can use our old bedroom for another client."

This was an excellent idea and we discussed it for a while but couldn't see any major problems, so long as Jim went along with the idea. Miranda's curatives generally ran now with 2 or 3 people and we'd even had four once when a couple came along. Adding a fourth room could be quite useful as word of mouth spread and, of course, the attic would give us a chance to give Emma a room of her own. We also discussed the possibility of us making a contribution towards the cost of the work although Miranda didn't think we could afford to pay for it all ourselves.

We let the idea brew overnight in case our subconsciouses came up with any major drawbacks. My main concern was heating but Miranda pointed out that there wasn't a fireplace in the attic so whoever had been using it probably found the heat rising from the rooms below and from the chimney itself sufficient.

"We could always top it up with electric heaters if we need to, or maybe Cliff could build a small fireplace and feed it into the main chimney," Miranda suggested.

That afternoon I was about to phone Jim when he phoned me.

"I've been talking to my Aunt Elizabeth, at least I think she's my aunt but I get confused about these things. She's the daughter of my grandfather's sister Mary and she's 89 and in ill health poor dear. She never married so that side of the family ends with her. Anyway, I always thought that my grandfather only had a sister but Elizabeth remembers her mother mentioned several times that she'd had two brothers. My grandfather and an older brother called Ralph. It seems Ralph was a keen photographer and he had the attic converted to a studio for his photography but when the war started he enlisted as an officer and was killed in Gallipoli in, she thinks, 1915. Anyway, her grandmother was so upset about the death of Ralph that she had the attic blocked off and he was never talked about. Elizabeth's mother married and moved away not long after so that's why I probably never even knew I had a great uncle Ralph."

We talked about that for a while then I put Miranda's idea to him. He thought about it for a few moments.

"You know, I think that's a good idea. If I'd known there was an attic I would probably have done it years ago, get more tourists in." He laughed.

"It would be too big a job for Cliff though. I'll get some estimates from proper builders and we'll talk about it again in a few days. I daresay it will need Council approval but that won't be a problem. I've some friends on the Council."

We left it at that but he rang back a few minutes later.

“Don't touch any of what's in the attic. It may have some historical significance. I'll make some enquires.”

Over the weekend he phoned again.

“Just to warn you that you'll be getting a couple of builders round next week to look over the attic and send me some estimates. And I've been on to a fellow I know who's on one of the committees of the Royal Photographic Society and told him what you told me. It seems that original glass plate photographs from before WW1 are extremely rare and its only very occasionally that a find like this comes along. He said it was an exceptional discovery and could be of immense historical significance. The Society wants to send up one of their archivist chappies to have a look and they'll probably handle the removal and restoration themselves. They're also interested in the cameras and other equipment. So whatever you do don't let any of the builders touch anything. Just let them look and measure and tap on walls and so on.

I found all this very interesting although Miranda wasn't as interested as I thought she'd be. In fact she'd seemed a little withdrawn recently. Anyway, I was even more interested in what I was learning at Chloe's. She was right, the white clay was difficult to work with as it needed to be much dryer and therefore wasn't easy to shape but I was beginning to get the hang of it.

A couple of weeks later Jim rang again to say he'd had the estimates. His choice of builder was keen to get started soon before the snows of winter began so if we were in agreement he'd get that organised. We talked for a while and, with input from Miranda, we agreed that he would pay for the work and we would pay for decorating and agree to a 15% increase in the rental. He thought this was fair as the extra rooms would allow us to increase our clients by 33%. We agreed. He also told us that the Royal Photographic Society expert would arrive by train on the Monday and would organise clearance of the attic and asked if we would give him a bed and food for a night or two. We had a curative starting that day but with only two clients so the archivist would be welcome to the spare room.

Everything was going quite nicely.

The archivist was a nice man, by the name of Richard Emmerson, and was nothing like what I expected. I'd expected a thin, bespectacled and retiring person but Richard was built like a rugby player and was voluble in his enthusiasm. He was so excited by the photographic plates and his enthusiasm was so infectious that when Natasha phoned to say I had a recording session in Manchester if I wanted it that I agreed without thinking and completely forgot to tell Miranda about it.

In my days as a session musician I'd been quite friendly with the Artistic Director of a medium ranked label who insisted on using me whenever a band needed a sax for one of their recordings. Sadly this didn't happen that often but his label had recently signed a new band called The Reprobates and were working on their first album and one track, with the delightfully innocuous name of Have Some Fun, needed a sax backing with a repeated 8 bar solo. He'd contacted Natasha as usual and insisted she talked to me about it even though Natasha had explained I'd retired.

I still practised my saxes because I simply enjoyed playing them. While I was no longer up to scratch for a top notch band I felt I would be fine for The Reprobates, as their style was an experimental fusion of neo-punk and death metal. Sophisticated sax technique was not a requirement here. Generally I was paid either a tiny percentage of the revenue or a flat fee depending on whether Natasha felt the likely revenue would be large (percentage) or small (flat fee). This one was a flat fee but still, money is always handy. I figured I could get there by train, do the session and get back all in the one day. So I said "sure thing" to Natasha, added the booking to my phone calendar and forgot all about it.

Richard spent three days carefully extracting the plates, wrapping them individually in several layers of special paper and recording their details before packing them in crates along with the other equipment and loading it all into a large removals van. When he'd finished I contacted Jim and he contacted the builders so they could move in and start on the attic conversion. They'd estimated it would take two to three weeks but we insisted that they skipped every other week because we didn't want builders in while curatives were running. They reluctantly agreed, although it was clear they didn't understand how

hammering, power tools, radios, shouting and swearing could possibly be considered disruptive.

The booking was on a Friday and the day before, Miranda went to bed early. She'd been increasingly withdrawn over the last few weeks and she felt tired and had a headache. I confess I had got caught up in the general excitement; Richard's enthusiasm about the old photographs, a room to ourselves and all the new things I was learning from Chloe about pottery. Even the process of converting the attic was a novelty so I wasn't perhaps as attentive as I might normally have been.

I remembered the session when the alarm on my phone went off to remind me of the calendar entry but Miranda had already gone to bed and was sound asleep. I had set my alarm for early enough to drive to the station for the early train. I had left a note for Miranda on the kitchen table. Because I have a sad sense of humour and I'd thought I had told her about the session, my note said quite simply "Gone to Have Some Fun. See you when I see you." I didn't know when the session would be over, you see, so I didn't know which train I'd be on.

The session went about as well as you'd expect from a neo-punk, death metal fusion band who weren't established quite enough to be skilled in every aspect of musicianship but they were friendly enough and my Artistic Director friend eventually pronounced himself happy with the recording. My train arrived at ten to ten and I was home by ten thirty. It was raining, the kind of heavy drizzle that can go on for days and threatens to become full-blown rain at any moment. There were no lights on in the house when I arrived. As soon as I walked in I felt the cold and emptiness, not a single fire burned.

I dumped my saxes in the hall and went into the kitchen hoping to find Miranda waiting for me and ready to fix some food. I flicked the light switch, no electricity. The generator wasn't running. I grabbed the torch. Miranda wasn't there. The place looked like it had been hit by a tornado. I panicked and ran from room to room calling her name and flashing the torch wildly. I even looked in the attic, no sign of her or Emma. Nearly blind with panic, thinking that there had been a break-in or that they had been kidnapped, I ran down the stairs. I tripped over my own feet and crashed into the wall. I ran to the living room and wrenched open the back door, grabbed the heavy duty torch

and ran out into the rain. The kitchen torch was still shining down the staircase where I'd dropped it.

I saw Miranda, sitting cross-legged on the stone table in the dark, in one of her thin Kate Bush dresses, absolutely soaked to the skin and shivering from the cold, her long blonde hair plastered tightly around her face. She looked into my eyes without moving and said in a thin, trembling, slurry voice "I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me? I'm so sorry."

I tried to get her to stand up and walk but she just sat there blankly. I gathered her up in my arms and carried her inside, stumbling in the long grass. I laid her on the living room couch, ran to the bathroom, grabbed some towels and ran back, my heart pounding with anxiety and my head throbbing from its contact with the stone wall.

"Where is Emma? Where is Emma?" I kept saying to her. After several attempts she muttered "With Jesse." I let it go at that for the time being. At least I knew who Jesse was, Emma hadn't been kidnapped. Explanations could wait.

I tried to undress Miranda but she wouldn't cooperate so in the end I just ripped the front of her dress apart to get her out of the wet clothes. I rubbed her vigorously all over with the towel and smoothed her sopping hair away from her face. Whatever else, my angel was alive; not like when she was hit by that car and I thought she was dead. There was no need to abuse the gods, for the moment.

Miranda seemed to be half asleep, uncaring and distant. I tossed the wet towels across the room blindly and wrapped her in the Tree of Life blanket we used as a throw-rug. I fought to calm myself as my numb, wet fingers tried to light the fire. It caught after a while and I piled on some logs. I forced myself to think what to do next. Chicken soup! That would warm her from the inside as well. I ran to the kitchen but there was no electricity for the microwave.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" I screamed and whacked the microwave.

I ran back outside, swearing with every step. I got soaked again getting to the outhouse. The fuel tank had no diesel in it. I filled it

and primed the engine and luckily it caught the first time. I was in no mood to play games with the damned thing, not now.

Back in the house lights were on again. Most of the crockery was smashed but one mug had only lost its handle and was still serviceable. I scooped a mug-full of chicken soup from the big pot we kept in the fridge for over-stressed clients and dumped it in the microwave, my fingers dripping. I paced and cursed the microwave then wrenched open the door before the two minutes were up. I ran back to Miranda, uncaring as soup slopped out. I sat on the couch and held her, trying to warm her body with mine while feeding her hot chicken soup and praying the fire would heat the room faster.

Slowly Miranda warmed up and became more alert. When she realised where she was and who I was she collapsed on me, hugging me fiercely and sobbing. I'd seen her cry before but nothing like this. I was desperate to know what had happened so I could solve the problem or at least panic effectively, but we spent the night on the couch, holding each other in our arms. Slowly the story came out.

"I thought you'd left me," she kept saying, her body wracked with sobs, clinging tightly to me. "I thought you'd left me."

Apparently she'd woken to find me not there, gone to the kitchen and found the note. "Gone to Have Some Fun." She'd thought I'd had enough of our life and I wasn't coming back. "See you when I see you." She'd thought I'd gone to have some fun with Chloe. "Because you're always talking about her. You go to her every Friday. And today is Friday. I thought you'd gone to Chloe. And left me. Because I wasn't fun anymore." The vague fears that had been building for weeks had suddenly crystallised.

When she'd read my note "my brain just died, I was so ... distraught, my brain just switched off." It seems enough of her mothering instinct kept going long enough to take Emma round to Jesse and when she'd got back she had completely lost it and trashed the kitchen. Sobbing in pain and grief and anger and frustration. "I thought you'd gone to Chloe forever."

She'd randomly gone through everything she could find in the kitchen

and had then gone upstairs to find my saxophones to destroy them too but she'd only found my soprano sax - I'd only taken the alto and the tenor. Frustrated by the missing saxes, she'd started to deflate and spent a long time crying on the couch. Then a cold anger had taken over and she'd found Chloe's phone number on her website. "I rang her and abused her for ages." Chloe later told me it was barely two minutes and she hadn't hung up as she was fascinated. She had never been accused of stealing another woman's husband before and kind of enjoyed the experience. When Miranda had started to run out of recriminations Chloe had asked who she was and then explained I hadn't turned up that day. And besides, "she told me she was gay and lived with her wife." I knew that, Chloe lived with Anna. I was sure I'd mentioned that to Miranda.

"And then my brain slowly started to work again. I realised your saxes weren't there so I phoned Natasha who told me about The Reprobates and that they'd hired you for their track Have Some Fun and that she didn't know when I'd be finished but I would probably be home tonight. And everything started to make some kind of sense."

She didn't know when it was but it had still been daylight when she went into the garden to try to contact the earth to bring some element of normality back. She'd sat in the cold and the rain for probably six hours or more trying to come to terms with her emotions and her love for me and her shame and disgust at having doubted me for one moment. "I thought you'd left me, I thought you'd left me." Each time she said that she started crying again.

I fed her chicken soup and toast until we ran out of soup and held her all night long. Although I was deeply worried about her health and state of mind I couldn't help thinking that she really did love me. Perhaps even as much as I loved her.

We picked up Emma the next morning and explained to a puzzled Jesse that Miranda had been taken ill quite suddenly. As we were both looking exhausted and drawn and our eyes were red from crying Jesse readily accepted that. In the car on the way back, Emma in her arms and not the car seat, Miranda suddenly exclaimed "Oh my god, that poor woman. I have to ring her and apologise."

She rang Chloe as soon as we got home. Chloe took it quite well, considering that after Miranda's call she'd had to spend some time allaying Anna's suspicions. I guess Anna had never been married to a woman accused to stealing someone else's husband either. Negative karma ripples outwards. I wasn't too sure I had the courage to go back to Chloe for more tuition although I knew that sooner or later Miranda would insist on meeting her herself.

Over the weekend Miranda slowly regained her old self.

"I tried to mediate out there on the table in the rain but I couldn't. My emotions were too strong. I just couldn't handle it. My mind was imploding."

Later ...

"I knew you were the one soon after we met but it wasn't until I got your note and thought you'd left me that I realised you are everything to me. Everything. I love you so so much I can't find the words and I need your love for me so so much too. My world is you and without you I have no world."

I knew she was back to normal when she said in bed on Sunday evening.

"That was one hell of a learning experience babe. I've never experienced pure naked emotion before. I was so scared, so terrified I'd lost you my 'self' simply disappeared and there was no 'I' to try to control it, just a thing, disembodied emotion, an amorphous mass of negative energy."

We just lay there in each others arms, each afraid to let the other go. The moment was so intense that even I wasn't able to ruin it with a stupid comment.

"I could never leave you, never," I told her. She snuggled even tighter. Emma just snored peacefully in her cot.

Later in the week she came to visit me in the Old Flour Pot while her clients were doing some sort of group activity and asked me to make

her a simple flat clay tablet, a little smaller than a sheet of A3 paper. It took only a few moments. She used her finger to write last Friday's date in it while it was still wet then "I doubted my Universe. Never again."

I lit up the kiln to fire it and left it unglazed as she asked. At the weekend Miranda put it in the garden with a simple frame of rocks from the creek where we were married. Within sight of her stone table so she could see it every morning around dawn.

Chapter Fifteen

Inevitably that bad Friday occupied our thoughts for weeks to come. Miranda, in her never ending analysis of herself kept coming back to it, trying to work out the various factors that had gnawed at her unconscious and which had combined with my not-that-funny-after-all note. She came to believe that it was a combination of the excitement of our moving to the Lakes and setting up a business, the stresses of her being run over and of getting married, the lingering effects of hormonal changes from being pregnant and the tiredness which comes from having a new baby. She was careful not to mention my tactlessness over Chloe but I knew she'd thought of it and, of course, the disruption of our peace and quiet by the attic workover and the discovery of Ralph's photography. She kept coming back to all this and more as she endeavoured to understand herself and reconcile the immense power of primitive emotions over her rational mind. I figured it would turn up as a case study in her curatives after a while.

I kept quiet and let her analyse herself. Aside from some guilt on my part, what kept me awake at nights for a while and drove some dreams for longer was the inevitable "what if" scenarios the mind plays with after the event. I briefly looked online about the effects of exposure and discovered that Miranda had shown some of the signs of early hypothermia. The apathy and uncooperativeness, for example. What played on my mind was the "what if the session had gone on longer and I'd stayed in Manchester that night?" When I'd got home and found Miranda she'd been sitting in the rain and cold for maybe six hours. What if I hadn't got home for another ten or twelve hours? It didn't bear thinking about but of course I thought about it. And dreamt about it.

Still, the workmen soon finished the attic conversion and we moved our bedroom up there and got Emma established in the other room. After a few nights she got used to sleeping alone and started to sleep longer. We were able to get into a routine and life returned to being relaxed and happy. The curatives were going well and I'd found the courage to go back to Chloe for a few more lessons. They petered out quite quickly as the weather got worse and the winter snows arrived with a vengeance and frankly I'd lost my enthusiasm for her friendship.

As I predicted Miranda decided she needed to meet Chloe to lay a few demons, or “clarify my internal conceptualising” as she put it, so we invited her and Anna over to dinner and to inspect my pottery studio. As you can imagine, things were a little strained for a while as Chloe and Anna were, I guess, a little apprehensive. Miranda's openness and charm and contriteness thawed them out though even if they didn't become best buddies. I showed Chloe around the Old Flour Pot and she seemed impressed but it was perfunctory and Anna's hovering presence seemed to inhibit her a little. Me too to be honest. We'd had both sets of parents up for Christmas again – they seemed to prefer our place to their own at Christmas – and both our mothers fussed endlessly over Emma.

When the spring markets began I started going regularly, all over the Lake District and generally sold two or three pieces each time. The sales were great for my ego and of course the money was useful as the rent on the Grange had gone up as soon as the conversion work was finished even though the room for an extra client took a while to become used. The most important thing with the markets though was being able to watch people and see what attracted and held their attention even when they didn't buy anything. I slowly learned that my more experimental pieces tended not to attract much attention whereas certain forms and colours attracted the most. Life is rarely that simple though as it was often the experimental pieces that sold even though they hadn't attracted much attention. I guess I was learning the difference between “Art” and “Popular” and my pricing was more “Art” than “Popular”. As Miranda had said, I wasn't selling everyday necessities, I was selling my unique creations. Without a conscious decision I slowly moved entirely over to the Art side. If I wanted to be popular I'd have probably taken up football at school rather than the saxophone and kicked a ball around with the other kids rather than practice on my own every day. Or taken up the guitar instead. Girls prefer guitarists. Sax players have to sit there with the reed in their mouths for several minutes to get it properly wet before they can play and girls don't usually find that as romantic as someone strumming an out of tune guitar.

Emma grew and developed as kids do. Miranda didn't approve, as she believed Emma should be allowed to develop at her own pace, in her own way, but I spent a fair amount of time gently waving Emma's

hands around going “say da-da, say ma-ma” to encourage her. It was probably inevitable that when Emma said her first word, two days after her first birthday, that it was “don”, followed not long afterwards by “bird” and “twee”. She was too young to get a handle on pronouncing “r” and Miranda figured “don” was “dawn” since Emma usually attended the dawn meditation with her. Sadly Emma never did learn to say “da-da” as she seemed to progress from “twee” to “I want biscuit” to “can I have a bicycle for my birthday please daaad” almost overnight.

She also recognised Cliff whenever she saw him and took to shouting “Fiff” at the top of her voice and banging whatever she was holding on any convenient surface. Cliff surprised me as he was in his early sixties and was fairly dour in his manner but he got on fabulously with Emma, tickling her and head-butting her tummy and making silly faces. Sometimes he bring round a toy rattle or something else he had made from bits of scrap wood left over from some job he'd done. But then I shouldn't have been surprised since he had four daughters of his own and, he had recently told us, a tenth grandchild. He was very used to young children.

“Gran'kids are a whole heap easier than kids” he said one day when he had been bouncing Emma on his knee. “When they stops being fun you just hands 'em back,” and passed her over to Miranda for a nappy change. “Sommat to look forward too,” and laughed.

Other than us, Emma saw Cliff the most as he was often over to do some gardening or minor repairs on the house – it was old and the plumbing was almost as old. Only the electrics were fairly modern since a generator had first been installed at the Grange in the 1960s.

It was mid summer when I finally plucked up the courage to show my pottery to Edward Fawcett to get his opinion as an art dealer. Miranda suggested we invite him over for lunch one Sunday and as the day dawned bright and clear we decided to eat in the garden. We ate outdoors often as we were still in love with the grandeur of Buttermere Lake and its surrounding crags and most of our clients relished the opportunity as well. Locals on the other hand had grown up with the scenery and preferred the comforts and convenience of eating indoors. When Edward arrived he confessed he spent a lot of his time in cities

and admitted he never took the time to just sit and enjoy what was on his doorstep. I could see Miranda preparing to explain the benefits of taking time to connect with the earth and the natural world and opening one's mind and soul but she must have changed her mind because she chatted about London instead.

Over lunch I told him I'd taken his advice and had been going to some local markets and that I'd sold some pieces. He took the hint and with the practised enthusiasm of a salesman he asked to see a few pieces. Miranda and Emma made themselves scarce as I took Edward and showed him some pieces.

“How long have you been doing this now?” he asked, inspecting one of my surreal Dali-esque vases.

“A little over a year,” I told him.

“This piece is interesting. Rather reminiscent of a Spanish school of pottery that thrived briefly in the 1920s, inspired by Picasso's Cubist period. I like the way you've expressed a certain duality of form, a counterpoint focused by this line here,” he said, running a finger along one edge that curved around and into another. “Yes, very interesting although the colours let it down somewhat.”

I wished I had done art history at school instead of music. I might have had some idea of what he was talking about then.

“By the way,” he added, “you ought to put your name and the date on each of your pieces to identify them as yours. It's usually done on the bottom where its not visible.”

“How do I do that since I can't turn them over until they've been fired?” I asked.

“Oh you do it when the clay is nearly leather-hard, using a stylus,” he answered.

Leather-hard is when the surface of the clay is dry to the touch but it's still full of water inside. It can be handled gently when it's like that and it hadn't occurred to me that it could still be worked on.

Interesting.

He picked up another, inspired by the Aztec vase Miranda's mother had bought.

“Ah yes. A strong Peruvian influence here. Particularly in the solid use of colour and the style is distinctively Inca with an element of Mayan. Yes, you definitely have potential. I've seen pieces broadly similar go for quite decent sums in New York although they tend not to appeal to the Europeans as much. Your proportions are off though. It's a little too squat, too depressed. It needs to soar like the Andes not sag like a slag heap in Wales.”

I felt he was possibly exaggerating a little. Admittedly I've never seen the Andes, but I haven't seen any Welsh slag heaps either.

He worked his way through my other pieces in a similar way. His overall verdict was much like most of my school reports. “Must try harder.” Oh well, at least he hadn't laughed.

Miranda materialised at that point, having taken Emma off for a nap. We went back into the garden to sample some local cider we'd picked up from an orchard in the next valley.

“Would it be a good idea if I got some books on pottery techniques and styles?” I asked him, intending to find out what books he'd recommend.

“Absolutely not,” he replied seriously. “Don't waste your time trying to replicate other people's work. You have a freshness, a vitality in your pieces that you need to develop. Yes of course you can read a book and copy the pictures but they won't be your own, they won't be original. They'll just be second rate copies of someone else's ideas. Stay true to yourself. You've only been at this a year and already I can see a distinctiveness. Keep at it and learn from your mistakes, not other people's successes. Work on your confidence too, there's a tentativeness, an air of holding back in your work that I find distracting. Be bold, be confident.”

Miranda was smiling happily and I realised that he was paying me a

compliment. If he thought I was useless he would probably have run off a handful of books for me to keep me quiet. There didn't seem to be much else to say as I lack the confidence to ask how to be confident so the conversation veered off onto how Miranda's leg was and whether she could predict rain if it ached and then to that topic closest to the heart of all new parents, their child. We could talk about Emma for hours but after twenty minutes or so Edward felt he'd imposed on our hospitality too long and made getting-ready-to-leave movements.

We took him back to his car but halfway down the hall to the front door he stopped suddenly and backstepped to the open kitchen door and peered in. Something must have caught his eye. There was a side cupboard next to the door where we kept a bowl for dumping small stuff when we came in the front door. The old bowl had been knocked off by a client a few weeks previously and I'd brought down one of my experimental pieces from the Old Flour Pot to replace it. I saw no point in replacing it with a shop bought one when I had an abundance of bowls. In fact, after Miranda had smashed all our crockery I had made new crockery to replace it. It was a nice feeling when Miranda told clients I had made the plates and bowls and dishes they ate off. It gave me a sense of accomplishment. Unlike when I told them I had been a musician and they asked if they'd heard of anything I'd done. I could reel off a handful of hits they probably knew but as a session musician doing mainly backing music I never got any credit or sense of accomplishment from that. The crockery was all me.

Anyway, this particular bowl was an experiment I'd tried and hadn't felt it to be particularly successful. The bottom part was a conventional bowl but sliced on a diagonal so one side was higher than the other and I'd built up the rest of the sides using a fine tracery using the techniques I'd learned from Chloe. I'd glazed the whole thing as uniform white as I could, although it was looking a little grubby now. It seemed to me to be lacking something, maybe a beetle crawling around the side or something. As it was it seemed austere and stark.

It was this bowl that had caught Edward's attention. He stood and stared at it for quite a few moments then picked it up and studied it more carefully. Then he upended it and all its contents fell on the

floor.

“Sorry” he said distractedly.

“Did you make this?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “It was an experiment that I tried but it ...”

He wasn't listening so I stopped talking. This was a useful skill Miranda had taught me. In the early days of our relationship I tended to talk to fill the uncomfortable silences. Miranda had taught me that silences can actually be very comfortable. Not that this was a comfortable silence, I just no longer had the need to fill them.

He studied the bowl intently from all angles then sat it on the kitchen table and studied it again. Then he took it over to the kitchen sink and carefully washed it until it gleamed. Then he studied it all over again. This was getting boring. I propped myself against the kitchen table and gazed out of the window.

Miranda left to attend to Emma who had started crying which usually meant Miranda would come running. It worked for me too. Whenever I cried she came running to me although I didn't try it as often as Emma did.

“Do you mind if I take this with me?” asked Edward. “I'd like to show it to some people I know. I think they might be interested.”

I couldn't think of any reason why not. I had other bowls we could use to dump things in.

“Do you have a recent newspaper?” he asked.

I rummaged around and found a copy of the previous week's Kendal & District Advertiser.

“Will this do?” I asked, assuming he was going to wrap the bowl with it. He glanced at the front page and muttered “Yes that's fine,” then he arranged the bowl on top of the front page so the paper's name, main headline and date were visible next to the bowl and got me to take a

photograph of it with my phone. I asked him why.

“To establish provenance, my boy. It's not much but it shows you had it around the date of the newspaper. Get it printed next time you're in Kendal. Actually get three prints and send me one. Keep the other two safe.”

I asked what he was going to do with the bowl but all he would say was the he wanted to show it to some friends. Well, whatever. I didn't think it would sell at the market anyway so it was no great loss. He fetched a roll of bubblewrap from his car and wrapped it, then he thanked me for showing him my pottery and made me promise I'd thank Miranda for a delicious lunch and left. I didn't bother to tell him I'd prepared it. Gender role stereotypes were still quite common in these parts.

I told Miranda that he'd taken the bowl and about the photo. She said Edward was an art dealer and maybe he thought he could sell it. I found that hard to believe and anyway he hadn't said anything about commission. Maybe he knew someone he didn't like but needed a gift for them. My mum did that sometimes with people she didn't particularly like although my dad just ignored them. The people he didn't like I mean, not presents my mum gave him.

We went back outside to sit in the sun.

“Did you know Picasso had a Cubist period?” I asked her, trying to show off a little. It wasn't often I got the opportunity.

“Yes,” she said. “It was after his African period and before he got seriously into surrealism. I forget exactly when, sometime around the First World War.”

I shut up. Just to enjoy the comfortable silence you understand. And to listen to Emma talking to the twees.

Chapter Sixteen

One of the reasons Miranda and I left London was to escape the hustle and bustle, the rat race if you prefer, and find peace in a country idyll to allow ourselves to grow as people rather than as consumers. The downside of this though is that so much happens every day in cities that you could fill a lot of books or movies with them whereas life in the country is generally routine day to day stuff and other people's idylls can be rather dull if you're not there too. Like, for example, a movie I saw a few years ago with someone. I can't remember who she was because there were several girls flitting in and out of my life around then but she wasn't Miranda as we haven't been to the cinema together yet. The movie was about an old woman who lived in a van for several years in someone's driveway in London. I never quite understood why the man who lived in the house never did anything about it but I guess if he had there wouldn't have been a story for a movie.

I was going to say that something like that could only happen in a city and not in the country but then I remembered Alf. We never found out his real name but we called him Alf since he looked like an Alf. We first saw him when we were driving out to Ambleside. He was sitting on a tussock of grass beside where our track met the road and waved at us as we went past in the car. We waved back and thought nothing of it. Over the next few days he built himself a little lean-to out of branches and things he found lying around. I got to know him a little as I often walked past on my way to the pottery. He never spoke but he said a lot, if that makes sense. I don't know if there was something wrong with his voice but he communicated through gestures and some acting. I think he had been an accountant or something like that but it's quite difficult to act out an accountant's job so I might have got that wrong. It could be that he'd simply found that he had better relationships with people by not talking since "I'm an accountant" takes maybe two seconds to say and doesn't really go anywhere but a couple of minutes of acting and the other person getting involved in trying to figure out what he's trying to portray and getting pleased when they've figured it out is much more stimulating for both sides.

Not that Alf probably had many conversations as he was beyond filthy

and his chosen spot beside the road had very few pedestrians passing by and no one is going to stop their car to talk to a dirty old man except maybe the police. He seemed to live permanently in a tatty old army greatcoat and had long straggly grey hair and a beard like Gandalf only not so white and clean. Over the course of several acted conversations I found out he'd had a drinking problem and had had a wife and kids at some time but he'd been kicked out after losing his job by his wife and someone else. I couldn't tell from his acting if the other person was one of his kids or his wife's lover or maybe a bailiff but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that he seemed to be enjoying his life a whole lot more than he used to. Now he wandered around Britain spending some time in all the beautiful places and communing with nature and whoever happened to be passing by until he got bored or was moved on.

Alf would come down to the house every now and then to cadge some food and usually brought Miranda some wildflowers or something he'd found like a badger's skull. He was harmless and was no trouble although I think he still had a drink problem as occasionally in bed we could hear him raging at the moon. We didn't mind him being there and Miranda felt he was a kindly person even though he turned down her offers of a bath and doing his laundry. She also gave him a spare copy of "Pillars Of Consciousness" by the Indian guru, philosopher and mystic Osho. One of our clients had left the book behind and as we already had a copy when Alf acted that he sometimes got bored – not an easy thing to do – she gave it to him. He was often reading it with great concentration when I walked up although its not the sort of book you can discuss when you can only act out questions and answers and he'd found a plastic bag to protect it from the rain.

Alf arrived in the early spring one year and simply disappeared three or four months later. I walked past one day and his lean-to was empty and all his bits and pieces had gone, including the book. I guess he'd just decided it was time to move to pastures new but I was a little sad that he hadn't said goodbye to us.

Something I forgot to mention earlier was that Marie and Cliff got married not long after their tenth grandchild was born. After nearly 40 years of living together and four children and ten grandchildren it took the combined forces of the entire European Union to pressure

Cliff into proposing. Since Marie was French, all the hoo-ha over Brexit had left it very unclear as to whether she would be allowed to continue living in the UK or not so she and Cliff got married to be on the safe side. For all his dour self-sufficiency Cliff would have been devastated if she'd been deported as an undesirable alien and Marie wouldn't have been too pleased either since she hadn't been back to France since she'd left and there was nothing for her there.

They got married in a registry office in Kendal and held an open bar in a pub in Ambleside that evening for anyone who wanted to drop in and “commiserate with Cliff” as Marie put it, her whole body quivering with suppressed laughter.

“Aye, reckon it had to 'appen sooner or later,” Cliff grumbled to me in the pub. “Though what bloody diff'ence a bit of ole paper's gonna make I ain't got no idea.”

We got to meet three of their daughters that night, with their partners and children although the other one had gone off to Antigua to be with her man and couldn't get back for the wedding.

Also, nothing came of Edward and the bowl. He brought it back a few weeks later and wouldn't say anything other than that he'd shown it to a couple of friends and they had found it “interesting”. “Interesting” is an interesting word because it sounds important but doesn't actually mean anything. It's not even clear if “interesting” is positive or negative. It's more of a polite non-committal word.

I guess because he didn't find me threatening – some people would probably have been constantly badgering him – Edward started dropping in to the Old Flour Pot sometimes when he was driving through the village and we'd chat over some tea and homemade biscuits or cake and he'd have a look at the new pieces I'd made and check up on how I was doing at the markets. Sometimes he'd tell me about pieces of art pottery he'd handled or seen and showed me photographs and we'd discuss how it had been made. It was interesting to hear of new techniques and ideas and I turned out a few nightmares trying them out myself.

Miranda thought Edward was keeping an eye on my progress but I

doubted that since he moved in artistic circles some way above me. It was more likely that business was a little slow and he just wanted some company. He had a nice house in Thackthwaite but he lived alone and spent a lot of time travelling. He was also getting on in years so I figured he was just a little lonely in his house.

Miranda herself had changed since that bad Friday. She had become a little softer and more tolerant. Don't get me wrong, she was already very tolerant but her tolerance now stemmed from personal experience of the effects of raw emotion and wasn't merely an intellectual kind of tolerance. So when she used to talk with a client she'd say things like

“And when you did whatever, did you think about what outcome there might be, how it would affect whoever?”

whereas now she was saying things like

“Yes, emotions can do that to you, but perhaps next time after you've calmed down it might be an idea to try to understand how that could have affected the other person.”

Much the same but more understanding.

I doubt it's directly related as things don't generally happen that quickly as people need to plan ahead when they book a curative – time off work, family and things like that – but several months after the attic conversion freed up the extra bedroom we had our first curative with all four rooms in use and three or four months after that we started to become fully booked for most of the curatives and started to get a waiting list. From a business point of view this was good but it saddened Miranda as it showed how many people needed her help and, worse, how many may not be able to get it.

“We could always look around for a bigger place, hon,” I suggested one day over the dinner table. “That way we could take in more clients.”

She considered it for a few moments in that way she had of seemingly withdrawing into herself to totally concentrate without external

distractions.

“No, that wouldn't be a good idea,” she replied. “If we have all couples on a curative that means we'd have eight clients and that's too many for me to handle. It would be fine with group activities but I wouldn't be able to give them the individual attention they need. Even with one couple, five of them is pushing it. And besides, the more people we have the more likely it'll be that we get personality clashes and we simply don't need any more angst.”

“What if we got someone in to help you?” I asked. Miranda found the curatives very draining so I thought an assistant could be quite helpful.

Her reaction was instant.

“I wouldn't trust them. No matter how carefully we picked someone I could never be sure they were right. What I do is largely based on trust and we'd have a hell of a time if that person didn't gain their trust as much as I did. Some of our clients also become dependent on me and although I work to break that dependency its entirely possible that with someone else that dependency could become unhealthy. I know my motivations and agenda but we can never be sure of someone else's. I'm not going to expose the people who come to me for help to any risk of someone who might be trying to exploit them in some way.”

As we were doing the dishes she added

“And besides, we'd have to get into all that crap with holiday and sick pay and all that shit we ran away from London to avoid.”

She flung out her arms and did a little pirouette and laughed that deep mischievous laugh of hers.

“And can you imagine trying to come up with Key Performance Indicators for all this? And doing reviews against targets? Like, how do you quantify an increase in someone's self-respect? You can see it happen but how do you measure it?”

I knew what she meant. I'd heard of KPIs but as a session musician about the only performance indicator I'd ever had was how loudly I got shouted at when I blew a bad note.

“And besides babe, I love it here and this house and everything and so do you and so does Emma. We've already got a lot of awesome memories and to abandon it would be wrong. This house likes us being here and keeping it company. And if we expand we'll only be making our lives miserable and not achieving anything in the process.”

That was also true. Emma thrived on the social interactions she had with our clients. More of them would probably only confuse her. If we moved somewhere else she maybe wouldn't find another nice tree to talk to or find another family of wild ducks that would tolerate her. We had a family of ducks that lived behind the Quiet Room and returned every spring.

We were also building a small number of clients who came back for more curatives. Karen, our first client, had come back for a second curative and wanted to book a third but Miranda wouldn't let her.

“She's stopped using her husband and children as avoidance and is starting to use me and meditation instead,” Miranda had told me. “She wants to come back for more curatives so she can learn to connect with her spiritual side but I'm certain she doesn't really want to do that. Her subconscious is saying that she really wants to sing and I'm convinced that's how her spirit wants to express itself.”

As a child, Karen's parents had disapproved of the likes of Madonna and Debbie Harry and Karen had grown up thinking that singing was somehow sinful and something nice girls didn't do.

They had a showdown when Karen brought up a third curative again and Miranda decided she was strong enough to face her own truths and that it was time to cut her loose. So she had given Karen a little shock therapy and told her in no uncertain terms that she was avoiding facing up to her 'self'. Karen had burst into tears and disappeared to her room. Miranda had fretted about this but was sure she had done the right thing at the right time. In the middle of that

night Karen had knocked on our bedroom door and she and Miranda had gone down to the kitchen to talk some more. I went back to sleep – not because I didn't care but because there's no one better than Miranda to talk to when times are emotionally difficult. For some reason people in emotional distress find my humour unhelpful. They were still talking when I came down in the morning and Karen went home later that day, missing the last day of the curative.

She phoned over the weekend and told us that she had had a long talk with her husband and that she'd found a singing teacher. She was really terrified about going for her first lesson the following week but excited as well. A couple of months later Karen wrote to Miranda to say that she'd joined an amateur choir and was loving it and felt free for the first time since she was a child. Her husband was incredibly supportive and that her kids were disappointed she wasn't singing their favourite pop songs but still insisted on coming to her rehearsals because “mum's kinda cool, not like the other mums”.

That's not to say that every one of Miranda's clients was a success story. There were a few who couldn't handle the emotional upheaval. After all, it can be trendy to try to find yourself but what happens when you actually do? There were some who wouldn't or couldn't develop but I suppose it was inevitable that that would happen occasionally.

And then there was Adam.

A behavioural therapist in Ipswich had got to hear about Miranda and phoned up about one of his patients. Adam was in his late thirties and had been sent to the therapist by his employer because of Adam's anger issues. The therapist had worked with Adam with great success and was interested in Miranda's work because he felt that Adam could benefit from a holistic approach to his entire life and not just his anger issues. It seems that, although Adam had never got very far with anything, he'd experimented with drugs, various negative spiritual practices and so on. Nothing particularly serious – Adam wasn't an ice addict or a satanist – but enough to feed his anger and keep him off balance. Miranda agreed to talk to Adam and after a very long phone call told me that she could feel a very deep negativity in him and that she didn't think she'd be able to help him. Two or three phone calls

later the therapist had talked Miranda into taking Adam on and in due course he turned up for his curative.

Adam was an average chap, unmarried and a little retiring but he readily took part in the group activities and his one-on-one sessions with Miranda and showed little or no sign of any particular anger beyond a minor irritation when it was his turn to do the dishes. When he departed at the end of the curative she breathed a sigh of relief and hoped she'd been able to help him in some way. Two weeks later he committed suicide by jumping off the top floor of a multistory car park in Ipswich.

We knew nothing about that until Miranda was called to give evidence at the Coroner's enquiry a couple of months later. Needless to say there was no way I was going to let Miranda go alone so the three of us went down and stayed in a depressing hotel. The enquiry dragged on for three days and the Coroner called in two psychologists as expert witnesses who all agreed, and I don't remember the psychological terminology they used, that Adam's suicide was pretty much inevitable without serious psychological help and had only been a question of time. The therapist had picked up a little of Adam's issues but had mistakenly opted for holistic guidance rather than full on psychiatric care. Miranda was fully exonerated but it took her a while to get over it.

Partly, of course, she was upset that she hadn't been able to help Adam or even recognise that he was in deeper need than anyone had realised and partly she was upset because she hadn't followed up on her feelings of negativity in Adam but mostly she was upset because she felt in some way responsible.

"I know they said it was just a matter of time but maybe what I did brought that time forward."

Personally I was just happy that Adam hadn't killed himself in our house but I couldn't say that to Miranda. Instead I listened at length as the poison worked its way out of her system and I was extra careful not to say or do anything to suggest she was at fault by accident. I did try blaming the behavioural therapist but she wouldn't have any of that.

“It wasn't his fault. He did a very good job as far as he could but behavioural therapists aren't trained to deal with deep psychological problems. He worked with Adam's anger and resolved it. The problem lies in the system for not picking up Adam's issues long before, maybe even when he was at school.”

Speaking of school, Emma turned five last year and had to go to school. It took a while to find one Miranda approved of because she maintained that Emma needed a school where she would be allowed to develop in her own way and at her own speed rather than be forced down of path of conformity and end up as just another non-entity, spewed out by a system designed to eradicate individuality. Emma herself seemed to embody this even as a five year old. If I tried to tell her off for some minor misdemeanour she'd look at me with those big blue eyes full of innocence and say quite calmly and sincerely, with a slight lisp “But Daddy, I need to express myself.”

We found a reasonable school in Ambleside. I doubt if the perfect school by Miranda's standards existed and I dreaded the day we'd have to find a secondary school since their sole purpose seems to be to enforce conformity. This one, however, gave the kids a lot of freedom to play and learn and they weren't overly worried about adhering to any particular curriculum. Miranda believed, and I agreed with her, that the ability to explore and experiment and learn and dream was much more important than long division or what the capital of New Zealand was.

“If you need to do calculations, use a calculator,” was Miranda's view, “and if you need to know where somewhere is look it up online or in an atlas. But where do you go to be creative or to explore a new idea? Where do you go to find out who you are?”

At the risk of being accused of being a bad father I confess at this point that one day quite early on I forgot to pick Emma up from school. I know this was inexcusable of me but I got engrossed in a piece of pottery and forgot the time. Fortunately this was quite a common occurrence among local parents and the school was on to me within ten minutes and I was there within forty five minutes but we had to find another solution in case it happened again. With both our sets of parents being hundreds of miles to the south, Marie and Cliff

had become virtual grandparents and Marie was only too happy to help as she already collected one granddaughter from primary school and Emma would be another child to play with. And Emma loved being able to help Cliff with whatever he did when he wasn't working on some job or other. So we settled into a routine of me, or Miranda when she wasn't running a curative, collecting Emma from Marie's. Sometimes we'd also stay over there for dinner and sometimes, if Cliff was doing a job at our house or nearby we'd bring Marie back too and all have dinner at the Grange and she'd go home with Cliff.

The reason I mention this is that I got a phone call one day in late October, when I was on my way to Marie's to pick up Emma. It was part of such a chain of unlikely events that if you saw it in a movie or read it in a book you wouldn't believe it.

I pulled over and answered the call. The caller said he was Kevin, a journalist with Rock It Magazine.

“Are you the guy who threw up rock music to live alone in a cave in Scotland?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I'm the guy who threw up rock music to live in a house with my wife in the Lake District.”

He checked my name and decided I was the guy he was looking for and asked me a few questions about my life.

“Well”, he conceded, “that's not as interesting but I still want to interview you for a piece in the mag.”

Rock It Magazine was, at the time, the main magazine for the Rock Music industry mainly because it was the only half decent one to survive the internet age. He wanted to interview me because most rockers who left rock did it either because they died young or because they died penniless in old age in a council flat after endless attempts at comebacks or they were one of the few who died filthy rich at any age. Apparently I was different because I was still alive or something like that. Anyway, something new might interest the magazine's jaded readership. Whatever. We agreed a date for him to come and visit. I confess I had never quite lost my dream of becoming a Rock Mega

God and even though I wouldn't be on the cover, being in the back pages would be the closest I'd ever got before. Miranda though I might be classified as a Rock Minor Imp. She said it without smiling so I don't know if she was serious or not.

Kevin turned up on the due day and interviewed me and took a few photographs. I asked him how he'd heard about me and he told me that he'd picked up on some gossip. I was very surprised and flattered that people were gossiping about me back in London as they'd by and large ignored me or looked faintly puzzled when my name was mentioned. After asking around and putting two and two together I deduced that it happened something along these lines.

Several years back when we discovered the attic photography studio, Jim Darrowby had offered the collection of pre-WWI glass plate photographs to the Royal Photographic Society who had come up and collected them for their archives. After a few years of preservation and restoration work the RPS put some of the photographs in an exhibition in their gallery in Bath and put a review in their magazine for members. Amateur Historian magazine picked up on this and published an article in one of their monthly issues but because they were interested in the history more than the photography they contacted Jim Darrowby for information about Ralph Darrowby, the photographer.

Now, Jim did an excellent job in the interview, bearing in mind that until the attic was discovered he didn't even know he had a great uncle Ralph. As he was no doubt desperate to think of things to say he told Amateur Historian about me and Miranda and mentioned the holistic curatives Miranda was running from his house.

"I thought you just might get a booking out of it," he told us.

Now it just so happened that Natasha's, my former agent, Polish husband subscribed to Amateur Historian even though he was mainly interested in Eastern European history. When he read their article he thought he recognised my name and mentioned it to Natasha.

"Its a pretty common name," she said, then "oooooh that must be him," when hubby showed her the picture of the house. Natasha had

come up for our wedding and spent the night there.

As she never really expected me to become a minor celebrity, as she put it later to me on the phone, she told a few other people she managed and some people in the industry. And, probably because things were pretty quiet at the time and there wasn't much to gossip about, people gossiped about me and the word spread and changed in the retelling so I became a sax player – that didn't change because it was the music industry after all and the important facts don't change – who chucked it all up to live alone in a cave in Scotland. As rock journalists are usually the last to hear any gossip in the business, it eventually filtered through to Kevin who took it to his editor who thought it might fill a couple of paragraphs now vacant because an advertiser had cancelled some advertising space and gave the go ahead.

Kevin had used his investigative reporting skills to track down Natasha by asking someone who my agent was and phoned her to ask for my phone number. It seems to have never occurred to him that being in a cave I might not have a phone, or at least not a charged one, but then journalists live through their phones and probably he couldn't even begin to imagine that someone might not have one. Anyway, I did have a phone so he phoned me. Kevin didn't bother to tell his editor I wasn't living in a cave in Scotland as his editor might have cancelled the story and he, Kevin, would then have missed out on an expenses paid weekend break in the Lake District. He wrote a decent article and his editor decided it was interesting enough to put in and I bought about thirty copies so their circulation wasn't too bad that week.

I sent two copies to my mum and a copy to Miranda's parents and a few copies to other people I knew. Natasha already had a copy as she subscribed. We kept three copies ourselves, one for our bedroom, one in the living room for clients to pick up and browse when they were having a dull moment and hopefully be impressed and we put one copy away safely for the day when Emma would wonder if I was special for any reason other than being her dad.

Now record company executives also read Rock It magazine since they all like to know what all the other record companies are up to. One

junior executive at J-Bomb Records – one of those minor labels that put out collections of other label's hits years after they were hits – read the article and had an idea. He did some research and found a few of the hits I'd backed on sax and took the idea to his boss. His boss thought it was a “not too bad” idea and took it to his boss. She in turn thought it might turn a few quid profit and gave her approval and J-Bomb then released a double CD of hits that featured me!

Now that was pretty cool. I'd kept a close eye on the first few recordings I'd made as a session musician but since very few had become hits I stopped bothering after a while. So when the CD deal came along I was surprised and delighted to find that I'd played on enough hits to even fill one CD let alone two. Quite a few even had solos. Also J-bomb had reproduced Kevin's article for an insert for the CD cover. I wasn't going to make any significant money out of it since the royalties went to the original artists not the backing musicians but Natasha had been astute enough to get a percentage of the revenue deal for many of them so I might make enough to buy Miranda a nice pair of earrings. But it wasn't the money. Fantasise though I had about multi-million dollar luxury houses in the Bahamas and gorgeous women flocking around my hyper-expensive sports cars and frolicking naked in my swimming pool on my yacht, I'd really become a musician for the music and it was seriously cool to have a CD of my music even though people bought it for the hits.

One of Miranda's favourite quotes is “Everything changes, everything is connected, pay attention” by the poet Jane Hirshfield and she delighted in reminding me how connected everything is and that despite our changing circumstances I should still pay attention to things even though they may not seem relevant anymore. I still think she was a little proud of me though. We bought a copy of the double CD to put away with the magazine for Emma when she was old enough to appreciate her daddy's talents.

Chapter Seventeen

Miranda was right of course, as she so often is. She has a profound understanding of people whereas I tend to just roll along and because I've had some setbacks in my life I tend to assume the worst rather than the best. Edward wasn't lonely and looking for company, he was, as Miranda thought, keeping an eye on me. It seems he'd been impressed by my white lattice bowl and had taken it to show some experts in the Art world who were also impressed. It wasn't quite "there" to be an art work in its own right which is why Edward decided to monitor my progress and gently lead me in the direction the Art world was heading. But you can imagine my surprise when, a couple of years after bringing the bowl back he dropped by the Old Flour Pot and quietly said, over a slice of home made orange caraway seed cake and some tea "You've got three or four pieces now that wouldn't look out of place in one of the big galleries in London. That one, those two and the one at the back."

I laughed. I was doing just fine at the markets and I thought he was joking with me.

"I'm serious," he said, "and to prove it here's an agency contract for you to look at if you would like me to work with the galleries on your behalf."

He pulled half a dozen folded sheets of paper out of his inside pocket.

It was a bit melodramatic but it made me stop and think. Well, my mind was blank actually but I tried to look as though I was thinking. Miranda had often told me that my tendency to be negative often got in the way but try as I might I couldn't really think of anything negative about this. After all, I was my own master here so if I didn't want to work on anything or whatever, no one could force me, I'd still be free to do my own thing and explore my own paths and if someone liked a piece enough to want to buy it, who was I to get in their way?

"Will I still be free to do what I want or does the contract make me do commissions or whatever?" I double-checked.

"No there are no restrictions really," Edward told me. "All it does is

make me your exclusive agent for any pieces you want to sell and what commission I get. The rest is just legal stuff that protects me if you try to go through someone else. Get a lawyer to look at it.”

I remembered Albert and his spit and a handshake to seal the agreement to rent the old bakery and asked for a pen and signed the contract without reading it and handed it back to Edward. He proved my trust in him by tearing up the contract immediately.

“There's no way I'm accepting this contract when you haven't even read it. I'll bring round another tomorrow and ask Miranda to read it if you won't get a lawyer and we can make any reasonable changes you want,” he informed me.

Needless to say Miranda barely skimmed the contract and told me to sign it. She knew, as I did, that Edward was on the level and she'd felt something like this was going to happen for several years. In fact ever since she knew she had to cut me free to find my destiny. A few days later he turned up with a small van and some packing cases and packed up the pieces ready to ship.

Around that time Cliff had a heart attack. He was in hospital for over a week and they put something in his heart to keep the arteries from closing again. It took him two or three months to get back to his normal dour self and Marie insisted he stopped working. They had enough money put by to tide them over until he qualified for his pension and after grumbling continuously for a couple of weeks he took to spending his time in one of his sheds whittling pieces of tree branches into Lake District souvenirs. Marie became almost depressed while he was in hospital but was in high spirits again when he came out. We went to visit when he got back home.

“I'll never be able to put any meat on him now”, she complained with a smile and giving him a gentle hug. “They've put him on a diet so he can't have cream and oil and things like that. Look, they've given me a list of banned foods.”

“It were forty years of 'er bad cooking what did me 'eart in”, Cliff retaliated. “She's been after me savings all that time.”

“Get over yourself you old fool” she responded. “It was all them damned cigarettes.”

“Well you can cut out the cream and the like but I ain't giving up me baccy,” said Cliff and lit a roll-up defiantly.

We left them to bicker good naturedly. Cliff was the type to battle on forever. It was Marie we worried about more. With her figure and love of rich food it was a wonder she hadn't had a heart attack herself.

Jim Darrowby sadly died that same year. The unspecified illness which had driven him to the dryer climate down south finally took its toll. He'd been incredibly good to us over the years and we were both saddened.

“We mustn't forget that this is all part of the endless cycle of birth and rebirth,” Miranda said. “Everything from the tiniest microbe to the biggest galaxy gets born and eventually dies. It is part of the nature of life and we should be glad to have travelled a path with him rather than be sad at his departure. Good or bad, everything comes to an end sooner or later. It's a shame he never got to go to the exhibition of his great uncle Ralph's photographs though.”

It was some time after we went to his funeral in Reading that we suddenly remembered that he was our landlord and the future of The Grange was now in doubt. We'd simply become so at home there that we'd forgotten that the house itself was part of the everything that is subject to change.

“We've got a fair amount saved up now,” said Miranda when we talked about it. “I wonder if we could afford to buy the house if Charles decided to sell it?”

Charles was Jim's son and his executor and inheritor of The Grange. It didn't seem right to pester him about the house, particularly as we barely knew him, so we went into Kendal the following weekend and asked a couple of estate agents what they thought it would be worth if it were put on the market. They came up with differing amounts and we had enough put away for around a third of the higher estimate. We looked at each other in dismay.

“I suppose we could try to get a mortgage,” I said feeling low. My past experiences with banks had made me realise that they didn't view rock musicians as highly as, say, the AIDS virus.

“You need to think positively and the cosmos will help,” said Miranda brightly. “If you are negative you are on your own.”

So we phoned to make an appointment with the manager of the bank which held our account for the business and were told we needed to speak to the Customer Experience and Relations Director. It seemed a very prestigious title for someone in a branch with only four employees but we made an appointment with her instead and she turned out to be the manager's wife who worked there part time, one day a week.

The good news was that after six years out of the music industry I was no longer classified as an undesirable. It seems I was now “a respected local artisan” with a half share in “a profitable and stable local business with an excellent record of growth” and that the bank would be “delighted to lend the required amount secured against the property in question and subject to valuation by the bank and with adequate mortgage indemnity to ...” Unfortunately I have a tendency to fall asleep when I'm bored and have no idea what someone is talking about and missed the rest of it.

Miranda translated for me. “We got the mortgage if we want it hon.”

So Miranda wrote to Charles Darrowby asking what plans he had for The Grange and asking if he should decide to sell it that he'd let us make an offer. He wrote back saying he intended to keep it as a rental for the time being, if we were happy to stay on as tenants. He also said he'd give us the first option if he chose to sell in the future. We decided to stay on as tenants for the time being.

Emma was doing well at school after a rocky start. Her teacher asked us to come in for a chat during her second term.

“I am a little worried about Emma and her writing,” Clare the teacher said. “When we practice drawing the shapes of the letters she prefers to draw little pictures inside them rather than concentrate on the

letters themselves.”

To demonstrate this she passed us a sheet of paper with a beautifully formed lower case “a” which Emma had turned up side down and turned into an owl and a “b” as the basis of a dragonfly.

“We do like to encourage individual expression here”, she continued without a pause for us to respond. “So while the owl and this dragonfly are delightfully original my concern is with this one.” and she handed over a “c” with just a “#” inscribed beside it.

Miranda was impressed by the drawings Emma had made and asked if she could keep them while I admitted, slightly shamefacedly, that I had already taught Emma how to write most of the lower case letters – Emma was having difficulty with “s” and “z” and got them mixed up – expecting to be made to stand in the corner for being naughty. Schools have that effect on me.

“But how do you explain the “c”?” said Clare.

“Umm, I've also been teaching her how to write music since they're the same letters. That's C sharp which is the natural note of my saxophone when no keys are being used.”

Clare was in raptures. “Oh it's so wonderful to have parents taking an interest in their child's education! Mostly they just leave it up to the school.”

Miranda quite liked Clare and backed down from the fight she was expecting to have over Emma's development. I was just happy to have got something right at school after all these years. It's a shame we weren't graded.

That wasn't the end of my involvement with the school though. In her second year the teacher, this time Veronica, held a weekly thing where each child brought in a relative for a “This is my ...” session and the relative gave a talk for a few minutes about what they did. Emma did “This is my dad” and I took in my saxophones and talked for a couple of minutes about music then played a tune which led to another tune and another and then led to a general free for all as every kid tried to

have a go. Only one little boy named Paulie was able to get any sound as saxes are quite difficult to play and it usually takes ten or fifteen minutes to get even a discordant squeak. You have to shape your mouth right and apply the right amount of pressure with your lips. Anyway, Paulie was as pleased as punch and strutted around saying “I played it!” to the world in general. Veronica roped me into performing at every one of the termly concerts the school put on for the rest of Emma's time there. That was pretty cool and it was a novelty for me to play live in front of an audience that wasn't drunk. I think they liked having a Rock Minor Imp as a parent.

Edward used to drop in to the Old Flour Pot every couple of months and would generally pick a piece to take away, sometimes two. By the time Emma was in her fifth year at primary school he had sold several of my pieces. Mostly through London galleries, two though a New York gallery and one through a gallery in Frankfurt. For some reason the Parisians didn't like my style. I didn't begrudge him his commission as he sold them for figures way above what I could get at the markets and, to be honest, he worked hard for his cut. I just carried on having fun which was far more important than making money.

It was towards the end of Emma's fifth year that Edward decided it was time to have an exhibition of my pottery and talked a small gallery in Regent's Street in London into hosting it. They wanted me to turn up and give a “Meet the Artist” type talk about my life and work as they thought it would help to get me a “name”. Between them, Edward and the gallery decided on September 14th as the day and since it was a school day and a curative day we decided that I'd go on my own. To be honest I didn't really want my wife and daughter to see my humiliation when no one turned up.

I was waiting for the train to London when I suddenly realised that the date of my talk was the same date as the day Miranda and I first came to the Lake District to stay at The Grange for a holiday. As I was already thinking about what to talk about at the “Meet the Artist” I got to thinking about all the wonderful things that had happened since we saw the rainbow, such as getting married to Miranda and the birth of Emma and the curatives and the Old Flour Pot and on the spur of the moment I went to the shop in the station and bought an exercise

book and a pen and started writing it all down on the train to London. It took longer than I thought it would and I carried on writing at the hotel as well.

I'm not a writer, as you can tell since what you are reading is the contents of that exercise book. Looking back over it I think I've managed to capture to some extent the wonderful highs and awful lows we've experienced and touched on some of the great people we've known but it seems to me that Miranda might have come across as a tree-hugging, intellectual, spiritualist weirdo. This is really not the case and if that's how you see her the fault is entirely mine for the inadequacy of my writing. She's a sweet, warm, fun-loving, kind, generous person. Yes she is very clever, way cleverer than me, but she is never arrogant about it. People naturally turn to her for help and she is always ready to give her utmost because that's the sort of person she is. She is my friend, my lover, my wife, my life.

Her dad, Robert summed it up very well when he said at our wedding reception

“So you can imagine my dismay when she brought home a bearded, tattooed, leather clad, skinhead musician and told me she was moving in with him. I was not impressed.”

I wouldn't have been impressed myself if I'd been her dad and frankly I thank every god every day that she did. So to finish this little tale of our lives I thought I'd write down how we met.

I was in a pub in the Old Kent Road at a gig. I was there to support a friend who'd joined a newish band and frankly they were not that good. They were still at the stage of confusing volume with skill. After a while I was bored and got up to go to the toilet. A small group of people came in just as I was walking by and one of them was this kinda cute, sexy blonde but I had a girl with me in the pub and I was intent on having a pee so I didn't take too much notice. Then she turned around, looked at me and smiled and I fell over.

It was like I'd been poleaxed. Actually it was nothing like that at all since nothing hit me other than the floor. It was more like the universe had opened up and I'd stepped off the edge into nothingness

and everythingness. Most girls would have either ignored me or laughed but Miranda came over and knelt beside me.

“Are you OK?” she asked, looking concerned.

The pub was empty. In fact it wasn't even there. There was nothing, just the two of us in a sea of emptiness. No sound, no light, no dark. Not even the smell of the toilets.

She helped me up and stood there in front of me, looking deep into my eyes.

“My name's Miranda,” she said. “When you've sorted yourself out I'll be at that table over there with my friends.”

And she walked away.

A few minutes later I'd had a pee and was in the middle of a screaming match with the girl I'd gone to the pub with who didn't particularly appreciate the fact that I was dumping her to go and sit next to a goddess. It didn't last long as it was a pretty one sided screaming match and when I went to sit next to the goddess she pulled some tissues out of her pocket and said “You could probably use these to wipe her beer off your face. Might even be an idea to go and wash. Your beard is dripping.”

I had fallen in love with Miranda when she first turned to me and smiled. She didn't fall in love with me until later.

“I fell in love with you when you came to sit beside me,” she told me later. “After that girl had thrown her drink at you I realised you hadn't sworn at her or hit her or been aggressive or anything nasty. You were just honest with yourself and with her and you were polite and kind and genuine. When I saw you sitting beside me with beer dripping from your beard and that mystified 'I have no idea what's happening' look in your eyes I knew you were the one and that was the end of it. No doubts no uncertainties.”

Miranda is not a tree-hugging, intellectual, spiritualist weirdo, she's just a wonderful, wonderful person.

Chapter Eighteen

Miranda died nearly 3 years ago. Well, she didn't really die, she returned to the earth, reuniting her spirit with the spirit of nature. A rockfall at the far end of the Lake took her. She would have wanted it that way. Of course we never found her body. I didn't expect to. My angel had returned to where she'd come from. I buried my saxophones there, so she could keep them for me until the time comes for her to come and get me as she always said she would whenever we were parted.

Our Emma's grown up and has a child on the way. She and her man still run the curatives at The Grange, still helping people find their place in the universe.

I still live at The Grange as well and create my pottery pieces although the joy of life left me that day. My life goes on, filled with emptiness. The death certificate said she was 48 but she wasn't. She was ageless, timeless, unique.

I'm sitting at the stone table in the garden now. At the table where Miranda used to meditate in the golden light of the dawn. I'm watching the tail end of a storm as the sun sets over the valley.

* * *

“Hey babe, look, a rainbow, over there,” I nudged her and pointed to the west.

She looked then turned to me with that incredible loving smile of hers. “We found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, didn't we, hon.” She grabbed my hand and jumped to her feet, pulling me up with her “Come on, let's go find another one.”