

Tom

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the
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Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
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Typeset, printed and bound by Richard Jefferis
Edited by Judy Jefferis.

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Chapter One

Clancy and I were out for a walk when he died. We were ambling along, pausing frequently so Clancy could sniff around and pee, when there was a sudden harsh buzzing in that dark patch where the light from two street lights don't quite meet. A little car, all of a foot long, shot out from a hidden pathway. Old Clancy, being almost blind, couldn't really see what it was and started to growl and went stiff-legged, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. Clearly it was dangerous since benign things don't move suddenly with harsh buzzes.

There was a face-off for a few moments while the stationary car and Clancy eyed each other then, emboldened, Clancy started to slowly move towards it. I looked around to see who was operating the car and spotted a young lad, late teens perhaps even twenty, leaning against a car, full sized, parked perhaps four or five yards away. He seemed to be holding some sort of remote control but wasn't looking in our direction.

I gave Clancy a tweak on his leash and said "come on, boy" but he was staring at the toy car. God knows what his tired, old eyes saw but, to him at any rate, it was definitely a threat. His growling continued, the only sound in the silent night. He took a step forward, every fibre of his being poised and alert. The car suddenly shot forward with an enraged snarl and Clancy leapt backwards, stumbled and fell on his side with a whimper. The car stopped, seemed to gather itself then shot off backwards, arcing towards the lad by the parked car.

"Clancy," I said, "you OK, boy?"

I stepped up to him and bent down to touch his head. He didn't move. I squatted down beside him, my heart starting to beat faster.

"Clancy?"

I tried to lift him to his feet but he was a dead weight and his head lolled. His eyes were shut and the loose folds of skin over his jaw were stuck to his upper teeth, making him look like he was snarling.

"You OK there?" called the lad.

“My dog,” I said, trying to get Clancy at least to a sitting position, “he seems to be hurt. Your car ...”

He came over, picking up the car on the way.

“Shit,” he said looking at Clancy. “He doesn't look too good.”

“Clancy,” I kept saying, touching him and stroking him and trying to get him to do something. Tears were welling up in my eyes and I felt cold and empty.

“Want me to run you to the vet?” asked the lad.

“I, ... I ...,” I said, not knowing what to do. 'The vet' filtered through.

“Yes, please,” I said, trying to stay calm.

“OK,” said the lad. “Come on, put him on the back seat.”

The indicators of the car flashed and there was a loud click as the doors unlocked. The lad marched over and opened the back passenger door and chucked his toy car across to the other side and stood there, expectantly, waiting for me.

I gently lifted Clancy and carried him, his leash dragging behind and his head and tail hanging limply, over to the car and got in the back seat and held him safely on my lap. The lad picked up the part of the leash hanging outside the door and tossed it inside then shut the door. Even though he was fairly gentle the slam made me jump.

“Oh god, Clancy,” I said, my tears starting to flow. “Oh god, you poor boy, I'll get you to the vet, don't worry, you'll be fine.”

“Where to?” asked the lad, starting the engine. The car smelled strongly of artificial air freshener.

“Umm,” I said. I had to force myself to think. Even though Clancy was a fairly common attendee at the vet's, I wasn't thinking clearly. My mind refused to cooperate with working out where we were and how to get to the vet.

“Go left into Adams,” I said. “Umm, two roads down, then into Marsden. The vet's at the end.”

“Rightoh,” said the lad and revved the engine and let out the clutch. The car jerked forward and Clancy's head rolled towards me. My heart gave a lurch as he moved then I realised it was just from the sudden movement of the car.

“Adams,” said the lad, turning left. “How far down's Marsden?”

“It's either the second or the third, I think,” I said. “Go right.”

He slowed to read the street name then speeded up again to get to the next turn off.

“Marsden,” he said, turning right. “Down the end?”

“Yes,” I said.

Clancy was still lolling, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. I could feel his chest wasn't moving. He didn't seem to be breathing.

“Looks closed,” said the lad, pulling up outside. He pulled on the handbrake and killed the engine.

“There's a light on,” I said, “in that side room.”

“I'll go and look,” said the lad. “You stay here.”

He jumped out of the car, letting the door swing shut behind him and went up to the front door of the surgery. Numbly I watched him, my hand repeatedly stroking Clancy's inert body. I heard a dull thudding as the lad banged his fist on the door and half saw a shadow make the light from the back of the vet's flicker. There was a pause then the door opened and I heard voices and saw the lad gesticulating towards the car. Then the main lights of the surgery came on and a young woman in a white coat came out, closely followed by the lad. He made a couple of half running, half jumping movements and got to the rear door of the car before her and opened it. The woman peered in.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m a vet. Is this the injured dog?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Can we get some light in here?” she said, a touch of urgency in her voice.

The lad opened the front passenger door and fumbled with the interior light. It dimly lit the interior. She leaned in and touched Clancy then moved her hand around to feel his chest. Then she lifted his head and pulled it towards her, her other hand reaching inside her coat for a tiny torch. She flashed it in his eyes.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I’m pretty sure he’s dead. I’m sorry. Bring him inside and I’ll take a closer look at him.”

We made a sorry procession, the vet leading the way, me carrying a dead Clancy and the lad bringing up the rear, carrying the end of Clancy’s leash.

“In here,” said the vet, turning on a light in one of the consulting rooms.

I very gently laid Clancy on the table. He just flopped and I moved his head so he’d be more comfortable. The vet, Sue according to the name tag on her coat, pulled out a stethoscope and moved it around his chest. Then she started to feel his limbs and stomach. I vaguely remembered seeing her around on previous visits but she’d never treated Clancy.

“No sign of any injuries,” she said in puzzlement. “I thought you said he’d been hit by a car?”

She glanced at the lad.

“It was easier,” he said. “Although the dog was, in a way. It was my toy car. I think it scared him.”

“Oh, you mean one of those remote controlled things?” she said, turning back to Clancy.

“Yes,” said the lad.

“I’d say he had a heart attack,” said Sue. “Probably caused by fright.”

She flashed her little torch in his eyes again.

“I’m sorry,” Sue said again to me. “Umm, we can do an autopsy, if you want.”

“He’s definitely dead?” I asked, my voice breaking.

“Yes,” said Sue. “Although by the look of him he was pretty old.”

“18,” I said. “I’ve had him since he was a puppy, since he was eight weeks old.”

My self control gave way at that point and I started to sob uncontrollably. Sue helped me sit down on the hard plastic chair and tried to comfort me. The lad disappeared.

He reappeared a few moments later with a little plastic cup of water in his hand.

“I, err, got you some water,” he said. “Umm, I’m sorry.”

He put the water beside me on the table.

“I’m sorry,” I said, getting a grip on myself. “I’m fine now.”

I wasn’t but they both looked relieved to hear me say it.

“What was his name?” asked Sue.

“Clancy,” I said. I couldn’t look at him but equally, I couldn’t look away. He looked at peace though.

“Would you like us to, umm, dispose of Clancy?” she asked.

“No,” I said. I don’t know how vets dispose of dead pets but I doubted very much they had a nice little cemetery out the back. Probably a

small furnace. Clancy deserved better.

“I’ll take him home,” I said.

“I’ll give you a lift,” said the lad.

“Thanks,” I said.

I lifted Clancy in my arms and Sue coiled his leash on top of him.

“Thank you,” I said. “At least you tried.”

She gave a half shrug.

“It was probably instant, I’d say,” she said. “He didn’t suffer.”

I gave her a token smile and the lad and I left the surgery. I imagine vets quickly get used to the death of pets. It can’t be an easy job. I got in the back seat again, with Clancy on my knees. I found it difficult to let him go.

“Umm, where do you live?” asked the lad as the lights to the surgery blinked out.

I gave him my address. It was a short drive and I carried Clancy to the front door and struggled to hold him with one arm as I fumbled for my keys. The lad had followed me to the front door and, for some reason, followed me inside. I went through to the lounge where Clancy’s big, old cushion was and laid him on it. It looked like he was just sleeping, although there was none of his usual wheezing and snoring. The house seemed very quiet now.

“I’m really sorry,” said the lad, startling me. I hadn’t realised he was there. He was standing in the doorway to the lounge, looking really quite desolate.

“I was just checking the car,” he said. “Making sure it worked. It’s a present for my brother. It’s his birthday tomorrow.”

“How old will he be?” I asked, out of habit more than interest. Really I

couldn't give a damn. Clancy was dead and the ages of unknown strangers' relatives mattered not at all to me.

"Nine," he said.

"That's nice," I said, wishing he'd go away. Now, ideally, if not sooner.

"He's not really my brother," said the lad. "He's my step brother."

"Oh," I said. Did he really think I cared?

"Can I get you anything?" said the lad after a while. He seemed to be bothered by the silence.

"No thanks," I said. A vague sense of hospitality prompted me to say "there's some coke in the fridge if you want some."

"Cool, thanks," he said and disappeared.

I unclipped Clancy's leash and coiled it around my hand as I usually did and put it on the top shelf of the half height bookcase beside the door, as I usually did. Clancy would always start to get agitated after we had our dinners and pace, watching every move I made. Whenever I went near the leash he would start to bark excitedly, knowing that his walk was imminent. Some days I'd take him out quickly, other days I'd make him wait, teasing him so he could savour the anticipation. I don't know which he enjoyed more, the walk or the cold half sausage as a treat when we got back.

"Never again," I thought sadly to myself.

I sat down on the couch and patted his head but he was already going stiff. I don't know the biological reasons for that but psychologically it actually helps to bring the reality of death home. It makes it somehow easier to accept, perhaps by confirming there is no hope left.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked the lad from the doorway.

I'd already forgotten he was there. I looked up, seeing him as a person for the first time. He was maybe the same height as me but slimmer

and a lot younger, of course. He looked barely old enough to shave so he was probably on the light side of twenty. He had short hair which stuck out in spikes, like a hedgehog.

“I’ll bury him in the garden in the morning,” I said heavily. Maybe in years to come there’d be dandelions on his grave. Marsha would like that. Would have liked that, I should say.

The lad took a sip from his can of coke.

“Can I help?” he said.

“Why?” I asked, genuinely astonished.

“I feel responsible,” he said, looking at the floor.

“Oh don’t blame yourself,” I said. “Clancy was very old. He’s done very well, I mean, to live this long. He was half blind and had arthritis and a bit of a bladder problem. I think he died happy.”

I don’t know why I said that but as soon as I did I felt it was true. Clancy had been a strong, brave dog in his earlier years and, yes, I really do think he died happy, trying to protect us both from some terrible attacker. He died on duty, as it were, not in his sleep.

“Oh,” said the lad.

He drank some more coke but stayed in the doorway.

“I had a dog once,” he said. “He got run over. I was only little but I cried for days.”

I didn’t answer. Well, what can you say? Especially when your own dog, your only companion for most of the last eighteen years, has just died. Other people’s past grief pales at times like that.

“Did you say his name was Clancy?” asked the lad.

“Yes,” I said. “That was his name, still is actually, even though ...”

I couldn't bring myself to say "... he's dead".

"Why did you call him that?" asked the lad.

"My wife named him," I said. "I don't know why she chose Clancy."

I cast around in my mind, thinking back eighteen years to Marsha and the day I got her the puppy.

"I think she chose it from one of her favourite poems," I said, half remembering. "*Clancy of the Overflow* I think it was called."

"'Twas his shearing mate who wrote it," said the lad, softly, "and verbatim I will quote it: 'Clancy's gone to Queensland droving, and we don't know where he are.'"¹

I hadn't heard those words for an eternity and I slowly lifted my head in astonishment.

"Clancy of the Overflow," said the lad, looking embarrassed. "Banjo Paterson."

"She loved that poem," I said. "How do you know it?"

"I found a book of Australian poetry in the school library," he said. "I borrowed it and leaned the ones I liked. That was my favourite too. Is your wife Australian?"

"She was," I said. "She's dead now."

And so was Clancy, my last remaining link with her. Clancy's gone to Queensland. How appropriate. He's gone to be reunited with my wife, my queen, wherever her land is now.

"Oh," he said and paused. "Do you know what 'droving' is?"

"I think droving is what the Australians call herding cattle," I said. "A drover is like an Australian version of a cowboy."

¹ Clancy of the Overflow, Banjo Paterson, 1889

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah, I thought it was something like that, from the poem.”

He finished the coke and squeezed the can in his hand so it bent and distorted.

“I'd love to go to Australia,” he said. “Isn't that where the pyramids are?”

“No, that's Egypt,” I said, automatically. “I don't think there are any pyramids in Australia.”

“But it's hot and dry there, yeah?” he persisted.

“Umm, in places,” I said. “It's very dry and hot in the centre, although down south it gets quite cold.”

“Was your wife from the centre?”

“No, she was from Sydney.”

“Is that in the south then? Where it gets cold?” he asked.

“No, Sydney is on the east coast,” I said. “It gets pretty hot there too.”

For someone who knew and loved Australian poetry he was astonishingly ignorant of the country.

“Oh,” he said and disappeared back into the kitchen. Presumably to dispose of the coke can since he didn't have it any more when he reappeared.

“Is Queensland in Sydney?” he asked.

Despite my grief over Clancy I had to laugh.

“No,” I said. “Queensland is a state, like a big county and Sydney is a city. Queensland's a long way north of Sydney.”

“Oh,” he said and thought about it. “So it's hotter in Sydney than in

Queensland, then.”

“No, Australia is south of the equator,” I half heartedly tried to explain. “Queensland is near the equator so it's hotter than Sydney which is further south.”

“I thought it got hotter the further south you went,” he said.

“Only to the equator,” I told him. “After that it gets colder again until you're at the south pole.”

I thought I saw Clancy's tail twitch but realised it must have been my imagination. I nearly started to cry again. I sighed heavily and stroked his head and back. He felt cold.

“Can I help?” asked the lad.

“What?” I said. Why was he still here?

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Can I help you bury Clancy?”

“I suppose so,” I said.

“I finish at the shopping centre at nine,” he said. “Shall I come round after?”

“Yes, if you like,” I said.

“Cool,” he said. “Will you say a prayer?”

“I don't know any,” I said.

“Oh,” said the lad. “Right, I'll, err, see you tomorrow then. Around nine.”

“Fine,” I said.

“My, err, name's Tom,” he said.

“Me too,” I told him. “What a coincidence.”

Tom's a fairly common name so it wasn't that much of a coincidence but you have to say something, don't you.

"I'll tell you what's a coincidence," he said. "I'm eighteen too, like Clancy."

Chapter Two

I didn't sleep well that night and woke up late, feeling tired. I buried Clancy underneath some oleanders in the garden the next day. I said a few words about his life and how much I'd miss him and felt very sad and alone. Tom didn't turn up, which was a relief. He was a nice enough lad but I have little in common with teenagers and, to be honest, I'm kind of set in my ways and don't like intruders in my space. It's no utopia by any means but it's home, and comfortable.

Back in the house I picked up Clancy's cushion. It was a reminder of Clancy but it was also old, tatty and smelly and probably not the best keepsake so with a heavy heart I took it out to the rubbish bin. After a longish pause during which I held it in my hands and just gazed at it, I resolutely thrust it inside the bin and closed the lid. It felt like a betrayal in some way but Clancy was dead and life has to move on. I'd told myself that after Marsha died and life did, in a fashion, move on.

Using the energy of my newfound resolve I neatly rolled up Clancy's leash and put it safely in a drawer in the lounge then picked up his food and water bowls from the kitchen floor and took them out to the garbage bin as well then did the vacuuming to clear up the dog hairs that, inevitably, were on the carpets. That job done I went back into the kitchen to make myself a light lunch and discovered Clancy's food in the fridge.

A memory of his excited barking at meal times came back to me and I nearly started to cry again but I toughed it out. There were three or four sausages still on the plate for his after-walk snack and a half empty can of dog food. I binned the can, together with two unopened ones in the cupboard and took the sausages out to his grave. I pushed them into the fresh soil on top so they formed a crude, meaty wreath and left them for the birds. I left the plate by the sink to wash later and made myself a chicken sandwich and took it into the lounge.

It was very quiet in there. It's strange how, even when there are no obvious signs of life such as sounds, you can still tell when there is someone else around and the walls seemed to lean in around me emphasising my solitary prison. Not even the sound of Mr Milekov cutting his grass next door or the faint hum of distant traffic from the

main road the next but one street over brought any feeling of companionship. Perhaps I'd been too quick to dismiss Tom. Even a teenager can be better than nothing.

Perhaps I should get another dog?

The thought rattled around my brain while I ate my sandwich. It was a thought but not, in all honesty, a good one. Clancy was special to me because he had been Marsha's dog and, in some small way, he helped to keep her memory alive. Another dog wouldn't have any special significance and pets are, if you aren't devoted to them, often more of a nuisance. You can't just get up and go away for a weekend on the spur of the moment, for example, without planning who's going to feed them and take them to the toilet. Not that I ever went anywhere on the spur of the moment.

My life was filled with routine. I got up, went to work, came home, had dinner, took Clancy for a walk then worked on my online daily chess problem and finished the day with my online daily cryptic crossword. Every day. Weekends excepted, when I didn't go to work and did my shopping and other chores instead.

The sudden silence of Mr Malekov's electric lawnmower going quiet made me glance out of the window and decide that my grass needed cutting too. I made a mental note assigning it to next weekend and took my plate into the kitchen.

A weekend away?

“Nice idea,” I thought, “maybe some other time.”

I was forced to take holidays from work since they didn't like people carrying leave over into the next year but I usually just stayed at home and took Clancy on little outings so he could run around woods or fields or even, occasionally, a beach if we went for a long day trip. With Clancy gone the prospect of holidaying seemed more dismal than ever.

I changed the sheets and pillow cases on the bed as I do every Saturday and gathered up my laundry. I shoved it all in the machine

and set it going and made myself a cup of coffee and settled down to make a shopping list. It was brief, a few odds and ends of food, some more washing powder and, if I felt up to it, a new pair of shoes. The ones I wore to work every day were getting a little old and it was time I bought a new pair. The old ones would then be demoted to become my gardening shoes and my old gardening shoes would go in the bin.

I decided I couldn't be bothered to go shopping. Sunday morning would do just as well and the shoes weren't urgent. I dozed off in front of the TV for a while then emptied the washing machine into the drier then folded the washing and put it away. Dinner time arrived and I wasn't feeling particularly hungry so I boiled a couple of eggs and had them with toast and Marmite. That seemed to hit the spot though and I felt a little peckish afterwards so I had half a can of sliced peaches as well.

There was a gaping hole in my schedule though where Clancy's walk used to be. Half an hour with no replacement activity to fill it. For want of anything better to do I decided to shift my chess and crossword forward by half an hour and use that half hour to read before bed. I browsed the bookcase and found a John Grisham novel to read and put it on my bedside table. I'd read it before but not for quite a while and it didn't seem the sort of book that would give me bad dreams.

It felt strange settling in my armchair and going to the chess problem website without having had a walk first.

“Perhaps I should just go for a walk anyway,” I wondered to myself. “The exercise will probably do me good anyway.”

On reflection I decided that going for an evening walk wouldn't make any difference since that was what I normally did anyway. Stopping going for the walk, on the other hand, could well be detrimental in some way. I felt much happier having decided to continue with my routine and I got up and pulled on my jacket, missing Clancy's excited barking.

I followed the same route that Clancy and I had followed the previous evening. I had a reasonably good idea of where Clancy had had his

encounter with destiny and I had a vague feeling that I might bump into Tom. He'd seemed very keen on attending Clancy's burial and I was mildly curious about why he hadn't. I didn't know what car he had and I didn't recognise any that were parked in that street, other than the souped up Ford Cortina that's been there for over two years now. It's parked on the grassy strip between the pavement and the road and its wheels are almost entirely engulfed in weeds. Clancy had peed on it many times and perhaps, in his own way, contributed to the rust on its body panels.

I didn't run into Tom, of course. I realised when I got home that he was a teenager and it was Saturday evening so he was probably off out partying with his friends, not loitering on back streets playing with toy cars.

The chess problem was not too hard this evening. It varies, of course, since it would be impossible to think up problems that would be equally difficult every day but I worked out how White could, from the starting position provided, check-mate Black in the required seven moves in only about half an hour so I was feeling quite pleased with myself when I moved on to the crossword puzzle.

A couple of the clues were very easy, 'Maybe Edward, the academic, changes sides in vote? (9)' which was fairly obviously 'confessor', for example. But several were fiendishly difficult. I was sitting there, pondering 'Fabulous creature married fairytale creation (9)' with no inspiration, beyond the third letter being 'n' from 'confessor', when I heard footsteps in the gravel pathway in front of the house. Then they stopped and I heard nothing more so I returned to the crossword.

'Winter dance party is to be thrown! (8)'.

"Oh, please!" I said to myself, "that's too easy," and typed in 'snowball'. That meant the fabulous creature was now third letter 'n' and seventh letter 'o'. It wasn't much help.

An electric frisson shot through my body when the doorbell went and I jerked my head up.

"Who on earth can that be at this time of night?" I said out loud.

I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was almost nine thirty and I was barely halfway through the crossword puzzle. I waited to see if anything happened. After all, this is a fairly quiet neighbourhood and I don't have unexpected visitors. I don't often have expected visitors either and certainly not in the middle of the night. The doorbell rang again so I got up and went to the door. Just to be safe I flicked on the porch light before opening it. On reflection, I don't quite see how this would improve my safety since all it does is make it possible for an attacker to see what they are doing but I didn't think of that at the time.

I stood there in astonishment. It was Tom.

“Umm, hello,” he said, looking a little nervous and apprehensive, “I don't suppose I could doss here for the night?”

“What?” I said, taken by surprise.

“I've got nowhere else to go,” he said. “Just for one night?”

I stood there, my mouth open slightly, wondering what was going on and, perhaps more importantly, what to do. He was casually dressed and didn't seem to be carrying any weapons. I was about to say “no” and close the door when I saw that his eyes were red and a little puffy. Had he been crying?

“You'd better come in,” I said, “and tell me what's happened.”

I stood aside and waved him in. A look of relief crossed his face and he stepped over the threshold.

“You'd better come into the kitchen,” I said and he made his way there. I wondered how he knew the way then remembered that he'd been in the kitchen the night before, when we brought Clancy home.

In the kitchen I could see him better and I was beginning to get over my surprise. He was wearing a shirt but no coat and there were a couple of buttons missing.

“Now, what's happening?” I asked. He seemed agitated.

“That bastard beat up my mum,” he said tightly, “and I’ve been at the hospital all day and they told me to go home but there’s no way I’m going back to that place.”

I could see he was on the verge of tears, whether anger or fear or worry though I couldn’t say. Perhaps a combination of all three. Still, I now knew what to do. When there is a major personal catastrophe there is only one thing to do. Make some tea.

“Go in the lounge,” I said. “Sit down and try to calm yourself. I’ll make some tea. Do you want anything to eat?”

Carbohydrates are nature’s stress relievers, which is why no one ever comfort eats carrots or steak. He didn’t answer, just went into the lounge. I made some tea, very strong, then hesitated before adding three spoons of sugar to Tom’s. Sugar is a carbohydrate, after all, and hot, strong, sweet tea is, I’m sure, in all the medical textbooks. The better ones anyway.

“There you go,” I said, putting it into his hands. He sat up and bent forward, holding the mug with both hands.

“Drink some,” I said, sitting in my armchair and slightly twisting to see him better.

He drank some tea, made a face then drank some more. It seemed to help.

“Now,” I said, after a while, “let’s establish some basic facts. Who is ‘that bastard?’”

“Ken,” he said.

It wasn’t much help since the only Ken I knew was from work and he was on holiday in Spain with his wife and children so it almost certainly wasn’t that Ken.

“And who is Ken?” I asked.

“My mum’s boyfriend,” he said. “We live at his place.”

Now we were getting somewhere. Tom's mother had apparently been assaulted in some sort of domestic dispute. Personally I can't abide violence of any sort, least of all on women. Regardless of the provocation, real or imagined, there are always better ways to sort things out.

“Oh dear,” I said. “Is your mother badly hurt?”

I could see he was about to launch into an emotional tirade so I held up my hand to quieten him and suggested he had some more tea.

He gulped down what he was going to say then gulped down some tea.

“Stay calm,” I said. “Your mother is in the hospital?”

He nodded.

“Then she is safe and being looked after,” I said, “and you are here, so calm down. Are the police involved?”

He nodded over his tea mug.

“Is your mother badly hurt?” I asked again.

“Her nose is broken,” he said, his face contorting. “That bastard slapped her around and broke her nose! There was blood everywhere and I called an ambulance and I've just come from there and ...”

He was getting worked up again and nearly spilt his tea. I got up and took it out of his hand and put it on the table then sat next to him. He started to cry properly and I didn't know what to do. Marsha and I never had children so I have no experience of these things. I pulled my handkerchief out of my pocket, I'm prone to colds and always carry one, although fortunately I didn't have a cold at the moment so it was clean. I handed it to him, then for want of anything better to do I put my arm around his shoulders. He sagged limply against me and held the hanky to his eyes and let go.

I get embarrassed by displays of emotion but I couldn't really pull

away so I put my other arm around him and hugged him. We stayed like that for several minutes.

“Sorry,” he said, after a while. “It's been a bad day.”

“When did you last eat?” I asked.

He was trying to dry his eyes with a very damp hanky and was no doubt as embarrassed as I was. I vaguely remembered from my own teenage years that being cool was very important and crying is definitely not cool. For boys anyway.

“I don't know,” he said. “I think, maybe, umm, this morning.”

“OK,” I said. “You need to eat something.”

He probably wasn't going to starve in the next few hours but it gave me something to do. I went to my bedroom and got another hanky and gave it to him then went into the kitchen and made a chicken sandwich with the last of the cold chicken and three cheese and tomato sandwiches and took them in.

“Thanks,” he said, “for the hankies.”

“Go and wash your face,” I said. “You'll feel better.”

“You sound just like my mum,” he said, with a half smile, but disappeared down the hallway.

Clearly I couldn't send him back into a possibly abusive situation so after a few moments I got up and went to the spare bedroom. There was a single bed in there but it needed some linen and a blanket and pillows. My rare visitors didn't usually stay overnight and I'd thought of getting rid of the bed. The only reason I hadn't was that I had no other use for the room so I never bothered to do anything with it.

I was making the bed when I heard the toilet flush then water running in the sink. It went on for quite a while and I had almost finished making the bed when he emerged. He looked considerably brighter.

“Go and have some sandwiches,” I said. “And make some more tea if you want some. I’ll only be a minute.”

When I returned to the lounge he’d made us both some coffee and was halfway through the chicken sandwich so I took a cheese and tomato one, to keep him company.

“Thanks a bundle,” he said. “I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

“Don’t you have any friends or relatives?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“We only moved down three weeks ago,” he said, “mum and me.”

“Into ...”, I couldn’t remember the man’s name, “... what’s-his-name’s place?”

“Ken,” he said.

“Right,” I said, “so she doesn’t know him that well.” I thought for a moment. “So this hasn’t happened before?”

“No,” said Tom, “and it’ll never happen again, that effing bastard, I’ll kill him.”

He spoke vehemently but his build didn’t make his statement believable since he was quite slim and not muscular and didn’t look the sort to get into fights, or come out of them alive.

“I caused it,” he said sadly, after finishing off the chicken sandwich and picking up a cheese and tomato one.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I got the sack last night,” he said. “I stuffed up and dropped a case of milk cartons and they split so at the end of my shift they told me not to come back. That’s why I didn’t come round for Clancy’s funeral. I’m sorry. I was going to but I had to go home and explain to my mum.”

“How did getting the sack lead to, erm, Ken attacking your mother?” I asked.

“When he got back this afternoon,” said Tom, reaching for another sandwich, “she told him and he lost it, just erupted like a loony. Said he wasn't going to support no effing layabout who can't keep a job and we started rowing and my mum stood up for me so he gave her one then I jumped on him and then she started hitting him and then he lost his temper, I guess.”

“That's seems a little unreasonable,” I said. “People lose their jobs all the time. Had you been there long?”

“Only a week and a half,” he said. “It was a pretty shit job and didn't pay much either.”

“Well, I'm sure you can get another one,” I said.

“Probably,” said Tom. “Although that bastard's never liked me.”

“Why's that?” I asked. Tom seemed a reasonable lad, despite being a teenager.

“I'm gay,” he said.

I stared at him, dumbstruck.

“Don't worry,” he said with a little laugh. “You're not my type.”

Chapter Three

Tom went to bed soon after that remark since he'd only had a couple of hours sleep during the day instead of his full quota. He actually looked quite exhausted as no doubt the events of the day had also been highly stressful. Still, teenagers are pretty resilient so I was sure he'd be fine in the morning.

I sat on my own in the lounge for a while after he'd gone. I'd found his offhand, jokey attitude quite confronting. On two levels, in fact, I realised as I thought about it. Whilst I appreciated his implication that I was in no 'danger' it's actually disheartening, if that's the right word, to be told to your face that you are unappealing. Not that I ever thought that I was particularly attractive, of course, but on the whole people who don't like you tend to avoid you rather than say "you're not my type" directly. It's not that I was attracted to Tom, although I thought he seemed a nice enough lad, it's just that, like most people, I preferred to be liked rather than disliked.

Be that as it may, the more confronting issue was his sexuality. I'd never met a gay person before and while, in principle, my general philosophy is 'live and let live', it was outside my experience. Then it occurred to me that I have probably met any number of gay people, men and women, over the years. It's just that they haven't told me, or given any overt sign, that they were gay. No one has ever come up to me and said "Hello, I'm gay, nice to meet you."

On the other hand, it occurred to me, such people may well have given overt signs but, either because I'm not gay myself or because I'm not particularly good at reading other people's body language, I could very easily have missed the signs. A thought struck me and I groaned.

"Oh god," I said aloud.

John, the Production Manager where I work, is prone to putting his hand on my shoulder when we talk about some issue in Production.

"Maybe John is gay and is trying to tell me but I'm not realising it," I muttered.

I tried to remember how I normally reacted and whether I might be giving him hints that I could be receptive. Had he ever followed me into the toilets?

“Oh don't be so stupid,” I told myself firmly. “You've known John for years and he's always putting his hand on your shoulder. If it meant anything he'd have taken it further long ago or given up. It's just his friendly manner.”

I went to bed, not entirely certain of my feelings about having a gay person under my roof. I lay in bed, with my bedroom door shut for the first time in a very long time, thinking about it. I decided that I didn't have a problem with Tom's sexuality as such, it was more his open casualness about it. I hardly knew him and yet he was ... shameless? ... in the way he brought it up.

“Private lives are best kept private,” I thought to myself, as I drifted off to sleep.

I woke with a start a couple of hours later. All seemed well and I started to drift back to sleep again when I heard a sound. A half stifled cry of some sort. I was thoroughly inured to Clancy's strange nocturnal noises but this was different. I lay there, half asleep, wondering what it was when it came again.

“I wonder if Tom is all right?” I thought. “Should I get up and check?”

I lay there battling between going back to sleep and ignoring it or investigating and perhaps embarrassing the boy, or myself. The sound came yet again and woke me further. I decided I was going to have to investigate for my own peace of mind, if nothing else. I fumbled for the bedside light then got out of bed and put on my dressing gown since it was colder out of bed than it was inside. I opened my door and realised that the occasional stifled sounds I'd been hearing were actually not occasional or particularly stifled. Tom seemed to be making a fair amount of noise but it had been muffled by my closed door.

“Tom?” I whispered, tapping quietly on the half open door to the spare bedroom, “Tom?”

The sounds continued. I pushed open the door and went in, highly conscious of how this could be misinterpreted. The curtains were open and in the light of the half moon I could see Tom was tossing from side to side, his face screwed up and his arms moving as though to ward off something. He was moaning quite audibly and occasionally saying things like “no, no”, “stop it” and “leave her alone”.

I stood and watched for a few moments wondering what to do. Marsha had had a lot of bad dreams and I'd wake her and comfort her but was this the right thing to do with a stranger? A gay one at that?

Well, I couldn't just walk away. Aside from anything else, there was a soul in distress in my house and I had to do something.

“Tom,” I said quite loudly from the doorway. “Are you all right?”

He went quiet so presumably he'd heard me but he didn't wake up and, after a few breaths, started moaning and moving again. I went to the side of the bed and called his name again then reached out and touched his shoulder. He was instantly awake and staring wide eyed at me, his arms half lifted protectively. I stepped back so I didn't seem threatening, or possibly because I felt threatened myself.

“You were having a bad dream,” I said quietly. “You were tossing and turning and calling out.”

He slowly relaxed as he came awake, then started to remember his dreams.

“My mum,” he said, “he was hitting my mum and I couldn't stop him. I tried and I couldn't.”

He started to cry and I sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to touch his body under the blanket. I was very aware he was gay, for some reason. Perhaps it was more threatening to me than I had thought, although logically the last thing on his mind would be seducing me.

“You are absurd,” I thought to myself. “The boy is scared to death about his mother and you're worried he's going to molest you!”

I consciously thrust my concerns away and reached out to hug him. Regardless of anything else, he was a young lad, worried to death and in a strange place with none of his familiar comforts. He needed reassurance and security, not judgement.

“It's OK,” I said, several times, trying to sound as reassuring and friendly as I could. “Everything is going to be fine, it was just a bad dream. It's OK.”

He stopped crying quite quickly. I imagine he knew it was just a dream and that he was only re-living past events.

“How about some tea?” I asked.

“Yes, thank you,” he said.

I stood up and clicked on the bedside light and gasped. He was sitting up in bed and the covers had fallen down, leaving his torso exposed. He wasn't wearing any pyjamas, inevitably since he hadn't brought any clothes with him and I hadn't thought to offer him any of mine. That wasn't what made me gasp though. There were a number of livid bruises on his chest, stomach and upper arms.

“Jesus,” I said.

He pulled the covers up in embarrassment.

“I'm fine,” he said. “Just a few bruises.”

“I should've thought ...” I said, then stopped.

It honestly hadn't occurred to me that Tom might have been hit in the assault as well. He hadn't appeared injured in any way so I just assumed he was fine. I think I had formed some mental image of Tom on Ken's back while Ken was hitting Tom's mother and not in the line of fire himself. I made myself try to think clearly.

“Just bruises?” I asked, “Or are there any cuts or other damage?”

“Just bruises,” he said. “Although I think there's a scrape on my

shoulder.”

I made him lean forward and looked at his shoulder. There was a wide scrape, as though he'd slid down a brick wall.

“Have you had a pee recently?” I asked.

“Before I went to bed,” he said.

“What colour was it?”

“I don't know, I didn't look. I had my eyes closed.”

I hoped he hadn't missed, but it wasn't a major issue. I was well used to Clancy's bladder problems.

“Go and have a pee now,” I said, “and tell me what colour it is. Especially if it's red or pink.”

“What, now?” he asked, looking worried.

“Yes,” I said. “We need to get you to the hospital immediately if there's any sign of blood.”

“Umm,” he said. “I'm not wearing anything.”

“Ahh, of course,” I said, cursing my thoughtlessness, “just a sec.”

I went to the closet in my room and got a clean pair of my pyjamas and took them in to him.

“These should be OK,” I said. “I'm bigger than you but not by a huge amount. Put them on and go to the bathroom and I'll make some tea or would you rather have some cocoa?”

“Cocoa, please,” he said. “I hate tea.”

“Rightio,” I said, “cocoa coming up.”

I went to the kitchen and put some milk on to heat and found the

cocoa at the back of the cupboard. I don't often take cocoa myself but it smelt fine and was only a couple of months past its 'use by' date. I don't imagine cocoa goes bad, it probably just loses flavour, like coffee, so I gave us each two spoonfuls instead of the usual one. I was pouring in the milk when I heard the toilet flush.

“All clear,” said Tom, coming into the kitchen.

“How do you feel?” I asked, relieved.

“I'm starting to get stiff,” he said. “And sore, I guess the adrenaline is wearing off. My leg hurts too.”

He pulled up his pyjama leg and showed me a large lump in the side of his shin. It was discoloured but the skin wasn't broken.

“I think I ran into something when I called the ambulance,” he said, “but I don't really remember.”

“It must have been a pretty good fight,” I said. “I wonder what state he is in right now?”

“I don't think I'd have hurt him,” said Tom, sadly. “I'm not a fighter although if I'd had a gun I would have shot him.”

“Well, best not to think about things like that,” I said. “You're going to be sore for a few days but I think you'll be fine. There's not a lot you can do with bruises, just wait for them to sort themselves out. Sit and drink this.”

He sat down and asked if he could have some sugar so I fetched the sugar jar and the packet of aspirin.

“Take a couple of these too,” I said, sitting down. “They may help a little with the soreness.”

He did as he was told. I like that in a teenager, not that I know many. There are a couple of teenage clerks at work but I don't have a lot to do with them.

“Will your mother be out in the morning?” I asked. “What’s her name, by the way?”

“Jessica,” he said, “Jessica Waters, I’m Tom Hayford.”

“Tom Appleby,” I said. “Pleased to meet you.”

I held out my hand and he shook it and we both laughed.

“The woman at the hospital said to ring around ten,” Tom said. “And if there were no complications overnight I can go get her.”

“Where will you take her?” I asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” he admitted. “I really don’t want to take her back there but if she insists, I don’t think there’s much I can do, except be there in case it happens again.”

“Is there anywhere else you can take her?” I asked.

“Maybe a hotel,” he said, “but we can’t really afford that, especially with me out of work now.”

I was about to say something then checked myself and thought it over. I said it anyway.

“You can bring her here, if you like.”

It seemed very wrong for Jessica to go back to an abusive partner because there was nowhere else to go. If she chose to go back that was up to her but she needed an alternative in case she didn’t want to go back.

“Are you serious?” said Tom, his face lighting up.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve got plenty of room so you can have time to think and sort something else out. I’ve only got two beds though so you’ll have to sleep on the couch.”

“That’s so cool,” he beamed and gave me a hug. For one panicked

moment I thought he was going to try to kiss me. "Thank you so much, I'll tell mum."

He let go of me and I tried to recover my dignity.

"Ahmm," I said, clearing my throat and running my fingers through my hair. "Yes, well, only for a few days, mind."

"No sweat," he said. "That's great."

"Do you have any pets?" I asked.

I'd read an article in the newspaper about domestic abuse and how many women are forced to stay in a bad situation because of fear of how their beloved pets will be mistreated in their absence. Apparently shelters for victims don't normally allow pets. I had empathised with the article as I don't think I would have been able to abandon Clancy to a violent person if I were in that situation.

"No," he said. "Just me and mum. We were going to get a cat but that was before she decided to move in with that bastard."

"Why did she move in with him?" I asked. "Surely she knew what he was like?"

"Dunno," he said. "Maybe she didn't."

"I suppose not," I said, thoughtfully. "Does anyone really know the person they live with before they start living with them?"

"No idea," said Tom. "I've only lived with my mum, and dad, of course, before he left."

"How long ago was that?"

"Ten years or thereabouts," he said. "They got divorced and dad went to live with someone else."

"So your mother went back to her maiden name?"

He nodded, sipping his cocoa.

“You've got a brother, haven't you?” I asked. I vaguely remembered him saying something about that. “Isn't it his birthday or something soon?”

“Yeah, Albert,” said Tom. “He's my step brother. He lives with dad and Karen.”

“Ahh, good,” I said. “So he's not involved in this situation with Ken.”

Tom had finished his cocoa and looked exhausted but calm again so I packed him off to bed. I rinsed our mugs and left them on the drainer and went to bed myself. I felt virtuous for having offered a temporary solution to Tom and Jessica's housing issue and nervous that they would take me up on it.

“Oh well,” I said to myself, resignedly, “the offer's made now.”

Tom phoned the hospital at quarter to ten the next morning. I left him in peace and went to inspect Clancy's grave. The sausages were gone so it looked like a fox had been doing the rounds in the night. Fortunately nothing had tried to dig up Clancy.

“Well, Clancy, old boy,” I said. “You're missing some fun here.”

I imagined him wagging his tail. He'd always liked company. When I went back in, Tom was looking worried.

“What's Emaraiscan?” he asked.

“MRI scan?” I said. “I think it stands for Magnetic Resistance Imaging, or Resonance or something like that. Why?”

“They said mum's just gone in for one,” he said. “Is it serious?”

“I think it's more or less just a better version of taking an x-ray,” I said. “I'm sure I read somewhere that the pictures are three dimensional.”

"It sounds serious," he said. He lapsed into silence and started chewed his fingernails.

"Did they say anything else?" I asked after a while.

"They said mum's got a broken nose, concussion, a sprained wrist and extensive bruising," he said.

I didn't think the hospital would bother with an MRI Scan for a broken nose, a sprained wrist or bruises so they were probably checking her for brain damage from the concussion. I had the sense not to say this to Tom. He seemed worried enough.

"So, when can you see her?" I asked.

"They said I could come in in an hour or so when she's back from the scan," he said. "Although it could be a while for the results of the scan to come back."

"Did they say if she'd be coming out today?"

"It all depends on the scan, they said. I dunno. Just have to wait and see, I guess."

He stopped chewing his nails and turned to look at me.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" he asked. "About mum staying here?"

"Yes," I said. "You too, of course. Your mother may not want to stay with a strange man. I wouldn't think she'd trust me enough, after what's happened."

He nodded, absorbing the implications of what I'd said. It obviously hadn't occurred to him that his mother might not trust me, even though he apparently did.

"Ummm," I said. Something else had just occurred to me. He looked up again.

“You have nothing here,” I said, “and when Jessica comes out of the hospital she won't have anything either. Someone is going to have to go back and get your belongings.”

“Oh shit,” he said. He looked even more worried.

“Food's not a problem,” I pointed out, “and I doubt she'll be worried about cosmetics for a while, not with a broken nose, but she'll need some clothes and something to sleep in.”

He thought about it for a while then got up and pulled out a cheap wallet. He checked inside and sighed.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“I thought I had more money,” he said. “I thought I'd get her a few things, like, just for a day or two. I can go back for our stuff while he's at work.”

“Don't you have any money?” I asked.

“Only a fiver,” he said.

I sighed.

“Well, let's wait and see what your mother wants to do,” I said. “If needs be, I can lend you some money to tide you over for a bit. The shopping centre doesn't close 'til late and she may even have to stay in a second night.”

“You think she's that bad?” he asked anxiously. “What if she dies?”

“She's not going to die,” I said, wishing I hadn't stupidly mentioned a second night. I'd only mentioned it to suggest that he'd have more time to get some things. “They may just want to do some more tests, that's all.”

“You sure?” he said. “Oh Jesus.”

He leapt to his feet and started pacing nervously. He looked at the

clock on the mantelpiece.

“Oh come on,” he said, “only five minutes? You're kidding me.”

He paced some more then stopped in front of me.

“I can't just wait here,” he said. “It's doing my head in. I'm going back to get some stuff. Will you come with me?”

Chapter Four

We went in Tom's car.

“This is really not a good idea,” kept rolling around in my head but I tried to put on a brave face.

I am not, by nature or physique, good at confrontations. The types of problems I cope best with can generally be resolved by a little thought and the judicious use of a spreadsheet. As Tom drove, a set expression on his face and a tight grip on the steering wheel, I kept my hands clasped in my lap to keep them from shaking. Fortunately it was a short drive, since waiting builds apprehension and allows doubts and uncertainties to become overwhelming. If something unpleasant needs doing, which cannot be avoided, it is generally best to get it over with as quickly as possible before you can talk yourself out of it.

“Be firm,” I said to myself. “Be polite but also be implacable. Do not get involved in any negotiations. Once he sees he cannot win he will give in gracefully.”

I tried to avoid thinking about the possibility that he might hit me instead.

Tom pulled up beside the souped up Cortina that Clancy and I walked past every evening.

“Is this the place?” I asked. It had a run-down air and the Cortina didn't help improve its image.

“Over there,” said Tom, pointing across the road.

He took a deep breath then reached for the door lever and stopped to take another deep breath. I unclasped my hands and ignored the nail marks in my palms.

“Right,” said Tom and got out. He tried to move assertively but his bruises must have been sore since he was a little slow and he winced. Clint Eastwood and Bruce Willis would not have been impressed. I, on the other hand, was just slow, more from reluctance than soreness.

The house had a dark, brooding, menacing look about it. The windows leered at the street, their malevolent gaze mocking. The daffodils and tulips in the flower bed alongside the pavement held a menace that belied their usual cheery benevolence. The stones of the front path looked like they'd come from a graveyard and led to a front door of gothic evil. Vultures perched on its guttering, preening themselves and eyeing us with relish. The gate creaked ominously as Tom swung it open.

"Hello there," called a neighbour cheerfully. He was weeding his own flowerbed and had spotted Tom.

"Saw an ambulance here yesterday," he said. "Everything all right?"

Perhaps it's just the English who ask if everything is all right when it clearly isn't. If it had been, there would have been no need for an ambulance.

"My mum just had a little accident," said Tom, pausing on the pathway.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear it," said the neighbour, happily decapitating a small, defenceless weed. "Hope she's all right."

"Oh, she's fine," said Tom. "The hospital just kept her in overnight for observation. I'm going to fetch her in a bit."

"That's nice," said the neighbour, giving me a casual glance and dismissing me. "There was a police car here too."

Tom gave me an indecipherable look.

"When was that?" I asked.

The neighbour looked at me again. His look clearly said "and who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Tom's," I said. It sounded very implausible. "Umm, Tom's mother," I added.

He nodded and squatted back on his heels.

“Ohhh, nineish, I'd say,” he said. “I saw it though the window. They went away not long after, took Ken with them. I don't think he's back yet.”

The vultures turned back into pigeons and the gothic castle of terror morphed into the pleasant little suburban house Clancy and I had walked past a thousand times or more. The daffodils brightened and stopped being menacing and nodded cheerily at the tulips. Even the Cortina across the road started to sparkle happily in the sunshine and stopped brooding.

“His car's here,” said Tom, pointing to a car on the driveway.

The neighbour nodded. He was clearly waiting for a detailed explanation.

“I'm sure Ken will be back soon,” I said. “Probably stayed with a friend overnight.”

The neighbour didn't like this explanation but there wasn't a lot he could do about it. Tom glanced at me and walked to the front door and I followed. The neighbour watched us closely. I had a funny feeling he thought I was the cause of the previous day's disturbances.

Tom opened the door and went inside. I don't know what I expected, perhaps pools of blood on the floor and 'scene of crime' tape strewn everywhere but it looked like a perfectly normal interior. Not to my taste, admittedly, but perfectly normal. He went into what looked like the lounge and picked up a footstool and took it into the hall.

On the surface the lounge looked fine but knowing what had happened I could see inconsistencies. The mantelpiece, for example, had a clutter of odds and ends but was completely bare for perhaps a foot on one side. Very likely the objects at that end had been swept off and the breakages cleaned up but the mantelpiece itself not yet rearranged. Beside it were some marks in the carpet that suggested a small table had recently sat there but only a couple of splinters of wood were there now. There was a smear of something dark brown

down the wall, probably dried blood. The couch had, again going by the marks in the carpet, been pushed out of its normal position and then pushed back again, but not quite to the exact position. There was an empty vase beside it, with a fresh stain in the carpet and a couple of petals.

I felt like a detective, deducing the crime from the evidence that remained.

I went into the hallway and through to where I could hear Tom. It looked like the main bedroom as there was a large, double bed in it. Tom had put the foot stool in front of a wardrobe and had presumably used it to take a suitcase down from on top of it. In any event, there was a suitcase on the bed, open, and he was going through clothes in another wardrobe and putting some into the suitcase. He stuffed in some handfuls of underwear from a chest of drawers and what looked to be a couple of nighties then disappeared into the hallway. He reappeared a few moments later with some jeans and tee shirts and crammed them into the suitcase.

“Anything else I should take?” he asked me.

“Umm,” I said, “any important documents? Passports, perhaps, drivers licences, things like that? Credit cards?”

“I don't know where mum keeps them,” he said, casting his eyes around.

“Her purse or handbag?”

“She took that in the ambulance,” he said.

“Did she keep any money in the house?”

“I wish,” he said, looking thoughtful. “No. I can't think of anything else for the moment. This'll have to do.”

“How about toiletries?” I asked. “Toothbrushes and things like that.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just a sec.”

He disappeared again and I could hear noises that echoed a little, as though from a bathroom. I looked around and it occurred to me that there were no photographs in the bedroom. I went back into the lounge and there weren't any there either. I thought this was interesting but for the life of me I couldn't see any particular significance to it. Still, I was feeling a little lightheaded and carefree since my anticipated confrontation wasn't going to happen after all so I went out the front door to find the rubbish bins. In my play-acting role as a policeman, I wanted to see if there was any evidence of damaged tables and ornaments that could be used in evidence.

“Hello,” said the man walking up the pathway. “What are you doing in my house?”

Ooops.

A taxi pulled away and the man came closer.

“Umm,” I said, “err.”

I get flustered easily and it didn't help that my heart had suddenly started to race.

“Well, you're obviously not a policeman,” the man said.

“Hello Ken,” called the neighbour. He was walking back to his gardening spot with some sticks in his hand. “What happened to you last night?”

“Oh, just a silly little misunderstanding,” the man called back, waving his hand. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Did the police put you in the cells overnight?” the neighbour wanted to know. He was grinning at the absurdity of the idea.

“No, no,” said the man quickly. “I, er, stayed with a friend last night. I'll catch up with you later.”

I heard him mutter “nosy sod,” just as Tom appeared with the suitcase and a plastic bag and said “oh shit.”

“Is he with you?” said the man to Tom, nodding at me.

Tom nodded, frozen to the doorstep.

“Let's go inside and talk,” he said. “I'm Ken Boothe, by the way.” He held out his hand and smiled politely. “This is my house.”

Out of habit I shook his hand, he didn't appear to have talons or satanic markings on his fingers or horns on his head. He was going bald so they would have been clearly visible.

“Tom Appleby,” I said. “Pleased to meet you.”

He nodded pleasantly and held his other hand up inviting me inside. “Come on in.”

“I'll take that,” he said to Tom, relieving him of the suitcase. “Let's go into the lounge.”

He slipped the suitcase into the main bedroom as he went past and pulled the door closed. I followed him into the lounge and Tom mutely followed me, his shoulders hunched, the plastic bag clenched in both hands.

“Have a seat,” he said. “Would you like some coffee or anything?”

I looked at Tom but he was clearly in something of a panic. My own heart was calmer now since Ken was not in the least bit threatening. He seemed quite normal and surprisingly amiable.

“That's very kind of you,” I said. “But we ought to be going.”

“I suppose Tom has told you what happened?” he said.

I nodded.

“Such a dreadful thing,” he said, looking apologetic. “Jessica tripping over like that. She can be so clumsy at times.”

Tom came to life. “You hit her, you bastard,” he cried angrily.

He stepped towards Ken aggressively, dropping the plastic bag. Ken stepped back in alarm.

“Tom, no,” I said, stepping in front of him. He bumped me but subsided.

“You see what I'm up against?” said Ken. “An aggressive boy like that. Is it any wonder Jess and I had words about him? I tried to set him a good example but he's nothing but trouble. I suppose he's been lying to you about me.”

Tom started towards him again and again I stepped in his way.

“No, Tom,” I said quietly. “This isn't the way. Go and get the suitcase. Go on.”

I pushed his shoulder in the general direction of the door and he shot Ken a filthy look. More importantly he started moving towards the door.

“So, erm, how is Jessica?” Ken asked.

“She has a broken nose,” I said, “and extensive bruising and concussion.”

“Oh the poor thing,” he said. “Where is she now? With you?”

“No, she's in the hospital,” I said.

“Ahh, right,” he said. “Yes, I must go to her. As soon as you've gone. Yes, she needs me.”

He looked worried and concerned.

I was in a quandary. I hadn't witnessed the events of the night before and I only had Tom's version of what had happened. As yet, I hadn't even met Jessica, let alone heard what she had to say. Perhaps Jessica had tripped and fallen and they actually had a loving relationship. Should I tell him to stay away or should I agree with him?

“Jessica just needs to rest,” I said, prevaricating. “Perhaps it’s best if she doesn’t have any visitors for the moment.”

“You could be right,” he said. “After all, it was a nasty accident. She needs a chance to relax and sort her mind out.”

He sat down heavily on the couch and put his head in his hands and I started edging towards the door. He suddenly looked up at me.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “Who are you and why did Tom have a suitcase?”

“We’re here to collect some of Tom and Jessica’s things,” I said, continuing to edge towards the door.

“What for?” he demanded, jumping to his feet. “Where is she going?”

“They’re going to stay with me for a few days,” I said. I had a funny feeling about the way the conversation had turned.

“Stay with you?” he said. “You? Who are you?”

“Tom Appleby,” I said. “I’m just a friend of the family.”

“But she doesn’t know anyone down here,” he said. “Or has the slut been whoring round behind my back? While I was at work?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t actually know Jessica.” I was within arms reach of the door. “I’m a friend of Tom’s actually.”

“Ohh,” he said contemptuously, “another queer then.”

“No,” I said, surprised at how calm I felt. “Just a friend.”

He started towards me. Amazingly I felt no fear, perhaps because he wasn’t a threatening man physically. He was really quite ordinary.

“I think it’s best we go now,” I said, standing in the doorway. The bedroom door was open and the front door moved gently in the slight breeze. Hopefully Tom was back at the car.

“Umm, I’m sure Jessica will be in touch with you very soon,” I said.

He wilted and ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

“Oh god,” he said. “Tell her, tell her ...”

He cast around for what he wanted me to tell her.

“Tell her I need her back,” he said. “Tell her I love her and she means everything to me.”

I nodded. What else do you do in such a situation? Argue?

“You will tell her, won’t you?” he said. “And that I’ll be waiting for her, longing for her to come back.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll be sure to pass that message on. Umm, goodbye, Mr Boothe.”

I turned and marched down the hallway, trying not to run.

“And make sure she understands it was an accident,” called Ken after me. “She had an accident and tripped, that’s all. Make sure she understands that.”

I stopped at the front door and looked back. Ken was standing in the doorway to the lounge, wringing his hands and looking a little pathetic.

“Bye,” I said and shut the front door behind me. I gulped in fresh air and started to shake as the adrenaline hit me. I left the front gate open and saw that Tom was standing beside his car. He looked very relieved to see me.

“Do you have the suitcase?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s on the back seat.”

“Let’s go then,” I said and got into the car. He jumped in and started the engine then groaned.

“What?” I said.

“I forgot the bag from the bathroom,” he said. “Oh shit, I’ve got to go back.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” I said decisively. “We can get those things at the supermarket. I need to get home as quickly as possible.”

Although I was shaking, my mind was crystal clear, at last, and thinking properly. Some years previously I had been going towards the mens’ toilet at work when one of the female members of staff had run out of the ladies’ toilet in distress. One of the men from the shop floor had been hiding in the ladies’ toilet and was trying to film women using the toilet with his mobile phone. He was dismissed immediately, of course, and there was an enquiry but the key point is that I had been appalled and disgusted at how quickly my memory of the events had faded and become blurred to the point where I wasn’t clear about what I or the man concerned had said and done. I needed to get home as quickly as possible to write down what I could of my meeting with Ken Boothe. Who knows, perhaps if Jessica pressed charges I might have to make a statement in court and my memory might have faded or been altered by the intervening months.

Tom drove me home then departed to go to the hospital. I opened my laptop and found that the crossword I had been doing the night before when Tom turned up was still there and had timed out, giving me a very low score. Was it really only last night? It seemed such a long time ago. I shut it down and opened a word processor and tried to write down what had happened at Ken Booth’s. Already my clarity was fading but I’m fairly sure I managed to record the more salient points.

I saved the file then opened the VPN connection to connect to the server at work and saved a copy in my personal folder there. I’m paranoid about backup copies because when companies lose their accounting data they generally go out of business soon afterwards. Admittedly it’s sometimes because the company was in trouble anyway and their records were lost deliberately to hide something but when a company had no record of who owes it money or what it owes to others, it’s more or less doomed.

I made myself a cup of coffee and mulled over the document, tweaking words here and there and adding a line or two as I played back as much as I could in my memory. There was something about it that didn't feel right. At the bottom of the document I wrote a little note about how Ken had suddenly changed from being sympathetic and worried to accusatory, then back again. Then I remembered what he'd said about her whoring around. I struggled to remember his exact wording and added that to the account as well.

Aha! It had suddenly come to me. I went to my study, not that I ever did any studying there, and found my little compact camera. I didn't use it very often and the battery was flat. I hunted around and found the charger and plugged it in. If Jessica had tripped and fallen and hurt herself that way – which was, on the face of it, plausible – why was Tom covered in bruises? We needed photographic evidence.

A couple of hours after I'd got home I started to worry about why Tom hadn't returned. It was conceivable that Jessica had decided to go back to Ken Boothe's house but I felt sure that Tom would let me know and he didn't know my telephone number. After three hours I was distinctly agitated.

“What was that?” I said to myself at a noise in the street. It sounded like a car door. I peered out of the front window into the early evening gloom and sighed.

Tom's car had pulled up out the front and he was going around the front of the car. He opened the passenger door and bent to help someone out. I went into the kitchen to put the kettle on then made my way to the front door.

“You must be Jessica,” I said to the strange looking alien on my doorstep. Tom stood behind it, grinning.

It had a purplish black band across its upper face where a human would have had eyes and a huge, white beak-like protuberance underneath. More purplish-black extended beyond the beak on one side, going up into the hairline at the top and down to the jaw at the bottom. It had vaguely human lips but the top one seemed unnaturally large and looked to have split. What hair the creature had was covered

by a gaudy scarf or cloth.

“Uh ho,” it said. “Eff, Um Yes'ca. Ice ooh eat ooh.”

“I'm Tom,” I said. “It must be painful to talk so don't try. Come on in.”

I stood to one side and the alien stepped inside. Heavy bandaging protruded from beneath the sleeve of what appeared to be a distinctively artisanal coat.

“Come into the lounge,” I said. “Would you like some tea or coffee?”

She shook her head and followed me into the lounge and sat, painfully it seemed, in my armchair. Tom came in too, with the suitcase.

“Where ...?” he said.

“Put it in the spare room,” I said, “where you were.”

I sat down on the couch. I rarely sat on the couch as I am, as I've already mentioned, a creature of habit. It didn't feel comfortable. Whether it was the couch or simply my not being in my accustomed spot, I couldn't say. Certainly the lounge looked unfamiliar and different from this angle.

What do you say to a perfect stranger, in pain, unable to talk coherently and straight from the hospital? I had no idea. We sat in silence and looked at each other. Fortunately Tom didn't dawdle.

“Mum's knackered,” he said, “and in pain. They gave me some tablets. Would it be OK if I put her to bed?”

“Certainly,” I said, jumping to my feet.

We fussed around getting her to the bedroom and I left Tom to deal with the mechanics of changing her clothes and putting her in the bed. I warmed some milk and got out a teaspoon since I didn't have any straws. It was obvious from the little she had said that it hurt to move her jaws as well.

I took the milk into the bedroom and Tom fed her a couple of tablets and milk with the teaspoon. I left them to it and went back to the lounge. Tom joined me a few minutes later.

“You must be pleased your mother is out of the hospital,” I said. “How was the MRI scan?”

“They said it was fine,” he said. “They did it because mum was having trouble focusing her eyes but she can now.”

“Good,” I said. “All she needs is rest and time to recover. Now, there's something I want to talk to you about.”

I explained my thinking about what Ken had said about Jessica's injuries coming from an accidental fall. Predictably Tom got quite agitated about that.

“If it was a fall,” I told him, “it doesn't explain why you are covered in bruises. I want to take some photos of you in case it ever goes to court.”

He understood but was surprisingly reluctant to strip off in front of me. He did in the end. I got him to hold the Sunday newspaper as well so the photos could be dated. It was a nice, fresh copy since I hadn't had a chance to read it, so it photographed well. As did his bruises, which were turning a rich, blue-purple-black and stood out nicely.

We had a light dinner and I abandoned the lounge so he could get some sleep on the couch. It had been a stressful day for both of us, although more so for Tom than me. I went to bed early and tried to work on my chess problem but just couldn't engage with it at all. I dislike it when my routine is upset and I felt exhausted.

Chapter Five

“Thank you, Janey,” I said.

She'd handed me a manilla folder of cheques to be signed. Janey was one of our purchase ledger clerks.

“The top one's already been signed by Mr Morley,” she said and started inspecting her nails, leaning her hip against the edge of my desk.

I signed all the company's cheques but it was our policy that any payments over £10,000 were counter signed by one of the directors. Janey waited in case I had any questions.

“Don't we owe Perkin Ebson's a lot more than this?” I asked working my way through them. There weren't many since it was a Monday.

“Yeah, but we're still waiting for the documentation to come through,” she said, without looking up from her nails. “They've promised it but Sue said not to pay them for that contract until Mr Dawson's signed off the certification.”

“Ahh, yes,” I said. “I thought it came through last week?”

“It was incomplete, Mr Dawson said,” said Janey. Her nails seemed to have passed inspection and she looked at me. She didn't seem to smile very often but when she did her face changed dramatically. She didn't smile now.

I made a note to talk to Jim Dawson about it, the documentation, not Janey's face. I needed to keep abreast of these things – if the certification wasn't complete, even for a tiny 50p bolt, we wouldn't be able to invoice a client for a stage payment on a contract worth perhaps £½m. These little details can be excruciatingly important.

I signed the last cheque and passed the folder back to her and she headed for the door.

“Umm, Janey,” I said, sitting back in my chair, “how old are you?”

She paused in the doorway, a little confused by my question.

“Nineteen,” she said. “Nearly twenty.”

“Ahh,” I said. There was an incomplete thought in my head.

“What, umm, do you do in the evenings?” I asked.

“Go on Facebook, mostly,” she said.

Then she suddenly looked anxious.

“Ere, you're not asking me out are you?”

“Good god, no,” I said, feeling suddenly stupid and going pink. “I'm old enough to be your father.”

Actually, at forty nine I was, theoretically at least, just old enough to be her grandfather, if both I and one of her parents had reproduced at fifteen.

“It's just that, umm, I've got a friend staying with me at the moment and her son is eighteen,” I said. “I was just wondering what teenagers do in the evenings. I'm sure he'd rather be doing that than spending his time with me.”

“Ohh,” she said, her face clearing. “Doesn't he have any friends, like?”

“They've only just moved to the area,” I said. “He doesn't know anyone.”

“Poor sod,” she said. She showed her emotions on her face very readily. She was now looking both concerned and sympathetic. “I remember when we moved here a few years ago. I didn't make any friends for three whole days.”

The emphasis she put on those last three words showed the significance she put on friendships and relationships.

“I can friend him, if you like,” she said. “What's his email address?”

“I don't even know if he has an email address,” I said.

I was a little surprised to hear 'friend' being used as a verb but language is a living growing thing. I knew about Facebook, of course. Barely a day went by without there being an article in the newspaper about the dangers of Facebook and addiction to social media and the havoc it is apparently causing to society. If one believed everything one read in the newspapers, Facebook was the equivalent to Satan in the Middle Ages. Never having used it I reserved judgement.

“Mobile?” she asked.

“He has a phone,” I said, “but I don't know the number.”

“Ohh,” she said. “I guess I could find him from his name.”

I scribbled his name on a scrap of paper and gave it to her. It struck me as a trifle odd that these days when you want to find someone you don't ask for their name first. In fact it seemed that names simply made it more difficult. I was also struck by her unquestioning assumption that he subscribed to Facebook.

She stuffed the scrap of paper in the Cheque file without bothering to look at it and disappeared quickly. A minute or so later I heard loud laughter coming from the Purchase Ledger section so I presumed she was telling Sue and Mary about how I tried to ask her out and covered it by inventing an imaginary guest. I hoped she found Tom on Facebook, if only to clear my own name. Accounts departments are fairly dull places and gossip thrives like wildfire. Ordinarily I don't mind as it helps keep the younger staff awake but I prefer it not to be about me.

I had a meeting that afternoon to discuss the current state of negotiations for a potential new customer contract so I spent some time working on a spreadsheet analysing the profitabilities of various aspects of the system design and implementation. I ought to mention that I am the accountant for Morley Fluid Systems. We manufacture large scale pumping systems for mines, tankers and so on. The company's marketing slogan is “If it will go in a pipe we can pump it” although there are a lot of things that will go in a pipe that we can't

pump, such as concrete that's set. Still, no one has ever asked us to design a system for pumping set concrete. I imagine if someone ever does we'll think up a way. We have some excellent design engineers.

John, the Production Manager, collared me after the meeting.

"Tom," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "can I have a word with you about last week's production figures?"

"Certainly," I said, shrinking slightly from his touch, "let's go to my office."

He let go of my shoulder, reluctantly it seemed to me.

"Do you know anything about gay people?" I asked, suddenly, surprising myself.

"Why?" He stopped in the corridor and looked at me intently. "What have you heard?"

Now that answer really did surprise me.

"Oh lord," I thought. "Maybe he is gay after all."

I carried on walking and he caught up with me. I inched slightly further away from him though as we walked to my office.

"I haven't heard anything," I said. "Why? What's there to hear?"

"Oh nothing," he said, and thumbed through a fistful of papers in his hand.

"Grab a seat," I said when we got to my office. I went the long way round to get behind my desk while he sat down. It seemed ... safer? God knows why.

"Now," I said, going through a pile of folders on my desk and pulling out the one marked Production: Weekly Returns. "Here we are, last week's report."

“My nephew’s gay,” he said with a sigh. “It still bothers me a little although I don’t know why. Shouldn’t do, not in this day and age. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. Sorry.”

“Ahh, I see,” I said, not really seeing at all. “You were worried I was going to somehow make some trouble for you?”

“I suppose so,” he said. “although it’s not the stigma it used to be. Mind you, some people can be funny about it and think I can’t do my job properly because I have a gay nephew.”

“Really?” I asked. “How strange.”

“Yes,” he said. “Mostly hard right fundamentalist types, like Wacko Jacko.”

Wacko Jacko was Winston Jacobs, one of the company’s non-executive directors. He was on the Board solely because of his political connections and occasionally smoothed the way when some aspect of Government policy looked likely to interrupt the smooth running of the business, such as the possibility of denying a mining permit for a mine that would be using our pumps. Conceivably Winston Jacobs might prove useful when we wanted a mine denied a permit because they planned to use a competitor’s pumping system but that situation hadn’t arisen yet.

“Ahh,” I said, a little light breaking through my relatively naive mind. “So you think Wacko Jacko might try to get you sacked because of your nephew?”

“Could be,” he said, “we don’t get on too well. Keep it to yourself, eh.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m in something of a similar position myself. I, umm, have a friend staying with me at the moment and her teenage son is gay.”

John leaned backwards in surprise and thumped his forearms on the arms of the chair.

“Good god,” he said. “You? A woman? Blimey.”

He burst out laughing.

“Well, well, well, old Tom the Apostle's got a woman, well I never.”

I stared at him. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Big mouth, always been a problem. Wife's always telling me off about it.”

“What has Thomas the Apostle got to do with anything?” I demanded. I was quite hurt by his reaction.

“Umm,” he said, looking out of the window with a half smile on his face. “Umm, Tom the Apostle is your nickname in, umm, certain circles.”

“Why?” I asked. I was genuinely curious and, I have to be honest, perturbed. I was surprised I even had a nickname.

“Umm,” he said, “well, erm, it's because, well, you're a bit of a dry old stick. Since Marsha, well, umm, have you even spoken to a woman since Marsha?”

“Of course I have,” I said in irritation. “There's Janice on the Board and Elaine in HR and I've got at least ten women clerks out there, and there are countless women in supermarkets and shops and ...”

It gradually dawned on me what he was saying and I fell silent. He didn't mean talking to women I worked with, he meant talking to women in another sense.

“Right,” I said. “Tom the Apostle. As in celibate. Right.”

He raised his eyebrows. I felt embarrassed and shuffled some papers around.

“There's nothing wrong with that, you know Tom,” he said. “It's just you know how people love to gossip.”

I wondered if Janey called me Tom the Apostle as well. No wonder she

looked panicked. Not only was I a lot older than her but apparently I had a reputation as a, well, what? A religious nut?

“People don't think I'm a religious freak, do they?”

“Lord no,” said John. “It's just that, well, people are scared of people who are different and a middle aged man who doesn't like women is, well, unusual.”

“Oh god, people don't think I'm gay, do they?”

I expected him to instantly say “No.” He didn't.

“Umm, one or two might have suggested that,” he said. “Not anyone who's known you for a while though. Those of us who've been here for yonks know what you went through with Marsha and we sympathise, we really do. Not many men can hold a memory as long as you have.”

I stared out of the window for a minute or so, lost in thought.

“Yes, well,” I said, turning back to my desk. “The production figures.”

He watched me for a moment.

“I've just remembered,” he said. “We were talking about gays.”

I sighed. I wanted to get back to the comforting world of numbers and business flows. Personal revelations were some considerable way outside my comfort zone.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “The production figures.” I tapped my finger on the latest weekly report.

“They can wait,” he said. “Your lady friend has a gay son? Does he know he's gay?”

Comfort would have to wait.

“Yes,” I said. “He told me himself.”

“Really?” he said. “Most gays aren't that open, He must trust you a lot.”

“Well, he said I wasn't his type,” I said.

“Ohhh,” John went wide eyed. “Did you come on to him then?”

“No, of course not,” I said irritably. “I'm not gay.”

“No, I was only joking,” said John. “So long as you're his mother's type, eh.” He winked and pulled his ear lobe.

I was about to say “no, it's not like that,” but I decided not to bother. He'd only ask what it was like and I didn't really have an answer. I was reluctant to admit I had opened my house to a victim of domestic abuse, to someone I didn't even know. Perhaps there was more of a stigma to that than being gay? Or perhaps he would question my motives? I wasn't clear what my motives were myself but however honourable they were, malicious people could easily misinterpret them. On the other hand, word of Jessica might get around and my nickname would get dropped. I confess I didn't like it and nicknames can often be quite cruel. Marsha wouldn't have liked it either, I'm sure.

I gave him a thin smile. “I'm not sure how to treat him,” I said.

John looked puzzled.

“Well, since he doesn't fancy you and you don't fancy him,” he said, “why treat him any differently to anyone else? He is human, after all.”

“I don't know,” I said. “It's just outside my experience, that's all. Once he'd told me he seemed ... different.”

“Ohhh,” said John. “You're afraid of him.”

“Of course not,” I said. “He's only eighteen.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked John. “He represents an unknown factor to you and you find that a threat. I know how you feel, I went though the same when I found out about

my nephew.”

“What did you do about it?” I asked.

“Not a damned thing,” he said. “Just got used to the idea. Doesn't take long. He's just another boy and he's my nephew, after all. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

He laughed again. “You of all people should know that.”

“Tom the Apostle again?” I asked, wryly.

“Doubting Thomas,” he said. “Put your doubts aside and let him be himself. At eighteen he has enough problems with his hormones and finding his way in the world without you judging him as well. Does his mother know?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I would think so. He's pretty open about it.”

“Hmm,” said John. “Best not to mention it to her then in case she doesn't. Wait until you're certain she knows. He may not be as open with his mum as he is with others. Not all kids are.”

I thought about that. There had been certain aspects of my own childhood that I hadn't told my parents about either.

“Yes, good point,” I said. “Thanks for the advice. The production figures?”

After John had gone, I made myself some tea and thought for a while. I suppose Tom must trust me. After all, he'd come to me for help three times now; when he needed somewhere to stay, when he had to go back to Ken Boothe's and when his mother needed help. I wondered why he trusted me and if I was, indeed, worthy of it. It occurred to me that I must trust him as well. After all, I'd left him and his mother alone in my house all day.

I laughed, and nearly spilled my tea.

“Serve me right if I get home and find they've gutted the house and

disappeared,” I thought. “I wonder why it never crossed my mind? Maybe trust is a two-way thing or maybe I’m just a fool.”

I turned back to my desk and opened up my web browser. I typed “stigma domestic abuse” into Google. There were about ten million hits. I opened the first one. It was from a website called Psychology Today and was written by someone with a PhD so it was probably reputable². I read it and was quietly shocked. Apparently studies have found that, on the whole, people blame victims of domestic abuse for the abuse, rather than the abuser, even to the extent that the victim herself often blames herself. This blaming of the victim is even stronger if the woman has voluntarily returned to the abuser, regardless of the validity of her reasons for doing so. Moreover, many victims of domestic abuse keep quiet about it rather than admit they are victims because they are more afraid of how others will perceive them than they are of the abuse itself.

I sat back and thought about that. After a while I could see some truth in it. I’d been in the workforce for many years and knew of people who put up with bullying from co-workers rather than did something about it, especially if that co-worker was a supervisor of some sort. It’s not just the power relationship between the two people concerned but about the perceived power relationship between the victim and the group of which they are a part. No one likes to be thought of as a wimp and to be a victim is to be a perceived wimp.

The article went on to say that victims are often treated differently, both personally and professionally, after details of their victimisation come to light. Interestingly, most employers change the victim’s job in some way, often by giving them a lighter workload or reducing their responsibilities. That would be something I would do myself if the situation ever arose but it is seen by the victim of abuse as another form of victimisation. Friends and relatives, too, treat victims of domestic abuse differently as well. Interesting. I imagined it was related to that very thin line between sympathy and pity.

Thinking about it, I would be quite irritated if I was demoted in my

² How Social Stigma Silences Domestic Violence Victims by Wendy L Patrick, PhD; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/why-bad-looks-good/201804/how-social-stigma-silences-domestic-violence-victims>, posted 9th April 2018

job or had aspects of it taken away because of something in my home situation. After all, when Marsha died, my work was the only thing that kept me going and having some of it taken away to make things easier for me would have actually made things a lot harder. Sympathy is good up to a point but too much can be detrimental.

On the other hand, how can you possibly treat someone the same once you know what they have been going through? Would that not be just as callous as being the abuser? How am I supposed to treat Jessica like anyone else when she is unable to talk to me because of her injuries?

Understanding slowly dawned on me. Obviously I have to treat Jessica like someone with a broken nose because she is someone with a broken nose. That is a simple inescapable fact and to pretend to ignore it would be simply stupid. At the same time, however, I needed to treat her the way I would treat anyone who has a broken nose, be it broken from a car accident, a fall or a beating. Did it really matter whether her broken nose came from a fall, as Ken said, or from a beating, as Tom said? Until such time as there were direct consequences, such as a court case or she wanted to return to an abusive situation, she was just someone with a broken nose and I should treat her that way.

Just like with Tom himself. Until there were direct consequences of his sexual orientation, and off the top of my head I couldn't think of any, he was just another person and should be treated as such.

“Excellent,” I thought to myself as I got ready to go home. “I’m growing as a person, developing my understanding of other people.”

Which is a shame, really, since I got angry with Jessica when I got home. Although to my credit, it was because she had a broken nose, not because she was a victim of domestic abuse.

Chapter Six

It was nice to see Jessica up and about when I got home at my usual time. She'd stayed in bed all Sunday evening and hadn't been up when I got up to go to work. She was sitting in my armchair when I walked in.

“Oh hello,” I said, “don't get up.”

She subsided back in her chair and gave me a small wave of her hand and a half smile. She winced so I guessed it still hurt to move her face much. The bruising was starting to go into that yellow, brown, green stage where it looks appallingly dreadful but is, in fact, healing nicely. The little eyes that peered out from the panda mask looked intelligent and alert.

I slipped my briefcase behind the couch, meaning to take it into my study later. Tom wasn't around and I realised that his car wasn't outside.

“How are you feeling?” I asked. “You look much brighter. Don't say anything, just give me a thumbs up or thumbs down.”

She stuck her thumb up and waggled it around which I assumed meant she wasn't too bad.

“Good, good,” I said, wondering what to say next and whether it would be rude to sit down and start reading the newspaper. I noticed a mug sitting beside her with relief. It looked like she was capable of drinking, at least.

“Would you like some coffee or tea?” I asked. “I'm going to make myself one, it's no trouble.”

She shook her head then gestured for me to come closer. She picked up a notebook and pen and wrote something down. I noticed that she held the pen in a clumsy way, with the top joint of her first finger bent almost at right-angles. She handed the notebook to me.

“Thank you,” it read, “for all your kindness. We both appreciate it.”

Something about the notebook looked familiar so I flipped the cover down and stared at it. It was a fairly conventional, rather mawkish, picture of a dog. A chill swept through me and my stomach churned.

“Where did you get this?” I said.

She looked at me in puzzlement.

“Where did you get this?” I said again, raising my voice and tapping the notebook.

“O'er air,” she said, pointing in the general direction of my study.

“You took it from my study?” I demanded, suddenly angry. “You took it from the desk in my study?”

She nodded, looking worried.

“Id I doo um'ing wong?” she said.

I wasn't sure what she said and I was too angry to try to try to work it out.

“You had no right ...” I spluttered, “ ... how could you, Jesus!” and I stormed out of the room.

Sure enough, the notepad beside Marsha's photograph on my desk was missing. I slumped in my office chair and pressed my hand to my eyes. They were burning and a couple of hot tears fell through my fingers onto the pad in my other hand.

I don't know how long I sat like that, a minute or two perhaps, certainly not much longer. I straightened up and put the notepad on the desk and gazed at Marsha. She looked back at me with that teasing smile that so often lit up her face but which I'd only ever captured in one photograph, the one on my desk. I kissed the finger tips of my right hand and reached out to touch the frame.

I became aware of someone in the doorway, watching me intently. I ignored her and smoothed out the creases in the notepad as best I

could and re-positioned it carefully beside the photo. It looked much the same as it had before, but I knew it had been violated. I had been violated. I smoothed back my hair, checked my tie was straight and cleared my throat then I turned to look at Jessica.

There was a defiant look in her eyes but, charitably, that could have been from the heavy black-blue-with-dark-yellow-edges mask over her eyes.

“Ahm orry,” she said and came closer.

I was calm again now, sad but calm.

“No, I'm sorry,” I said. “I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. It was unforgivable of me. Umm. let's go into the lounge.”

I didn't feel comfortable with Jessica in my study. I very rarely went into the spare bedroom and had no associations with it and, of course, the lounge was where I entertained my occasional visitor. My study, however, was my inner sanctum. No one had been in there, other than me, for years.

We trooped back to the lounge, if two people can troop. Jessica stood in the centre, as if waiting for permission to sit and guidance on where. She seemed to like my armchair so I gave a vague gesture towards it and sat on the couch. The room still looked unfamiliar from there.

Jessica held up her hands and made a writing motion. I was being stupid and callous. It was painful for her to talk and probably quite difficult with all that bandaging on and around her nose, which is why she'd found a notepad to communicate with. And, of course, I was being churlish since the first thing she'd written to me was her thanks and I'd got angry. I pulled my briefcase from behind the couch and got out a large, A4 accounting pad and gave it to her and she smiled and started writing busily.

“I'm really sorry,” she wrote, “4 upsetting u - I don't no what it meant to u but that pad must have been very important - I'm sorry”

She handed the pad to me and I read it slowly then looked up and nodded.

“Yes,” I said, “it was important to me. Ummm, the lady in the photograph on my desk?”

She nodded, watching me intently.

“She was my wife,” I said, “she, umm, died.”

I felt uncomfortable about telling Jessica this, for some reason. Probably because I didn't know her.

She nodded encouragingly.

“Umm, the day before, before, ..., she went into hospital, umm she bought me that notebook,” I said, forcing the words around the lump in my throat. “She got it for me because ...” I put one hand on my forehead and pushed the heel of the hand down on my eyes. “Because, the umm, dog on the cover looked almost exactly like, like her dog.”

I started to cry, silently, my hand covering my eyes.

“Clancy,” I said quietly, “Clancy, he died a few days ago and ...”

Suddenly she was sitting beside me on the couch, with her hand on my shoulder. I half turned in surprise and she put her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I stiffened then slowly raised an arm and half hugged her back. It was an emotional moment. Well, for me anyway. It must have been painful for Jessica though, because of her injuries.

I got up and excused myself and went to the bathroom and washed my face and combed my hair. My suit jacket was a little wrinkled so I hung it on a hanger in the bedroom to drop out overnight and got changed into something a little less formal. Frankly, I was a little embarrassed to go back in the lounge to that stranger who'd managed to make me cry. I thought I had better control over my emotions. So much for being a dry old stick.

When I say a little less formal I don't mean I put on my pyjamas or dressed like a hippy. I simply put on a pair of dark grey slacks and a plain, pale blue shirt with no tie and the neck button undone. That's about as informal as I get.

Jessica was still sitting on the couch, although she now had the pad on her lap. She smiled at me and patted the couch next to her so I didn't have the chance to reclaim my armchair.

“What was her name?” she wrote.

“Marsha,” I said.

“When did she ...?”

“Ten years ago,” I said. “Eleven next April.”

She looked thoughtfully around the room then tapped the pad with the pen two or three times.

“You haven't redecorated since?”

“No,” I said, surprised. “Why?”

“What did redecorating have to do with anything?” I wondered.

She just nodded and waved dismissively. I noticed that she wasn't wearing a head covering anymore and that her hair was light brown, thick and shoulder length. It didn't go well with the bandages on her face, but then, what hairstyle would?

“I'm seeing doctor tomorrow,” she wrote. “They packed my nose at hospital & doc 2 unpack. Should be able 2 talk then.”

“Why did they pack your nose?” I asked, grateful to be on a less personal topic. Well, less personal to me. I'm sure her nose was very personal to Jessica.

“Broken,” she wrote. “They reset & packed 2 keep in place. Very itchy, want 2 blow nose.”

“Ouch,” I said. “I hope it won't end up bent.”

“Me 2.”

Neither of us seemed to quite know what to say next so I asked if she could eat.

“Diff 2 chew,” she wrote, “can't breathe thru nose & jaw hurts.”

“How about some scrambled eggs?” I asked. “Nutritious and easy to swallow. I'll make it, don't worry.”

“Thanks.”

“Where's Tom?”

“Chemist 4 painkillers, back any sec.”

“Ahh, right,” I said. “Aspirin not enough?”

Her abbreviated style of writing was catching. She shook her head.

She stayed on the couch while I did dinner and Tom joined her there when he got back. We ate off trays in the lounge and watched the news on the television. The world was as dismal as ever. I dumped the dishes beside the sink and made some coffees.

“So,” I asked, bringing them in and sitting in my armchair, “have you had a chance to make any plans yet?”

I was curious about how long they might be staying.

“Prob go back Wed,” she wrote. Tom read it out to me then stared at her.

“You're joking,” he said. “I won't let you go back to that sod.”

She wrote something else.

“Well, he is a sod,” said Tom. “He broke your nose.”

She wrote some more.

“I saw him do it!” he exclaimed.

“What did Jessica write, Tom?” I asked.

“She said she fell,” said Tom, “and hit her head on the mantelpiece, but I saw him hit her, I did!”

“How did you come to fall?” I asked Jessica.

“Huh!” said Tom, reading what she'd written.

“Tom?” I asked.

“She says she doesn't remember, probably a fold in the carpet or something.”

Jessica wrote some more.

“Oh come on!” said Tom, getting agitated. “I saw him do it!”

From where I sat it looked as though Jessica was denying that Ken had hit her and she was saying she'd just fallen and that she didn't believe Tom. I was glad I'd read that article earlier that afternoon because it had made me more aware of the issues around these things. It seemed to me that Jessica was too calm in the way she was handling her one and only son accusing her lover of assaulting her. I would have expected her to be more agitated, more aggressive or more defensive. More something, anyway. I watched them for a few moments and definitely got the impression that she was trying to defend something she knew not to be true. It was like she was being too objective.

“Jessica,” I said.

They both stopped and looked at me.

“Have you spoken with Ken since Saturday?”

“We texted,” read out Tom. “Loves me and wants us back.” He

snorted. “No way, mum.”

“What does he say happened?” I asked.

“Tripped,” read Tom.

“Did he say what you were doing before tripping?” I asked.

“Talking about Tom and job,” said Tom.

“Interesting,” I thought, since that was what Tom had said had started it all.

They both sat and watched me while I wondered how to phrase what I wanted to ask next.

“Does Tom get into a lot of fights?” I asked.

“God, no,” said Tom then read Jessica's note: “Never”.

“So he didn't get into a fight on Friday? Or at work on Friday night?” I asked.

“No,” she wrote.

“Take your shirt off, Tom,” I said.

He looked at me.

“Show her,” I said. “She needs to know.”

Jessica looked very puzzled and confused as Tom slowly and reluctantly unbuttoned his shirt.

“Take it off,” I said.

He did. Jessica screamed and held her hands to her face in horror as she stared at the ghastly bruises on Tom's torso. They were much more spectacular than they had been when I first saw them on Saturday night. I hadn't planned it but the timing was perfect.

“Tell her how you got the bruises, Tom,” I said.

“I had a fight with Ken,” he said quietly, holding his shirt on his lap with both hands, “after he hit you and knocked you down.”

He started to put his shirt back on but I shook my head. Jessica needed to absorb them fully.

“I don't really know what happened,” I said, “since I wasn't there. But from what I've seen and heard, and from what I saw and heard at Ken's I'd say that he got angry with you about Tom, hit you and knocked you down, breaking your nose and then had a fight with Tom.”

She scribbled furiously.

“No, no,” read out Tom. “He loves me, he wouldn't do a thing like that, and not to Tom either.”

She snatched the pad back and scribbled some more.

“When did you see Ken?”

“I went round with Tom, yesterday,” I said.

“Oh,” she said out loud.

“What did he say?” read out Tom.

I debated with myself for a moment then got my laptop and opened the file of the notes I'd made immediately afterwards. I watched her closely as she read them. She read them silently, with no visible reaction, then shut the laptop and sighed.

“Oh dear,” I said. Her lack of reaction spoke volumes.

She looked sharply at me.

“He's called you a slut and a whore before, hasn't he?”

“What?” cried Tom. “Are you serious?” He stared at his mother. She stared back at him and then dropped her eyes and slowly nodded.

“es,” she said and tears started to trickle over her bandages. She didn’t move, just sat there staring at Tom’s bruises.

“I’m sorry,” I said. There wasn’t a lot else to say really. Her need to protect her baby was forcing her to deny her denials, not that I’m a psychiatrist. It must have been difficult for her.

We sat there in silence for a while. I wanted to ask if he’d hit her before but figured that Tom would have noticed, so I kept quiet. Tom was staring at his feet. I guessed he’d wanted to spare his mum his injuries.

“I don’t think it would be a good idea to go back there,” I said quietly, after she’d stopped crying. “For either of you.”

“Me neither, mum,” said Tom, looking up at her.

She shrugged then wrote something.

“Oh for god’s sake,” cried Tom. “We’ll think of something.”

“She says she has no choice,” he said to me. “We have nowhere else to go.”

He turned back to her.

“We can claim benefits,” he said in a rush, “I’ll get another job and we can get somewhere cheap to live, we’ll manage. You’re not to go back there. I won’t let you! Tell her not to go back, Tom.”

“You’re welcome to stay here,” I said. “As long as you need to until you get yourselves sorted out.”

She shut her eyes and visibly wilted then she wrote something on the pad and walked out of the lounge.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“She said she can't handle all this tonight. Everything hurts too much and she can't think properly so she's gone to bed,” said Tom. “I think I'd better give her some more painkillers.”

He hesitated then got up and followed her. I left them to it. It wasn't my place to make her do anything but at least I'd been able to give her some options. What more could I do?

I sat there for quite a while thinking then retrieved my laptop and loaded my chess problem for the evening. The little shapes of the pieces refused to coalesce into anything coherent so I gave up and thought about Marsha.

“Would Marsha approve?” I thought. “No, probably not, She'd probably try to get me to think of a way of forcing Jessica not to go back.”

I sighed. I wished I hadn't taken Clancy for a walk on Saturday. That way I wouldn't be in this very awkward situation and Clancy would still be alive. We'd be in our own private little world again.

Tom came back in due course and curled up on the couch with his mobile phone. I pretended to do my crossword but got as far with it as I had with the chess. We didn't speak. There didn't seem to be anything much to say.

Perhaps an hour passed like this. I don't really know but it was getting close to my bedtime and Tom couldn't go to sleep on the couch until I went anyway. I had just shut down my laptop when he looked up from his phone.

“Do you know someone called Janey Watson?” he asked. “Only she's trying to friend me and says she knows you.”

“Yes,” I said. “She's one of my clerks at work.”

“Why's she trying to friend me?”

“I was talking to her about you,” I explained. “She said she would.”

He stared hard at me.

“Are you seriously trying to fix me up with a girl?” he demanded. “Like, for real?”

“Oh god,” I groaned and put my forefingers on my temples. I wasn't having a good evening.

“No,” I said. “It's not like that at all.”

“What's it like then? I thought you weren't bothered about me.”

He sat up straight on the couch. It looked like he would have run out of the room, except that he didn't have another room to go to.

“No, Tom,” I said. “Listen to me. I have no problem with you or your being, umm, gay ...” Well, I'd committed myself now. “... it's just that I have no idea what teenagers get up to these days. It's been a long time since I was a teenager myself and the world has changed a lot since then. I just asked Janey what teenagers did in the evenings because I was worried you'd get bored talking to me all the time. She's 19 so I thought she'd know, that's all. I wasn't trying to set you up with her. In fact it was her idea to befriend you.”

I really couldn't bring myself to say 'friend', it seemed an abuse of the English language.

“It never occurred to me that you might be offended, I just thought you'd appreciate someone your own age, that's all.”

Chapter Seven

Janey was off sick the next day so I wasn't able to thank her for friending Tom. I confess to being a little relieved about that since it occurred to me when I went to bed that if Tom misunderstood my motives in talking to Janey about him, she might also have misunderstood. She may have, perhaps, thought I was trying to get the two of them together as well and could be put out to find he wasn't inclined towards girls. I found this whole business of dealing with people quite stressful. Numbers and ledgers don't have emotions or expectations and don't get upset if you make a silly little error.

Restful isn't a word I normally associate with the workplace but when I arrived and sat behind my familiar desk in my familiar office with the familiar hum of chatter from the rest of the department I felt a sense of relief. Everything was so restful, so normal and *ordinary*. I felt quite content as I plugged my laptop into its docking station. Until I checked my email.

According to a lady purporting to be Trevor's girlfriend, Trevor had come off his motorcycle the evening before and was going to be off sick for a week or more. I say purporting to be his girlfriend since I was under the impression that his girlfriend's name was Natalie and this lady called herself Bethany. I opened my contacts list and phoned him but there was no answer so I put my head around his office door and he wasn't there either. It was irritating, to say the least.

Obviously I was concerned for his welfare, that goes without saying, but as my Assistant Accountant his role included doing all the routine tasks that I found onerous, such as bank reconciliations. We did these daily as a fair amount of money went through our various bank accounts and we needed to keep an accurate check on payments and receipts in order to keep track of our cash flow. It's an important task, particularly as a significant proportion of receipts these days come through direct transfers, but since 99.9% of it involves ticking figures on one list and then ticking the corresponding figures on another list I find it remarkably tedious. The remaining 0.1% is slightly more interesting as it involves finding out why one or two particular figures on one list don't have corresponding entries on the other list. Most of the time it is due to a clerical error but occasionally it's a banking

error.

As Trevor was going to be away I was going to have to do the bank reconciliations and, aside from the tedium, I am out of practice and, perhaps more importantly, it was going to eat up an hour or more of my days until he returned. Anxious to avoid the task I cast around for someone onto whom I could delegate but everyone I felt capable of doing it was fully occupied with their own jobs. I toyed with hiring a temp for a few days but it didn't seem worth the cost, although my mood had changed. The office wasn't as restful as it had been.

My mood improved when I decided I wouldn't do anything about the bank reconciliations, or any other aspect of Trevor's role, until I had confirmed the situation with him. He may, for example, simply be late or would be off for just a day and this Bethany person may have misunderstood or simply be malicious. These things are not unknown. Three or four years previously a young lad in the Contracts section had had his convertible covered in a load of manure by the father of his recently ex-girlfriend, her father being a farmer. The police got involved and things got a little messy for a while and the car had never smelt quite as fresh again.

About half past nine I got a call from Natasha on Reception.

“A Mr Jones from Customs and Excise to see you, Tom.”

A visitor from Customs and Excise could only mean one thing. A VAT audit.

This was turning out to be a bad day. Not because I had any issues over a VAT audit, we got them every couple of years and our records were meticulous. It's simply that Trevor handled the quarterly VAT Returns and did the running around when there was an audit and took the auditor to lunch. This meant that I wouldn't be able to work through my lunch break.

I collected Mr Jones from Reception and installed him in Trevor's office with a nice pile of printouts to play with. He had a suspicious air about him which is common to all VAT auditors as they seem to assume everyone is perpetrating VAT fraud. No doubt this is part of

their training. They usually thaw out by lunchtime when they realise that everything is accounted for properly and relax during the afternoons. One, I won't mention his name in case he still works for HM Customs and Excise, used to work in a frenzy for the morning then doze off in the afternoons, after having had a good lunch.

I finally got hold of Trevor late in the morning. He had indeed come off his motorcycle and done something unfortunate, but not too serious, to his right arm. He also explained that Natalie and he had gone their separate ways over a year previously and seemed a little hurt that I wasn't aware of it. I had a vague recollection, now that he mentioned it, that he might have said something about breaking up with Natalie but I don't concern myself overmuch with the private lives of my employees. Private lives are, after all, private and I respect that.

So, all in all, I didn't get home until perhaps an hour later than I normally did and in not the best of moods. It was a very pleasant surprise to smell food when I opened the front door.

"Great, you're back," said Jessica, looking up from the TV. "I've done tea. Should be just about ready."

"That's very kind of you," I said. I'd been toying with getting an Indian takeaway as I was tired and didn't feel like cooking. "It smells delicious."

"No idea," she laughed. "Can't smell a bloody thing."

"Oh my word," I said in surprise. "You can talk!"

"Yup, the doctor took out the packing and my jaws hardly hurt at all now," she said.

She had a discernible Essex accent and her voice had a nasal quality to it. The extensive bandaging across her face was also gone, replaced by a single strip of sticking plaster across the bridge of her nose.

"Is your nose still badly swollen?" I asked. After all, it could be she normally had a very wide nose.

“Shit, yeah,” she said. “You don’t think I normally look like this do you?”

It seemed my ability to say the wrong thing was still working. I think she looked insulted but it’s difficult to read facial expressions when the face is swollen and multi-coloured.

I smiled, perhaps a trifle uneasily.

“So, what’s for dinner?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I did a stew,” she said, “cos I still can’t chew properly.”

“How nice,” I said.

I don’t like stew. It’s like thick, lumpy soup. Still, it was a nice gesture and I appreciated it.

“Come on, let’s eat,” she said and led me into the kitchen.

“Where’s Tom?”

“He’s at the shopping centre,” she said. “Hey, he’s got a job!”

“Another night job?” I asked, sitting down.

The kitchen table was set for three.

“Nah, day job, at the swimming pool,” she said, setting out two bowls. “as a life guard. He’ll eat when he gets back. He’s gone to buy some swimming trunks.”

“That’s excellent news,” I said.

Up close, in the kitchen, the stew smelt strongly of an unusual and exotic assortment of spices. Garlic definitely, with a hint of marjoram and perhaps even pepper, amongst others. Jessica’s sense of smell was undeniably absent. She ladled out some into my bowl and waited for me to taste it. I did.

“This is really quite delicious,” I said.

I have to confess it was, as stews go, perhaps a tad on the wet side, which was fine since it was more like soup but the spiciness was deceptive. There was chilli in it. A lot of chilli. Perhaps to counter-balance the pepper.

“The problem with stew,” I said to myself as I slowly spooned it into my mouth, “it that, being wet, you can’t plead thirst and get some water.”

Still, the meat was exceptionally tender although the carrots and chunks of potato were on the mushy side. I could feel the sweat caused by the chilli dampening my hair.

“I hope it’s OK,” she said, anxiously. “I think your spices are going stale since I couldn’t taste them and I had to put in a lot.”

She seemed to be enjoying hers and had a second bowlful. I declined a refill.

“I’ll just mop up the rest with bread,” I said, hoping four or five slices might help put out the fire on my tongue and the roof of my mouth. It didn’t and I could feel the sweat beading on my forehead. I got a paper towel off the roll and mopped my face.

“Bit warm in here,” I said. “Perhaps I should take my jacket off. I’ll just pop it in the bedroom.”

I got changed with my mouth full of cold water from the bathroom tap then spat it out and had some more before I went back to the kitchen.

“I think there might be some ice cream in the freezer,” I remarked, as casually as I could.

She looked at me a little suspiciously. I looked in the freezer and there wasn’t, although the ice crusting on the sides looked very tempting. I remembered finishing the tub the previous week and, because of Clancy I hadn’t done my usual shopping trip on Saturday. Because of Tom I hadn’t gone on Sunday either.

“Oh well,” I said, disappointedly shutting the freezer. “Shall I make some coffee?”

The front door opened and closed and Tom appeared in the kitchen.

“Hello, Tom,” he said, “Hey, I got a job today.”

He looked very pleased.

“So, umm, your mother was saying,” I said. For the life of me I couldn't remember her name. 'Your mother' seemed safe. “A life guard?”

“Yeah, pretty cool huh.”

“Did you find some trunks?” asked Jessica.

“Yeah, they had some on sale, discontinued line.”

He held up a pair of what were indisputably swimming trunks.

“Jessica,” I thought, “that's it.”

“How did you find out about the job?” I asked.

“I went asking round the shops,” he said, putting the trunks back in their bag and sitting down at the table. “Didn't get anywhere so I thought I'd ask at the swimming pool since I was passing. I thought they might want some help in the cafeteria or something.”

“But life guard?”

“The manager asked if I could swim well,” said Tom, watching Jessica ladle some stew into a bowl. “I told him I was in the school swimming team so he got me to swim in the pool to show him how fast I was. He lent me some trunks.”

“Don't you need first aid training?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, picking up a spoon. “But they're going to train me.”

Three days of training next week then I'm working three days a week after that. Jesus!"

He stared at his bowl.

"I told you to go easy on the chilli, mum," he said, fanning his open mouth vigorously.

"Tasted fine to me," she said calmly as he got a drink of cold water.

Back at the table, Tom fished around in the bowl for a piece of meat then rinsed it in his glass of water and ate it.

"Much better," he said with a grin at his mother and proceeded to do the same thing with the other pieces of meat. He left the rest.

Jessica looked sideways at me for a few seconds then nodded.

"Ice cream," she said to herself then raised her eyebrows. She collected the dishes and put them by the sink.

"I'll wash them later," she said.

"There's no need," I said. "I've got a dish washer."

"Oh, I like washing dishes," she said. "It's very spiritual, very cleansing."

I had no answer for that. I looked at Tom but he was busily slicing cheese and eating it with his fingers.

Jessica insisted on making my after dinner coffee, tea for Tom and some herbal concoction for herself so I went into the lounge and claimed my armchair while I had the opportunity. Tom appeared moments later and sat on the couch, hunched over his mobile phone. I opened my laptop and found my day's chess problem. I had a strong hunger for some normality in my life. I heard Jessica start to wash the dishes.

"White to check mate in three moves," it said. Interestingly white had

two knights and two pawns whereas black had only a castle and a pawn. One of white's pawns was on the seventh row so it looked likely that the solution would involve turning that pawn into a queen although it was prevented from doing so immediately by the black castle. Hmm.

"Janey had a nice day at the races," said Tom, looking up from his phone.

"That's good," I said, absently.

Perhaps if white moved a knight there, then black would move his castle here, so white would ...

"What was that?" I asked, jerking my head up.

"I said Janey had a good day at the races," said Tom. "She's posted it on Facebook, with some piccies. Wanna see?" He held his phone up in my direction.

"Oh, what a silly girl," I said sadly.

"Who's a silly girl?" asked Jessica, coming in with my coffee and Tom's tea. Tom was looking faintly puzzled.

"One of my clerks at work took the day off sick," I said, "but Tom says she spent the day at the races."

"Her boyfriend's dad had a horse running," said Tom. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," I said. "Except she shouldn't have taken a day sick. That's what annual leave is for. Sick days are for when you are sick."

"So what?" said Jessica.

"It means I'll have to start disciplinary proceedings," I said. "Which is a shame since she's an excellent clerk."

"What?" said Jessica. "You're going to sack her for going to the races?"

“Oh lord, no,” I said. “The first stage is just a verbal warning but it goes in her personnel file. If she does it again she’ll get a written warning. It’s only after three warnings that we sack anyone.”

“Seems a bit harsh,” said Jessica. “How old is she?”

“Nineteen,” I said.

“So you’re going to sack a nineteen year old for having a bit of fun?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll give her a verbal warning.”

“It’s not like she just didn’t turn up,” said Jessica. “I can understand sacking someone for that but she did let you know she wasn’t coming in.”

“I’m not going to sack her,” I said. I took a deep breath. Was I somehow not making myself clear?

“Sick days are like leave days, aren’t they?” asked Tom. “You get paid either way?”

“Yes,” I said. “But leave is for general time off and sick is for when you are sick.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t know that. I’ve never had a job with sick pay. The jobs I’ve had, if I don’t turn up I just don’t get paid.”

“Seems a lot of fuss about nothing,” said Jessica. “What if she takes some leave and is sick when she’s away? Do you change it?”

“No,” I said. “Not unless it’s something really major that’ll mean months off.”

“So why get upset if she takes a day sick when it’s really leave?” she asked. “Since you do it the other way round.”

“But she lied to us,” I said.

“Everyone lies to their boss,” said Jessica. “I bet you have too,

sometimes. Does it really matter? She gets paid either way and she'll probably be happier at work tomorrow cos she's had a day off with her boyfriend and his horse."

"But it's the principle," I said. "Surely you can see that?"

"Time off's time off," said Jessica. "I don't see that it's any of your business what she does with it."

"So you're saying I should just let her get away with it?" I asked, a trifle sarcastically.

"Would you have known if Tom hadn't said something?" she asked. "Where did I put my tea?"

"You didn't bring it in," said Tom. "I'll get it."

He got up and fetched her herbal tea from the kitchen. It smelt horrible.

"No," I said, trying to ignore the thin, herbal, antiseptic smell, "I don't go on Facebook."

"So if you hadn't got her to friend Tom you'd never have known? Thanks sweetie."

"Of course not," I said.

"So basically it's your fault, then," said Jessica, triumphantly.

I closed my eyes and groaned. Chess problems were so much easier to deal with as they didn't argue back. Jessica sipped her herbal tea and smiled as sweetly as she could, given her thick, bruised upper lip and cheek.

"Fine," I said in exasperation. "I won't do anything about it ..."

Jessica lifted her cup at me in appreciation.

"... provided Tom tells her not to post what she does on her sick days

on Facebook,” I said.

We both looked at Tom.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll tell her.” His fingers started moving rapidly around the screen.

I went back to my chess problem. Another option might be if white went there, ready to take black’s castle so black would have to move it and ...

“Whatcha doing?” asked Jessica.

“A chess problem,” I said.

“Cool.” She came over and peered at the screen. “What do you have to do?”

“Can you play chess?” I asked.

“Nah, not really,” she said. “I know the moves but ...”

“Well,” I said. “In this problem the game is nearly over and these are the pieces that are left. White has to work out how to checkmate black in three moves.”

“You mean like two moves for white and one for black” she asked, staring at the screen. “Or does white get three moves?”

“White gets three moves,” I said. “And black two, of course.”

“Ohh,” she said. “So you mean, like, if white goes there then the black castle has to go here so white takes it next move putting the king in check so it has to move to here and white then moves the other knight there so it’s check mate?”

“Yes,” I said. “Something like that.”

I closed the laptop. It didn’t seem that much fun anymore.

“Each to their own,” she said, sitting back down. “I prefer a nice game of Boggle meself, more of a challenge. I’ll teach you if you like. Can I see what’s on TV?”

Chapter Eight

“Ohh, damn, that's so nice,” said Jessica, coming into the lounge in a dressing gown and towelling her hair, wafting a mixture of bath oils and shampoo.

I looked up and twisted my laptop slightly so she couldn't see my chess problem.

“Haven't had a bath for a week,” she said. “Hurt too much. Ohhh, clean hair, wonderful!”

She took the towel away from her head and bent forward and shook her head vigorously so her semi-wet hair flew in all directions and some water droplets splattered on me. Clancy used to do that after he'd had a bath as well, although he used to run around barking for ten minutes too. Jessica showed no sign of doing that. She said “oww,” instead and gently touched her nose.

She sat down on the couch, pulled out a hairbrush and leaned forward again, with her head between her legs. She swept her hair over her head and proceeded to brush it with long strokes going from the back of her head, up and over and ending with faint thuds as the brush lightly tapped the carpet at the end of each stroke.

“Mmmm,” she said from under the thick waterfall of hair, “Whatcha doing?”

“Just looking at my chess problem,” I said.

“Need any help?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I can manage.”

She sat upright again and held her nose.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Only when I bend over,” she said. “All the blood rushes to me head and it throbs.”

She sniffed a couple of times and turned on the TV. One of those irritating reality TV shows appeared. I turned my attention back to my laptop.

“Tom's out tonight.” she said, not looking at the TV. She started to brush her hair again, this time from the outside. Clean, it was a lighter shade and seemed much thicker than it had the last two or three days.

“Is he working?” I asked, trying to ignore someone who was breathlessly updating us on the situation of various people whose names had no meaning to me. I got up and picked up the remote from beside her and turned the volume down a little. She didn't notice as she had her head twisted away from me and was vigorously brushing her hair on my side.

“He's gone out to meet that Janey,” she said. “And some of her friends.”

“That's good,” I said, sitting down and picking up my laptop. “It's nice he's meeting some people his own age.”

She finished brushing that side and twisted her head to look at me and started brushing the other side.

“Girls, you mean?” she asked, giving me a casual but penetrating glance.

“Oh dear,” I thought. “Now what do I say?”

It seemed every innocent remark I made became fraught with meaning. It was like living in the middle of a minefield. I really didn't want to be the one to tell her if she didn't know her son was gay but on the other hand, if she did know, I didn't want her to think I was homophobic.

“No,” I said, carefully. “But it's good for young people to be with young people, isn't it. We get old so quickly the young should make the most of being young while they can.”

I thought that was quite a good answer, being positive and non-gender

biased.

“Don't know about you sweetie,” she said. “but I'm not old. Not yet, I'm only forty.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, realising that I hadn't reached the end of the minefield, merely stepped over into a new one. “I didn't mean to imply anything.”

“Ha,” she said, brushing the fringe on her forehead. She stood up and looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece and started running her fingers through her hair and twisting her head in various directions.

“No grey yet, see?”

I couldn't see as she didn't keep her head still enough but I had sufficient wits about me to realise she was being rhetorical.

“No, you're lucky,” I said. “I started going grey a few years ago.”

“So you are saying I'm old then,” she said, giving me a cold look then resuming her hair fingering. “Since I'm lucky not to be going grey.”

I could tell from her inflection that the 'I'm lucky' had mental finger quotes around it.

“No, no,” I said. “I'm just astonished that someone who looks as young as you do could have a son of eighteen.”

“Pfffft,” she said.

She stopped fingering her hair and looked at me in the mirror. “You think I look old, don't you. Go on, admit it.”

“Oh god,” I muttered to myself.

“If you look old,” I said, “then I must look positively antique.”

“How old are you?” she said, scrutinising her face in the mirror and pushing up the corners of her eyes.

“Forty nine,” I said.

“Wow,” she said. “I thought you were older than that!”

I sighed. It stung a little. She laughed and sat back down on the couch. There was a burst of cheering and catcalls from the TV.

“Ohh, Shazza's going to get voted off,” she said, watching intently. “Good, can't stand her.”

“Which one's Shazza?” I asked.

They all looked pretty similar to me. Well obviously the males looked different to the females but all the males were about the same age, with well developed muscles and neon teeth. The females were perhaps a little younger with well developed other areas and possibly even more glittering teeth. All of them showed their perfect teeth at every possible opportunity. It seemed unlikely that a zit or a cavity had ever cast a shadow over any of their lives.

“They probably floss with correcting tape,” I thought uncharitably to myself.

“That blonde,” she said, “there.”

I looked at the TV but there were about ten women in the shot and seven or eight were blondes. Their teeth sparkled with vitality in the studio lighting and their bikini clad bosoms cast deep shadows on their stomachs.

“Right,” I said, looking in bemusement at the TV. “The blonde, yes.”

She pulled something else out of her dressing gown pocket and put one ankle on her knee and started to rub the sole of her foot with whatever she had in her hand.

“You dress old,” she said, looking at her foot.

“I'm sorry?” I said, tearing my gaze away from the TV. The antics of the, well 'contestants' I suppose might be the word, since there

appeared to be some sort of competitive element involved of some sort. The show did have a certain morbid fascination. Like a hanging.

“Your clothes,” she said, running the palm of one hand over the sole of the foot she was rubbing. “They’re a bit, umm, ...”

One side of her dressing gown had fallen away a little and from where I was sitting I could see half way up her inner thigh. I started to go pink and coughed, meaningfully.

She glanced up and I nodded towards her lap and she looked down.

“Oh, sorry,” she said and hitched up her dressing gown without missing a rub on her foot. “It’s all right, I’ve got undies on.”

“You were saying,” I said, focusing intently on the screen of my laptop.

“Was I?” she said, twisting her foot round so she could see the sole.

“My clothes,” I said, not looking up.

“Oh yeah,” she said.

Apparently that foot had passed inspection and she put it on the floor and hoisted the other foot to her knee. Her dressing gown fell away again but only below the knee was visible. Not that I was looking, of course.

“Solid greys,” she continued, “and old fashioned styling, makes you look older.”

“Respectable,” I said. “I look respectable.”

“I 'spose,” she said. “Though a bit of colour wouldn't hurt. And a better style. You know he's gay?”

She was twisting the other foot to look at but fixed me with a piercing glance.

“Yes,” I said.

She went back to her foot. I daresay my matter of fact reaction had reassured her. Certainly I was reassured, as it was obvious she knew about Tom's orientation.

"He isn't a bad man, you know," she said, putting the other foot on the floor and tapping the thing in her hand against the other hand.

I made a mental note to vacuum the carpet carefully on Saturday.

"I know," I said, startled. Had I given any impression I thought Tom was in any way bad?

"I think maybe he cares too much, you know?" she said, inspecting her fingernails closely.

"Perhaps," I said. Did she really think that a man who is gay is merely someone who cares a lot?

"He was ever so nice when I met him," she said.

She pulled her bag over and started rummaging.

"I think we're talking at cross purposes," I said. "Who are you talking about?"

"Ken, of course," looking at me as though I was stupid. "Who else would I be talking about?"

The 'about' came out as 'abaaat', I noticed, for some reason.

"Tom," I said. "I thought you were talking about Tom."

"Oh Tom's a sweetie," she said, violently shaking a small bottle.

She unscrewed the top and started applying nail polish to her forefinger.

"How did you meet him?" I asked. "Ken, I mean."

She gave a little snort, as if to say "I didn't meet Tom, I gave birth to

him.” She may not have meant that but I realised it was a rather silly thing for me to have said.

“In a chat room,” she said, concentrating on the fingernail. “We chatted for like three or four months, then he came to London and we met in a coffee shop.”

“You must have got to know him quite well,” I said.

I shut my laptop since it was clear I wouldn't be able to work on the chess problem for a while. She still had nine fingers to go and quite possibly ten toes.

“Like I said, he was a nice guy,” she said, frowning in concentration.

I didn't remember her saying she thought he was a nice guy but I didn't contradict her.

“He came up to London every couple of weeks,” she said, moving to the next finger. “We'd meet up each time.”

“So you decided to move down here with him?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “We went out maybe eight times and then he suggested we moved in together.”

She blew on that finger then started on the next.

“It wasn't, like, an easy decision,” she said, seemingly absently. “But we were struggling and not really getting anywhere and he seemed to like Tom so I said like 'what the hell.'”

“Did you have a job in London?” I asked.

I'd wondered about what work she did since she hadn't said anything about being off sick or when she'd be going back to work but I hadn't liked to asked outright.

“I had five,” she said. “Bits and pieces, here and there. Tom did a couple as well, after school. But, well, we agreed to, oh, did Shazza

go?”

The closing credits for the reality show were rolling.

“I don't know,” I said, “I wasn't watching. So all your jobs were casual?”

“Yeah, I did some cleaning and dog walking,” she said. “Three nights a week I did pizza deliveries and two mornings a week at the checkouts. Quit them all, gave up the flat and we moved down, like.”

“You must have loved him a lot to give up your security like that,” I said.

She stopped doing her nails and rested her head on her hand, her elbow on her knee, and gazed at me.

“Maybe,” she said, after a few moments. “I been thinking about it the last couple of days. Can't decide if I did love him or if I just liked him and hoped he'd change things for us. Does that make me a bad person?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Unless you planned to strip him of every penny then walk out on him.”

She found that quite funny and went back to doing her nails.

“Ken's not well off,” she said. “If I took him for everything I still wouldn't be much better off. But he had a job and a house, not like some of the losers I've been out with since the divorce.”

“What does he do?” I asked.

“He was a nice person,” she said. “Kind, considerate.”

I wondered whether I ought to remind her about her nose, then decided she probably already knew about it. It didn't seem the kind of thing one would forget.

“Just had a bit of a temper,” she carried on, without looking at me.

“Not often, just ... well, every now and then.”

“Did he like Tom?” I asked, remembering that Tom had said Ken couldn't stand him.

“He said he did,” said Jessica, starting on the other hand.

There was a silence for a few moments.

“But ...” I prompted.

“I dunno,” she said and looked at the TV. Some sort of show involving people excitedly talking about possible home renovations was on. She grimaced and went back to her nails.

“Gonna pay you rent,” she said.

I was beginning to get used to the way her conversations suddenly changed topic without warning although it usually took me four or five seconds to switch my thinking. By nature, I prefer to exhaust a topic and form definite conclusions before moving on to the next.

“There's no need,” I said. “Especially if you're not working.”

“I'll get a job soon as,” she said, giving me a sharp look. “And my website'll bring in something, soon as I get my stock back but we won't stay here as charity.”

“It's not charity,” I said. “You're my guests.”

“I won't be under any obligation to you,” she said quickly. “I pay my way, Tom too.”

“You're under no obligation,” I said. “It's nice to have some company.”

“That's what I mean,” she said, obscurely. “I'd like to pay rent, proper like.”

“OK, if you insist.”

“How much?”

“How much can you afford?”

“I asked first.”

I laughed and she waved her hands at me. I guessed it was to help the nail polish dry rather than some negotiation technique I was unfamiliar with. On the TV someone was starting to knock down an interior wall with a sledgehammer and a voice-over seemed to be explaining why, or how, or something.

I named a figure and she told me not to be silly and trebled it.

“If you wish,” I said. “£90 a week seems rather a lot to me but if that's what you want to do.”

“Yes,” she said, looking at me seriously. “Can I owe it to you until I get a job?”

“Certainly,” I said.

She looked relieved.

“What do you do on your website?” I asked.

“Reworked clothes,” she said, picking up the nail polish and starting on her toes.

“Oh,” I said and thought about it.

“What are reworked clothes?” I asked.

“I buy old clothes and bits of cloth from junk stores and recycle yards,” she said, “and cut them up and rework them into new clothes.”

“That's very innovative,” I said. “Is there much of a market for such things?”

“Getting there,” she said. “Been doing it for a couple of years now,

starting to make a bit of money.”

“You said 'when you get your stock back,'” I said. “That's your cloth and clothes?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It's all at Ken's. I'm getting it back Saturday and all me other stuff.”

I like to think I am a rational thinker, but I hadn't occurred to me that she had left most of her belongings behind. It was foolish of me since I had watched Tom collect a few things myself and Jessica had come here straight from the hospital. I'd somehow come to the conclusion that when they got back from the hospital that it was all over, bar some misgivings on her part.

“Of course,” I said. “Umm, he knows you're going round there?”

It crossed my mind that she might not have any belongings left at Ken's once he knew she was planning to take them away.

“Yeah,” she said, leaning back and wiggling her toes while looking at them. Her dressing gown fell away but I pretended not to notice.

She put her feet back down and screwed the top back on her nail polish bottle and tossed it carelessly into her bag.

“I told him today and I've hired a van for Saturday.”

“Umm, you don't think Ken will have ...” I asked.

“Bloody hope not,” she said, watching the TV. “Jesus this is crap.”

She reached for the remote and changed channels. We now seemed to be in the middle of a movie.

“Our furniture's in storage in London,” she said, concentrating on the TV. “All there is at Ken's is our clothes and stuff and me stock. Won't be the end of the world. Worst thing is me sewing machine. They ain't cheap.”

She was obviously aware of possible outcomes so we watched the movie for a while. It seemed to be about a married man and a married woman meeting every day on a train somewhere in America. Then they decided to get a room together for the night.

“Would you like some tea?” I asked, getting up.

“I’m going to bed later,” she said.

Well, I hadn’t expected she was going to stay up all night and it didn’t answer my question.

“Umm,” I said, pausing uncertainly.

She looked at me as if uncertain why I was pausing. No doubt her meaning was perfectly clear to her, if not to me.

“Coffee or tea?” I asked, hoping it would clarify things.

“Tea,” she said. “Seen it, the woman gets raped by some guy in the hotel and the man tracks him down.” She changed the channel again.

When I came back with our drinks she was watching a pop music quiz show. The opposing panels of, presumably, minor celebrities had just been asked which band Bjork had started out with.

“Spit and Snot,” I said, without thinking, handing her her cup of tea. It still smelt disgustingly antiseptic.

“The Sugarcubes,” said a celebrity amid rapturous applause.

“Wroooooong,” called the compare delightedly as an evil sounding klaxon went off. “In 1979 Bjork formed an all girl punk group called Spit and Snot. The Sugarcubes weren’t formed until 1986.”

“Well done,” said Jessica, “never did like Bjork though.”

“She’s an acquired taste,” I admitted. “The first album I bought was *Holidays In Europe* by Kukl, which was another band she was in. I was sixteen and thought I was such a rebel, until I found out no one else

had ever heard of it. Is Tom going with you?"

"Where?" she asked.

"To get your things," I said. I was reluctant to say Ken's name.

"He's in London, Saturday," she said. "For his brother's birthday."

"So you're going alone?"

I didn't think that was a good idea. Ken might try all sorts of tactics to get her to stay, including, but not limited to, more violence.

"I was hoping you'd come with me," she said, focused on the TV.
"Thanks for the tea."

Chapter Nine

Much as I disliked the idea of going back to Ken's house I couldn't turn down the request. It would have been ungentlemanly of me. Even if Tom was going to be available, it was clear that the two of them would need support, especially if things turned nasty. However, and this was, to me at least, a significant point, was I the right person to provide that support?

Still, I agreed to help. I had offered sanctuary and although there are obviously boundaries to that sanctuary, Jessica should not be allowed to go on her own and the presence of an independent adult male as a possible witness should help to keep things fairly calm. I'm just not comfortable with confrontation.

“Might it be a good idea to hire a couple of people to help load your belongings?” I asked after a while. Armed bodyguards too, I didn't add.

“There's a guy comes with the van,” Jessica said. “He helps load it and does the driving.”

“Ahh, that's excellent,” I said, with some relief. Another possible witness although what if the driver turned out to be a friend of Ken's? I quickly estimated the probabilities of this and decided it wasn't a significant risk.

“His name's Denzil,” she added. “He'll be round about ten.”

Tom came back at that point and sat in the lounge peeling an orange.

“How did it go with Janey?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah, cool,” he said. “Mostly girls with their boyfriends but they were friendly.”

“It takes time to build a circle of friends,” she said, patting his hand. “Don't worry, you'll make friends of your own soon enough. Umm, Tom's going to help me get all our stuff on Saturday.”

Tom stared at her with a couple of orange segments sticking out of his mouth.

“You mean you're not going back?” he said, swallowing them whole.

“Yeah,” she said. “We're not going back.”

“Way cool!” Tom was delighted and gave her a hug. “Awesome!”

Then his face clouded a little.

“Where are we going to live then?”

“Here,” I said. “Your mother insists on paying me rent and you can both stay here, until you find somewhere better of course.”

“Sweet,” said Tom. “Bit of a shock for you though, I guess.”

He grinned sympathetically.

“Oh I'm sure I can handle it,” I said. I hoped I could anyway. I'd been living a solitary life for many years now and found change bothersome.

“Saturday!” said Tom, suddenly realising. “I've gotta ring Albert, tell him I won't be there 'til late afternoon.” He pulled out his phone.

“There's no need,” Jessica said. “Albert's expecting you and we can manage. After all, there'll be three of us, with the van driver.”

She explained that she'd hired a 'man with a van' to help with the loading and unloading and do the driving.

“No way,” he said, seriously. “You and me can pack, the driver can load and Tom can ride shotgun. It'll be quicker that way, and cheaper. I can get an afternoon train and maybe come back later on Sunday. Anyway, knowing you, you'll probably leave half my stuff behind.”

Jessica thought about it for a couple of moments then squeezed his hand while I wondered about my role of 'riding shotgun'. Tom rang his

brother, who was clearly disappointed and Tom promised they'd do something special on Sunday morning.

“Will Ken be there?” I asked.

“Probably,” she said, looking a touch apprehensive. “It's his house, after all, and he'll probably want to make sure we don't take any of his stuff.”

“Do you think he'll, umm, make any trouble?” I asked.

“Not with four of us,” she said confidently.

“Are you sure that the four of us will be enough?” I asked. “I thought I could perhaps ask one or two of the bigger, stronger lads on the shop floor to lend a hand.”

I had one in particular in mind. Winston was the local karate champion and had hopes of doing well in the County championships later in the year. I hadn't totally abandoned the idea of armed bodyguards either.

“Trouble is,” she said thoughtfully, “too many people will get things all confused and we'll probably end up leaving stuff behind and having to go back another time to get it which could be worse.”

“Fair point,” I said, disappointed. I would have liked Winston to help me 'ride shotgun', whatever that was.

“Just don't you do any heavy lifting, mum,” said Tom. “Getting nosebleeds and stuff, maybe even stopping it healing properly. Leave it to us.”

“That's right,” I said. “Leave the heavy loads to, umm, Denzil, who'll be used to it and Tom and I will carry the lighter things. You just say what is to go. Do you have any boxes organised?”

“Ooooh, no,” she said. “Hadn't thought about actually moving stuff. It's been hard enough just deciding to do it and telling Ken.”

“Of course,” I said.

Actually her remark had pulled me up. I'd been thinking in terms of Ken as an adversary, intent on stopping us, the good guys, from leaving a place of evil. In reality, he was, to Jessica at least, a soon to be ex lover and the repository of her hopes and dreams for the future. She wasn't just collecting some odds and ends from storage, she was ending that relationship and going forward into a life of uncertainty and insecurity. I was beginning to understand why some women did end up going back into abusive relationships.

“Ahem,” I cleared my throat, ashamed of my own insecurities to do with re-visiting Ken. Of the three of us, I had the least to worry about. “I suggest, Tom, tomorrow you go to the supermarkets and collect as many cardboard boxes as you can. And get some rolls of strong packing tape in case we need to strengthen any. And some big, strong garbage bags, the biggest you can find.”

“Right,” he said, enthusiastically. He seemed pleased to be given some direction.

“Will we need to dismantle anything?” I asked Jessica. I was on comfortable ground since I like to get things organised.

“How d'you mean?” she asked.

“Umm, like beds, furniture, electrical equipment?” I said. “Do we need to take screw drivers or spanners or anything like that?”

“No,” she said, “we didn't take anything that needed assembling and some of it's still in boxes.”

“Good,” I said, “although it's not far if we need to come back for things like that. Now, umm, have you given any thought as to where all your belongings are going to go when you get them here?”

Clearly she hadn't as she stared at me in confusion. Tom was looking thoughtful.

“Umm,” she said.

“I've been thinking,” I said.

Actually the thought had only just occurred to me.

“Not about the moving,” I said, “or at least not directly. Since we've agreed that you both will be staying here for the foreseeable future, I think it is inappropriate for Tom to continue sleeping on the couch.”

“Where do you want him to sleep?” asked Jessica, raising an eyebrow. “Obviously he can't sleep with me or with you.”

She put a slight emphasis on the 'you' which made me acutely aware that she didn't wholly trust me. Logically, of course, it was right for her not to trust me implicitly as I was still very much an unknown and may well have ulterior motives but it hurt a little.

“No, of course not,” I said. “I was thinking of clearing my desk and so on out of my office and letting Tom use that as a bedroom. And, since I don't know how much room you'll need for your belongings it will give you a second room for storing things.”

“Oh we can't do that,” said Jessica. “You need somewhere quiet to work without us disturbing you.”

“I rarely work in there,” I said. “I used to, years ago, but these days I just tend to stay later at the office to get things finished when I need to.”

Jessica thought about it then nodded.

“Well, if it's not too much trouble,” she said.

“No trouble at all,” I said. “I can clear some space over by the window and put my desk there and if we move the couch forward the bookcase can fit behind. The rest can go in my bedroom.”

We discussed the lounge layout for a while. Like most women, Jessica had opinions on room layouts and we agreed on her arrangement although I insisted on my armchair staying approximately where it was.

“Will you be bringing back a bed?” I asked.

“Our beds are in London,” said Jessica, “Ken had a spare bed for Tom. Ohhhhh, Tom. What’s Tom going to sleep on?”

“I can get an old mattress, mum,” he said. “Or maybe a yoga mat or an airbed. Don’t worry about me.”

“No,” I said. “That would be fine for a few nights but since you’re paying rent I, as the landlord, have an obligation to ensure you have a proper bed. After all, I don’t want you prosecuting me as a slum landlord.”

I laughed as I thought that was quite funny. Jessica and Tom just stared at me as though I was mad.

“You’re not buying a bed,” said Jessica, aghast. “You’ve done too much for us already. Have you any idea how much beds cost?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking of a fancy four poster or anything like that,” I said. “Just a simple, single divan or something like that.”

“No,” said Jessica firmly. “I’ll get one. Where’s the local paper? I bet there’re some used ones in there for sale.”

“Better get two then,” I said pointedly. I was a little irritated my offer had been rejected out of hand.

“What?” she said, looking startled and worried at the same time.

“You’re sleeping in my bed too,” I said. “If you’re going to try to keep things fair then you should buy one for yourself as well and I’ll put that one in the shed.”

“Oh,” she said. “I hadn’t thought of that. I wonder if Denzil will go to London and get our beds out of storage?”

“This is getting silly,” I said with a smile. “Let’s look in the paper and see if there’s a reasonably cheap bed Tom can use and I’ll buy it. Neither of you are earning much and it’ll be cheaper than sending that

chap to London. I could use a second spare bed anyway.”

“He is an accountant, mum,” said Tom.

I don't know why he said that as my occupation seemed to be irrelevant but it had an impact on Jessica as she agreed, albeit reluctantly. I fetched the local paper and there was not one bed advertised. Fridges, freezers, bicycles, dart boards, even an antique styled gold plated telephone but no beds. There was a photo of the telephone and I thought it looked rather stylish, until I saw the price.

“Right,” I said to Tom. “First thing Saturday morning you and I will go into town and get a bed. Hopefully it can be delivered the same day.”

“Does it have to be a single bed?” he asked with a cheeky grin.

“Yes,” said Jessica, firmly. “As long as you're living with me it does.”

They locked eyes for a moment and Tom backed down.

“Chance would be a fine thing,” he muttered.

I was about to remark that this, too, seemed a little unfair since, presumably, Jessica had not been celibate with Ken but then I remembered who Tom's choice of bed mate would be and decided Jessica had a point.

“Talking of beds,” I said, diplomatically, “I'm going to mine. Good night.”

As it turned out, Tom found a secondhand bed the next day. It was advertised on a card on the Community Notice Board outside the supermarket in the shopping centre and he rang the advertiser. It was still available and he went round and bought it.

“It was only a tenner,” he told me. “It was only after I'd paid for it I realised I couldn't get it in the back of the car. Luckily the old lady said I could collect it tomorrow. We can get that guy with the van to pick it up, can't we?”

“Was it comfortable?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “although her husband died in it. That's why it was so cheap.”

“Better not tell your mother that,” I said. “Has it, umm, been cleaned?”

“Yeah, the old lady said it had. It looked OK. Why?”

I decided not to tell him what happens when people die. He didn't really need to know.

“Oh, no particular reason,” I said, “just the idea of someone dying in your bed.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, “but I told myself if I stayed in a hotel I wouldn't know how many people had died in that bed so I'm not going to worry about it, just think about how cheap it was. She said it was a heart attack.”

I fretted in the night about Ken and what to do if a confrontation arose but it turned out to be unnecessary as he wasn't there. Jessica and Tom seemed relieved as well and between the four of us we got everything moved in two trips. Most of it seemed to be clothing in various states of repair which made things easier since it could be stuffed into the van rather than neatly packed. Another quick trip to pick up the bed and it was done. Remarkably painlessly. The bed looked to be almost new as well. It didn't take long to move my bits and pieces out of the study and I dropped Tom off at the station by mid afternoon, the toy car neatly wrapped for his brother's birthday.

I stopped off on the way back home and bought some new linen and pillows for the bed. I unwrapped them surreptitiously and pretended to get them out of the linen closet when I made up the bed as I couldn't be bothered to have a discussion about who would pay for it. I'd overheard Tom telling her he'd used the last of his money to pay for the bed and asking if he could borrow the train fare off her. From what I could hear she barely managed to scrape together enough for that herself so when I dropped him off I asked if he had any

'emergency money'.

“What's that?” he'd asked.

“A cash reserve you keep for when there's an emergency,” I'd told him. “Sometimes being able to pay cash quickly can solve a problem before it becomes major. Like you miss the last train somewhere so you can get a taxi rather than spend the night on the street or you get a sudden headache and need some aspirin.”

I'd taken some notes out of my wallet and tucked them into his jacket pocket. He took the money out and counted it then held it out to me.

“That's a hundred quid,” he'd said seriously, “I can't take that.”

“It's not spending money,” I'd said, “just for an emergency. Just imagine what your mother would say if you got hurt and couldn't get to a hospital because you didn't have the cash.”

He looked dubious at that but the train arrived and there wasn't time to argue. I felt better knowing he wasn't totally penniless.

I got Jessica and myself a takeaway that evening. We were both quite tired as we'd ended up rearranging the lounge more extensively than I had expected and she'd given herself a nosebleed carrying bags of clothing between rooms and getting their rooms organised so I made her lie down for an hour or two. She was a lot perkier when she got up.

“I quite like this arrangement,” I said, gesturing around the lounge with a spoonful of special fried rice.

“It's OK,” she said, “although your armchair would look better over there.”

I laughed. “Maybe one day,” I said.

“Probably around the time you get new carpet,” she said. “Ohhh, I can smell this!”

She held a piece of sweet and sour pork to her nose with a fork.

“Excellent,” I said. “Your sense of smell must be coming back. Why do I need a new carpet?”

Actually I could see why without having to ask. There were patches of fairly fresh looking carpet which had been under furniture for years and never got trodden on. Elsewhere the carpet was dingy in comparison. Even though I cleaned every week it had still got dirty over the years. The same was true of the walls now that bookcases and cupboards had been moved about. The whole room looked dull and, I don't know, old and decrepit maybe.

She didn't answer and started telling me the background of the show that was on the TV. It was about someone who psychologically profiles murderers and apparently something crucial had happened in the last episode which she'd missed because she'd been in the hospital. Since I'd missed all the episodes I couldn't really follow.

“It's so nice having all my stuff back,” she said when she'd cleared away the dishes and brought in her tea and some coffee for me. “I can't thank you enough for all you've done for us.”

“Oh, my pleasure,” I said.

She picked up her laptop and started to check the state of her website and whether she had any orders so I got my laptop out and went to my crossword site. The TV talked quietly to itself.

“Ooooh, I've had an order!” she said happily then her face clouded over.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I can't remember where that skirt is,” she said. “Come to think of it, I don't remember even seeing it for a while.”

She leapt up and went to rummage in all the garbage bags of clothing that was piled in their rooms. I was half way through the crossword before she came back.

“Found it,” she said happily, holding it up.

It was a strange looking skirt. The part that went from the waistband to the top of the thighs was a fairly normal looking blue skirt but from there it hung in strips of different materials and colours. I said it looked nice and secretly wondered who would wear such a thing. Since the strips weren't joined, other than at the top, whoever it was must have been fairly confident of their legs.

“I'll just send a quick email apologising for the delay,” she said. “I'll post it off on Monday.”

She shut her laptop after busily typing and sat, gazing around the room. I carried on with my crossword for a while then gave up as the last five clues were getting me nowhere.

“So tell me about Marsha,” she said, unexpectedly. “Why've you kept this place like a museum?”

Chapter Ten

I froze for some reason. Well, I didn't really want to talk about Marsha, so I suppose that was the reason. I liked to remember the good memories, not the bad ones.

“Oh there's nothing much to tell you,” I said, vaguely, hoping Jessica would take the hint and drop the subject. I opened up my laptop and tried to look busy.

“Is that her picture?” asked Jessica, pointing to the picture on my desk in the corner of the lounge.

It was back in its familiar spot, in the back right corner, next to the notebook with the dog that looked like Clancy on the cover.

“Yes,” I said. “We'd been married, ohh, three years or so when I took that.”

“She looks nice,” said Jessica, getting up and going over for a closer look.

“She was nice,” I said. “Tell me, what do you think this is? 'Lose knack winding short bit of hose (5,4)? Third letter 'K', seventh letter 'O'.”

“'Short bit of hose' is probably a sock,” she said. “Where did you meet her?”

“'Sock' would fit the second word,” I said. “Hmm, oh, in Earl's Court, in London. You don't suppose it's 'ankle sock', do you? It fits but I can't for the life of me see why.”

“No idea,” she said. “I thought Marsha was Australian? I think Tom told me that.”

I sighed. Clearly she wasn't going to give up on this. She must have heard my sigh since she put the photograph back down and straightened it fussily.

“Yes, she was from Sydney.”

“So what was she doing in Earl's Court?” asked Jessica, going back to the couch.

I shut my laptop in resignation.

“She backpacked her way from Australia to London,” I said. “With a couple of friends. Sooner or later all Australians end up in Earl's Court for some reason. That's why its nickname is Kangaroo Valley.”

“Were you living there at the time?” She was half watching me and half watching the TV.

“Oh lord no,” I said. “I was a newly qualified accountant then with Price Waterhouse and I was living on the other side of London. They sent a group of us on a training course in a place in Earl's Court for some new standards in auditing practice.”

“So how the hell did, sorry, how did an Aussie backpacker meet up with a stuffy accountant?”

“Is that what you think of me?” I asked, a little sadly. “A stuffy accountant?”

Actually it was a pretty good assessment of me, I had to admit, even if it didn't sound 'cool' as Tom would say. Jessica had just left out the 'old'. I was a stuffy old accountant and that was the end of it.

“Nah, sorry, didn't mean it like that. I was just thinking that a young backpacker travelling the world would probably think of an accountant that way,” she said, watching the TV intently so I couldn't see her eyes properly.

“No, you're right,” I said. “I'm a stuffy old accountant now, just not so old back then.”

A memory came back to me and I smiled.

“Why are you smiling?” asked Jessica. She was half watching me again.

“I was just remembering what she said to me,” I said.

Jessica waited.

“Well?” she prompted.

“Ohh,” I said. “Sorry, I didn't think you'd be interested. No, as I said there were several of us on the course and we all went out for a drink at a nightclub when the course finished.”

“I can't imagine you going clubbing,” said Jessica with a half smile. “Did you dance?”

“Oh lord no,” I said. “The others did, of course. I just sat at a table with a drink and enjoyed the music. I'm not much of a dancer.”

“So did you talk to Marsha or did she talk to you?”

“I can still remember the song that was playing,” I said, not really listening to Jessica. “It was Alice DeeJay, Better Off Alone. I remember that because I was sitting there watching all these people dancing and so on and thinking I was probably better off alone myself. I'd had girlfriends before, you see, but I'd not long broken up with a girl and I wasn't feeling all that happy with myself. Damned if I can remember her name now. I've still got the record, although I haven't played it for years.”

“What, you bought the record because you met a girl in a nightclub?”

“Yes,” I said. “Silly isn't it.”

We sat in silence for a while, the droning of the TV ignored. I don't think Jessica knew how to respond to that.

I laughed at a memory.

“You'll never guess what happened,” I said to the TV. “I was about to get up to go to the toilet and a girl sat down next to me. She looked quite lovely and she leaned over and put her hand on my shoulder and said, in the broadest Australian accent you can imagine, 'Strewth mate, you're never better off alone. Wanna buy a girl a drink? I'm as dry as a dead dingo's donger.’”

“A what?” asked Jessica.

“A dead dingo's donger,” I said. “I didn't know what it was either and I was too scared of her to ask. I did later though, when I got to know her better.”

“So what is it then?” asked Jessica.

“A dingo is a type of Australian wild dog,” I said, “and a donger is Australian slang for, well, umm, a penis.”

Jessica burst into peals of laughter.

“I imagine it's a metaphor,” I said, “bearing in mind how hot and dry the Australian outback is.”

“A dead dingo's donger,” she muttered, “gotta remember that one. Ohhh, classic.”

I smiled, not quite understanding the joke.

“So what did the stuffy accountant do after that?” she asked.

“I bought her a drink,” I said. “Fosters, that's ...”

“Yes, I know, it's an Australian lager.”

“Being a club in Earl's Court they had quite a few Australian patrons,” I explained, “so they probably stocked the beers they liked.”

“Makes sense,” said Jessica. “So what happened next?”

“She was still at the table when I came back with her drink,” I said, “although she was talking to another chap so I just slid the drink over to her and sat back in my seat to watch the people dancing.”

“That was rude of her,” said Jessica.

“Oh not really,” I said. “I'm sure you know what it's like in clubs, a pretty woman sitting alone is a target for every man within a hundred

yards.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. “So did she go home with you, or you with her?”

“Oh dear me no,” I said. I was a little shocked at that. “Marsha wasn't like that at all.”

“You really don't know how to tell a story, do you,” said Jessica. “She's talking to another man and you're sitting alone, come on, move it along.”

“Quite,” I said. “I'm not much of a story teller. Yes, anyway, the other gentleman went away quite quickly and she said something like 'so you're still alone then, mate, c'mon, dance with me.'”

“Did you?” Jessica asked, her eyes fixed on me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Shit, I wish I'd been there,” she said, all agog. “It must have been a sight.”

“Well, I suppose so,” I admitted, “I never was much of a dancer. I'm too self conscious.”

“You must have done well enough,” she said, “since you didn't put her off.”

“No,” I said. “She stayed with me for the rest of the evening. She even gave me her phone number, she wrote it on the back of my hand.”

I made a scribbling motion with my right hand over my left hand.

“I bet you had a pen on you,” said Jessica.

“Of course,” I said in surprise. “I always carry a pen.”

Jessica smiled.

“0171 370 5162,” I said. “That was her phone number, I’ve never forgotten it.”

“I’m impressed,” said Jessica. “So how many weeks did you wait before you rang her?”

“I rang her the very next day,” I said.

Jessica looked disbelieving.

“Before I lost the courage,” I explained. “If I waited I would have talked myself out of it.”

Jessica was now curled up on the couch, her head resting on her hand and her elbow on the arm of the couch. There was some football on the TV but neither of us paid it any attention.

“The number turned out to be a backpackers’ hostel,” I continued. “It took forever to get her on the line and I nearly hung up several times. I was sure she wouldn’t remember me and if she did that she wouldn’t want to go out with me.”

“I’m sure she remembered you,” said Jessica.

“Well, actually, she did,” I said. “To my astonishment, when I told her who I was, she said she’d been hoping I’d ring.”

“That must have made you feel good,” said Jessica. She turned off the TV.

“Yes,” I said. “It gave me the courage to ask her out. There was a little Italian restaurant in Earl’s Court that she liked so we went there. I expect it’s gone now, restaurants don’t last very long these days.”

“So how long was it before you got married?”

“Ohh, almost two years,” I said.

“Why did you wait that long?” asked Jessica.

“She had to go back to Australia,” I said. “She had a job in London as a filing clerk but her visa ran out and she had to go back to Sydney. I never thought I’d see her again but we wrote to each other and phoned at least once a week and I arranged six weeks leave from work and went out to Sydney. That was where I asked her to marry me.”

“Obviously she said yes,” said Jessica.

“Yes,” I said, “although it took a long time to organise since she wanted to get married in Australia so her family could be there but we had to get things organised so she could come to live in the UK when we were married. And I had to leave Price Waterhouse since they wouldn’t give me any more big blocks of time off. Fortunately I was able to get the job with Morley Fluid Systems quite easily so I could afford to bring my wife back to England and get a house.”

“How come you didn’t have any children?” asked Jessica.

“Ah, yes, children,” I said sadly. The atmosphere of the room changed. “We both wanted children, of course.”

Jessica sat there quietly, not moving.

“We put it down to Marsha not being used to the British winters,” I said after a while. “She’d only been here for a few months when she started getting chills and fevers and things. The doctor said it was just her getting used to the new viruses of a new country. Then she started to lose weight and then the nose bleeds started. We went to another doctor and he did some tests, lots of tests actually. Oh god.”

I fell silent, reliving that dreadful day when we got the final test results back.

“What was wrong?” whispered Jessica.

“She had leukaemia,” I said.

“Oh no,” said Jessica, raising a hand to cover her mouth, “how awful.”

I nodded. I took a deep breath.

“No one really knows what causes leukaemia,” I said, “but they think it’s partly genetic and partly some environmental factor. The specialist thought Marsha had inherited the risk of leukaemia but that it was actually triggered by something when she was backpacking, probably through Asia.”

“Is that what killed her?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “They started treatment and she started to put on weight again and the nosebleeds and the fevers stopped. She was doing just fine and everything was back to normal. She wasn’t cured but it was under control. That’s when she decided she wouldn’t have children. She didn’t want to pass on the risk of leukaemia to them, you see.”

“Were you dreadfully disappointed?”

“We both were,” I said. “It was a very difficult decision and, of course, one that only Marsha could make. We agonised for quite a while but it was the right decision, I’m sure. I couldn’t bear to have lost Marsha and then lost a child as well, that would have been too much, too much.”

Jessica just sat there quietly, a tear or two trickled down her cheek and she didn’t brush them away.

“It brought us closer together though,” I said, when I had my voice under control again. “Something like that could have driven us apart but it actually brought us closer together. We found out what true love really meant and the joy of simply being together.”

I paused and opened my laptop and stared sightlessly at the screen then closed it again.

“That was when we got Clancy,” I said. “Our dog, he died just last week.”

“Yes, Tom told me,” she said quietly, “like the dog on the notebook.”

“Yes,” I said. “We got him as a substitute for a child and he became part of the family. Marsha loved him, well we both did, of course. Such

a wonderful dog. We were so happy together, the three of us.”

I smiled ruefully, lost in memories.

“She died, you know,” I said after a while. “The leukaemia got her in the end except it wasn’t leukaemia that she died of.”

“How ...” said Jessica.

“Pneumonia,” I said. “Leukaemia weakens the immune system and one winter she got the flu. Before we knew it it had turned to pneumonia and she died, quite suddenly. She was getting over the flu, then the pneumonia set in and, poof, she was gone, just like that. Gone.”

I started to cry; silent, racking sobs. This was the first time I’d talked to anyone about Marsha since that dreadful, dreadful day when I had to phone her parents in Sydney and break the news and they flew over for the funeral.

“They took her ashes back to Australia,” I whispered between sobs. “Her parents. They came over and took her away from me. I’ve never even been able to visit her grave.”

I couldn’t talk any more. I think Jessica was crying too. Anyway, after a while she came and knelt in front of me and hugged me. I cried on her shoulder while she hugged me. I hadn’t had a shoulder to cry on since Marsha left me.

We stayed like that for a long time. I don’t know how long but Jessica’s knees must have been hurting. I pulled myself together after a while.

“I’ll make us some hot drinks,” she said, gently. “You go and wash your face, you’ll feel better.”

I did what I was told. I felt drained and lifeless. She brought me in a cup of her tea and made me drink it. It was quite disgusting. It tasted worse than it smelt and it smelt terrible but I felt life returning to my limbs.

“I’m most dreadfully sorry,” I said, after a while, trying to suppress an

antiseptic herbal belch. "I thought I had more self control."

"You had ten years of pain to get rid of," she said quietly. "I don't know how you've kept it all inside for so long."

"What else could I do?" I asked. "After Marsha was gone there was just me and Clancy. We just carried on as best we could."

"Didn't you ever think of finding someone else?" she asked. "Another love?"

"No," I said, heavily. "I'm not a particularly ... sociable man and I've never wanted a woman just for, well, you know. It never seemed right to go out, well, looking for someone else. It's so, mmm, disrespectful to Marsha, you see."

"So you've lived here all alone, in this house, ever since?" asked Jessica.

"I wasn't alone," I said. "I had Clancy."

She nodded and looked around the room.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What for?" I asked in surprise.

"For making you change things around. I didn't realise. I should have been more considerate, more aware. I'm sorry if I've hurt you."

I nodded and leaned back and closed my eyes. We sat in silence.

"That's why I never changed anything," I said after while, not opening my eyes. "For a long time I wanted to keep things the same, so I could remember her, to show her my love and respect. Then after a while ... , after a while you start to ask yourself, 'Why should today be the day to change things, to destroy her memory? Why today and not yesterday or tomorrow? And there's no real answer to that and so things never changed. I get up, I go to work, I come home and I remember. One day just follows the next. One after another, one day at a time.'"

I opened my eyes and looked at Jessica.

“You know,” I said, “Marsha's been gone now for longer than I actually knew her. It was about ten years after we met that she died and she's been dead for ten and a half years. That means something, doesn't it? I don't know what but I'm sure it means something.”

“It means you're one of the very few lucky ones,” said Jessica.

“Oh don't be silly,” I said. “How could I possibly be one of the lucky ones? Look at me, look at my home. You were absolutely right, it's a museum, not a home.”

“I'm not being silly,” she said, looking very serious. “I've never loved anyone as much as you loved Marsha and for sure no one has ever loved me that much. My husband couldn't wait to run off with another woman and look at Ken, for god's sake, and the friggin losers I've known in between. I wish someone like you had loved me that much for as little as a week, let alone ten years. Shit, ten years? Most people never even get ten minutes. You're one of the luckiest people in the world.”

Chapter Eleven

“Morning Tom,” said Trevor, appearing in my doorway.

“Trevor,” I said, delighted to see him. “Come on in and sit down.”

He wasn't wearing his suit jacket and his right shirt sleeve was rolled up, revealing heavy bandaging from his elbow to his fingers.

“Looks pretty serious,” I said as he sat down. “What's wrong with your arm?”

“No, it's not serious,” he said. “I've just broken some tiny little bone in my wrist. It's so small they don't even have a name for it.”

“Natalie, sorry, Bethany said you crashed your motorcycle,” I said.

“I didn't crash, I fell off,” he said with a grin. “I was coming to a stop at the junction between Mondive Street and the High Street and the front wheel must have hit a patch of oil or something. Anyway, I was barely moving and the bike just flipped over on me. Bashed my wrist on the ground. It just ached a little so I picked the bike up and drove home. Couple of hours later it was agony and all swollen so Beth took me to the hospital. All very embarrassing really.”

“Was your motorcycle badly damaged?” I asked. It was his pride and joy and had cost rather a lot.

“Just a bent foot peg and a smashed mirror. I can bend the peg back and get another mirror. I just can't ride it at the moment.”

“And rightly so,” I said. “If you try to ride it with that injured arm you'll probably have a serious accident.”

“That's what Beth said, too” said Trevor. “And my mum.”

“Listen to them,” I said. “Women have more sense than men when it comes to injuries. How did you get here today?”

“Beth brought me in in her car,” he said. “She's picking me up after

work.”

“Aren't you supposed to be off sick?”

“I'm bored to death,” he replied. “So I got in to see the doctor first thing this morning and he said I can go back to work since it's only bean counting. I just mustn't put too much strain on my wrist.”

“Judging by the amount of bandages you have I doubt you can move it at all,” I observed.

He held his arm up and showed me he could move his hand about a quarter of an inch backwards and forwards.

“I can still use a spreadsheet,” he said, “although I can't write but I can tick things with my left hand. I thought I'd come back to work and get on with some stuff even though it'll be a few days before I can get up to speed again.”

“Well, I'm delighted to see you back,” I said. “You know how much I hate those reconciliations. Just make sure you don't strain your wrist.”

He half got up to go but I waved him back down.

“Actually, there is something useful you could be getting on with,” I said thoughtfully. “It's pure spreadsheet work so it won't strain your wrist and it'll need doing soon anyway. May as well get started. I've been looking at the Variance account.”

When I joined the company I implemented a system of standard cost accounting, meaning that parts and labour were allocated a fixed, standard cost which made it much easier and faster to work out the cost associated with the sale of any particular pumping system, which is particularly useful for estimating costs for proposed systems. The designers and sales staff didn't have to spend hours getting accurate cost quotes from suppliers, and this is often impossible anyway since prices usually vary with quantities. They could quickly apply the standard costs.

Although our pumps are generally custom made to the customers'

specifications they are, generally, all broadly similar. For example, we keep in stock a variety of standard cast iron casings and send them to outside contractors, as and when necessary, for machining and minor modifications. Depending on how many casings were sent for machining, the scope of the machining, and, inevitably, the workload of the machinists at the time, there are fluctuations in the cost of the finished casings.

The only drawback to this system is that you don't pick up the actual cost of the parts and labour, just the estimated, standardised cost. So, when invoices come in for parts we put them, en masse, into the Variance account. This means that we in Accounts don't have to waste time trying to work out which particular projects a particular invoice may apply to. Indeed, for reasons of efficiency, one invoice for parts may well apply to twenty or more different projects.

The Variance account is credited with the standard costs when each system is sold so the balance of the account represented how well our standard costs had been estimated. Ideally the balance would hover around zero, meaning that we had our standards pretty accurately set. If, on the other hand, the balance was consistently in credit then our standard costs were too high. This could make our estimates for future systems uncompetitively high.

I'd had a meeting cancelled the previous Friday and had cast my eye over the balance of the Variance account for the last few months and it seemed to be running with a fairly large debit balance. Now, this didn't affect our accounts as such, since the balance of the Variance account was included as part of the reported Cost of Sales but it did mean that the designers and sales staff would be underestimating the costs of projects and quite possibly affecting our profit margin on accepted quotes.

I didn't need to explain all this to Trevor, of course, since he was quite familiar with standard costing systems. In fact, he would probably be a qualified accountant in a year or two if he didn't fail any more exams.

“OK,” he said. “I'll take a look and identify which components have significant variances then analyse the key ones.”

It really didn't matter if a 10p washer varied by 100% or more and a 10% variance on the occasional £1000 casing wasn't that significant either but high cost, high volume items needed tighter control. A 3% excess cost on a £5000 diesel motor that we put on 10,000 pumps over the year was certainly significant since it would amount to underestimating future costs by £1½ m. Even though the specialist pumping system market wasn't that competitive, we didn't want to give discounts like that (by way of under quoted estimates) without at least knowing about it.

“Excellent,” I said. “Then we can review them with Purchasing.”

This was a necessary step as well. It could be that the Purchasing Department knew of future pricing changes by suppliers that might end up making our re-calculated standard costs too high or even not high enough. On the other hand, Purchasing, once alerted, may well be able to source particular parts from elsewhere and keep the costs down that way. Although it often looks like it, the Accounts Department never works in isolation. It is, in fact, the one department of a business that works with every other department, gathering and disseminating information and analysis. It's not all about tax returns. In fact, taxation takes up at most one day of my time a year and is fairly mechanical. The interesting and creative side of accounting is in identifying and evaluating opportunities.

Regardless, I was delighted that Trevor was back. There's nothing like endless bank reconciliations for ruining your day.

I was working on an early draft of a proposal to utilise a forty square yard area at the far end of the main shop floor when Janey came in with the day's cheques. We had our own painting facilities but they were no longer adequate and we were starting to outsource a significant amount of this work. The question is whether it was worth using this spare space to expand the paint facility, move the entire paint facility to a remote location and find some other profitable use for the vacated space or simply abandon doing our own painting and outsource the lot.

There were a number of considerations, such as whether it was better to expand the facility on site and pay overtime to existing staff or

employ new staff on a remote site and risk under-utilising them which made the current set of forecasts particularly crucial. The ultimate decision was not mine, of course, but the way I presented my thinking to management would certainly have a significant impact on the final outcome.

Janey seemed marginally happier than usual but that could simply be a reflection of my own happiness that Trevor was back.

“So, I hear you took young Tom out,” I said, absently, looking through the cheques.

“Yeah,” she said, her hip against my desk as usual.

“Do you like him?” I asked.

“He's all right,” she said, giving me a quick glance, perhaps to guess what, if anything, I was getting at.

“Good,” I said. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary about the cheques so I started to sign them.

“He doesn't like football or beer much,” she said suddenly, pausing in her routine inspection of her nails.

“Is that good or bad?” I asked. It seemed good to me since I don't like football or beer much either.

“It's good,” she said. “He's not like most boys.”

I froze momentarily, wondering what, if anything, Janey knew and whether she even cared, then carried on signing.

“I thought you had a boyfriend,” I said, jokily, which was probably a mistake since I don't joke as a rule.

“Yeah,” she said.

Was it my imagination or did she seem a trifle sad about that? Certainly she wasn't bubbling with the enthusiasm of young love.

“Be nice if he talked about something else than football and beer,” she said.

“What does Tom talk about?” I asked. I signed the last cheque and put them in the folder.

“He recited some poetry,” she said. “Really weird, like, but it was nice. Cool. And he don't half know a lot about music. And he can dance. Kev never dances with me.”

“Kev is your boyfriend?” I asked. They changed fairly frequently and I never bothered to try to keep track of them.

“Yeah,” she said, unenthusiastically. “I guess.”

“Well, OK,” I said. “Here are the cheques, thanks.”

She took the folder and paused at the doorway.

“Does he have, like, is he seeing anyone?” she asked, studying the door hinge.

“Oh god,” I thought, “what do I say?”

“Not as far as I know,” I said, deciding, as so many people do in awkward situations, to be honest but literal. She could, conceivably, simply be asking on behalf of a male friend of hers or just wondering if she should allow for a couple when planning whatever teenagers plan for evenings out. You never know.

“Cool, thanks Mr A,” she said and disappeared.

Usually Janey called me Mr Appleby, since that was my name and I don't encourage junior staff to use my first name, but sometimes, when she's in a good mood she forgets to be formal and calls me Mr A. I'd pulled her up on it a couple of times but I'd got used to it now. I liked to think that perhaps it meant we had a good working relationship. If she stayed long enough to take over from Sue, her supervisor, then she'd be calling me Tom and a good working relationship would be essential.

Unusually there was no raucous laughter from Purchase Ledger. Generally Janey reported back to the others, and no doubt embellished, whatever oddity I'd said or done. I thought about it for a few moments then got back to my proposal. Clearly I'd managed to not be odd, at least in Janey's eyes, that day.

I didn't recognise my house when I got home.

Well, when I say that, I don't mean the outside. Obviously the outside was much the same as when I'd left it or I would have driven past looking for my house. I pulled into the driveway, went into the lounge and wondered where I was.

The entire lounge was strewn with clothing and cloth. There were piles on every surface and all over the floor. Some was hanging from hangers from pictures and the door and window frames. There was even something flimsy and semi-transparent draped over the floor lamp. I moved a few things and put my briefcase on my desk and went into the kitchen. If anything, the kitchen was worse and I had trouble finding the kettle. To make room for my mug, I had to shift what looked like a pile of feathers from the counter and discovered that they were, more or less, joined together.

"Anyone home?" I called.

By the look of it, Jessica was doing some sort of stock-take even though she wasn't around. While the kettle boiled I had a look around. My bedroom, of course, was untouched. Knocking on Jessica's door produced no response so I peered in and it was liberally coated with empty garbage bags. There was no response from Tom's door either and his room looked much like the lounge. Presumably he was still at his first day at the swimming pool. The bathroom door was open and there was no one inside, although I noticed that the small assortment of toiletries on the back of the sink had become a large assortment and was overflowing onto the rim of the bath.

"Why on earth do women need so many creams and things?" I wondered.

It was one of the eternal mysteries of the universe, along with the

prodigious quantity of toilet paper that women get through. On my own I got through two rolls of toilet paper every three weeks, fairly consistently. In the week Jessica and Tom had been here, we'd got through five rolls. I vaguely recalled that was roughly on par with Marsha. Not that I monitor these things but you can't help noticing.

I went out into the garden and saw Jessica had got one of the garden chairs out of the shed and was sitting in the patch of autumn sun at the bottom of the garden. She was smoking.

"Damn," she said with a wave when she saw me come out, "You've caught me! Didn't expect you back so soon."

"My assistant was back today," I said, walking down the garden. The grass definitely needed trimming as I'd not got around to it for the last two weekends.

"How is Trevor?" she asked.

"He shouldn't be back yet," I said, "but he was bored at home. Would you like some tea or coffee? The kettle's on."

"Tea, please, no I think I'll have a coffee" she said, taking a deep pull on her cigarette and holding her breathe for a few moments. She exhaled. "Do you mind?" she asked, waving her cigarette.

"Not at all," I said. "I used to smoke myself, years ago, although I'd appreciate it if you don't smoke in the house."

I smoked for a couple of years while I was at university but I had given up since it hadn't improved my social life the way I had hoped.

"I suppose that's a herbal cigarette," I said, catching a whiff. "To go with your herbal tea."

I laughed and went back to the kitchen and made the drinks. I was carrying hers out when she came in and we nearly crashed into each other in the doorway to the garden.

"There you go," I said, handing it to her.

I took mine into the lounge and she followed me in. There was nowhere to sit. I wasn't even that certain my armchair was still there.

“Sorry,” she said, “give me a moment.”

She pushed some rags off the low table beside the couch and put her coffee down then grabbed a huge armful of assorted pieces of cloth that hid my armchair and dumped them in the middle of the floor. I sat down and she made a little nest in the material on the couch and sat down too.

“So, err, is this all your stock?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I was going through it all, looking for inspiration.”

“So what exactly do you do with it all?” I asked.

“I rework it,” she said. “Ummmm ...”

She gazed around then jumped up and grabbed a pair of tatty jeans.

“Like these,” she said. “Someone had thrown them out but there's still some life in them. So what I could do is cut out this bit here ...”, she waggled her fingers over a couple of rents in one leg, “... and maybe, ahhh, ...”, she grabbed an old floral pillow case off the back of the couch. “... and replace it with a piece from this.”

“Won't that look a little funny?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, looking at the pillow case. “Probably not the best example but you get the idea.”

She jumped up and ran into the kitchen and came back brandishing a length of fur trim.

“Although if I put some of this down the other leg as well,” she said, “that might look, ..., hmmm, possibilities, definite possibilities.”

“And you put this on your website when you've done it?” I asked “And people buy it?”

“Sometimes,” she replied. “Not always.”

I found this quite intriguing.

“What do you do if no one buys it?” I asked.

“Ohh, I leave it up for a while,” she said, “but if there's no interest at all I just take it down and try again with something else.”

“Do you sell much?”

“Not yet but it's slowly building. And I've had three people now come back and buy something else, which is really awesome and I get a lot of nice, positive comments.”

I looked around, trying to make sense of the mass of colours, shapes and materials. It was overwhelming.

“And I've had a couple of people say they'd liked something and asking if I could change it a little and I say that on the website too.”

“So you mean someone might like the jeans but without the fur?”

“That's right,” she said, “they might want a bit of leather instead or a green fur heart on the crotch or something.”

“Why on earth would they want a fur heart on the crotch?” I asked, perplexed.

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” she said enigmatically. “I just do what they want and charge them for it.”

“Is it profitable?” I asked.

“Shit yeah,” she said. “I get all this stuff for free or virtually free and I charge a fortune. Like those jeans, when I'm done I'll charge more than a new pair of jeans would have cost, although there's the postage, of course.”

“And people pay a fortune for this?” I found it perplexing.

“Sure,” she said. “It’s like everything is totally unique and creative and different. Not everyone wants to wear a grey suit and look like an accountant.”

She gave me a wink so I assumed she was making a joke at my expense.

“The biggest problem is deciding what would look good with what. I think I’ve got too much stuff because it’s getting quite difficult. I decide on something then find something else and think that would be better instead. It’s easier if I can spread out like this so I can see what I’ve got and get more ideas. I wasn’t expecting you back just yet which is why I haven’t tidied it all away.”

“So long as I have somewhere to sit,” I said. It was nice to see her looking so enthusiastic. Her swollen nose seemed to have subsided a lot and I noticed that the bruises were fading too.

“Give me a few minutes and I’ll do dinner,” she said, swallowing the last of her coffee.

“No, no,” I said. “I’ll do it. Ahh, there’s Tom.”

The front door opened then closed and Tom appeared in the lounge doorway. He didn’t seem to notice all the clothing so perhaps he was used to it.

“How was your first day?” Jessica asked.

“Pretty cool,” he said, pushing some clothes around to clear a space on the couch. “Mostly first aid today. I had an exam and aced it so I’ve got a first aid certificate.”

He looked pleased.

“Do you wear any of your mother’s, umm, creations?” I asked, idly curious.

“God no,” he said, giving his mother a big smile. “I have enough trouble fitting in as it is without looking like a total freak.”

I nodded. This at least was something I could understand.

“I’m going to do dinner,” I said, standing up. “By the way, Janey likes you.”

Chapter Twelve

“Good god almighty!” I spluttered, looking disbelievingly at my laptop.

It was six weeks or so after Jessica and Tom had moved in, a Tuesday if my memory serves me. Tom had downloaded *The Martian* onto a USB stick and we were watching it. I don't enquire how Tom gets hold of these things although I do have the occasional fit of worry since the internet connection is in my name.

In the film, Mark Watney, played by Matt Damon, is a scientist who is accidentally left behind while on a mission to Mars and the film is more or less about how he survives until a rescue mission can be sent. At one point in the film he gets upset with the senior people at NASA and, in the middle of a global broadcast, calls them bureaucratic felchers. I wasn't familiar with the word but it was clearly interesting since the Head of NASA has to apologise to the President for Watney using the word. So I looked it up on the internet.

“What's up?” said Jessica.

They were both looking at me in surprise.

“I just looked up what that word 'felcher' means,” I said.

“What does it mean?” asked Jessica.

“Oh nothing really,” I said, hurriedly composing myself and shutting my laptop. “I, er, just caught my finger in the lid.”

“Oh come on,” she said, laughing, “what does it mean? Tell me.”

“A felcher is someone who ...” started Tom.

“Your mother doesn't need to know that sort of thing, Tom,” I said hurriedly, cutting him off.

Jessica gave me one of her looks and pulled out her phone.

“Oh,” she said flatly, after a couple of minutes. “Right, I see.”

She put the phone away and we carried on watching the film.

“Do you do ...?” she asked, looking sideways at Tom a few seconds later.

“God no,” he said, watching Matt Damon.

“So how do you know what it means?”

“There are people like that in the gay community,” he said, “you hear things. Knowing a word for something isn't the same as doing it, mum. Like matricide. I know the word but I'm not planning on doing it. Yet.”

He gave her a disarming grin and went back to Matt Damon. I had the funniest feeling that Jessica was building herself up to ask me the same question so I hurriedly offered to make some coffee. Tom declined but he paused the film and Jessica asked for some tea. She'd recently changed from her old antiseptic concoction and her new choice was Chamomile which smelt very pleasant. I'd even had a couple of cups myself. It wasn't that bad.

We resumed the film and about where the Chinese send a spaceship to help, Jessica's phone played a few bars of something tinkly and slightly eerie to tell her she had a message.

“Oh my god,” she said, staring at her phone. “Oh no.”

“What?” said Tom. I looked over.

Jessica was already ringing someone and waved her hand at him so he paused the film again.

“I just got your message,” she said, “what happened?”

She listened intently.

“Oh no,” she said. “How's ...?”

“But ...”

“How are you coping?”

“And John ...?”

“I’ll come over ...”

“You’re sure?”

It's always frustrating listening to a one sided conversation and after several minutes Tom stopped the film completely and we both sat there watching Jessica who had started wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“Oh, it's so sad,” she said. “You’ll send me the details though won't you, as soon as it's decided?”

She nodded and uh huh'd a few times then hung up. She gazed blankly into the air for a good fifteen seconds.

“My auntie's dead,” she said. “That was my mum, she was found this morning. The doctor says she had a heart attack in the night.”

“Auntie Maureen?” asked Tom?

“No, Brenda,” she said. “You probably don't remember her, you were ohh seven or eight when me and your dad took you to visit.”

“Was she the one with the birds?” he asked.

Jessica nodded.

“Right,” he said. “I remember.”

“She had half a dozen parrots,” Jessica said to me. “She liked parrots. Or were they Macaws?”

“They weren't in cages,” said Tom, looking at the carpet, trying to remember. “They just flew around the house and sat where they wanted. Smelt pretty bad and they pooped all over the place. I didn't like it there. I wonder what's going to happen to her birds?”

"I think her friend is looking after them for the moment," said Jessica. "Oh how sad. I wish I'd been to see her more often. Oh dear."

"How old was she?" I asked.

"Seventy four," said Jessica. "I know she hadn't been well for a long time but she wouldn't go into home. She worried about her birds."

"Will we be going to her funeral?" asked Tom.

"Yes," she said, "well I am. What you do is up to you."

"I'd like to go," he said, slowly. "I'm sure I can get time off work. Do you know when it is?"

"No, mum'll let me know when it's fixed," said Jessica. "It'll almost certainly be in Chelmsford, though."

"Shall I make some more tea?" I asked. I don't think they heard me.

"That's seventy miles or so," said Tom, doing something on his phone. "I don't think the car will make it there and back."

The car I had thought was Tom's was, in fact, Jessica's and they both shared it. It was an old Ford Escort and it was a miracle it was still running. I had to agree with Tom, taking it for a hundred and fifty mile round trip was definitely tempting fate.

"I suppose we can go by train," she said, dubiously.

"You can borrow my car," I said.

"But how will you get to work?"

"One of you can drop me off in the morning," I said, "and pick me up afterwards if you're back or I can get the bus. It's not a problem."

"I'll pay you for the petrol," said Jessica. "Thank you."

I made a mental note to check the insurance to see if they'd be

covered since it was actually a company car and neither of them were employees or even using it for company business. Tom being eighteen probably wouldn't help either. We didn't go back to *The Martian* as Jessica and Tom went outside to share a cigarette and reminisce about Aunt Brenda, or Great Aunt Brenda to Tom.

I confess I was curious how the stranded scientist was going to be rescued as it had been a good film up to the point where we abandoned it. It had all been very plausible, which I like since I have trouble suspending disbelief. I'd once tried to read *The Lord of the Rings* because it was supposed to be brilliant but I found the whole idea of hobbits rather absurd and a magic ring ... please, don't waste my time. Anyway, I asked Trevor the next day if he had seen *The Martian* and he explained how it ended. I like happy endings as well. I was pleased that Mark Watney was rescued and went on to teach survival skills to budding astronauts as it also seemed a fitting, positive thing to do. I was also pleased that our insurers would cover Jessica and Tom for a small premium for the day. Insurance companies aren't usually that cooperative.

"The funeral's Wednesday of next week," Jessica told me in the evening. "Is it still OK to borrow your car?"

"Next Wednesday? I said. "I think I need it that day. I'm pretty sure I have to go ..."

I checked my calendar on my laptop.

"Yes, I have to go to a Creditor's meeting," I said. "I'll need the car myself. Damn. I'm sorry."

It was an unlikely coincidence as I used my company car for company related trips perhaps twice a year at most. That made the probability of me needing it on the day of the funeral somewhere around a hundred and fifty to one. No one would bet on a horse with those sorts of odds. One of our customers had recently declared bankruptcy and I had to go to the Creditor's Meeting run by the Insolvency Agent and try to negotiate the return of the new pumps we'd recently supplied or, failing that, a decent proportion of the £147,000 we were owed. The Agent was proposing 4% and a look at their last published

accounts made me think 12% would be possible, given their assets. The threat of a law suit wiping out the Agent's fee would no doubt help him to see things our way. Certainly, it was worth a trip rather than a phone call.

“Oh.” Jessica's face fell. “Not to worry, we'll get the train to Chelmsford. I'll just see how much it is and what ...”

“Chelmsford?” I said. “Oh that's no problem then, so long as you don't mind waiting a bit. My meeting's in Chelmsford too. At noon, what time's the funeral?”

I briefly wondered how to calculate the probability of Jessica's aunt's funeral being in Chelmsford on the same day that my meeting was in Chelmsford. It wasn't immediately obvious how to do it.

“Two,” she said, “but you can drop us off at my mum's hotel anytime, she's going over the night before to sort out the reception and stuff. Hey, you'll like my mum. Maybe you could stay after for the reception and meet all our rellies? I'm sure no one will mind.”

I have to confess I didn't fancy the idea of going to a funeral reception for someone I didn't know and mingle with complete strangers but it seemed a simple solution. Having to drive back from Chelmsford would mean we wouldn't be able to stay particularly late anyway.

“Right,” I said, “that's settled then.” I made a note of it in my calendar, not that I would forget.

We were part way through a cooking show on TV when I had a thought. I'd come to enjoy these cooking shows since quite often they taught me how to make more interesting dishes, sometimes with the most basic of ingredients. With Jessica and I sharing the cooking, I was no longer cooking for just myself and it was becoming quite enjoyable; not that I had any ambitions as a chef.

“Should I wear a black suit?” I asked.

“Oh god no,” said Jessica. “People don't wear black suits to funerals anymore. Tom doesn't even own a suit, let alone a black one. Anyway,

you're not going to the funeral, just the piss up afterwards.”

“Are you serious? A piss up?”

This didn't sound like something I would enjoy much.

“Well, not really a piss up although my cousin will be there and his wife never misses a chance to get legless although with a bit of luck she won't make a fool of herself this time. There will be some drinking going on, though, it won't all be lemonade and orange juice. Oh god, you're not going to wear one of those dreadful grey outfits are you?”

“What's wrong with my suits?” I asked.

“They make you look like an accountant,” she said teasingly, at least I hoped it was teasingly. “Boring and pedantic.”

“But I am an accountant,” I replied, with a smile. “I am pedantic, although I hope I'm not too boring.”

“Don't you have anything else?” she said. “You can always get changed after your boring, pedantic accounting meeting.”

“I suppose I could wear my pyjamas,” I said.

“They'd certainly look better,” she said. “More character, bit of a fashion statement.”

I laughed. “People will think I'm mad,” I said.

“No they won't,” she retorted. “They'll think you're one of the family, we're all mad and you probably won't be the only one in pyjamas!”

She looked thoughtfully at me for a few moments.

“What size chest are you?”

“Forty two,” I said. “I'm not going to wear one of your weird creations though. If you try to make me you can get the train.”

“Back in a mo,” she said and disappeared.

She hadn't reappeared when Tom got back.

“What are you going to wear for your aunt's funeral?” I asked.

“Jeans,” he said, “and probably a jumper. Why?”

“Your mother says I should wear my pyjamas.”

“Anything would be better than one of those suits,” he said. “That style went out of fashion before Auntie Bren was born.”

“Why does everyone hate my suits all of a sudden?” I asked, puzzled.

“It isn't sudden,” he said, laughing. “We've always hated them.”

“Ta-daa” cried Jessica, jumping into the lounge, holding up a jacket. “Try this on.”

It was a mid-blue herringbone double breasted jacket. I sighed.

“Really?” I said, “do I have to? I hate double breasted jackets and blue doesn't suit me.”

“Try it on,” she commanded.

“But it's got white buttons,” I exclaimed.

She just looked at me, one eyebrow raised and one hand on her hip.

“OK, OK I'll try it on.” I said, hoping it wouldn't fit.

It was not my lucky day. The damned thing fitted perfectly. Tom wolf whistled.

“Sweet as,” he said. “That's only thirty years out of date, not eighty like you usually wear. Do up the buttons. Yeah, nice.”

He stepped forward and tweaked the shoulders of the jacket.

“What do you reckon, mum? Bit of white trim on the breast pocket?”

“It would look better but he'd never go for it. Too much of an old fuddy duddy.”

I looked at myself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. I had to admit that the cut was nice and it fitted me well. It even made me look a little slimmer. But blue? With white buttons?

“I like being a fuddy duddy,” I said, turning sideways and pulling in my stomach. Then I had a flash of inspiration.

“I don't have any trousers to go with this.”

“Wear your pyjama bottoms,” said Tom, “the blue ones.”

“No, the grey trousers look nice with that jacket,” said Jessica. “Do you have any that are a little tighter?”

“I've got an old pair,” I said. “I was going to use them for gardening but I haven't worn out my gardening trousers yet.”

“Go and put them on,” she said.

It was easier to put them on than it was to argue so I did.

“Nice bum,” said Jessica when I came back in.

I didn't have a quick response.

“The white shirt seems to work,” said Tom, “surprisingly. Just don't wear a tie, and leave the collar button undone.”

“Do you always wear lace-up brogues?” asked Jessica, looking at my feet. “Do you have any loafers?”

“Always,” I said. “I've never worn anything else.”

She sighed. “They'll have to do then, unless you're willing to get some? I'll come with you, if you like?”

“No, I like these,” I said. “My feet are used to them.”

“OK,” said Jessica, sitting down in my armchair. “I’ll do you a deal. Wear that jacket and those trousers to the funeral and I’ll let you have your armchair back.”

Tom sat on the arm of the armchair to show solidarity with his mother, trying to look stern.

“Hmm,” I said. “The armchair and you cook all the dinners between now and the funeral.”

“Deal,” she said and we shook hands on it.

“What do you want on your toast for dinner tomorrow?” she asked with a straight face.

“Roast lamb,” I said, “with all the trimmings and gravy.”

We both laughed. I turned back to look at myself in the mirror.

“Oh god,” I thought. “At least no one there will know me.”

“You should wear that to work tomorrow,” said Tom.

“Don't be absurd,” I said, unbuttoning the jacket and slipping it off..

“I'm not being absurd. It looks good. Everyone will be impressed.”

“I have to set a standard for the junior staff,” I said. “I can't go to work dressed like a hipster.”

Tom burst out laughing. “Oh that's one thing Tom the Apostle will never be accused of.”

The unexpectedness of that stung.

“What?” said Jessica.

“That's Tom's nickname at work,” said Tom. “Tom the Apostle, Janey

told me.”

Jessica gave me an embarrassed look.

“That's not very nice, Tom” she said. “I hope you told Janey not to call him that.”

“It's only because his clothes are so old fashioned,” said Tom. “Like they're biblical or something.”

“You can be very tactless sometimes,” she said.

“What have I done?” said Tom, looking worried, puzzled and guilty all at the same time. “I thought it was because they respected him, like a Bishop or something.”

I folded the jacket and placed it gently on the arm of the couch.

“It's not because of the way I dress, Tom,” I said, quietly. Jessica put her hand on my arm. “And it's definitely not a sign of respect. It's because they see me as a hermit, a dried up dusty old reclusive hermit.”

“Tom,” said Jessica, to me, “Tom didn't mean anything. He's just repeating some nasty gossip, he doesn't understand.”

“I know,” I said. “It's not his fault I've got that nickname.”

“But what did I do?” said Tom. “Why's it such a big deal? I don't get it.”

“I'll explain later,” said Jessica, “why don't you go to your room and download some music or something.” She looked at me anxiously.

“No, it's all right,” I said with a sigh. “They call me that because it's more or less true. It's because they think I'm like a priest, that I'm scared of women, well, of people generally.” I paused. “Maybe they even think I'm dead,” I added, “inside as well as out. That I'm as grey on the inside as I am on the outside, if I even have an inside. They probably think I'm just a husk, a shell.”

I gave a sarcastic little laugh. “They don't respect me, Tom. I'm just a figure of fun, of contempt.”

Tom looked helplessly from me to Jessica and back to me then plonked down on the couch.

“So, like, umm, you don't like being called Tom the Apostle, then?” he said after a few moments.

“No,” I said, “but what can I do about it?”

“Change what they think of you,” he said, “then they'll have to think up something else to call you.”

“Right,” I said, sitting in my vacated armchair. My familiar, old, safe, comfortable armchair. “Just change my image, just like that.” I clicked my fingers.

“Sure,” he said. “Stop wearing those crappy suits and try talking to people, be more sociable.”

“And what do I wear instead?” I asked, a little sarcastically. “That jacket?”

“Sure,” he said seriously. “Then they'll call you Tom the Trend Setter and fight to be seen with you.”

Chapter Thirteen

I thought a lot about what Tom had said. Maybe it was time to change my image, but equally, change is difficult to make even at the best of times and when you want change and I wasn't too sure that I did want change or even that it was the right time to try. Yes, I know that there are times when you need to step out of your comfort zone and challenge yourself but they're called 'comfort zones' for a reason. Still, the solution was obvious; postpone changing.

“Wear the new jacket to the funeral,” I said to myself. “See how people react to it then decide whether or not to wear it to work.”

I congratulated myself for making an excellent decision and left the jacket hanging in the closet. After all, as nicknames go 'Tom the Apostle' wasn't overtly rude and its corollary, 'Doubting Thomas', I saw as a positive virtue. Thomas was the one disciple who doubted the resurrection of Jesus and there are few things worse than a gullible accountant. Doubt and caution are essential prerequisites in my profession.

Unfortunately Jessica noticed that I had forgotten to put the jacket in the car and they made me go and get it, and the old trousers, before we left to go to Chelmsford.

There were, probably inevitably, delays getting past London and there was a danger I would be late for the Creditors' meeting so I dropped Jessica and Tom at her mother's hotel with the arrangement to meet them there mid afternoon before going on to the funeral reception. As I have probably already mentioned, I am not a particularly sociable person and have difficulty with small talk. I have no problem talking with people when there is a specific topic so the Creditors' meeting or other topic based events caused me no concerns but I did lose a little sleep over talking with strangers about nothing in particular. There is a limit on how long you can talk about the weather and I have little idea about sport generally. Answering “I dislike football” to the question “did you watch the match last Saturday?” tends to result in very short conversations, even if it is true and pretending to like it generally highlights my ignorance fairly quickly as well.

Of course, if I were more sociable, it would be easy enough to simply pick a team and note their weekly results as a conversational tool but since I rarely attend social events it seemed too much effort.

The Creditors' meeting went as well as could reasonably be expected although more creditors attended than I had anticipated and it was difficult to have a quiet chat with the Liquidator but the outcome was positive enough to have made the trip worthwhile and I was moderately contented when I returned to the hotel.

Needless to say, neither Jessica nor Tom were waiting for me so I settled myself in the lobby with the Financial Times. Over an hour later neither had arrived and I'd abandoned the FT crossword having managed only a handful of the clues. I was about to pick up The Sun, a newspaper I wouldn't normally look at but it occurred to me that the first few pages might give me some conversational topics, when the young lady on Reception materialised beside me and gave me the address of the pub where the funeral reception was being held.

"The lady who rang also asked me to remind you to get changed before you go over there," she said.

I thanked her and asked where there was a toilet I could use. Jessica seemed to be quite determined so I fetched the clothes from the car. I felt very exposed when I came out of the toilet, very self conscious. The girl on Reception gave me a half smile when she noticed me crossing the lobby and I tried to convince myself that it was one of encouragement, not amusement. Still, the couple in the car park who were going into the hotel didn't give me a second glance.

"Come and meet my mum," said Jessica, when I arrived and found the function room.

She introduced me to a small, somewhat rotund lady of around seventy.

"So sorry for your loss, Mrs Waters," I said.

She said something incomprehensible in reply then someone else came up to her and started talking.

“How was the funeral?” I asked Jessica.

“Oh fine,” she said. “The flowers were nice. There's some food over there somewhere and soft drinks but if you want anything stronger you'll have to get it from the bar.”

I was driving and I rarely drank anyway but I asked her if she wanted a drink.

“Oh, a glass of house red, but only if you're having something,” she said.

I headed for the bar and got a glass of the house red, which seemed to be from a bottle with no label, but when I turned around she had disappeared. There was no sign of Tom either.

“Haven't seen you at one of these do's before,” said a burly man standing next to me at the bar. “I'm Jim, Brenda's cousin's uncle's daughter's best friend's second husband,” or something like that. “How're you connected, then?”

He held out his hand so I shook it. He swallowed half his glass of beer.

“I'm a friend of Jessica's,” I said.

“Oh yeah? Which Jessica's that then?”

“Brenda's sister's daughter,” I said, trying desperately to work out whether that meant Jessica was Brenda's niece or second cousin or what.

“Oh yeah.” He swallowed the other half of his glass of beer and ordered another. “See the match Saturday?”

“I wanted to,” I said, feeling a little guilty for lying. “Who won?”

“United,” he said, unhelpfully. “Effing dodgy refereeing though. Ought'a be a bleeding enquiry.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Weather's nice though, for the time of year.”

“S’right,” he said. “Straight up.”

We stood there for a while, silently. I was scanning the throng, looking for Jessica or Tom and Jim was concentrating on his beers.

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” I said. “I’m, err, going to get some food.”

“Right then,” he said, not looking around from the bar, “gi’us another, luv.”

Picking up Jessica’s wine I went off in the general direction that Jessica had indicated and found some food on a long table in another room. This room had a number of other table with chairs and there were a handful of people sitting in groups, talking and eating off paper plates. I picked up a paper plate from a pile and slowly worked my way along the dishes of food. None of it looked particularly appetising and there didn’t seem to be any utensils for picking up the sandwiches, anonymous rolls of pastry and mini pies. I put a selection on my plate and made my way to an unoccupied table, then went back to get a plastic cup of apple juice.

I sat there for a while, slowly eating the food and watching the people. Interestingly they seemed to be grouped by age. There were a couple of groups of quite elderly people, a group of men who looked to be in their forties and a large group of women in their twenties behind a barricade of prams and strollers. They seemed to be passing babies around as though it were a swap meet of some sort.

“Allo Tom,” said a loud voice and a heavy hand landed on my shoulder.

“Hello,” I said, turning to look at him.

“Ain’t seen you for a while,” he said, dropping into the seat next to me.

He was pushing sixty and smelt strongly of whisky.

“Still got the old betting shop?” he asked. “I was sayin’ to Charmaine,

the other day, ain't seen old Tom for a long time, not since I lost that packet on the 'orses, like."

He chortled to himself at the memory.

"I think you've got the wrong Tom," I said politely. "I'm an accountant."

"S'right," he said, "turf accountant, 'ere, where's Dottie?"

"Dottie?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know, ya wife."

"My wife's dead," I said, "but I wasn't married to Dottie, my wife's name was Marsha. I'm not the Tom you know, I'm another Tom."

"What?" he said, looking horrified. "Dottie's dead? Dear old Dottie?"

Tears welled up in his eyes.

"'Ere, Charmaine," he shouted across the room.

"What you want?" shouted back a stout blonde on the other side of the room, talking to a young man who was loading two paper plates with food.

"I just 'eard," he shouted. "Dottie's dead!"

"No she ain't" shouted back Charmaine. "I was just talking to 'er like, over by the bar."

"You 'aving a laugh or something?" he said angrily to me. "Not nice, that ain't, saying old Dottie's dead. Not effing nice at all."

He struggled to his feet and was about to say something else but changed his mind and lurched off, presumably in search of Dottie. The room was filling up and his progress was impeded by someone who looked to be about three years old, pushing a large toy truck across the floor. He narrowly missed stepping on it and the child

started to cry when her mother slapped her. I assumed the child was female since it had gold studs in its earlobes but the toy truck suggested that it might have been a boy.

“Get that bleeding truck back over 'ere” she said loudly, grabbing the child's hand and kicking the truck in the general direction of the child barricade. She yanked her, or his, arm and the child fell over and was dragged the rest of the way. I noticed that at no point did the child let go of the bar of chocolate it was holding.

“Effing kids,” the mother said and sat down and had a baby dumped in her lap by one of the other young mothers who had presumably got bored with that baby and wanted to play with a different one.

“Is this seat taken?” a rather plain lady of indeterminate years asked me, touching the back of a chair on the other side of my table.

“No,” I said. “help yourself.”

She sat down and looked sadly at the plate of food she'd brought with her. She picked up a pastry roll then put it down again.

“Are you a close relative?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I'm just a friend of Brenda's niece.”

“Ahh,” she said. “So you're a stranger here too. I'm just a friend of someone as well. I like your jacket, did you get it at C&A?”

“It was given to me,” I said. “I don't know where it came from originally.”

“Bess,” she said, extending a limp hand, “I'm a social worker.”

“How nice,” I said. “I'm Tom, umm, I'm an accountant.”

“Ooooh,” she said, looking interested. “Tell me, can I claim my work clothing against tax?”

“Do you have a uniform?” I asked, “or specific clothing that your

employer requires you to wear?”

“No,” she said. “I just wear ordinary clothes, like these.”

“Then I’m afraid not,” I said.

“Bummer,” she said, picking up a pastry roll again. She stared at it distastefully and put it down again.

“What area of social work do you specialise in?” I asked.

“Domestic abuse,” she said.

A youngish man at the end of the table overheard her and turned to look.

“I like my women the way I like my fish,” he said, “battered,” and broke into loud raucous laughter.

“Pig,” she said to him.

“Shit, you can’t take a bleedin’ joke,” he said, irritably, “up yours luv.”

“Domestic abuse is no laughing matter,” said Bess heatedly.

I decided it was time I went somewhere else so I stood up.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, “I need to find a toilet.”

I made my way towards the door of the room and got there just as Jessica appeared.

“Hello,” she said brightly, “having fun?”

“Are these your relatives?” I asked.

She peered into the room and looked around.

“No,” she said, “not really. They’re mostly friends of my dad’s second wife’s family. I know them to say ‘hello’ to but that’s about it.”

She waved at someone who waved back.

“Most of my close relatives are out the back in the garden,” she said. “I was wondering where you'd got to. Come on.”

She grabbed my hand and led me out into the garden, which was actually a concrete area with a canvas awning and some rows of tables and chairs. Tom was talking with a group of teenagers on the far side and waved.

“This is my niece, Clair,” said Jessica introducing me to an attractive girl in her mid twenties.

“Oh, that's definitely one of yours,” said Clair, “the buttons are so your style.”

“Clair's a fashion student,” said Jessica. “She likes your jacket.”

“Ahh, yes, thank you,” I said. “Did it come from C&A originally?”

“I don't remember,” said Jessica.

“Looks like Bowmans of Saville Row,” said Clair, “judging by the style of the shoulders.”

She reached out and started feeling the material.

“Definitely too good for C&A,” she said.

“Come over here, there's someone I want you to meet,” said Jessica so I followed her.

“Take no notice of Clair,” she whispered. “She's a bit pretentious and wants everyone to know she's in fashion.”

“But I like the idea of a jacket from Saville Row,” I said, smiling.

She laughed. “OK, you're a bit pretentious as well, but Saville Row stuff doesn't make it down to my end of the market.”

“Oh, I got you some wine,” I said, remembering. “I left it on the table back in the other room. Shall I go and get it?”

“Someone will have had it by now,” she said. “Thanks anyway.”

“Jess,” called a man standing next to Jessica's mother, “could you come over here a minute?”

“That's my brother, I'll be back in a minute,” she said to me. “There's some more food round the corner.”

She disappeared and I took the opportunity to find the toilet. When I got back, Jessica, Tom, Jessica's mother and the man who had called her over had disappeared so I went to investigate the food. It was pretty much the same as had been in the other room although trays of slices of cake and assorted chocolates had appeared as well. A large young man in a nice three piece suit was determinedly making his way through the chocolates.

“These are really not bad,” he said, licking a finger, “not bad at all. Have one?”

“Not for me thanks,” I said, patting my stomach to suggest I was trying to lose weight. Actually I didn't have a particularly sweet tooth and all I really wanted at that moment was a cup of coffee.

“Ahh,” he said with a smile. “I know all about that,” and he patted his own ample stomach.

“I'm Desmond,” he said, holding out his hand. “I'm one of Brenda's sister's daughter's brother in law's sons.”

“I have no idea how you manage to keep track of all these complicated family relationships,” I said. “I'm the only child of two only children. I'm Tom, by the way, a friend of Jessica's.”

“Oh, you have to be born into it,” said Desmond, picking up another chocolate. “Which Jessica?”

“That one over there,” I said.

“Ohhh, you're that Tom,” he said, looking at me appraisingly.

“Possibly,” I said, confused.

“The one who took Jessica and Tom in after that little fracas? Gave them refuge? Sanctuary?” he said.

“Well, yes,” I replied. “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“It would make my job a lot easier if there were more people like you around,” he said. “I'm with the Family Courts in Essex.”

“Ahh,” I said.

“Too many people turn a blind eye,” he said, “sweep the problem under the table. The CPS is working on it but it's a big issue and isn't likely to go away in the near future.”

“I suppose you must get to deal with a lot of such cases,” I said.

“Yes and no, the more serious ones are handled by the criminal courts, of course, as assault is a criminal offence but we get a lot of the minor cases, far too many.”

“Is there any way of preventing domestic abuse?” I asked.

“Sadly, not really,” he said looking serious. “All the law can do is make potential abusers afraid of the consequences but that only works if the abuser knows they are being abusive and, of course, is afraid of the consequences. Too many think it's their natural right and have no idea why they get prosecuted. And, of course, there are some women who play the abuse card for their own purposes.”

“Good god,” I said, shocked. “You mean some women falsely claim these things?”

“Yes,” he said. “Only a few but it does complicate things. We had a case a few weeks ago where a woman accused her husband of sexually assaulting their children and after an extensive investigation by the police it turned out to be a false accusation because she was trying to

get revenge on him for sleeping with a friend of hers. Terrible business. And there was that one you may have read about in the newspapers. In Australia?”

“I don't think so,” I said.

“A woman accused her boyfriend of beating her up. When she went to the police she had extensive but minor facial injuries. It looked like an open and shut case but he was let off in the end.”

“Why?” I asked, “how did she get the injuries if it wasn't him?”

“The police found security camera footage taken inside the lift of the hotel the couple were staying in at the time,” said Desmond. “It quite clearly showed the woman hitting herself in the face at the time of the alleged attack.”

“Are you serious?” I said. “I live a quiet life, I don't know anything about these things. You mean she beat herself up in order to accuse her partner?”

“Yes,” he said. “When you work in the legal system you are continually astonished at the lengths some people will go to. Still, you did a noble thing. The vast majority of cases are genuine, and the majority of those are perpetrated against women and the victims need all the help they can get.”

“I'm sorry?” I said. “You mean there is domestic violence against men as well?”

“Oh most definitely, and not just in homosexual relationships either. There are plenty of cases where the husband is abused by the wife. The really sad part is that it's very rarely reported. There is some sympathy for female victims of domestic abuse but virtually none at all for male victims which means that hardly any of them ever get help.”

I think what bothered me most about this conversation was that Desmond continued happily eating chocolates throughout as though he was discussing the weather or the football results.

“I suppose you get inured to it after a while,” I said, thoughtfully.

“Not really,” he said. “That’s why I’m so fat, I eat too much to compensate for the sheer horror of it all.”

“Oh, there’s Samantha,” he said, then called out “Samantha, come and meet Tom,” and waved at her.

“Samantha is Jessica’s sister,” he said. “Sam, this is Tom, the chap I was telling you about.”

“You’re the Tom Jess is staying with?” she asked, coming over.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good, I’ve been hoping to meet you. You do realise that Jess is just using you, don’t you?”

Chapter Fourteen

“Using me? I said, quite taken aback, “using me in what way?”

“Oh my dear,” said Samantha, putting her hand on my arm, “you have no idea how calculating that woman can be. I should know, after all I’ve known her for thirty six years.”

I looked at Desmond but he was back at the chocolates, talking animatedly with someone else.

“Why do you say Jessica is calculating?” I asked.

“She always has been,” said Samantha, edging closer to me. “She’s never been much in the looks department but she’s always used what little she has to get men to do things for her and when she’s used them up she moves on without a single qualm. Take Ken, for instance, lovely man but when he turned out not to be rich enough for her taste she dumped him and found you. Tell me, does she pay you any rent, hmm?”

She looked knowingly at me.

“Yes she does,” I said, “in fact she insisted.”

I had to admit to myself, however, that no money had yet materialised. It wasn’t an issue and I knew Jessica wasn’t making much from her website and was looking for another part time job.

“Well, don’t be surprised if she stops paying you and has a very good excuse,” continued Samantha. “It’s not like she’s ever held a proper job. She has no skills, poor dear.”

“She seems to be quite good with clothes,” I commented.

“Ohhh,” Samantha laughed musically and batted her eyelids at me. “That website! If you listen to her it’s one of the most successful websites on the internet! You do know what she does though, don’t you? She’s sells used clothes! I ask you, is that any way to make a living? She might just as well have a stall at a flea market!”

“She doesn't just sell used clothes,” I commented. “She modifies and reworks them. Quite artistically too, I have to say.”

She half stepped back, as though to look at me properly without glasses.

“Have you seen what she does?” she asked. “I'm sure someone with your sense of style wouldn't be seen dead in any of her creations.”

The word 'creations' was dripping with sarcasm.

“Actually, this jacket is one of Jessica's,” I said. “It's very good, I think.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I suppose she gave you that in lieu of rent?” she said. “That's just the sort of thing she would do. Is it any wonder her husband left her?”

“He left her because she reworks secondhand clothing?” I asked, confused.

“Noo,” Samantha laughed again, her hand back on my arm. “He left her because she was so bad with money. Always over spending. She has absolutely no idea whatsoever about living within her means.”

“Do you work?” I asked, beginning to feel quite entertained by this woman.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I'm personal secretary to Mr Johnson of Johnson, Hutchins and Fielding, a highly respected law firm.”

“Ahh, yes,” I said. “I've heard of them.”

I hadn't heard of them, of course, but she carried the air of someone expecting me to have heard of them.

“We are leaders in the Essex legal circuit,” she said proudly. “What do you do for a living?”

“I'm an accountant,” I said. She looked impressed. “And are you

married, Samantha?"

"Sadly not anymore," she said, stepping closer again, her hand not leaving my arm. "Are you?"

"I'm a widower," I said. "Are you a widow or a divorcee?"

"I divorced my former husband," she said. "He was a philanderer. I wouldn't be surprised if he had an affair with Jessica as well, she's just the type to break up a happy marriage. I do hope you aren't getting involved with her, she's really not up to your standard."

"No, no," I said. "She's just staying with me until she gets back on her feet again. Tom too."

"Ohh that poor boy," said Samantha. "I blame his mother."

"What for?" I asked.

"Oh! You know he's ..." and she raised her eyebrows a couple of times meaningfully.

"No," I said. "He's what?"

She lowered her voice. "He doesn't like girls," she said.

"I don't understand," I said, looking puzzled. "What do you mean he doesn't like girls?"

"He's homosexual," she whispered in my ear.

"No!" I said, trying to sound horrified. "Are you sure?"

"It's a scandal," she said. "That woman has brought scandal and shame on the whole family!"

"Well," I said. "Yes, I can see that. So he's a homosexual because of the way Jessica brought him up?"

"Oh absolutely," she said. "It's a well known fact that boys brought up

by single mothers become homosexual. It's because of all the boyfriends, you see. A constant stream of men at her front door, is it any wonder that an impressionable young boy grows up thinking that's the way of the world? No, a young boy needs a solid father figure to set a good example."

"Well, yes," I said, "I can see that."

"Do you have children, Tom?"

I felt something behind me and, out of the corner of my eye saw it was the wall of the pub garden. Without realising it, I'd been gently manoeuvred away from the table and other people to an area that was relatively quiet.

"Yes," I said. "I have a daughter."

"And I'm sure she is a credit to you, Tom," she said. "A man of your standing in the community."

"She's of that age where she needs a mother's example," I said, trying to look serious. "As a single father, I'm very much afraid that the constant stream of women to and from my front door will turn her into a lesbian, especially with Jessica around the house so much, leading her astray. It's just so hard to find the right woman who can set her a good example. Someone with all the wifely virtues, respectable and tolerant."

"Oh my god!" she said. "And you brought Jessica into the house ..." and then she petered out as she realised that I was making fun of her.

"Hmmp," she said, letting go of my arm. "You mark my words, she's using you and when she's used you up she'll move on to someone else."

"Hello, Samantha," said Jessica, materialising at my elbow. "I see you've met Tom."

"We were just talking about you," I said.

“Oh I'm sure Sam had lots of nasty things to tell you,” she said, looking daggers at Samantha.

“I would never say anything nasty about you, Jessica,” said Samantha, sweetly. “I wouldn't dare. Tell me, how's that darling little business of yours going? I'm sure you'll sell something very soon.”

“I've sold quite a few things,” said Jessica.

“Is that so? Well, I suppose the economy is faltering a little so the rag trade would benefit. And Tom, how is he doing? Has he found himself a nice girl yet?”

“Tom's just fine, thanks.”

“And have you heard from Ken recently, or don't you worry about him any more now he's all alone?”

“Ken?” said Jessica. “Why would I be talking to Ken?”

“Oh, I just thought, you know, after everything he did for you, you might have spared him a thought or two. But then, I suppose you have to think of yourself, as you always do.”

Samantha smiled sweetly at Jessica, whose jaw seemed clamped firmly shut.

“Well, I must mingle and thank people for coming. It's Aunt Brenda's funeral after all and someone in the family should make an effort, don't you think? It was so nice to meet you, Tom.”

She put her hand on my arm again and turned in towards me so her back was half towards Jessica.

“I do hope we meet again, very soon.”

“I'll look forward to it,” I said, “although perhaps on a happier occasion.”

“Quite,” said Samantha. “And give my regards to your daughter.”

“Your daughter?” asked Jessica, watching Samantha walk away, a strange look on her face.

“I’ll tell you about it on the way home,” I said. “She’s your sister?”

“Step sister,” said Jessica. “Mum’s second husband. You OK to go now? It’s getting late.”

“Certainly,” I said.

“I’ll just find Tom and say goodbye to mum. Meet you back at the car.”

“So tell me about your daughter,” Jessica said twenty minutes later when we were all in the car.

“I didn’t know you have a daughter,” said Tom from the back seat.

“I don’t,” I said. “I just get very suspicious when complete strangers seem to be worried about my welfare. They usually have an agenda of their own.”

“Why? What did she say?”

“She wanted me to know that you are just using me,” I said, checking the road sign to make sure I was heading in the right direction.

“Is that what you think?” asked Jessica, “that I’m using you?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I’m guessing your sister doesn’t like you very much.”

Jessica sat silently for a few miles. As far as I could tell from the rear view mirror, Tom was doing something engrossing with his phone.

“I was four when mum got married again,” said Jessica quietly. “He and Sam moved in with us and she’s eight years older than me. I don’t know why, but she’s always hated me.”

“Was she an only child?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Jessica.

“That’s probably why,” I said. “She wasn’t the centre of her dad’s attention anymore.”

“She was always pinching me and being nasty,” said Jessica, “and telling lies to mum about me and getting me into trouble. Once, I think I was five, she took me to the park and left me there and went home and told mum I’d run away. Mum was furious with me.”

She glanced at me but it was dark and she couldn’t see my expression.

“And when I was a teenager she was in her twenties and always going on about how fat I was. I wasn’t fat, just a little chubby but she was always going on about how I’d never find a husband.”

She went quiet again, for a while.

“You know that scar on my cheek?”

“No,” I said, “I’ve never noticed a scar.”

“It’s right here,” she said, raising her hand. I was concentrating on the road so I didn’t look.

“I had a mole,” she said, “on my cheek and she was always going on about how ugly I was because of that mole and how disgusting it was with a hair growing out of it and one night I picked it off with my nails. Then it got infected and went all nasty and horrible and now I’ve got a scar.”

“There’s nothing wrong with moles,” I said.

“Tell that to a fourteen year old girl who’s insecure about her looks,” she said sadly. “I was convinced everyone hated me because I was ugly.”

“You’re not ugly,” I said, worried that I’d missed the turnoff onto the M25.

“Thanks,” she said. “So what was all that about you having a daughter?”

“Ohhh,” I said, “she was going on about you making Tom gay because you had endless lovers as a single mother.”

I happened to glance in the rear view mirror and noticed Tom looking at me in the mirror, listening intently.

“So when she asked if I was married and had children I teased her by saying I was a widower with a daughter and I was worried that all the lovers I had would make my daughter a lesbian.”

Jessica burst out laughing at that although Tom stayed quiet. I could see in the mirror he'd gone back to his phone.

“She doesn't approve of me,” said Jessica. “She blames me for my husband running off with another woman and thinks I should have married someone else immediately.”

“She told me she divorced her husband because he had an affair with you,” I said.

“Friggin' bitch,” said Jessica, vehemently. “I never did and he left her, she didn't leave him, and he went because he couldn't take her nagging any more. He was a painter and decorator but that wasn't good enough for her. She got that job with that law firm and wanted him to be a social climber, jumped up little cow.”

“Is she really PA to the senior partner?” I asked.

“No, she's a general secretary to all of them. It's only a small outfit, in Market Road. There's the three lawyers, her and a girl on reception but to listen to her you'd think they were one of the top London law firms. They mostly do conveyancing and wills.”

“She seemed to like Ken, though.”

“She never met him,” said Jessica. “She only likes him because it's a way to criticise me.”

When I was young I'd thought it would have been nice to have brothers and sisters. I hadn't realised that it might well not have been that good after all. We drove in silence for a while.

"You looked good in the jacket," said Jessica, after we'd turned off onto the Sevenoaks by-pass.

"Thanks," I said. "It took a while but I forgot I was wearing it. Nice and comfortable and a lady said it looked good."

"Who was that? Samantha? She did seem to be coming on to you."

"Oh I don't think so," I said. "I think Samantha was just intent on turning me against you and anyway, she realised I was teasing her after a while so that wouldn't have impressed her. No, I've forgotten her name but we talked briefly. She was a social worker."

"I don't know any social workers," said Jessica. "What did she look like?"

We talked about the people at the funeral for a while but since I didn't know who anyone was or any of the gossip it wasn't a lengthy conversation and we lapsed into silence again. I caught myself seriously thinking about wearing the jacket to work the next day, since no one had actually laughed at it, at least not openly, or said anything negative.

"Hey, listen to this," called Tom from the back seat as we were nearing home. "Far to the Northward there lies a land, a wonderful land that the winds blow over, and none may fathom nor understand the charm it holds for the restless rover.' Isn't that beautiful?"

"Is that a poem?" asked Jessica.

"Yeah, one of Banjo Paterson's," said Tom. "I'm chatting with this guy in Australia, he's into poetry."

"What's it called?" I asked. "I might have it at home."

"Just a sec, I'll ask," said Tom. "Umm, *By The Grey Gulf Water*."

“It rings a bell,” I said, “although I have a feeling it’s a very sad poem.

“Ohh,” he said, “I don’t really like sad poems. I’ll just ... oh, he’s had to go.”

“Are you in a chat room?” asked Jessica.

“Nah, Facebook. He was on his lunch break.”

We were all quite tired so we went to bed when we got home. In the morning I got dressed as usual and had my breakfast and went out to the car to go to work but changed my mind and went back inside. I was feeling quite daring and slipped off my normal suit jacket and put on the one Jessica had given me although I kept the suit trousers on.

“Good morning, Sue,” I said, walking past the Purchase Ledger section. Only Sue was in at that time.

“Morning Tom,” she said, glancing up then she did a double take.

“Morning Trevor,” I said, standing in his office doorway. “Not a nice day for biking, is it.”

“Oh morning Tom,” he said. “No, but it’ll stop raining this afternoon, for sure. Can I grab you later to talk about those variances?”

“Sure, I’ve got a meeting at ten so find me after that.”

“Will do.”

I went into my office and hung the jacket over the back of my chair, feeling absurdly deflated for some reason.

“Morning Mr Appleby,” said Janey, a little while later, bringing in the day’s cheques. Unusually she stood at the end of my desk while waiting for me to sign them rather than in the middle and she kept glancing at my chair and there was no laughter when she went back to her own desk.

“You going to the planning meeting, Tom?” asked John, poking his

head in my door around quarter to ten. "I'll walk over with you. Have you seen the production schedule for next week?"

We talked about the schedule for a few minutes then I got up to go to the meeting and put on the jacket. John didn't notice a thing.

I felt eyes on me as I walked past the Purchase Ledger section and looked up to see Sue, Janey and Mary studying me intently. I suddenly felt self conscious and hurried past.

"Come in Tom, John," said Mr Morley, giving me a funny look. We went into his office and took our places at the meeting table.

"You look different, Tom" said Jim Dawson. "Had a haircut or something?"

"No, not recently," I said. "Probably ought to soon, though."

"That's a nice jacket, Mr Appleby," said Karen, Mr Morley's secretary, when I stopped at her desk after the meeting to get some details from her. "Is it new?"

"Not really," I said. "I've had it for a while."

"It suits you," she said. "I'll just get the file."

"Hmm," I thought. "At least someone's noticed."

When I went back into the Accounts Department, I distinctly heard a voice whisper loudly, "here he comes, shhh". It sounded like Janey but I couldn't be sure. All three of the girls in Purchase Ledger watched me intently as I walked past, as did the girls in Sales Ledger and Michelle, the bookkeeper. In fact the entire Department was silent as I walked, self consciously, to my office. As soon as I went in a buzz of conversation started.

I got engrossed in some work and didn't notice the time so it wasn't until after half past one that I got up to go to the canteen for my lunchtime sandwich. Most of the staff had had their lunch breaks by that time and there was a fairly loud wolf whistle and some girlish

giggles but when I turned round to see who it was everyone was bent over their desks getting on with things, apart from Michelle who had her back to me and was looking out of the window while eating her salad. When I came back with my sandwich the place was a hive of industry.

“So how did they react at work when they saw your jacket?” asked Jessica, innocently, that evening.

“Karen said it was nice,” I said, “although no one else seemed to notice.”

“Right,” she said, “but no one laughed, yeah?”

“No, no one laughed. I was a little disappointed, I'll be honest. I expected more of a reaction,” I said. “I've worn the same suits for years.”

“Oh, there was a reaction,” she said, grinning, “just that you being a guy, you didn't notice. What was that you found on Facebook, Tom?”

Tom picked up his phone and slid his thumbs around a bit.

“Boss looked almost cool today,” he read out. “This one says 'a bit dishy, years younger' and this one just says 'OMG check this out, way cool' and there's a picture. Wanna see?”

“A picture? Who took a picture of me?”

Tom showed me the picture but he kept his thumb over the name of whoever posted it. The jacket was quite clear although my face was a bit blurred. It looked like it had been taken when I was trying to see who had whistled when I went out for my sandwich. The blurring made my jowls look a bit fat and my hair wasn't as neatly combed as I had thought.

“Hmmm,” I said, trying to sound disapproving, although I have to admit I was quite pleased.

“I've got another one you might like,” said Jessica. “Want to try it on?”

Chapter Fifteen

“That you, Tom?” shouted Jessica from her room.

“Which one?” I called back, picking up my post from the table in the hall way. There was a letter from my bank and a thick padded envelope.

“You, of course,” she said, emerging. “Had a good day? Want a coffee?”

“Yes and yes please,” I said, looking at her. She seemed happier than usual, more animated.

“Have you sold some more clothes?” I asked, following her into the kitchen.

“Better than that,” she said. “You go and get changed and I’ll tell you in the lounge.”

I went to my bedroom and changed into a pair of chinos and a checked woollen shirt Jessica had insisted I bought. She thought I needed to be more 'casual' in the evenings and, with winter just round the corner, a warm shirt did help with those chill areas the central heating didn't quite reach.

“So tell me the good news,” I said, going into the lounge.

“I've got a job,” she said proudly. “Two actually.”

“Two in one day?” I said, “that's impressive. What are they?”

“Well, I went to that discount bookshop in town last week and I got a letter today saying they wanted to take me on,” she said. “Only one day a week for the moment but still.”

“Will you get a discount on the books too?” I asked.

“5% staff discount,” she told me, “so if there are any books you want let me know and I'll get them for you. Especially with your birthday

coming up soon.”

“How do you know when my birthday is?” I asked. I was fairly certain I’d never told her.

“You’re a Scorpio,” she said, “so it must be in the next two or three weeks.”

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “November 18th to be precise, but why did you think I’m a Scorpio?”

Jessica laughed. “You’re passionate, resourceful and brave,” she said, “and probably quite stubborn too when you want to be. You’re a classic Scorpio and if your birthday is the 18th you’re not far from Sagittarius which would account for your generous nature although I’m surprised you’re not more extrovert.”

“I’m not any of those things,” I said. “Certainly not passionate or brave.”

“Oh pooey,” she said. “I’ve seen you in nasty situations. You may be scared but you don’t back away and only a very passionate man would still be in love with his wife ten years after she died.”

I didn’t want to get back onto that subject so I changed it.

“And what is your other new job?” I asked, sipping my coffee. Jessica had changed the brand we get and even I had to admit it was a definite improvement. Apparently it was a strong blend, intended for espresso but it was very nice with milk.

“Tom is March 19th,” she said, ignoring me. “He’s a fairly strong Pisces since he’s affectionate, empathetic and artistic but since he’s almost Aries he’s also dynamic and competitive too.”

“And when’s your birthday?” I asked.

“What sign do you think I am?” she replied, a little coyly.

“Ummm, Gemini?” It was the only sign I could think of off the top of

my head, other than my own and she was nothing like me temperamentally.

“Hmmm, not a bad guess,” she said, pursing her lips, “although do you really think I'm two faced?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Are Geminis two faced?”

“It's because they are twins,” she said. “Geminis are opposites at the same time and it often shows as being two faced. No, I'm Aquarius.”

“Ohhh, so that explains your hippy side,” I said.

“You what?” She looked baffled.

“This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius,” I sang, badly. “When the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars ...”

She looked at me as though I was mad.

“It's a song,” I said apologetically. “The Age of Aquarius by 5th Dimension. It was something of a hippy anthem back in the 60s, I believe.”

“Oh,” she said, flatly.

I was feeling a little foolish now, so I asked when her birthday was and mentally filed it away. Women don't like it when you forget birthdays and things like that. Tom came home at that point.

“I got that job at the bookshop,” she told him.

“That's, like, awesome,” he said, dropping onto the couch, “when do you start?”

“Next Monday,” she said.

“What is the other job?” I asked.

“You've had a busy day then, mum,” said Tom, grinning. He didn't

look particularly dynamic, sprawled over the couch the way I was sure I never had when I was a teenager.

“Since I didn't hear from the bookshop, I phoned that estate agent, you know, that one on the corner opposite the post office? Anyway, the last person had just quit and the manager told me to come in this morning and he gave me the job. Isn't that cool!”

“So you're going to be an estate agent?” I asked. I could imagine Jessica as an estate agent.

“Noooooooo, I couldn't ever do that,” she said. “No I'll be going round houses putting up the signs that say 'For Sale' and 'For Rent' and 'Sold' and so on.”

“That is so cool, mum,” said Tom, leaning over and giving her a hug.

“You know,” I said, “it never occurred to me that someone has to do that. The signs just appear, I've never seen anyone actually putting them up. That'll probably mean a lot of driving though, is your car up to it?”

“I get a company car,” she said proudly.

“Wow,” said Tom, “impressive. Can I borrow it in the evenings?”

“Pah,” she said, slapping his knee. “I don't really get a company car. They've got a little old van they keep round the back and I get to use that for the signs but I don't get to take it home. I've just never had a company car and I like the sound of it!”

“Won't it clash with the bookshop?” I asked.

“They said the signs aren't urgent, so long as they go up within a few days,” said Jessica. “So I can fit them in whenever.”

“Well we must celebrate,” I said. “How about a takeaway? My treat.”

“Cool, pizza!” said Tom, enthusiastically.

“Or Chinese?” said Jessica.

“We’ll have Chinese,” I said “and Tom can have a pizza if he wants.”

They both looked happy.

“Oh,” I said, remembering my post. “speaking of bookshops, Tom, I ordered something for you and I think it’s arrived. Just a second.”

I went to my bedroom as I’d left my post on the bed.

“There you go,” I said, handing Tom the padded envelope back in the lounge.

“Oh that’s so cool, thank you,” he said when he’d unpacked *An Anthology of Australian Bush Poetry*. He jumped up and gave me a hug then sat back down and started studying the book.

“I couldn’t find that book of Banjo Paterson’s poems,” I said. “So I went online and found that. It’s got several of his in it.”

Actually I did have a look for Marsha’s book when we got back from the funeral but when push came to shove I found I couldn’t give it away so I put it at the far end of the shelf where it was mostly hidden by the curtain.

“It’s got *The Man From Snowy River*,” said Tom, scanning the contents, “and *Clancy of the Overflow*. Oh wow, and Henry Lawson.”

He quickly found the page.

“Our Andy’s gone to battle now ‘gainst Drought, the red marauder. Our Andy’s gone with cattle now, across the Queensland border.”³ he recited. “Oh this is, like, unreal. And there are some modern ones, sweet. Greg will be so jealous!”

“Who’s Greg?” asked Jessica.

³ Andy’s Gone With Cattle, Henry Lawson, 1888

“My friend in Melbourne,” said Tom, looking up. “The guy I chat with? Remember?”

“Oh right, he's got a name then,” she said. “How often do you chat?”

“Oh most days,” said Tom, flicking through his book. “although the time difference is a pain. You want me to go get the takeaways?”

We spent a while sorting out who wanted what and phoning through the orders and then Tom departed, drooling at the prospect of a stodgy lump of dough smothered in molten, tasteless cheese. I've never understood why pizza is so popular.

“I'll be able to pay your rent now,” said Jessica, “with the extra money coming in, and some of the arrears.”

“Don't worry about it,” I said, opening the envelope from my bank.

“But I do worry about it,” she said, “especially after what Sam said to you last week.”

I laughed. “I took no notice of that,” I said. “It was obvious she had it in for you and she was clearly talking nonsense.”

I paused while I read the letter from the bank.

“Anyway, it's not like I need the money. Look, I've just had a letter from the bank saying that there is one final payment of £238 left on the mortgage and once that's received they'll send me the title deeds, look.”

I passed over the letter and she read it.

“I wish you hadn't shown me that letter,” she said, looking up.

“Why ever not?” I asked, surprised.

“Because Sam would say that if I'm ever nice to you it's because I'm after your house,” said Jessica.

“But how would Sam ever know?” I said, confused by her reaction.

“Oh she won't,” said Jessica, giving me back the letter. “But what she said is bound to colour your perception of me and maybe in time you'll think that way yourself.”

“I have no idea how to respond to that,” I said, truthfully. “Are you saying you think I'm suspicious of your motives?”

“I suppose I am really,” she said thoughtfully. “Poison from snakes like Samantha can slowly work on the mind for years.”

I wanted to protest but I couldn't think of anything sensible to say because she was right. After a while I got up and sat at my desk in the corner. I pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer and wrote 'I, Tom Appleby, do solemnly swear that I will never give my house to Jessica Waters, no matter how nice she is to me.' and signed it with a flourish. I handed it to Jessica.

“Is that better then?” I said.

She read it then burst out laughing. “Perfect,” she said, “just perfect” then she folded it and put it in her bag.

“By the way,” I said, on a sudden impulse, “my company is having their Christmas Dinner Dance in few weeks. Would you like to go with me?”

“Is this a date?” she asked, smiling mischievously.

“2nd December,” I said, thinking she'd asked what date it was. I was quite surprised by my impulse since I hadn't taken anyone to the Christmas do other than Marsha.

“I meant, are you asking me on a date,” she said, “seeing as how your house is safe now?”

“Oh god,” I said hurriedly, “I didn't mean it like that. I just thought that since you invited me to your Aunt's funeral reception and the company thing is coming up and I always go alone and you don't get

to go out much and ...”

“I’d love to,” she said, interrupting my rambling. “Only I don’t have a thing to wear.”

“You know,” I said thoughtfully, as it had just occurred to me, “this suspicion thing can work both ways. Why should you think that my house being safe is a factor here?”

“It was only a silly joke,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be offensive.”

“It bothers me that you might think that I’d think you were after my house. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked you if you’d like to go.”

“You see?” she said sadly. “Samantha’s poison is working already.”

“You’re right,” I said. “OK, let’s do a deal. How about you don’t go to the Dinner Dance and I just give you the house and get it over and done with?”

“No,” said Jessica. “I’m not giving up a perfectly good Dinner Dance for some crappy old house. Keep the damned thing and I’ll go on my own.”

“Go where on your own?” asked Tom, coming back with the takeaways.

“Tom’s trying to bribe me into going out with him,” said Jessica with a smile.

“No,” I said, “I’m trying to bribe you into not going out with me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Tom, “but why don’t you both go out separately and give me house?”

“But where will I live then?” I asked.

“I’ll rent you the shed,” said Tom. “Do you want some pizza?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I asked your mother if she’d like to go to my

company's Christmas Dinner Dance and I've no idea now if she's coming or not. Would you like to go?"

"Are you asking me on a date?" said Tom, sitting back with his pizza box. "Only I'm probably a little young for you and people will talk."

"I'm going to have to go then," said Jessica, "if only to stop people talking."

"Get real, mum," said Tom,. "If you go with him, people will talk about it for years. What are you going to wear?"

"How formal is it?" she asked, as I handed her a fork.

"It's at the Imperial Hotel," I said. "fairly formal."

She wrinkled her nose as she peeled the cardboard top off a tin foil container of Chicken in Black Bean Sauce.

"So an evening dress, then," she said.

"Do you have one?" I asked. "I normally just wear a work suit."

"Oh great," she said, "nothing to wear and my date will look like The Night Of The Living Dead."

"Hey, I've got an idea," said Tom, licking cheese off his fingers, "why don't you wear the suit and Tom can wear an evening dress."

"He doesn't have the legs for one," she said.

"You're right," said Tom. "I've seen him in just his dressing gown, not a pretty sight."

"It's not fancy dress," I said hastily, just in case either of them were serious.

"That doesn't mean it has to be plain and boring dress though," said Jessica. "I'm pretty sure I can run up something. Yeah," she paused with one eye closed and her fork halfway to her mouth. "Mmm, I

wonder ...”

“She’ll be either the best dressed there or the worst dressed,” said Tom. “Mum never does anything by halves.”

“So you think I should buy another suit?” I asked.

“What on earth for?” she said, coming out of her reverie. “I’ve got plenty of stuff you can use, we just have to mix it up a little.”

“Do you want to come too?” I asked Tom, trying not to think about what wild designs were running through Jessica’s head.

“Will it mostly be really old people like you and mum?” he asked.

“We’re not that old,” I said.

“You are from where I sit,” he replied. “I’m not even twenty and you’re like three times older than me.”

“Don’t ever try to get a job in accounting,” I replied. “You’re almost nineteen so I’m barely two and a half times older than you, not three times.”

“Whatever,” he said, “you’re past thirty and thirty is, like, really, really old.”

I grimaced and concentrated on my Special Fried Rice.

“Will there be music?” asked Tom.

“They’ve got a band organised,” I said.

“What, like rap or something?” he said, wiping his fingers on his tee shirt and dropping the pizza box on the floor.

“I think they’ll be playing swing music,” I said. “Mr Morley likes swing music.”

“Oh god,” said Tom, “you mean like Rocking Around The Christmas

Tree?” He did some half hearted hand jiving.

I had to laugh. “They play that every year, it's the highlight of the evening.”

“I'm pretty sure I'm working that night,” he said. “They're opening the pool for disabled kids or something.”

“You don't know which night it is,” I said, “but you don't have to come if you don't want to. Janey might be there and one or two of the other youngsters.”

“Would you mind very much if I didn't,” he asked, seriously, “only Janey's boyfriend doesn't like me. He's obsessed with the idea that I'm trying to take Janey away from him and he might cause a scene.”

“Why would he think you're after Janey?” I asked. “Doesn't he know you're gay?”

“He does but I don't think he believes it,” said Tom, closing his eyes and stretching. “The thing is, I'm Janey's gay friend and she'd rather hang out with me than him. She said she's sick of talking about football and beer all the time.”

“So what do you and Janey talk about?” I asked, curious.

“Mostly clothes and guys,” he said. “Actually, mostly just clothes. Guys are only now and then.”

“What do you talk about with Greg in Australia,” I asked, “if you don't mind me asking?”

“Ohh, much the same,” he said with a laugh, “and poetry. Greg writes poetry, some of it's pretty cool although he's not up there with Banjo Paterson. And he has been to Queensland. I'd love to go to Australia, see what these places in the poems are like. Is it expensive?”

“Depends what you mean by expensive,” I said. “I think you can probably get cheap flights for seven or eight hundred but you've got the cost of staying there and travelling as well. You'd probably need a

couple of thousand minimum.”

“Oh well, maybe one day,” he said sadly, “like in about fifty years.”

“Although maybe Greg would know how to make it cheaper,” I said. “Airport car hire is very expensive whereas local people know the cheap car hire places and he might know about backpacking hostels and student discounts and so on.”

“I’m not a student,” he said.

“You could always sign up for a free course somewhere,” I said, “just so you can join the students’ union and get the student discounts. Might even be worth paying for a cheap course. You could look into it.”

“Actually that’s not a bad idea,” he said. “I’m only working three days a week and I can’t find another job for the other two days so maybe I could do a part time course somewhere, although it’s still going to be expensive just for the flight. Do you think I could get some sort of work in Australia?”

“You’d need a work permit, I would think” I said. “Ask Greg, he might know or at least know who to ask. I suppose you could talk to the Australian Consulate in London as well. You won’t be the first person to want a working holiday in Australia.”

“Hmmm, I’ll think about it,” he said. “What do you think, mum?”

Jessica was lost in thought, still slowly eating her cold Chicken in Black Bean Sauce.

“Hmm? Yes, dear, whatever you think. I know what I’m going to wear to that Dinner thing,” she said, turning to me. “Are you going to dance with me?”

Chapter Sixteen

“No,” I said, quite firmly, “I am not wearing that.”

“Why not?” said Jessica, “It’s a lovely jacket and it goes beautifully with that shirt I got you for your birthday.”

She’d got me a black shirt and, after thanking her, I’d put it away at the back of my wardrobe and hadn’t touched it since. Black shirts are really not my style.

“But it’s green,” I protested, eyeing it suspiciously.

“Yes, you’re right there, it is green,” said Jessica. “So what?”

“A green jacket?” I said, “Seriously? You want me to look like chat show host?”

“Oh nonsense,” said Jessica. “It’s a lovely dark green not some lurid, bright green and it’s worsted. I know you hate polyester.”

“And those lapels,” I said, fingering one of them. “What are they, velvet?”

“Satin,” she said, “and the black shirt will blend superbly with them.”

“But they’re so narrow.”

“Which is what makes it so stylish,” said Jessica. “At least try it on. If it doesn’t fit then it doesn’t fit.”

“Tom, help me out here,” I pleaded.

“I don’t know why you’re making so much fuss,” he said, looking up from his phone. “You know she’s going to win in the end whatever you say.”

“Well, thanks for that,” I said drily, “don’t ever ask me for help.”

He laughed and went back to his phone. Jessica was still standing

there, holding the jacket out.

“Oh all right,” I said, “but I'm not wearing it to the Dinner Dance and that's final.”

She just smiled and help me put it on.

“You see?” I said. “It looks dreadful on me and I don't have any ties that will go with it.”

She ignored me and looked critically at the jacket.

“It could do with being a half inch longer,” she admitted, “but you slouch anyway so that won't matter.”

I drew myself up in protest. “I do not slouch,” I said, pompously.

“It's much better when you stand up straight,” she said. “What do you think, Tom?”

“I think we need to see it with the proper black shirt,” he said, “not that ancient white one he's got on.”

“Good point, hon,” said Jessica, “go and get it for me, would you?”

“Where is it?” asked Tom.

“Hidden at the back of his wardrobe,” she said.

Tom disappeared to my bedroom.

“How do you know where it is?” I asked, turning to look at her. “Have you been going through my things?”

“Of course,” she said, matter of factly, slipping the jacket off me. “I needed that grey jacket of yours to get the shape just right. Come on, take your shirt off.”

I started to protest.

“Oh, don't be such a baby,” she said, trying to undo my shirt buttons, “it's not like I haven't seen a man's bare chest before.”

“Well you're not going to see mine now,” I said.

“Take it off,” said Jessica, firmly, “or I'll make you change your trousers in here too.”

I took off my shirt and sucked in my stomach and made sure I wasn't slouching.

“There, that wasn't so bad, was it,” she said, ignoring my exposed torso. Tom handed me the black shirt so I put it on as I didn't feel comfortable semi-naked in front of Jessica.

“Aren't you going to tuck it in?” she said.

I tucked it in with as much passive aggression as I could muster.

“Now the jacket, oh and undo that damned top button.”

They both looked appraisingly at me.

“Very nice,” said Jessica.

“But what about a tie?” I said, “I can't go to the Dinner Dance without a tie.”

“Of course you can,” she said. “It's just the Imperial Hotel, not Buckingham Palace.”

“Why not try the shirt collar outside the jacket,” suggested Tom, “like this.”

He fiddled around with my shirt collar then stepped back.

“Oh for Pete's sake,” I said, looking at myself in the mirror. “I look like someone out of a Boy Band. Everyone will laugh at me.”

I tried to put the shirt collar back inside the jacket but Jessica slapped

my hands away.

“No, it's perfect,” she said. “It took me hours to get those lapels just right and it works beautifully. Now I'm going to go and have a shower and get ready so you put your black trousers on, then we'll go.”

“Told you,” said Tom, grinning, after she'd disappeared to the bathroom. “She always wins.”

“Pah,” I said, looking at myself in the mirror some more. “She's just destroyed whatever credibility I had with my colleagues.”

Tom laughed as if to show doubt as to whether I had any credibility to begin with.

“They'll probably mistake me for the band leader,” I said.

“Nothing wrong with being a band leader,” said Tom, “but you really don't want to go to a Christmas party looking like Scrooge. Do they have a prize for best dressed?”

“No, it's not that sort of function,” I said.

“Shame, since you'd probably win it,” said Tom. “Grey really isn't your colour. Have you ever thought of having your undertones analysed?”

“My what?”

I took off the jacket and sat in my armchair. The evening was going to be a disaster and there was nothing I could do about it. I felt a certain empathy with the Captain of the Titanic.

“Your skin undertones,” said Tom. “The underlying colour of your skin.”

“Why on earth would I want to do that?” I asked, “I'm white, isn't that good enough?”

“Oh god no,” said Tom. “Even your surface skin colour is more subtle than that since there are various shades from very pale, albino white

to olive but the surface colour changes constantly, depending on the weather and your emotions and so on. If you want to get clothes and makeup just right you need to get your undertones sorted since they never change. ”

“Oh god, she’s not going to make me wear makeup as well, is she?” I was horrified at the prospect.

“Wouldn't hurt,” he said seriously, “you've got a couple of little blemishes on your face and some hair dye would get rid of the greys.”

“I am not wearing makeup,” I said, “and I am not going to start dying my hair.”

“I was teasing,” said Tom, “you're not a metrosexual so you wouldn't be able to get away with it but you ought to think about getting your tones and undertones analysed. I'm thinking your undertones are probably warm to neutral which is why green and brown suits you, but I'm no expert. Grey is just about the worst colour someone like you could wear.”

“I'm comfortable in grey,” I said. “I don't want to stand out.”

“Then you shouldn't have asked mum out,” he said. “She loves to stand out!”

“I'm out of the bathroom,” called Jessica, “won't be long.”

“Hey,” said Tom, “my passport arrived today, wanna see it?”

“Sure,” I said, “Are you going somewhere?”

He went to his room and got his passport.

“I want to go to Australia,” he said, “although I'd love to go anywhere, really. I'm putting a little money aside each week but hey, you never know, I might find a sack of money in the street so I figured I'd get a passport just in case.”

“Well, yes, you never know when opportunity strikes. That picture

doesn't do you justice though.”

“Yeah, mum said passport photos are always crap.”

“It'll be worse in a few years time when you've got a little older and changed your image and you'll look at your passport photo and be horrified at what you used to look like,” I said. “Mine still shows me with a beard.”

“Wow, cool, can I see it?” said Tom.

I went and got my passport.

“Jesus,” said Tom. “A beard is so not you.”

“I only had it for a few months, but I had to get my passport renewed so there it is and I'm stuck with it until it runs out. I didn't like having a beard.”

“You had a beard?” said Jessica. Tom showed her my passport picture.

“Oh no,” she said. “Definitely not. Well, how do I look?” She gave us a twirl.

“Knockout, mum,” said Tom giving her a double thumbs up.

“Magnificent,” I said, meaning it.

She'd taken a long black dress and turned it into an evening gown by replacing the bra area with black lace panels that angled down to just above the hips. The dress itself was tight but flared out below her knees and she wore some simple but effective high heeled shoes.

“Thank you,” she said, admiring herself in the mirror. “Now go and put those black trousers on, Tom, I'll only be a few minutes.”

I consider punctuality to be a virtue and I cannot abide being late but even I know that when the ticket for a Christmas Dinner Dance says 7.30, no one is actually expected to be there at 7.30 and I wasn't at all concerned when we got there just before 8.30.

“Looks like we got the timing about right,” I thought to myself when we arrived.

In the car park Jessica made me put my shirt collar outside the jacket before we went inside the hotel. I felt like a five year old having his face scrubbed by his mother before being taken in to see his grandmother.

There were a fair number of people there although there were still quite a few behind us and there was no sign of anyone attempting to serve any dinner. Having been to most of these company dinners over the years, I'd taken the precaution of having a sandwich earlier so that I wouldn't be fainting from hunger.

“You look very smart, Tom,” said Elaine from HR, who was collecting the tickets and showing people where they were seated on her seating plan. “Green suits you. You must be Jessica. Hello, I'm Elaine, I've been so looking forward to meeting you, Tom's never brought anyone to one of these things before, and when I saw he'd got two tickets, I was soooo surprised, and oh, isn't that a lovely dress, where did you get it? You make me look like I'm dressed in rags, ha ha ha.”

“Jessica made it herself,” I said, a little proudly.

We made some small talk for a few moments until Steve, the Works Foreman, called out, “oi, there's a bleedin' queue 'ere, get a move on.” He was smiling when he said it and his language was quite restrained so clearly he intended it as a joke but Elaine got a little flustered. She always gets a little flustered when Steve is around as he sometimes pinches her bottom and she never knows whether to officially reprimand him or not. As Steve had his wife with him, he was unlikely to pinch her bottom tonight but I think she just got flustered out of habit.

“Don't tell people I made this dress myself,” Jessica hissed at me as we walked to our table, “it makes me look cheap.”

“We're over here,” I said, pointing to a table midway to the dance floor. “I thought it made you look talented, which is why I said that.”

“Just don't, OK,”

“Hello,” I said, and introduced Jessica to the others at the table.

I'd already decided to simply introduce her as Jessica and not give any explanation of our relationship as it seemed inappropriate for me to tell people that I'd taken her in after she'd escaped an abusive situation.

Elaine had tried to shake things up this year by making sure people from the same department didn't sit at the same table. As a result we were sitting with Paul Ferguson from Production and his wife, Peggy someone or other from the Canteen and her partner and Tim Dawson from Projects, who was divorced and on his own and Natalie the Receptionist who was single and between boyfriends. Personally, I'd have probably seated people by age group since Natalie was clearly intimidated by being at least fifteen years younger than anyone else at the table. The band was playing quietly in the background and, as yet, no one was dancing.

“I don't think we've met before,” said Peggy to Jessica. “Why hasn't Tom brought you to one of these do's before?”

“Oh we haven't known each other that long,” said Jessica.

“That's nice,” said Peggy, “so are you two an item?”

“Oh no,” said Jessica, with a quick glance at me, “Tom does my accounts.”

I'd never done any accounts for Jessica but it was as good an explanation as any and suggested Jessica had given more thought to explanations than I had.

“Jessica runs her own fashion business,” I said.

“Oh how wonderful,” said Mrs Ferguson and the three of them launched into a discussion of clothing. Natalie looked as though she would have liked to join in but stayed quiet. Paul Ferguson and Peggy's partner started talking about football.

Jim watched Jessica for a while, a strange expression on his face.

“So you're not going out together?” he said.

“No, we're just friends,” I said.

I saw no reason to mention that we lived in the same house and Jessica hadn't mentioned it either. We started talking about the weather then moved on to the difficulties of dating after divorce. It was a subject Jim seemed to have strong feelings about although I had no experience of it. I hadn't dated anyone since Marsha, even though Jessica seemed to think this was a date of some sort. At one point, before the waiters started to bring out the meal, Jessica stood up to show her dress to Mrs Ferguson and Peggy and Jim watched her closely, a slight smile on his face.

“So, Peggy,” I said, during a lull in the conversation, “What's it like not having to cook tonight?”

I ask her that every year since we don't really have anything else to talk about and it's almost a part of our Christmas tradition now.

“It's a holiday,” she said, “I love not having to cook.”

She says that every year too.

“Nice jacket, Mr A,” said Janey, walking behind my chair, “why don't you ever wear cool stuff like that to work?”

“Jessica gave it to me this afternoon,” I said, “although I don't think I'll wear it to work.”

At the mention of her name, Jessica looked up from her food and talking to Mrs Ferguson.

“Oh Janey,” I said, “I'd like you to meet someone.” She turned back to me. “This is Jessica,” I said, “Tom's mother.”

“Oh wow,” said Janey, “you're nothing like I thought you'd be.”

Jessica started to laugh. "So what's Tom been saying about me then?"

"Oh gawd, I didn't mean nothing," said Janey, going a little pink. "I just thought you'd look a lot older, like. Did you make that dress yourself, it's lovely. Tom showed me your website."

"Why would Tom show you a clothes website?" asked Jim.

"Tom's my son," said Jessica.

"No way," said Jim, "Tom's a lot older than you."

"Not me," I said, "Jessica's son's called Tom too, he's eighteen."

"Oh right," he said. "Gotcha."

Janey turned to go again and I got up.

"Janey," I said quietly, "is there room on your table for Natalie? She isn't enjoying herself here, we're too old for her."

"No probs, Mr A," she said then raised her voice quite loudly, "ere, Nat, wanna come and sit at the cool table?"

"Go on," I said, sitting back down, "it'll be more fun for you over there."

She gave me a grateful look and scurried off with Janey and Jessica winked at me. A young lad came over a minute later and took her chair. I guessed he was Janey's boyfriend since he wasn't dressed like one of the waiters.

After the desserts were cleared away the band got louder and a few of the more energetic people started to dance. I caught Jessica's eye and hurriedly started a conversation with Peggy's partner. Mrs Ferguson whispered something to Paul which made him shake his head then she jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked Jessica, leaning across the table.

“Oh I'd love to,” she said, “if Sandra doesn't mind.”

“You go right ahead,” said Sandra Ferguson, “my feet are killing me and Paulie loves to dance.”

Paul and Jessica went on to the dance floor and, safe for the moment, my conversation with Peggy's partner lapsed. After a few minutes he and Peggy went for a dance as well. Jim started chatting with Sandra Ferguson. I got up and started to wander around the tables, talking to various people and trying to be sociable. As a fairly senior person in the Company I felt I had an obligation, of sorts.

I was away perhaps for twenty minutes and when I came back to the table, Jessica was back, talking with Jim. The Fergusons had disappeared and since Sandra's bag wasn't there either it looked like they'd left early. As I slipped into my chair, Jim asked Jessica to dance so they went off to the dance floor.

I caught the eye of one of the waitresses and asked her for some lemonade and sat back. To be honest, I was feeling rather tired as I had been more sociable than usual and that's quite a tiring thing. I could see Jim and Jessica on the dance floor and they seemed to be getting along just fine.

It was getting quite late and I was just thinking that Mr Morley would be getting ready to give his annual speech of thanks to everyone for the year and encouragement for the year to come when the tempo of the music slowed down. I noticed Jessica and Jim got closer together and was surprised to find that I found that a little disconcerting. Especially when he tried to kiss her.

Jessica, I saw, jerked back then Jim said something and she pulled away from him and stood still. Another couple bumped into her and she said something to Jim and shook her head then he said something in reply.

“How strange,” I thought to myself, just before she slapped his face and stormed off the dance floor.

“What happened?” I asked when she got to the table. I stood up.

"I'm going to the toilet," she said angrily, grabbing her purse.

"What's wrong?" I asked, but she'd already gone.

Jim slowly made his way back to the table and sat down, an angry expression on his face. He picked up his beer and took a long swallow. I sat down again. I didn't know what to say.

"Should I ask what happened," I wondered, "or should I pretend I didn't see anything?"

It seemed easier to pretend I hadn't seen anything.

"Oh god," I thought, "what do I do when Jessica comes back? Who's side should I be on?"

I spotted Mr Morley working his way around the room to the microphone on the stage. Jim was clearly still angry and there was no sign of Jessica. Jim suddenly slammed his almost empty beer glass down on the table and leaned over to me.

"I don't expect you know this," he said viciously, "but your girlfriend is a whore," then he got up and left.

Chapter Seventeen

I sat there in stunned surprise for a few seconds then got up and ran after him. I found him outside the main foyer, pacing and lighting a cigarette.

“I don't know what you said to Jessica,” I said angrily, “but if it was anything like what you just said to me you need to go back and apologise.”

“Oh get over yourself,” he said, still angry, “I used to know her way back, she was a stripper in a club in Bethnal Green, effing bitch.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Didn't know that, did you, you old tosser,” said Jim, throwing down his cigarette and lighting another. “her name was Cherry Apples, but then I reckon you probably did know that. So you're her sugar daddy then, eh?”

“How dare you!” I said, going cold with anger. “You will go in there and apologise to her this instant.”

“Oh get stuffed, you old fart,” he said. “I'm going home. Where's a frigging taxi, eh?”

“You will apologise,” I said and grabbed his coat, meaning to drag him inside if necessary. The next thing I knew I was on my backside on the ground. One of the hotel staff came running out.

“Are you all right, sir?” he asked anxiously, “shall I call the police?”

The side of my head was throbbing but there was no blood coming from my nose. “Where did he go?” I asked, looking round.

“That way,” said the hotel person. “Come on inside, we'd better get some ice on that. I'll get the manager.”

He took me inside and called to the girl on Reception to get the manager and sat me down on one of the chairs in the foyer. He

reappeared a few moments later with a small cloth bundle, just as the manager appeared.

“I’m John Boscombe, the Manager,” he said, “what’s happened, Raj?”

Raj applied the cold compress to the side of my face.

“This gentleman had an altercation with another gentleman just out there,” he said, “and the other gentleman hit him and knocked him to the ground.”

“Do you want me to call the police?” asked John Boscombe, “or an ambulance?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, my voice muffled by the cloth. “Just give me a few minutes.”

“Are you with the Morley Company Dinner Dance?” he asked. “What is your name?”

“Yes,” I said, “my name’s Tom Appleby.”

He pulled a notebook out of his inside pocket and wrote that down.

“Do you know the name of the other gentleman?” he asked.

“Jim Dawson,” I said, “he’s with Morley’s as well.”

“I see,” he said, writing that down as well. “Stay with Mr Appleby, Raj,” he said and walked off.

“Oh my god, Tom, what’s happened?” said Jessica, rushing over.

“Mr Appleby was in an altercation,” said Raj. “He was hit in the face.”

Jessica prised the cold compress away from my face. For some reason I was reluctant to let it go as my face was starting to throb.

“Doesn’t look too bad,” she said, “who hit you?”

I shook my head and pushed the compress back against my face.

“What's happened?” said Elaine, coming over, the hotel manager close behind her.

“Tom's been assaulted,” said Jessica, “he won't say who by though.”

“A Mr Jim Dawson,” said the manager.

“Oh god,” said Elaine and Jessica simultaneously.

“I'm fine,” I said irritably, as I can't abide fuss, “I just need to sit quietly for a few moments, OK.”

“Can I leave this matter with you?” the manager asked Elaine.

“Yes,” she said, “leave it with me. Oh, by the way ...” She took him over to the Reception desk and they talked for a few moments then she came back. The manager called Raj into his office.

“Ummm,” said Elaine.

“Could you take me home?” I asked Jessica.

“Of course,” she said, “umm, is that OK?” to Elaine.

“Yes, take Tom home,” she said, “unless you want to stay for the end of Mr Morley's speech?”

I shook my head and pain stabbed through my head and neck.

“Come on, let's get you home,” said Jessica, helping me stand.

“Do you need a taxi?” asked the manager, coming out of his office.

Several people leaving the Dinner Dance had stopped in the foyer to watch.

“What's happened to Tom?” asked John, the Head of Production, coming over and looking concerned.

“He's fine,” said Jessica, “just a little mishap, I'm taking him home.”

She started to lead me towards the doors but Elaine put her hand on Jessica's arm. I heard her say something about a 'statement'. John grabbed my other arm but I shook him off.

“I'm fine,” I said through the cloth, “just wanna go home.”

Jessica got me to my car and put me in the passenger seat.

“Did you leave anything at the table?” she asked.

I shook my head and pain stabbed again. She got in the driver's seat and asked for my keys. I fumbled through my pocket and handed them over and she drove quietly home and gave me some aspirin and made some coffee.

“You're going to have a black eye,” she said, “but you'll live. I'll wash the cloth tomorrow and take it back to the hotel.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“So why did Jim hit you?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said, determined not to shake my head again.

“Yeah, I can understand that,” she said. “The two of you work together so you must have pissed him off a lot over the years and he just decided to hit you tonight. Tell me the truth.”

I shook my head. That was a big mistake.

“Was it about me?” she asked when I stopped groaning and let go of my head.

I didn't say anything and, more importantly, I didn't nod or shake my head. New behaviour can be learned surprisingly quickly, given the right stimulus.

“I'm just guessing here,” she said, after watching me for a while, “so

correct me if I'm wrong, but you saw what happened on the dance floor, didn't you.”

I moved my head in the tiniest of nods.

“So I'm guessing he went outside after I'd gone? And you went to find out what happened?”

I nodded ever so gently again.

“So I'm thinking you said something he didn't like, and so he hit you?”

“Kind of,” I said.

The aspirin must have been working since it didn't hurt much to move my jaw.

“Wow,” she said. “You're always so polite, what could you possibly have said to make him hit you?”

“I insisted he apologised to you,” I said.

She sat there quietly, looking at me.

“Did he tell you I was a stripper?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, after trying to think what to say and not being able to think. “He said he used to know you and your name was Cherry Apples.”

She nodded.

“Yeah, that's what he said to me on the dance floor too. He got it totally wrong, I've never done anything like that. He got me mixed up with someone else.”

I was too scared to nod so I smiled instead. That hurt a little too but not as much as nodding. She picked up my hand.

“Thank you,” she said and kissed me on the cheek.

“What was that for?” I asked in surprise, fortunately she'd kissed my non-injured cheek.

“For defending my honour,” she said, “no one's ever done that before.”

“Ahh,” I said, as I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“That lady, the one who took the tickets, ...”

“Elaine,” I said.

“She said she needs a statement from you, before you forget the details,” said Jessica.

“Ugh, no,” I said.

“She also said you probably wouldn't want to,” said Jessica, “but there were witnesses so the Company's going to have an enquiry anyway.”

“I'd rather not,” I said.

Jessica thought for a while.

“I think you should,” she said, “that way however Jim tries to blame you, you'll be able to have your say as well.”

“I'll think about it,” I said, not intending to think about it.

“And it'll help you believe me,” she said.

“I do believe you,” I said, surprised.

“Maybe you do, maybe you don't,” said Jessica. “It's like that thing with Samantha all over again and maybe you'll start to have doubts. If you make a statement saying what he accused me of he'll have to prove I am that Candy person to justify himself and he won't be able to since I'm not.”

“Will you make a statement about what happened on the dance floor?” I asked, since I could see the logic of what she was saying.

“I will if you will,” she said.

“OK,” I said with a groan. “Get some paper and some more aspirin.”

Jessica read out her statement after she'd written it. It seemed that Jim had told her he knew she used to be a stripper and said he'd tell me if she didn't sleep with him. She'd denied it, of course, and they'd had words and then she'd slapped his face and stormed off to the toilets and when she'd come out she'd seen me in the foyer.

She signed her statement with a flourish. I signed mine, but didn't have the energy to use a flourish. I hadn't been in an actual fist fight since I was eleven and I'd lost then as well. I much prefer spreadsheets, they're a lot easier to wrestle with.

Needless to say I had a pretty good black eye the next day. Tom thought the whole thing was hilarious.

“Wow, mum was a stripper,” he said. “Isn't that awesome? Hey, was I born in a strip club then? That is soo cool! I so wish I'd gone to that dance, I would have loved to have seen Tom get into a fight, wow, just so totally awesome! Hey, did dad know you were a stripper? Is that where you met him? Did you wear those tassels and things?”

“It's beyond me how I could have raised such an obnoxious child,” said Jessica, raising her eyes to heaven. “I swear they must have got the babies mixed up at the hospital.”

“Oh, by the way, if either of you are going to the supermarket, could you get some candy apples?” said Tom, laughing his head off, “this one's getting old and wrinkly!”

Jessica had to hit him several times with a cushion before he quietened down.

When I went into work on Monday, interestingly, not one single person asked me about my black eye so the jungle telegraph must have been operating with its usual efficiency, no doubt aided by Tom and Facebook. I took mine and Jessica's statements to Elaine soon after I got there, as she is Head of HR.

“Jim phoned in sick,” she said, after reading them. “I’ve also got the statements from the hotel manager and the doorman who saw what happened, although he doesn’t know what was said, and a couple of people told me what they saw on the dance floor. Still, I have to give Jim the opportunity to give his side of the story.”

“Why do you have to be involved?” I asked. “It was a private dispute.”

“Ordinarily what happens between employees outside working hours isn’t any of our business,” she said, “but this was a company function so technically you were both in the workplace. On the face of it, Jim insulted the guest of an employee and when requested to apologise he then assaulted that employee.”

“What will happen to him?”

“If he doesn’t dispute anything, he’ll be dismissed and if he does then there will be a formal enquiry.”

“Will the police be called in?” I asked.

“Only if you want to press charges, or if Mr Morley does, which I doubt. Do you want to press charges?”

“No,” I said. “I only suffered a black eye which isn’t a major issue, but ...”

“But what?” asked Elaine.

“He was exceptionally rude to my guest,” I said. “If for some reason he doesn’t leave, I will be unable to continue working with him.”

“Yes, I can understand that,” said Elaine, making a note of what I’d just said and the time. “Do you want me to put that in my report?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s a matter of honour.”

“Well, there’s precious little of that left these days,” she said.

She looked at her watch and sighed.

“I think I’ll take a copy of these statements round to him,” she said. “Best get it over with quickly and see what he wants to do. Thanks for coming to see me.”

Elaine phoned me late in the afternoon to tell me that Jim had resigned and wouldn't be working out his notice.

“What a silly man,” said Jessica when I told her, although I didn't see any need to tell her I'd threatened to resign if Jim didn't. “I hope he finds another job soon enough.”

Chapter Eighteen

“I am going to die,” I wheezed.

Well, I probably wasn't actually going to die, at least not for a long time yet, but I most definitely wanted to.

Jessica had gone to stay with her parents for Christmas and some other relatives for New Year and Tom had spent both with his father and step-brother. I had done what I usually did at that time of year and spent it alone at home. Morley's, as usual, shut down for the week. What had made this holiday different to previous years was that I had caught my annual January cold early.

Now, to most people, a common cold is irritating but not a major event. I, however, suffer from something my doctor calls 'nasal back drip' which sounds rather unpleasant but is actually a lot worse than it sounds. Apparently, a normal, healthy person produces mucus in their sinuses and a large proportion goes down the throat. The doctor said it was actually around a litre of mucus every day which seems a lot to swallow but some is swallowed every time we swallow so it adds up to quite a lot. Anyway, when you have a cold or infection the mucus gets thicker and, with most people, it comes out of their nose.

If you suffer from nasal back drip, the thick mucus doesn't come out of your nose, it drips backwards from the nose and into the throat. So, as well as all the usual symptoms of a cold, the sufferer, specifically me, has a continuous feeling of drowning and a strong need to cough all the time to get the stuff out of the throat. What makes it particularly bad is that lying down or sitting makes the mucus drip backwards into the throat. So, the only way it is tolerable is to keep your body in such a position that the stuff drips forwards, not backwards. Which means you can't lie down to sleep, or even sleep sitting in a chair. You have to get what sleep you can leaning forward or lying face down and I have never been able to lie face down.

The solution, of course, is simple. Take cold tablets that dry up all the mucus so it doesn't drip back. Unfortunately, I also suffer from sinusitis so if the mucus isn't flowing freely my sinuses are agony and make me want to rip my face off and scrape my sinuses out with a

teaspoon. On the whole I prefer to be sleepless.

So when Jessica got back after New Years and found me slouched face down on the couch surrounded by screwed up tissues, eyes like two bags of tomato ketchup with puffy black circles around them and my hair a mess, she quite naturally asked me what the matter was. Hence my reply, which actually came out more like “arm gerna derrr.” Still, she knew what I meant.

What she didn't know was anything about nasal back drip which is why she got a little irritated with me when I refused to go to bed. Unfortunately, when faced with someone who hasn't slept for at least three days it's usually not a good idea to get irritated since that person's self control isn't working at optimum efficiency.

“Ohhh, what's the matter, Tom?”

“Arm gerna derrr.”

“Have you got a cold?”

“Eff.”

“You should go to bed, I'll bring you some tea.”

“Mo.”

“You really should go to bed, you look like death warmed up.”

“I 'ed mo.”

“Come on, get up, let me help you into bed. You'll feel better after a good sleep.”

“Gerroff.”

“Oh for god's sake, come on.”

“Oh away an 'eave me 'lone.”

“You're just being stupid. You need to sleep and I need the couch. Come on, ..., ouch, don't do that!”

“Ugggh.”

“I'm warning you, I'll smack you if you don't do what you're told!”

“o to 'ell, iss is my 'ouse!”

“Tom! You're only making it worse for yourself. Go to bed or do I have to drag you?”

“'amit, woman, 'eave me 'lone!”

In the end I had to get up off the couch and Google 'nasal back drip' so she had some idea but she still insisted I drank large quantities of Chamomile and Lemon Myrtle tea and when my cold was vastly improved the next day she claimed that it was proof of the veracity of herbal teas. It wasn't, of course, since I'd had the cold for several days and it was about to end anyway but I didn't have the energy to fight back.

In the middle of January I had to go to court. That insolvency in Chelmsford had proved to be more irksome than it warranted with a dispute arising over the ownership of the pumps we had supplied and I took them to court. It was a very simple matter but the liquidator was hiding behind some absurd little technicality and it was easier to dump it on the magistrate than to argue fruitlessly. Of itself, it isn't worth mentioning but while I was waiting for the hearing I went to a vending machine in the waiting area to get some coffee.

Sadly, the vending machine wasn't working and there was a large handwritten sign sellotaped to it saying “Out of Order - m/c in family” which I took to mean that there was another vending machine in the Family Court further down the corridor rather than that the machine was out of order because it was pregnant. Sure enough there was another vending machine in the Family court waiting area. While I waited in the small queue at the machine I couldn't help noticing two girls sitting nearby.

One was attractive and probably about twenty. She had a mixed race baby in a stroller and a toddler playing with a little wooden toy. The other girl could well have been attractive once but she had extensive bruising on her face which, judging by the colours, varied in age. She also had a couple of healed but recent scars, one down the side of her cheek and jaw and the other across her forehead and going down into her eyebrow. One hand was heavily bandaged. She was probably much the same age as the girl with her and had two toddlers who looked to be of different ages.

The girl with the scars was studying a document intently. Her finger traced the words on the page held on her lap by the bandaged hand and her lips were moving as she tried to make sense of it. The other girl was half heartedly trying to keep the various toddlers amused while repeatedly looking at her phone. I watched them surreptitiously while standing in the queue as it looked as though the girl with the scars was in the Family Court for reasons very likely to do with the scars and bruises and I found it heartbreaking. She looked like one of the victims of abuse who was unable to escape or, if she did, kept returning. I couldn't help but remember what Desmond had told me at Jessica's aunt's funeral and what I had discovered myself through the Internet.

Still, the reason I mention the incident is that, while the person in front of me was getting her coffee from the machine, I saw the girl with the scars look up from her papers and heard her say to the other girl:

“ere, Trace, don't you just hate fucking social workers?”

Trace continued half heartedly playing with the toddlers and didn't look up from her phone.

“Dunno, 'Chelle, I ain't never fucked no social workers before.”

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. On the face of it, it had been a simple misunderstanding of the use of a swear word in the conversation and their poor use of English was amusing. 'Chelle didn't like social workers for some reason and felt a swear word helped to express that idea to her friend who had mistakenly taken the swear

word literally.

However, there was another interpretation, stemming partly from the precise wording of 'Chelle's remark and partly from Trace's implicit assumption in the way she replied. I'm no philologist but 'Chelle putting the 'fucking' after 'hate' implied she hated the process rather than merely emphasising her hatred of the people, which would have been phrased as 'I fucking hate social workers'. This in turn implied that 'Chelle was having unwelcome sexual relations with one or more social workers, either as bribery or the result of extortion, quite possibly in order to assist her in her legal case. If this was the case, Trace was correctly picking up on the process by saying she'd not done it herself, rather than simply misunderstanding. If so, Trace also further implied that such matters were somewhat routine by not giving a more animated response. Indeed, one could take it still further by deducing from the 'before' that Trace was also having relations with a social worker although presumably for the first time, and had not yet come to hate it.

It was something to think about on the long drive back to the office although I was well aware that I was imputing things into a casual conversation between two girls who may not have had full literal understanding of what they were saying, and, of course, I wasn't privy to the entire conversation. My own hearing had lasted barely two minutes before the magistrate dismissed the liquidator's 'technicality' and ruled in Morley's favour and I was more interested in these two girls who came from a world I barely knew existed. It seemed, on the face of it at least, that the law did not protect them to the same extent as it did, say, Morley's money and that Desmond was unlikely to lose any weight in the immediate future.

"How did it go?" asked Trevor when I got back to the office.

"Oh we won, of course," I said. Accounting disputes can generally be easily resolved by the courts, unless someone very clever has spent a lot of time making sure that there is a lot of camouflage and confusion.

"Great, can I have a word, in your office?"

He followed me in and handed me a letter. Not being one to jump to premature conclusions, I read it as it could easily have not been his resignation.

“You’re resigning?” I said, quite surprised. “Can I ask why?”

“I’ve found another job,” he said. “Accountant at J B Smithson and Sons.”

“Weren’t you happy here?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” said Trevor, “but I can’t move up unless you leave and you aren’t likely to do that for a long time.”

This was actually true. The advent of computers had dramatically reduced the need for middle level accountants and it wouldn’t be too long before he was fully qualified. We didn’t really need to have a second qualified accountant in the department and I had no ambitions to leave. Comfort zones are nice places to be.

“Well, I’m happy for you, of course,” I said. “although you will be much missed.”

I was praying we’d find someone to replace him quickly so I didn’t have to do the bank reconciliations myself.

“Thank you,” he said. “The pay is a lot better and I hope the people are as nice to work with.”

“Will you be running the Accounts Department there or reporting to another accountant?”

“I’ll be running it,” he said, “much like you although they’re a smaller company.”

“Well, this is excellent news, congratulations. We’ll have a leaving party, of course. Do you have any leave owing?”

“Just a couple of days, but I’ll take them before I go.”

“It would be a great help if you could take them sooner rather than later so that we have more time to find your replacement and for you to hand over,” I said.

Usually when people leave with holidays owing they take them at the end so they can, in effect, leave earlier and have a break before starting their new job.

“Whatever works,” he said. “I don't mind either way, it's only a couple of days.”

We left it at that and, since I had no meetings until mid afternoon, I went to see Elaine in HR.

“Yes,” she said, “I rather expected this when we had a reference request for Trevor.”

“So when will we start looking for his replacement?” I asked. “I was also wondering if it would be worth looking for a part qualified person rather than a complete trainee.”

“Hmmm,” said Elaine. “Don't rush into anything just yet. I rather have the idea that Mr Morley won't want to replace Trevor in the immediate future, or if we do it'll be with a clerk rather than a trainee.”

“Oh really?” I said. “Mr Morley hasn't mentioned anything to me about this. I'm not certain we'd be able to find a clerk with sufficient skills, someone part qualified will be far more suitable.”

“Perhaps I'd better clarify this with Mr Morley,” said Elaine. “After all, as Head of Department you should have a significant input in staffing matters.”

“I think I'd better speak to Mr Morley myself,” I said.

“No, not yet,” said Elaine. “He is planning one or two structural changes but nothing is finalised and it wouldn't be appropriate to release any details as yet.”

“Hmm,” I said.

I found it rather strange that structural changes were being planned without involving me since there would undoubtedly be a financial impact on the company as a whole as well as the departments directly and indirectly affected. Small changes can have ripple effects.

“But Trevor will be replaced?” I asked.

“Oh definitely,” said Elaine. “We just haven't decided yet on the level of his replacement. Leave it with me.”

Short of barging in on Mr Morley and demanding an explanation there wasn't much else I could do. Certainly, as the person who prepared the accounts, I knew we didn't need to implement structural changes to reduce costs as we were reasonably profitable although Mr Morley might well have plans for expansion. Perhaps he was thinking of reopening his ideas for small scale pumping systems although that was far more competitive than the large scale systems we specialised in and was dominated by Asian manufacturers.

“How is the search for Jim Dawson's replacement coming along?” I asked.

It had been a month and a half since he'd left, although admittedly Christmas and New Year always complicate these things and no one seriously looks for another job in the week or two before Christmas. A lot of people do look for new jobs in the New Year though, very probably as part of their New Year's resolutions ~ go to gym, lose weight, get new job, that kind of thing.

“We've had a number of applicants,” she said, “although no one yet worth interviewing. As you know, it's a very specialised area.”

“I'm sorry to have been the cause of all this trouble,” I said.

“Of course you're not the cause,” said Elaine. “He brought this on himself. We have strict workplace practices on harassment here and the fact that the other person was not an employee is irrelevant. We'll probably end up promoting his assistant Linda anyway, she seems

quite capable.”

“Actually I was going to suggest that myself,” I said. “Has she applied for the role?”

“No, but she's put some feelers out,” said Elaine. “I think she wants to know she has a reasonable chance before applying. After all, no one likes rejection.”

“So why don't you promote her?” I asked, “rather than wait for her to apply.

“We don't really like to promote people who haven't applied,” said Elaine. “It makes them over-confident of themselves and demanding. It's better if they apply and go through the selection process.”

I had to laugh at that, although I imagine HR have a reasonable grasp of what they are doing, even though it isn't an exact science.

“By the way,” continued Elaine, “I probably shouldn't mention this just yet but I've also had a reference request for Sue Pearsons. It may not come to anything but have a think about whether you would consider Janey or Mary for the role.”

“Really?” I said. “I wonder why Sue is thinking of leaving? I always thought she'd be here forever.”

“I don't know anything officially,” she said, “but rumour has it that she's quite close with Trevor so if the rumours are true it could be that he's taking her to his new company.”

“Good lord,” I said. “I knew nothing about that. Are they ... ? No, it's none of my business, although I know Trevor has a girlfriend and Sue is married. Is the reference request from the same company?”

“I really couldn't say,” said Elaine. “I've said too much already. It's pretty bad for the Head of HR to pass on rumours and gossip, so it wasn't me that told you, OK?”

I was quite intrigued by this, possible, revelation about Sue although if

she did leave I'd have no qualms about promoting Janey as she'd been with us since she left school and was bright and capable as well as being experienced. If she wanted a promotion, of course. Not everyone does as we all find our optimum balance between rank and responsibility. I, for example, was quite content at my level and had no desire to take that last step to a Financial Directorship somewhere.

"Has Janey ever mentioned her supervisor to you?" I asked Tom while Jessica was doing her stint at cooking dinner.

"You mean Sue?" he said. "Sure, quite often. Why?"

"Oh just wondered," I said. "I've just been hearing some rumours, that's all."

"You mean that one about her and Trevor?" said Tom, "or the one about her leaving Morley's?"

"She leaving?" I said.

"Maybe," he said. "Janey knows she's looking for another job since she talks about the ads during the lunch breaks. She wants more money because her husband is going to start his own business and they want to be a little safer if it doesn't work out."

"That's actually very sensible," I said. "So what's this about her and Trevor?"

"Janey thinks it's rubbish," said Tom. "She thinks Mary started it when Sue told her off about something."

I know from a lifetime of experience that most rumours are just that and are usually started by someone who is upset about something.

"So if Sue leaves," I said, "would Janey be interested in her position?"

"You'd have to ask her yourself," said Tom "but I'm pretty sure she would."

"Well don't say anything to her," I said. "Sue may not leave and there's

no sense in getting her hopes up.”

“Yeah, I understand,” said Tom. “So what’s happening with Trevor’s job?”

“How did you know about that?” I said. “He’s only just handed in his notice.”

“He put it on Facebook this morning,” said Tom. “Are you going to take on another trainee?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I was talking to HR about that this afternoon. I’d like another trainee but HR seem to think that maybe a clerk would be better. Why? Are you interested?”

“Not in the slightest,” he said. “but Janey would be. She wants to move up in the world and she seems to like working with money and she wants to start a career before she gets married and has a family.”

“Janey?” I have to confess I was quite astonished by this new idea. It wouldn’t have occurred to me but now that the idea had been mooted it didn’t seem entirely impossible. “Interesting.”

“Dinner’s ready,” called Jessica. “I’m dishing up now.”

Tom and I went into the kitchen and sat at the table. Marsha and I had always sat at the table for meals as Marsha had felt it was an important part of being a family but, of course, I had got into the habit of eating from a tray on my lap in recent years. Jessica had reinstated the ritual. I confess I didn’t dislike it. It almost felt like I had a family again.

“So have you told him?” said Jessica.

“No,” said Tom, “I was going to but then I decided it would be better if you did. After all, it’s your money.”

“Told me what?” I said. “Today certainly seems to be the day for revelations.”

“I had a letter today,” said Jessica, sitting down at the table. “From my cousin Isaac, he’s my Aunt Brenda’s son and he’s her executor.”

“Ohh,” I said. “Did she leave you something in her will?”

“Yes,” said Jessica. “I was astonished to be honest, since I assumed she’d have left everything to Isaac and Becky but she left me something as well.”

“How nice,” I said, tucking into my dinner, “this is delicious by the way. So are you now a multi-millionaire or something?”

“Ohh, I wish,” said Jessica, laughing. “No, nothing like that. But Isaac said, now that probate’s through, my share comes to a little under ten thousand pounds. Isn’t that wonderful of her? Ten thousand pounds, I’ve never had that much in my life!”

“Well, I’m delighted for you.” I said. “Just shows that she thought more of you than you thought she did. Have you decided what you’re going to do with the money? Invest it, perhaps, or use it to promote your website?”

“We haven’t decided for certain, yet,” said Jessica, looking at Tom, “but we’re thinking of going to Australia.”

Chapter Nineteen

Well, that made me stop eating and put down my knife and fork.

“Good god,” I said. “Australia.” I didn't know what else to say.

“Pretty cool, isn't it,” said Tom, “I can't wait to see all those places in those poems and I'm really looking forward to meeting Greg.”

“Is that why you're going to Australia?” I asked Jessica.

“Partly,” she admitted. “Tom's going to meet this man sooner or later and Australia is so far away. If he turns out to be some scammer or con man he'll be too far away for me to help and he's still very young.”

“Greg's not a scammer,” said Tom, indignantly. “He's genuine, I can tell, and we've been talking for too long for him to keep up a scam anyway, especially since he knows I can't do anything for a long time.”

“So you haven't told him yet?” I asked.

“No,” said Tom, glancing at Jessica, “mum wants to wait for a day or two to see if either of us changes our minds.”

“That's very sensible,” I said, picking up my knife and fork again. “Sometimes you don't think of drawbacks for a while. It's never a good idea to rush into something.”

“Either way,” said Jessica, “neither of us have had a holiday for yonks, more than ten years. Imagine that, Tom's nearly nineteen and hasn't had a holiday since he was seven. We haven't been able to afford to go anywhere except camping for a few days. It'll be lovely to go somewhere completely different. The other side of the world, just imagine!”

“Don't book anything until you've given Greg a chance to think about it as well,” I said. “He may not be as interested in meeting Tom as Tom is in meeting him. After all, he lives there and has to live with the consequences after you've come back.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tom.

“Well,” I said, “I’m assuming he’s gay too but it could be his family doesn’t know. After all, not everyone has such an open relationship as you and your mother. He might even be married or in a relationship at the moment and you turning up could cause problems for him.”

“He isn’t,” said Tom, “he told me. He lives with his sister and she knows he’s gay.”

“He may not have been entirely honest,” I said, “especially if he thinks you’ll never visit ...”

“Which is why I want to go too,” butted in Jessica. “Tom’s still very young and really quite innocent.”

“Oh mum,” said Tom. “You make me sound so uncool.”

At eighteen, Tom thought he was worldly wise, as we all do at that age. It’s only as you get older you come to understand more of how the world really works and even then you probably don’t know the half of it.

“... and there could be any number of other things we can’t even begin to imagine,” I finished. “Still, Australia is a nice place and almost everyone speaks English. Whereabouts are you thinking of going?”

“Melbourne,” said Jessica, “to ...”

“That’s where Greg is,” interjected Tom. He seemed quite excited but at his age problems usually seem trivial.

“... begin with, anyway, depending on how things work out.”

“I’ve never been to Melbourne,” I said. “Sydney a few times and Surfer’s Paradise in Queensland. I vaguely remember hearing that there are some nice beaches along the south coast of Victoria. How long are you going for?”

“Probably just two or three weeks,” said Jessica. “It depends on what

deals we can get with flights.”

“I’d get one way tickets,” I said. “The cheaper flights usually don’t let you change them so if you want to come back earlier or later you’ll be in for an expensive time. Book the return flight when you have a better idea.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” said Jessica. “That way we can do a bit of travelling around as well and not have to go back to Melbourne. We could fly back from somewhere else, like Perth. I’ve got an uncle in Perth, I think, although no one’s heard from him for twenty years or more.”

I laughed. “You have no idea how big Australia really is,” I said. “Flying around Australia is very expensive and if you’re going to drive to Perth it’ll take you a couple of weeks and still cost a fortune. It’s not just down the road like, say, London, it’s way over on the other side of the country, something like three thousand miles and I think it’s something like fifteen hundred miles from Melbourne to Brisbane and that’s in the bottom of Queensland. Most of Queensland is much further north, especially the drover country that Tom wants to see.”

I picked up our plates and put them in the sink.

“I’ll get my atlas out and show you,” I said. “And I seem to remember car hire places won’t let you go interstate, although that may have changed.”

I got my atlas and took it into the lounge.

“Look,” I said, showing them where Sydney and Surfer’s Paradise are on the map. “Doesn’t look far, does it, but it took Marsha and me three days to drive up there, although we did take it fairly easy. Look how much of Queensland there is north of Brisbane and how far to the south Melbourne is. And way, way over there is Perth. If you want to explore Australia properly you’ll need at least six months and an awful lot more money.”

“Hey look mum,” said Tom after searching the internet for a while, “we can stay at this place in Melbourne for \$20 a night, that’s like

£10.”

He passed his phone over to her.

“Absolutely not,” said Jessica, after looking at it, “that’s a backpacker place, I’m not sleeping in a bunk bed with eight people in the room. What’s the weather like at this time of year, Tom?”

“Hey, Greg’s online, mum, shall I tell him?”

“I would,” I said. “You’re not committed but it would be useful to know how he reacts.”

“Yeah, OK” she said. “Tell him we’re thinking about it but don’t make any commitment.”

“And don’t say anything about how much money you’ve got,” I added, “the less he knows the better.”

“So what’ll the weather be like?” asked Jessica.

“Hot,” I said, “very hot. And skin cancer is a serious risk in Australia so you need to stay covered when you’re in the sun.”

“And they eat proper food? I mean, not weird shit like insects and snails and things?”

“No, they eat proper food,” I said, “and aussies like to have barbeques although they haven’t got a clue how to do them properly.”

“What do you mean? A barbeque is a barbeque.”

“They use outdoor gas cookers,” I explained, “not charcoal.”

“You’re kidding!” she exclaimed. “So why not just cook the food in the kitchen and take it outside?”

“I’ve no idea,” I said. “The whole point of a barbeque is the smoked charcoal flavour, I never understood it either. Oh, and if you do get invited to a barbeque, don’t talk to the men.”

“Ooooh, you'll be jealous, will you?” teased Jessica.

“Oh lord no,” I said, “talk to whoever you like, but in Australia the men never talk to the women at barbeques. One of the men does the cooking and the other men stand around them drinking beer and talking about football and the women are sent off to the far end of the garden, which they call the yard. They're quite strange people, really. Everywhere else in the world people go to parties to meet people of the opposite sex and in Australia they go to parties to avoid them. I've never understood it.”

“So when you were there you went to meet women, huh?”

“No,” I said, “I was with Marsha but when we went to barbeques I had to listen to men going on endlessly about footy, which is what they call football. It's not like they even play football, it's some weird complicated game that no one else in the world plays but they call it football even though they use their hands. Or cricket, if they're not talking about football they're talking about cricket.”

“Hey mum,” called Tom, excitedly, “Greg thinks it's a brilliant idea and he's gone to check with his sister but he says we can stay with them and he'll take some time off work and take us sightseeing and we can use his car when he's at work too, and he really wants to meet you, he thinks your website is stellar. Oh and he said to go to Tullamarine not Avalon, whatever they are.”

“I wouldn't stay with him for the first couple of days,” I said, “until you've both got to know them a little better. It would be safer.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Jessica. She looked a little overwhelmed.

“How old is Greg, Tom?” I asked, “and his sister?”

“He's 21,” said Tom. “His sister is a few years older and she's got a little boy, I think he's four or something like that.”

“Where's the boy's father?”

“I don't know,” said Tom, “I think Greg said she broke up with him

two or three years ago which is why Greg lives there. He needed somewhere to stay after his parents kicked him out and they share the bills.”

“Do you know why they kicked him out?” I asked, hoping it wasn't because he was a dangerous criminal who habitually preyed on foreigners.

“They couldn't handle it when he came out,” said Tom, looking up from his phone. “You know, told them he was gay. Happens a lot.”

“Tom was fortunate with you,” I said to Jessica.

She gave a half smile. “I knew before he did,” she said, “and it's never bothered me so when he reached that conclusion himself, I encouraged him to be open about it. It seemed to me it would be much healthier if we both just admitted it than tried to pretend he wasn't, although I'm glad he never wanted to borrow my clothes, he's got much cuter legs than I have.”

I didn't know how to react to that although Tom rolled up the legs of his jeans and showed off his calves.

“Oh, oh, Greg says his sister says it's fine, so long as we sleep together, just a sec,” said Tom, his thumbs flashing over his phone.

Jessica and I looked at each other, hoping Tom would clarify things.

“That's me and mum,” he said after a moment or two, “not me and Greg's sister. She said she'll move Andy, that's her son, out of his room for a few days and me and mum can sleep in there. They've got a couple of air mattresses.”

“Tell her that's very kind of her,” said Jessica, “but I think it would be better if we stayed in a hotel and Andy kept his room.”

“K,” said Tom, thumbs blurring, “I'll ask if there's a cheap hotel nearby.”

He paused then burst out laughing.

“What?” said Jessica.

“Greg said there's a hotel down the road which isn't bad and we can stay with him when we've decided he's not a schizophrenic axe murderer, although I think he's spelt schizophrenic wrong. It's not 'sk' is it?”

“What did you reply?” I asked. I wasn't exactly sure how 'schizophrenic' was spelt either but I was fairly sure it wasn't with a 'k'.

“I said that's just what a schizophrenic axe murderer would say,” said Tom. “His sister's name's Alice, by the way.”

“So what do you reckon?” he added, looking intently at Jessica.

Jessica looked thoughtfully at Tom for a few moments, then at me.

“Sod it,” she said. “Let's do it. Ask him when's a good time.”

Tom messaged Greg, a delighted smile on his face.

“Anytime,” he said, after waiting for the reply, “just let him know when we're arriving and he'll book a room at the hotel and get some time off work. Coolies, mum! We're going to Australiaaaaaa! Woo hoo!” He jumped up and gave her a big hug.

“Oops, lost the connection,” he said, sitting back down.

“OK,” said Jessica, also looking happy. “I'll look online and find out when the cheapest flights are in the morning and we'll get back to him with the dates.”

“When do you get your inheritance?” I asked.

“Already got it,” she said. “Isaac did a bank transfer this morning when I phoned him about the letter. I'll give you what we owe for the rent in the morning.”

“Oh no, no, no” I said immediately. “The rent's not in the least bit important. It's much better you have enough money to do your trip

properly and cover any emergencies that arise. Let's worry about the rent when you come back."

Jessica looked at me seriously. "No," she said, "I want to pay that rent, so you don't go thinking Samantha was right."

"I'll refuse it if you do," I said. "It's much more important you have the cash to come back when you need to rather than give me money now. Wait until you're back and if there's any left over you can pay me then."

Jessica could see the logic of what I was saying, even though she wasn't happy about it.

"Oh, alright then, but I promise you that you will get it," she said. "Should I get a suitcase or a rucksack, do you think?"

Jessica found a last minute cheap flight with Royal Brunei Airlines which meant she'd be in Melbourne on her birthday so that weekend I bought her a Samsonite suitcase with matching carry-on bag for her birthday. They were labelled 'metallic sand' although they were more of a pale burnished gold colour than sand and looked very stylish and elegant although she protested that they were far too expensive. The suitcase had four wheels and a handle so it could be pushed and the carry-on bag fitted neatly on top of the suitcase when the handle was extended. Unfortunately, although the bags could be engraved with her name at no extra cost, to make it easier to identify at Baggage Collection in airports, there wasn't time to have that done. Tom stuck to the rucksack he'd used through most of his school days and anyway, they'd be back before his birthday, otherwise I'd have got him a new one.

I took the afternoon off work and drove them to Heathrow Airport in plenty of time. Even though Jessica is generally fairly open with her emotions, when she is nervous she tries to hide it and I could see she was definitely nervous. To be safe, I double checked that she wasn't carrying any of her herbal tobacco since Customs officials can be touchy about these things. Even if they were relaxed about it in Australia, which was unlikely, they most definitely would not be in Brunei since such things carry the death penalty there. The house was

silent and empty when I got home and I had a solitary dinner and watched a cooking show on TV and told myself the peace and quiet was a welcome change.

They had left me Greg's address in case I should need to contact either of them while they were away and a couple of days beforehand, I ordered, via the Internet, some white orchids in a rather nice glass vase to be delivered on her birthday. I was a little concerned that she didn't ring or email me to acknowledge them and it made me wonder if Greg actually was a schizophrenic axe murderer. There is no reason why she should acknowledge them, other than politeness, and it was quite possible that they had not been delivered or that she hadn't yet got them or that the address was simply wrong but it did make me wonder how long I should wait before reporting them as missing. After all, they didn't have a return date so at some point I would have to make that decision if I didn't hear from either of them again. Five days was obviously too soon and five years was probably leaving it a little late but where would be appropriate in between?

It was, coincidentally, Valentine's Day, when Karen, Mr Morley's secretary, phoned me and asked if I could come and see him. In some ways it was also faintly ironic because, although Valentine's Day is traditionally a day for lovers, St Valentine himself was a Roman and was martyred for giving aid to persecuted Christians, not that I am claiming to have been persecuted, of course, even though it felt that way.

"Take a pew," Mr Morley said when I was shown into his office.

"Thanks," I said, sitting down. "I've been wanting to have a chat with you for a while since we're short staffed now that Trevor has gone and Elaine tells me that you've not yet decided on replacing him."

Actually, it was a damned nuisance but I couldn't really say that to the Managing Director.

"I told Elaine to go ahead with a trainee a couple of days ago," he said.

"Oh, I wonder why she didn't mention it to me?" It would have been polite, if nothing else. Still, on the positive side if Janey wanted the

position she could start immediately and take over the bank reconciliations.

“She's extremely busy at the moment,” said Mr Morley. “She's very involved in a major project. In fact that's what I wanted to see you about.”

That was another thing that rankled which I couldn't say anything about. It was unheard of for any Company project to not involve the accountant at some point since there are always financial ramifications to everything.

“We have, for the last six months, been involved in discussions with Franklin Pumping And Waste Management Systems Inc in Miami,” he continued.

“To what end?” I asked. They were our biggest competitor in America although they didn't operate globally as we did

“Specifically, a merger,” said Mr Morley.

I thought about that for a few moments.

“Yes,” I said, “I can see that there would be significant benefits for both companies, particularly through giving us access to the American military and by reducing marketing and support costs within the USA.”

The American military were a huge consumer of large scale pumping systems, particularly the Navy as warships need a lot of pumps for a variety of purposes, and, unsurprisingly, the Americans would only purchase from American companies. This was, for us, a huge potential source of revenue. It also crossed my mind that, if I played my cards right, I would also get one or two expenses paid trips to Miami. And, perhaps, Jessica might like to go to.

“Absolutely,” he said, and we discussed the potential benefits to Morley's of such a merger for a while.

“I will, of course, need access to their books to perform a full evaluation of their business structure and finances and to establish an

equitable joint valuation prior to negotiating merger terms,” I said. “Perhaps the simplest solution would be cross-acquisition of shares but it could well not be the best solution.”

“Actually that won't be necessary,” said Mr Morley. “The financial analysis has been carried out by HKPC Finanzen in Berlin and the merger terms have been agreed.”

I was stunned by this. I found it inconceivable that I, the company's accountant, had not been involved at any point in the analysis of the proposal or the negotiations.

“In fact,” continued Mr Morley, remorselessly, “it was agreed by the Board and I signed the agreement on Tuesday and the merger takes effect at midnight tonight. I will be informing all staff at a full meeting at 3pm this afternoon.”

A coldness started to rise up my body from my feet. I was getting an idea of what was going on.

“Why are you telling me now?” I asked. There could only be one reason and I prayed it wasn't the case.

“When there is a merger,” said Mr Morley, looking uncomfortable, “there are always duplications in staffing, primarily in those areas that will be centralised and at the more senior levels. I'm afraid, Tom, that, even though most accounting functions will continue to operate in both centres there is no need for your role to be duplicated and we have, that is to say I have, well, we the board, at any rate, have decided to retain your counterpart at Franklin's, Leonard Kublitski, post merger.”

“So you mean I'm not wanted anymore?” I said.

“Of course we want you, Tom,” said Mr Morley, “it's just that, well, we don't need you anymore.”

“But I've been here for eighteen years,” I said, in shock, unable to fully comprehend what was happening.

“Indeed,” said Mr Morley, “and your redundancy package will reflect how much we appreciate your many years of dedicated service.”

He paused for a few moments, perhaps thinking of what to say next or to give me an opportunity to say something. I couldn't think of anything to say as my brain seemed to have shut down. In fact, I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible although I doubted that my limbs would respond to my brain.

“Umm, Elaine is waiting in her office to take you through your termination benefits,” he said, glancing at his watch. “Yes, she should have finished with John by now.”

“John?” I said, “John Sloane the Production Manager?”

“Yes,” said Mr Morley. “You're not the only one. Eleven in fact, and a similar number in Miami.”

The scale of it surprised me, as did the cost of the payouts.

“Six months, you said?” I said. “How on earth did you manage to keep it secret?”

“It's been very difficult,” he said, “just as, umm, breaking the news to old friends is very difficult. I've, umm, always considered you to be my friend, Tom.”

Although we'd worked well together over the years, this came as a surprise to me. At the very least I would have thought a friend would let me use his first name.

“Now,” said Mr Morley, breaking the uneasy silence and leaning forward proactively, “unless you have any questions I shall pass you over to Elaine. I have a few more people to see before the meeting.”

I slowly got up, forcing my limbs to work although my legs felt weak and trembled a little, and walked to the door.

“I want you to understand, Tom,” said Mr Morley, just as I was opening the door, “that it's just business, not personal. I truly regret

having to do this.”

“Really?” I said, icily. “Taking away my job seems pretty personal to me, not very friendly at all.”

I didn't slam the door behind me, much as I wanted to. A visibly upset Karen escorted me to Elaine's office where I was given a fistful of documents and efficiently taken through the various termination benefits to which I was entitled. I didn't feel up to driving home but the company, very kindly, paid for a taxi for me since I had to leave my company car in the car park as I was no longer entitled to it. I was, with immediate effect, no longer an employee. I wasn't even allowed to say goodbye to my, former, staff.

Chapter Twenty

It was four days before it occurred to me to use Jessica's car.

The weekend wasn't too bad. Admittedly it was quiet and uneventful and I would have liked to talk to Jessica about what had happened at work. After all, she had a pragmatic, innovative nature, even if it was a little off-beat, and Tom's relentless optimism would have helped pass the time. Still, I watched an International rugby match on Saturday, although I couldn't tell you who was playing. In fact I watched the TV a lot over the weekend, without really watching if that makes sense. I wanted to check my email to see if Jessica had responded to her birthday flowers yet but I couldn't as I'd had to leave my laptop at work, since it was a company computer.

I didn't particularly feel unemployed until Monday when I got up at my usual time, got dressed, went to the kitchen to get some breakfast and suddenly realised I didn't have a job to go to, or even a car to go in. I sat in the lounge, drinking my coffee feeling rather embarrassed and foolish for quite a long time then went and got changed again. Then I sat back in the lounge and wondered what to do. The day stretched ahead. Empty. Remorselessly empty.

So I cut the grass. It didn't really need it since it was February but it was something to do. Then I sat in the lounge again and had some more coffee. Odd thoughts went through my head now and then about how I should have reacted to Mr Morley. I developed logical arguments refuting his points and even made up an impassioned speech that would have turned the stoniest of hearts. At one point I even picked up the phone to ring him but hung up when I heard Natalie's voice. Logically I knew that even if I did manage to make him change his mind, he wouldn't be able to change the minds of his new American partners and, frankly, putting him in such a position wouldn't help my case anyway.

There wasn't much food left in the house so I made myself a scratch dinner. I'd been resolutely ignoring the papers Elaine had given me, but after dinner I picked them up. Denial wasn't going to get me anywhere. I went through them, slowly, one by one, then went to get my laptop to do some calculations. Then I called myself an idiot for

forgetting that I didn't have a laptop. Actually it turned out to be a good thing since I had to do my calculations long hand on a piece of paper and not quickly in a spreadsheet which meant I managed to fill most of the evening.

On the positive side I was going to get a substantial lump sum on top of the three months pay in lieu of notice and I was also owed thirteen days holiday. Usefully, the final month's pay was going to be in the next tax year so if I didn't earn anything else next year I wouldn't pay any tax on it. What was also encouraging was that, if I lived very frugally, I would just about be able to afford to make it through on my savings until I was 65. This was, of course, assuming I didn't buy another car, that inflation didn't happen and that interest rates went up so that my money would earn something until I spent it.

On the downside, however, was the fact that the retirement age by the time I reached 65 would be 67. So, cutting things to the barest of bones meant that, if I didn't find another job, I would have at least two years during which I would have to claim unemployment benefits. Probably more, realistically, since inflation was inevitable and there are always unexpected expenses. I also didn't fancy spending the rest of my life wholly dependent on public transport. The conclusion was inevitable, I had to get another job. Fortunately it wasn't urgent, at least financially. What to do all day and every day until I found a job was going to be an issue. I didn't sleep well that night and I got up at the usual time on Tuesday morning although I did remember not to put on my suit.

I also had to do some shopping since there was no milk and I had to have black coffee and the last of the bread for breakfast instead of my usual cereal. I was halfway to the shopping mall when it occurred to me to use Jessica's car so I walked home again and found her car keys. It was strange to drive a manual again but I got the hang of it quite quickly. When I got home I went to ask Jessica's advice on buying a second hand car, as my last six cars had been company cars on three year leases, and felt foolish all over again when I remembered she wasn't here.

“I can email her, though,” I thought happily to myself, “and get her permission to use her car just in case I have a little accident,” and

went to get my laptop and felt foolish all over again.

“I really need to get another laptop,” I said out loud, then reached for my laptop to Google where to buy laptops.

“Idiot,” I said out loud and went to make some coffee instead. I didn't like continually feeling foolish.

“Where do I get a laptop?” I wondered, enjoying the coffee with milk in it. “I know, go into town and look around. There's bound to be somewhere in the Mall that sells laptops.”

Feeling very positive I drove to the shopping mall and walked around. Other than the supermarket and a butcher and a bakery, the shops seemed to be primarily women's clothes shops and shoe shops. Slightly disheartened but not discouraged I went for a drive around the rest of the centre of town and found a place that sold televisions, cookers and so on. An unlikely candidate for the buying of a computer but it turned out that they had a selection of laptops in one corner and, after a lot of soul searching, I chose a cheap little notebook computer. Not as big and powerful as my last but it would suffice for my needs. It took a while to configure but to my delight there was an email from Jessica. She was still alive! Well, at least she was on Friday when she sent it.

Hey Tom

Hey, Australia is just awesome! The weather is incredible and the people are so amazingly friendly!

Thank you for the lovely orchids you sent me for my birthday! They're gorgeous and I love the vase, you're so sweet! I've been meaning to write you but things have been so busy here ...

Tom and Greg have really hit it off and they are looking for a small place to live and Tom has already found a job as a trainee manager at a bottle shop, which is what they call off-licenses here and the manager is helping him apply for his work permit. Alice, that's Greg's sister, has been so kind and helpful and she says I can keep staying here when Tom and Greg get

their place, at least until I'm sorted. I've been looking for a job too but nothing so far.

Yeah, you've probably guessed by now. We're probably not going back to England. Obviously it all depends on our applications to migrate but we had a long talk and we both agree there isn't a lot for us in England.

You've been so incredibly kind and helpful and I really want you to know how much I, well the both of us actually, really do appreciate everything you've done for us. Is it asking too much for you to do just one more thing?

Well two things really. Could you find my file in my bedroom with all my paperwork and post it over? We need birth certificates and stuff for our applications. Also is it asking too much for you to keep our stuff at your place until we know for sure we can stay here?

You're such a sweetie, Tom, I just know you'll help us one last time :) :) xxxxx

I had to read it three times before I fully grasped what she was saying. In shock I hit reply and wrote a long, rambling email about how I'd miss her and how I was already missing our evenings and her company and how lonely it was in this house all alone and silly things like that but fortunately I didn't send it and embarrass myself. At the last minute, with my finger poised over the keypad to send it, I came to my senses and deleted the entire thing. She and Tom had their own lives to lead and clearly I wasn't a part of their lives anymore. She was right, of course, there wasn't really anything here in England and her prospects there were much better than they would be renting half a house with a sad, lonely, unemployed, stuffy old ex-accountant.

Dear Jessica (I wrote in the email I did send)

I'm glad you like Australia and of course I will send the file and look after both your belongings. My apologies for not

replying sooner but I was made redundant last week and did not have a computer until I bought one this morning. Still, I'm sure I will have another job very soon. Give my regards to Tom and congratulate him on his position as a Trainee Manager. I'm sure he will succeed admirably. My felicitations too on his new relationship. I'm certain you will find good employment in the very near future.

Regards and best wishes to you both,

Tom

I wanted to say something about Tom finding love but found I couldn't. It wasn't because he was gay, of course, that was irrelevant. Love is love regardless of the genders involved. It's just that using the word 'love' in what basically amounted to a farewell email to Jessica seemed, somehow, inappropriate, almost as if it was a reflection on me and my own inadequacies.

Anyway, after I'd sent that email I went to Jessica's room and found, not without some difficulty, her file of papers and took it to the Post Office where I bought a large envelope for it. I had a discussion with the clerk about how to ensure it arrived safely and decided to opt for *Parcelforce Global Priority* which guaranteed delivery to Melbourne within three days and was trackable online. It was expensive but I felt it was the least I could do to help them start with their new lives. Back home I sent her a quick email confirming I'd sent the file and giving her the tracking details.

That evening the house was emptier and lonelier than it had been.

I'm not a drinker but I keep some sherry in the house for the occasional visitor and, after my solitary dinner, faced with the prospect of a depressing evening of television, I poured myself one. Tom, of course, was always going to move on with his life since he was young and would undoubtedly go places once he found a direction. For some reason though, I had found Jessica to be stimulating company and, knowing that her resources were

limited, I hadn't given any thought to her moving on. I had got used to her being around and I found it quite saddening that she would not be keeping me company in the evenings any more. Indeed, since that tearful night when I'd opened up to her about Marsha, I had felt that there was a bond growing between us, a connection.

The sherry wasn't too bad so I had another one which got me thinking about Morley's. I wondered if the new accountant, whatever his name was, would give the traineeship to Janey. She was a good girl and deserved to move up in the world and I started to think about all the people I'd known there over the years and how they were getting on in their lives. I was a little shocked to realise that I had given no thought to John and how he was going to handle his redundancy. After all he had a wife and children and a mortgage to support. Still, there was nothing I could do about it.

I was halfway through my third when it occurred to me that Jessica might well have planned something like this all along. After all, Samantha was her sister and had known her for a long time.

"There's no smoke without fire," I reminded myself. "I never did get any rent from her."

I opened my notebook computer and worked out how much rent she hadn't paid me. Surprisingly it amounted to almost two and a half thousand pounds. I hadn't realised it was that much.

"And the house is full of her junk," I muttered, looking round, "my house, not hers. Full of old rags and crap."

"And she has the cheek to expect me to look after it all while she goes gallivanting off, having fun," I grouched, finishing my fourth glass of sherry.

"Bloody Morley's," I said, some time later, "just bloody used me all these years, bastards probably planned to dump me all along, just like that bloody Jessica. Used me, everyone just uses me.

Nobody loves me, they all just want what they can take without ever doing anything for me. Good old Tom, Tom the Apostle, just use him up then throw him away when they don't want him anymore. Bastards.”

I was woken by the pale sun coming in through the window. I hadn't closed the curtains the night before and I was stiff and uncomfortable in my chair. Fortunately I wasn't cold since the heating had been on all night but my head throbbed and my neck was rigid.

“You're a stiff necked old fool, all right,” I said when I noticed the sherry bottle was empty. A hot shower and a very strong cup of coffee brought me back to life.

“Right,” I said, rapping the worktop in the kitchen with my knuckles, “you need to think positively, Tom. Get the house tidied up then make a list of all the things you want to do but have never had time for then start doing them while you're finding another job.”

Full of enthusiasm I dumped the sherry bottle in the rubbish bin and attacked the vacuuming with gusto. That done I decided it was time the bathroom had a proper clean. Jessica's creams and cotton wool and what have you were all over the place so I found a cardboard box in the garage and packed them all away neatly and deposited the box in her room. One of Jessica's hairbrushes was on the floor beside her bed and I picked it up intending to put it in the box but I was suddenly struck by the hairs in the hair brush.

“She had nice hair,” I said to the hair brush, pulling at some strands, “a nice shade of light brown.”

The strands lifted away from the brush, pulling more hairs with them. Unconsciously I started to lift them all until I ended up with a ball of her hair in my hand.

“Pfft,” I said, “why do women leave so much hair in their hairbrush?”

I tossed the hairbrush into the box and went to put the hair in the bin in the bathroom but instead found myself in my room. I put the ball of hair on a shelf in the bookcase intending, I suppose, to keep it as some sort of memento then changed my mind and dumped it in the bathroom bin and closed the door.

“Sentimentality will get you nowhere,” I said. “It's over, you need to move on. You're better off alone, anyway.”

I went back into the lounge and opened a text document on my notebook and rather grandiosely headed it 'Life Ambitions' then stared at it wondering what to put.

'Learn to ski' I wrote after a while. 'Learn a musical instrument' I wrote a while later. This was surprisingly difficult. Surely there were things I had wanted to do but had never got around to? 'Learn to paint' seemed a worthwhile ambition, although I'd never particularly wanted to, so I wrote that on the list as well.

“Not a bad start,” I said approvingly, “if a bit short.”

I saved the document and made some coffee. I added 'Candle making' to the list. 'Croquet?' went on it shortly afterwards. I thought about it for a while then deleted 'Croquet?' and typed 'Bowls' in its place then deleted that as well.

“Oh come on,” I said to myself, “what do you really want to do? There must be something.”

So I typed 'Visit Marsha's grave' then abandoned the whole idea and closed the document.

“You need to get another job,” I said to the TV.

* * *

“If you could just fill in this form,” said the girl, passing me a clipboard and a battered old biro. She didn't seem overly bright but she had a job which put her ahead of me. “And I'll get one

of the consultants to see you.”

I smiled and nodded. There were three employment agencies in town and I planned to visit all of them. I sat in one of the uncomfortable arm chairs and balanced the clipboard on one arm. It didn't take long to fill in as I'd only had one job in the last eighteen years and they didn't want any employment history earlier than that. I'd just signed it when a young Indonesian-looking man appeared and the girl on the reception desk briefly spoke to him.

“Tom,” he said, with all the sincerity of a used car dealer, “I'm Zed, delighted to meet you. If you'll just come this way?”

He led me to a small cubicle.

“Have a seat,” he said, “if I can just have your form, thanks. So you're looking for a job?”

I was tempted to say “no, I came into an employment agency looking for a lawn mower,” but restrained myself. I've always been irritated by people who say the obvious.

“Yes,” I said. It seemed the sensible answer and had the advantage of being true.

“Nice one,” he said. I'm not sure why.

“So you're fifty,” said Zed, scanning my form, “and you're an accountant?”

I wasn't certain why he wanted me to confirm what was on the form. Presumably if I'd lied on the form I wouldn't be so stupid to change my story so soon or be caught out by such simple questions.

“Yes,” I said.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Not a lot of call for accountants at the moment. So you've only had the one job?”

He seemed disgusted by this. Quite possibly because employment agents are paid for each placement so by not being frequently placed in jobs I wasn't properly supporting his lifestyle.

"Yes," I said.

"You've only put one employer reference," he noted. "We need two."

"I've only had one employer for the last eighteen years," I said. "Before that I was with Price Waterhouse but I doubt anyone there would remember me."

"Can't say I've heard of them," he said dubiously. "Manufacturing, are they?"

"They're one of the largest firms of accountants and auditors in the world," I said.

"Brilliant," he said enthusiastically. "Get me their details and I'll put you on the system and we'll take it from there. I'm sure we've got something for you. What area do you want to be in?"

"Well, accounting," I said, surprised by his question. "Manufacturing, I suppose."

"Nah, I meant you wanna stay local, or London, UK, overseas, whereabouts?"

"Oh, local I suppose. I have a house and don't really want to relocate."

"Nice one," although he looked dubious and not at all sure it actually was 'nice'.

I went home before approaching the other two agencies in order to get the address of Price Waterhouse's head office. Interestingly they were now Price Waterhouse Coopers and had

grown to over a quarter of a million people worldwide. The likelihood of them giving any sort of meaningful reference for someone who'd left eighteen years previously was vanishingly small. Still, I phoned Zed and gave him the details.

"Tom, great," he said. "Got something here that might interest you. Debt Collector with a small firm of plumbing tool manufacturers."

"Oh I think that's a bit junior for me," I said. In Hollywood, Debt collectors are tough people who go around collecting debts from desperadoes and usually end up in gun fights or worse. In English businesses, debt collectors spend most of their time phoning other businesses to encourage them to pay and very occasionally go to court. It's important work but not in the least glamorous and the only qualification needed is tenacity.

"Right then," said Zed. "I'll get back to you when something else comes along."

It was the same story, more or less, with the other two agencies, except one had a vacancy for a reconciliation clerk and the other a data entry clerk with specific knowledge of Canon flatbed scanners. It wasn't a good day.

Chapter Twenty One

“Have you considered retraining?” asked Lilith.

After over three weeks of being informed of only very low level positions from the local employment agencies I had decided to approach one of the top London firms. My 'Executive Liaison Manager' was Lilith, a razor sharp blonde in her early thirties. She'd spent all of a minute and a half perusing my resume and hadn't bothered to confirm my age or that I was looking for a job.

“Why would I retrain?” I asked, “I'm a fully qualified and highly experienced accountant.”

“Because no decent employer will touch you,” she said, bluntly. “You're too old and you've been in the same position for nearly twenty years which says to employers you lack drive and ambition and that you are narrow and inflexible in your range of abilities and set in your ways. Ideally you would be ten years younger and have moved industries every three or four years to broaden your vision and stay up to date with the latest innovations. By rights you should now be solidly in the Financial Director bracket but you are not demonstrating the, shall we say, foresight that is needed for such a role.”

“But my background is solid and reliable,” I said, stunned at her brutality.

“Solidity and reliability are not virtues in this day and age,” she said. “The modern economic climate is fast changing and rapidly evolving and businesses need senior managers who can drive that, not lag behind, desperately trying to catch up. You have no experience of internet startups, for example, or even social media data systems or global tax avoidance.”

“But surely there are still old style businesses operating?” I asked.

“Yes, some,” she said, but most are suffering and they'll promote internally rather than recruit from the marketplace and will pay for it in the medium term.”

I gazed at her in bemusement. She was, I imagine, archetypal of the fast moving, fast changing modern business executive. I fancied I could see her evolving before my eyes.

“But what could I retrain as?” I asked.

“Data warehousing is 'in' at the moment,” she said. “Perhaps you could retrain as a database programmer, although it would help if you were twenty five years younger.”

I thanked her and left. It was clearly a waste of her time trying to find me a job, although it struck me on the train home that this was quite possibly why the local agencies didn't have any positions at my level. Or at least, didn't put me forward for them. Perhaps I should thank Lilith for being honest with me.

“Who's going to want a fifty year old trainee?” I thought. “Even an Aged Care facility will want staff younger than their clients.”

There was an email for me when I got home. From Jessica.

Hey Tom

Got the paperwork, thank you muchly. We've both put in our applications for work permits so that's ongoing, we're crossing our fingers and toes!

Hey, I've got a job! This girl called Lucy Wei emailed me about my website – she loved some of my designs! – and she's just finished her degree in Fashion and Textiles and we got talking and when she found I was in Melb she flew down to meet me and offered me a job as her PA or Assistant or something like that, it's not very clear, but she's very ambitious and is definitely going places. She's getting her plans organised and working on a portfolio of new designs and then she's really going to take off. I've seen some of her early sketches and it's going to be so awesome!

So sorry to hear about your job. Have you found another one yet?

Forgot to say I'm moving to Sydney where Lucy is, Tom & Greg still in Melb. Big step for me but he's happy and in a stable relationship and I have to learn to not be mum anymore and let him go his own way, after all, he's 19 now :(

BTW Lucy is Chinese Australian and she's going to radicalise the fashion world, I can tell. Isn't that just so cool????

I tried to reply positively and enthusiastically even though I had forgotten Tom's birthday, being so wrapped up in my own problems. I told Jessica that I wasn't looking seriously for a job at the moment and that I was having a well-earned rest for a while since that didn't make me look such a loser. Since I was only a few days late, I sent Tom, via Jessica's email address, Au\$200 in Amazon gift vouchers. It was several hours before I realised that she'd sent me an email because she wanted to share her happiness with me, which cheered me up a lot. At least for a while, since it was clear she wasn't planning on coming back in the near future, if at all.

Although I wasn't short of money, I was hoarding it as well as I could since I didn't know how long it would last. I'd scrapped my idea of learning to ski as it seemed rather dangerous and very expensive. I did look in the local paper and saw that there were two or three second hand guitars for sale that seemed reasonably priced so I got a book on how to play the guitar from the library. It was mystifying, to be honest, so I took it back and didn't pursue the idea any further. I even went and talked to some people at the local Bowls club but they all seemed to be in their sixties and seventies and the games didn't look particularly interesting. Basically the winner is the one who can roll a bigger ball closest to a smaller ball which isn't exactly thrilling.

As a result my days were filled with reading library books, a lot of library books, and aimlessly watching tedious shows on television. Even the cooking shows which I'd enjoyed seemed flat and pointless since cooking is only fun when you're cooking for other people. When you're cooking for yourself, baked beans and sausages are good enough. I rarely went out since there was nothing in particular to go out for. Not being particularly social I had no circle of friends to socialise with and even if I had they'd probably be at work during the days and with their families in the evenings. Still, on the positive side,

I had had the time to go through all the radio stations and had found a local radio station that didn't play angry rap music or soporific classical music. Mellow FM played mellow jazz twenty four hours a day and was really quite pleasant and restful and I had taken to having it on a lot of the time. It filled the silence.

Since Jessica and Tom seemed unlikely now to be coming back I decided I ought to organise their belongings and perhaps even pack them so they'd be ready to ship as and when they wanted them sent over but there's something about having little to do that makes it difficult to get motivated to do anything. Several times I opened the door to Jessica's room, gazed around and decided to leave it for another day.

Still, the weeks slowly passed and the weather was getting warmer, which meant gardening would be back on the cards.

It was the middle of April when I had another email from Jessica.

Hey Tom :)

We've both got our work permits! Tom got his last week but I've been waiting for mine before telling you and it came in the post this morning and I'm now officially working for Lucy as her PA. Hey, you wanna hear the really cool part? Lucy's got an uncle in China who has a cloth and garment factory and he's going to make Lucy's designs and ship them to Aus. That's not the cool part, the cool part is that Lucy's going to China in a couple of weeks to sort out some stuff with him and she's taking me with her !!!! Way cool :) 3 months ago I was banging estate agent signs into the frozen ground of merry old England and now I'm in Sydney (Australia!! hot, hot hot!!) working as the PA to a haute couture fashion designer and going to China on business. Wow is all I can say, freaking WOW lol

Hey I wanted to ask you something. Have you got a job yet? Only Lucy is looking for an experienced businessman who'll work for peanuts for a while since she can't afford to pay much yet to set up and run her fashion house, that's right, she

wants to set up a pret-a-porter (my keyboard won't let me do the proper accents) company to do mass produced ready to wear versions of her haute couture designs. Anyway, you're very experienced and I figured you can't be that short of money if you're having an extended holiday so would you be interested? You've have to come to Sydney of course, but didn't you used to like Sydney?

Anyway, let me know and I'll talk to Lucy. I know she's struggling to find someone.

I dismissed it out of hand of course. I knew nothing of the fashion industry and didn't speak any Chinese which seemed to be a necessity if the product was going to be manufactured in China. Naturally I was politely enthusiastic in my reply about Jessica's job but move to Australia to take a job I probably couldn't do? No, it was unrealistic.

I sent the email and was wondering whether to make a cup of coffee and start reading another book from the library or finish the book I was currently reading and have a cup of coffee later when the doorbell rang. Admittedly not as important perhaps as the decisions I used to make but times change. I glanced at the clock and it was coming up to two in the afternoon.

“Who on earth can that be?” I wondered, as I rarely get visitors and salespeople usually try to do their cold selling around dinner time when people are most likely to be in.

I lethargically made my way to the front door and opened it. There was a smartly dressed, middle aged woman standing on the doorstep with another a few feet behind her. The one on the doorstep visibly winced and stepped backwards when she saw me.

“Hello. I'm making just a brief call to share an important message with you,” she said and held a printed card out to me.

I glanced briefly at it. It was some bible tract so they were obviously Jehovah's Witnesses.

“No thanks,” I said, “I’m a Hindu,” and shut the door. I find Jehovah’s Witnesses mildly irritating and I wondered what sort of success rate they had, going from door to door. I’m not a Hindu, incidentally.

“Probably not very good,” I thought, sitting back down. I picked up the book I was part way through and sighed, it wasn’t very interesting. I put it down and picked up the next book and sighed again, It seemed less interesting than the other one.

“Go to Australia, indeed,” I scoffed to myself, “set up a fashion house. How ridiculous.”

Still, if the manufacturing was being sub-contracted then it would be simply a process of importing already manufactured goods so really all it would involve would be a strong stock control system and, of course, strict quality control. Accounting for the actual manufacturing would be considerably more difficult but that was the subcontractors’ problem and no doubt this Lucy person would either do the selling herself or hire sales people.

“More likely the latter,” I thought drowsily as I nodded off in my chair. “She’s the designer.”

I didn’t doze for long, perhaps just a few minutes, but as I came awake again there was a lovely song playing on the radio. I sat there with my eyes closed, just letting the soothing melody wash over me.

*The shadow of your smile
When you have gone
Will colour all my dreams
And light the dawn*

It was a beautiful, haunting song, sung by a gentle woman’s voice.

*Now when I remember spring
All the joys that love can bring
I will be remembering
The shadow of your smile⁴*

⁴ The Shadow of Your Smile, Astrud Gilberto, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group, 1965

“That’s so beautiful,” I whispered to myself as the song came to an end. “Ahh, the shadow of her smile,” and I conjured up Marsha’s smile. *All the joys that love can bring, I will be remembering, the shadow of your smile.* I smiled happily, remembering Marsha’s beautiful, teasing smile. Except it wasn’t quite right, there was something wrong with her smile, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

I got up and walked to my bedroom where my favourite picture of Marsha sat and picked it up.

“Marsha’s smile is quite different,” I thought in surprise. “Whose smile am I remembering?”

Then it hit me.

“Good god almighty,” I said. “Jessica? I’m remembering Jessica’s smile?”

In a semi-daze I made my way back to the lounge. Why was I remembering Jessica’s smile, not Marsha’s? Then I had a major shock. I caught sight of myself in the mirror. No wonder that Jehovah’s Witness lady had stepped backwards. There was an old man with wild hair and three days stubble staring back at me. In rumpled pyjamas with his dressing gown hanging open. At two in the afternoon.

“Jesus,” I exclaimed. “Jesus, what have I become?”

Shaking, I made my way to my armchair and lowered myself into it then got up and looked at myself in the mirror again.

“Jessica wouldn’t smile at that,” I whispered, “she’d run away.”

Jessica?

I was filled with a desperate longing to see her again, to have her smile at me, to light my dawn and my day.

“Oh god,” I said, filled with self-pity, “what am I going to do?”

I fumbled my way back to my armchair.

“Get a grip on yourself, man,” I said, trying to be firm. It didn’t work.

“I want to see her smile at me again,” I whimpered.

“Then do it,” a voice inside me said. “Stop bullshitting and just do it.”

I ran to the kitchen where I kept the yellow pages and scrambled through it looking for Travel Agents and rang the first one on the list and, incredibly there were seats available on a flight leaving Heathrow that evening. Bound for Sydney. With a two hour stop-over in New Delhi.

“Book it,” I said to the nice young lady at the agency, “I’ll just get my credit card.”

I found my wallet and gave her the details and she promised faithfully I’d have the eTicket by email in the next few minutes. I grabbed my notebook and checked my email every two or three seconds until it arrived. I stared at it. Air India AI302, LHR → DEL → SYD departing 21:30, arriving 07:10 the day after tomorrow.

“Awe-SUM” I shouted and wrote a quick email to Jessica

ignore last email, am arriving Sydney AI302 07:10 Tom

and sent it.

That done, I wandered happily into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

“Feels right,” I said to myself. “It’s good to be proactive.”

I glanced at the clock on the oven then got my mug and took the coffee jar out of the cupboard.

“What?”

I looked at the oven clock again. 3:12 in the afternoon.

The flight left at 9:30 in the evening. That meant I had to be at the airport no later than 7.30 and it would take at least two hours to get

there, if not longer.

“Shit!”

I dropped my coffee cup and left the pieces on the floor. I flew into the bedroom and rummaged through my closet for a bag big enough to hold some clothes. I used to have a suitcase but for the life of me I couldn't remember where it was since I hadn't travelled anywhere for at least ten years. Still, I did find a carryall that would do. I pulled a suit and some shirts at random from the cupboard and tried to fold them neatly then stuffed them in the carryall and grabbed a handful of underpants and socks and zipped it up then unzipped it and stuffed a pair of shoes on top.

“Passport!”

I rushed to my desk and scrambled through the drawers until I found my passport. Triumphantly I picked it up and headed for the bedroom and caught sight of myself in the mirror.

“Oh god, I need a shower.”

I rushed to the bathroom, pulling off my dressing gown and trying to get my pyjamas off over the passport in my hand then realised I was still holding the passport and ran semi-naked into the bedroom and slapped the passport on top of my carryall then ran back to turn the shower on.

“I'm going to need a taxi!” I cried and ran, naked this time, into the kitchen to get the fridge magnet for a local taxi company.

“Answer the phone, answer the phone,” I said to the phone as soon as I'd dialled their number.

An elderly woman walked past the house and glanced in casually, as people sometimes do when they're out walking. She must have seen me standing there naked, holding the phone, as she did a double take then hurried off.

“I need a taxi to take me to Heathrow,” I said, “as soon as possible.”

"10 minutes all right, mate?" said a voice.

"Yes," I said and gave him my address then rushed back to the shower, It was still running so I jumped in and rapidly adjusted the hot tap. Twenty four hours on a plane with severe scalds wasn't a good idea.

I'd just lathered my face when the doorbell went. I wrapped a towel around myself and ran to the door.

"Taxi," said the man.

"Give me five minutes," I said. "I need to shave."

"No problem mate," he said, "meter's running though."

"Fine," I said and ran back to the bathroom to finish shaving. I washed the remains of the lather off my face and combed my hair then ran into the bedroom to get my carryall and passport.

"Ready," I said.

"No you ain't," said the taxi driver.

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled and worrying I'd miss the plane.

"Put some clothes on, mate," he laughed. "And take a chill pill. What time's your flight?"

"9.30," I said.

"No probs, ain't even four yet. Get yerself dressed then sit and think what else ya need to do before ya leave."

This taxi driver was a very sensible man. I got dressed, by sheer chance in the herringbone jacket that Jessica had given me for her Aunt's funeral. It was a little too big, I must have lost weight. I found my wallet and keys and put my notebook computer in the carryall as well then thought for a few moments then went round turning everything off.

“Passport?” said the taxi driver. I nodded.

“Ticket?” I ran back inside and printed the ticket.

“Wallet, keys?” I nodded.

“Turned everything off?” He clearly assumed I live alone. I nodded.

“OK,” he said. “Doors locked?” Just to be safe, I double checked the kitchen door then went outside and carefully locked the front door.

“Right,” said the taxi driver. “Let's go.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Of course I regretted it almost straight away.

Calming down from my self-induced panic in the taxi I started to think thoughts like 'what on earth are you doing?', 'she doesn't want to see you again' and others on the same theme. The only thing that stopped me turning the taxi round and going home was that the driver must have decided I was fair game and spent almost the entire trip to Heathrow, terminal 2, expounding his views on Brexit, some of which were worrisome enough to make me argue with him.

However, he got me there in plenty of time and after checking in I went to a cafe in the Departure Lounge and bought some dinner. To pass the time until departure and knowing I had twenty four hours of flying ahead of me I spent a pleasant hour browsing through books in a bookshop. I got a book about a stalker in New York which, I have to confess didn't especially interest me as a topic but the book was written in the second person, with the stalker seemingly talking to the girl he was stalking which I found intriguing. I also got an illustrated history of twentieth century fashion which was half price because I was getting the other book. When I saw it, it occurred to me that I hadn't said I was going to Sydney to see her again and to visit Marsha's grave so Jessica would assume that I had changed my mind about the possible job with that girl she'd emailed me about. She might even have arranged an interview for me. Even though I wouldn't get the job I didn't want to seem totally useless by knowing nothing of the fashion industry.

I find it almost impossible to sleep on aircraft. It's something to do with the constant noise and vibration I imagine so when I arrived in Sydney, half an hour late because of strong winds, all I wanted to do was find a hotel somewhere and get some sleep before contacting Jessica. Consequently I was annoyed by the tannoy system.

"Would Mr Tom Appleby on Air India flight AI302 please go to the Passenger Information Desk on the main concourse." They repeated it three times.

"Oh now what?" I muttered. "Surely Immigration aren't going to hassle

me?"

"I'm Tom Appleby," I said, irritably, to the lady on the Information Desk.

"That lady over there is looking for you," she said, pointing to Jessica.

"Hello Tom," she said, smiling broadly.

I was stunned and nearly let go of my carryall.

"Jessica," I stammered. "What are you doing here?"

"Meeting you, of course," she said, giving me a hug. "I got your email although you didn't say which day you were arriving but since you didn't reply to my email asking I figured you'd left that day so this would have to be the day you arrived so I came here on the off chance. And here you are. Did you have a good flight?"

"Oh, it's lovely to see you," I said. "And thank you for meeting me. Yes the flight was good and the food was delicious although," and I lowered my voice, "I think I was the only white person on the flight."

Jessica laughed that laugh of hers. "Well, what do you expect with Air India? Jamaicans? Where are you staying? I've brought my car, what are your plans?"

"I haven't got anywhere to stay," I admitted. "It was all a bit of a rush and I was just planning to stay at the Airport Hotel and get some sleep before I contacted you. I can never sleep on planes."

"Yeah, I figured that was the case since it wasn't like Mr Pedantic to forget to tell me which day you were arriving so I booked you a room in a hotel in the city. It'll be cheaper and more comfortable and easier to get around. Come on, let's go to the car. How long are you staying?"

"I don't know," I said. "It all depends but I'm too tired to think about it."

Jessica took me to a quite decent hotel in Clarence Street in the CBD and came up with me to inspect the room. Apparently it passed her inspection.

“You get some sleep. I've told Lucy all about you and she wants to meet you. I tentatively arranged for 10am tomorrow but you can change that if you want to. Since you've got no plans I'm guessing you haven't got anything arranged for dinner tonight?”

“No,” I said, sitting on the bed and wishing I could lie on it. I really didn't feel up to an interview the next morning.

“Good,” said Jessica. “You're having dinner with me then and I'll fill you in on Lucy. You need some sleep and I have things to do so I'll come back around six, OK?”

Well, I had a good sleep. It was helped by the fact that Jessica had not only seemed pleased to see me but had made the effort to come and collect me on the off chance I was arriving that day. I woke around four, feeling quite rested. Jessica arrived around six, as promised, and we walked slowly down to Darling Harbour and found a Malaysian restaurant. It was a nice evening and she updated me on everything that had happened to her since she and Tom arrived in Australia. I was a little reticent about my doings, partly because I hadn't done much and partly because what I had done, such as sitting around the house in my pyjamas moping, was neither to my credit nor particularly interesting.

“Hey, if you've time to visit Melbourne,” Jessica said, “Tom would love to catch up and for you to meet Greg but if not we're to let him know and he'll come up to Sydney although they can't afford for both of them to come up.”

“Are you missing him?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Like crazy,” she admitted, “but every mother has to cut them loose sooner or later. He's at the age where he'd probably go off to uni anyway so now is the right time. At least I know where he is and that he's safe and that Greg is a good lad.”

“Where are you living?” I asked.

“I’ve got a room in a house in Corcorde,” she said. “It’ll do for now, until Lucy can afford to pay me better.”

She talked for a while about Lucy, giving me some background.

“Is ten in the morning OK with you,” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Where’s her office?”

I pulled a notebook and pen out of my pocket to take down the address.

“She doesn’t have one,” said Jessica. “She’s operating out of her bedroom at her parent’s house.”

“That’s no way to run a business,” I said, a little confused. “Where am I going to meet her, then? In her bedroom?”

This made Jessica laugh. “No, of course not. There’s a Chinese cocktail bar in York Street, just behind your hotel. You’ll meet her there. And anyway, she doesn’t have a business, not yet, at least. That’s why you’re here.”

“What does she have then?”

“Just her talent, a fashion degree, relatives in China and me.”

“Well, I really don’t think I can help much. Setting up a business is hard enough but in a foreign country, in an industry I know nothing about and I don’t speak any Chinese.”

“That’s how I thought you’d react when I sent you my email,” said Jessica, “and I wasn’t in the least surprised when you rejected it out of hand. What did surprise me was your other email. You didn’t even ask for any more details, you just booked a flight straight away. Now that did surprise me. It surprised me a lot. Why did you drop everything to come here if you don’t think you can do it?”

I had prepared an answer to this on the flight over, along the lines of “well, obviously I have my doubts about such a venture but if you can be in at the beginning of something worthwhile you can really feel you've contributed,” but, of course, it didn't come out like that. It came out more like “I've missed you and I wanted to see you again.” Which was very embarrassing.

Jessica just stared at me in shock.

“Oh my god,” she said. “Oh my god. You came all this way just to ..., oh my god. I had no idea. I've always liked you since Tom brought me to your house but I had no idea, none at all, that you liked me back. I just thought you tolerated us. Like when you invited me to your Dinner Dance thing and I joked about it being a date and you got all huffy and stuff.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, going red with shame. “I really didn't mean to give you the impression ...,”

“Stop it, Tom,” she said. “Stop hiding and just live with it. You can't take it back you know, you can't unsay something like that.”

She leaned back in her chair and watched me, silently. I got even more self-conscious, if that was possible.

“All this way,” she said softly.

“Hurrumph, yes well,” I said. “Perhaps we'd better call it a night, you've no doubt got things to do tomorrow and I've got jet lag, so let me just pay for this then we'll go.”

“No, Lucy's paying for this,” said Jessica. “She wanted to since you've come all this way to meet her. You won't forget your meeting tomorrow, or do you want me to cancel it?”

I thought about it. I hadn't yet got as far as an interview for any of the jobs I'd applied for so the practice would be useful.

“No,” I said, “I'm interested in meeting her and it'll be polite to thank her for dinner anyway. Will you be there?”

“No,” said Jessica. “It’ll be much better if I’m not. I’m really just a secretary.” We stood up.

“Will you have dinner with me tomorrow evening?” I asked, impetuously.

“You mean as a business debriefing?” she asked, with what could only be described as a smirk, “or as a date?”

“Ummm,” I said, looking at my feet and going red again.

“Tom,” said Jessica, “look at me, Tom,” and she pulled my chin up with her fingers. “Say it, come on, just say it.” She looked at me encouragingly.

“A date,” I mumbled.

“I’d love to,” she said, softly. “What’s taken you so long?”

I sat in my hotel room for quite a while that night, wishing I’d brought a picture of Marsha with me. I wanted to talk to her but it felt silly talking to a soulless empty room. Still, I planned to visit her grave after seeing Lucy and I was looking forward to that.

It may have been a Chinese cocktail bar but it looked just like any other bar to me, although I’m not an aficionado. The barman was Indian or Pakistani which seemed a little incongruous. Still, Lucy was definitely Chinese, despite her Australian heritage. She was tiny and almost hidden by the large A1 sized portfolio case she was carrying. Jessica must have told her what I looked like since she came into the bar, looked around and unhesitatingly came over to me. She was, presumably, wearing one of her own creations, since her outfit was unlike anything I’d ever seen before. I was in my herringbone jacket since the suit I’d packed was badly creased.

“Tom?” she asked, without a smile.

“Yes,” I said, jumping up, “you must be Lucy Wei.” I held out my hand but she ignored it and propped her case against the window and sat down.

“Do you have your resume?” she asked. She had a slight, but quite endearing lisp which softened her brusqueness.

Jessica had told me Lucy would want to see it so I'd asked the hotel receptionist to print one for me. I handed it over and she went through it, very slowly and carefully, as though she was proof reading it.

“OK,” she said when she'd finished. “Let's eat.”

She ordered a beefburger and a bowl of wedges for herself while I just had a coffee.

“I am a designer,” she said. Her small talk was even worse than mine, which was a relief. “I am setting up my own fashion house and I need a business manager to help me but first, I must prove myself to you before the rest of the world.”

“Well, if you insist,” I said, smiling. Lucy never smiled apparently.

She lifted the portfolio onto the table and proceeded to show me all of the designs she had in it without a word. She just waited until it was clear I'd had a good look at each one before turning to the next.”

“So,” she said when she'd finished and put the case back on the floor again, “you believe I can design fashions?”

“Well,” I said carefully, “there's no doubt you are a designer.”

“You didn't like them?”

“I have to admit they aren't to my taste,” I had to admit. She nodded thoughtfully.

“Let me explain what I want to do,” she said and proceeded to talk without seeming to pause for breath until her food arrived, which took a long time as the bar was busy. It was quite apparent that she was exceptionally intelligent and imaginative and daring. Breathtakingly daring.

“What name are you thinking of for your business?” I asked. “Names are important for creating an instantly recognisable identity in the marketplace.”

“Wei Ahead,” she said.

“That’s a good name,” I said. “It has a couple of implied meanings both of which are positive. It says that you and your designs are way ahead of everyone else’s and that you are also showing the way ahead to others.”

“You don’t like it, do you,” she said flatly.

“No,” I admitted, “it’s too much like an ordinary sentence, part of general conversation.”

“What do you mean?”

I tugged the lapels of my jacket.

“Do you like this jacket?” I said, “it’s a way ahead.”

She looked at me in puzzlement.

“It doesn’t say anything,” I explained. “How about this? Do you like this jacket? It’s a Lucy Wei.”

She nodded, thoughtfully.

“Just by saying that I’m establishing your brand identity,” I said. “If I say ‘it’s a way ahead’ people wonder what I’m talking about but if I say ‘it’s a Lucy Wei’ they immediately know I’m talking about the designer, even if they’ve never heard of you. Like Coco Chanel or Giorgio Armani.”

I was glad I’d read some of that fashion book I bought at Heathrow Airport.

“What else don’t you like?” she asked.

I laughed.

“Oh god, was I really that obvious?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, unsmiling as always.

“Well, your pricing is wrong for one thing,” I said. “You need to quadruple what you're proposing, if not more, for your haute couture items. Even if you never sell any you're setting the standard of desirability for the off-the-peg clothes. The more expensive they are the more ordinary people will want the cheap versions.”

“What else?”

“Umm, well, I understand you wanting to use your relatives to reduce your costs of manufacturing but it's a hell of a risk. You've basically putting control of your business into your uncle's hands. Even though it'll cost a little more if you have multiple manufacturers you're reducing your risk if one of them can't supply you with the quality you need. Ideally from more than one country too.”

“Why have you not got another job?” she asked, pulling the burger towards her. It was almost certainly cold by this point. “I have a fast metabolism, I have to eat a lot just to stay at 38kg, but I hate lettuce.”

She must have seen me watching her pull the lettuce out of the burger. She started chewing the burger vigorously, watching me intently. I didn't see any point in pretending I was taking an extended holiday before choosing one of the many opportunities that were coming my way. She was too intelligent to believe that kind of nonsense, especially as she thought I had come all this way at my own expense and at a moment's notice.

“I'm too old,” I said, “and because I stayed in the same role for eighteen years I have shown I lack drive and imagination. I'm more or less unemployable unless I retrain and even then there are no guarantees.”

“So you left Morley's in exactly the same state you found it?” she asked, reaching for the wedges.

We spent a while talking about the innovations I'd introduced. She was particularly interested in the cost accounting system, for some reason. When the wedges were all gone she started shredding the lettuce leaf into tiny pieces. She struck me as being one of those people who are so full of nervous energy they have to be doing something constantly.

She sat silently for a while, staring at the green confetti piling up on the plate.

"I like that you don't like my designs or the name," she said, after a while. "It means you are honest and don't just agree with me. I like that you understand risks, I get carried away and I take too many risks without realising. And I like that you had that job for so long. It means you are loyal and don't run away to chase other jobs."

Lucy stopped shredding her lettuce leaf and looked me in the eyes.

"Will you help me?" she asked quietly.

"You want me to be your business manager?" I asked. I like to get things crystal clear.

"Yes," she said.

"No," I said.

She visibly shrank inside her clothes and lifted both feet onto her seat and hugged her knees defensively.

"Oh," she said sadly.

I toyed with the spoon in my empty mug.

"Your business manager will be a crucial member of your team," I said, conversationally. "I don't care how good a designer you are, your business manager will be the one who makes or breaks your company and who you choose will be the most critical decision you ever make. I won't let you make that decision instantly, it's far too big a risk. Think about it for ..." I was going to say a week but decided her nervous

energy would probably have caused her to explode before that, “... three days and see if you still feel the same way. If you do then we’ll get together and talk some more.”

She stared at me.

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’ll only do it when I’m convinced you are making the right decision. I’m certainly not going to do it because you had a sudden impulse in a café. It would be quite wrong for both of us.”

Her eyes narrowed and I could sense the steel in her. Jessica was right, this girl was going places, the steel just needed tempering a little to make it stronger and more flexible. With a sudden burst of energy she jumped to her feet and picked up her case.

“Be here in seventy two hours, we’ll talk again,” she said and disappeared out of the door.

“Goodbye to you too,” I said to the empty seat where she’d been. “Talking of risk, it’s a hell of a risk for me too.” I wasn’t exactly certain if I was talking about Lucy Wei and her business or not but I was certainly taking a big risk just being here in Australia.

I ordered another coffee. I had to admit to myself that she was intriguing. A little scary perhaps but definitely intriguing. Maybe I didn’t know anything about the fashion industry or setting up a business in Australia or establishing trade links with China but there was no reason why I couldn’t find out, if her sheer nervous energy didn’t exhaust me first. And Jessica had been impressed by her too. On the other hand, it would be a hell of a lot of work and I’d have to leave my house with all its memories and start all over again in a foreign country. And work with Jessica.

I stayed there quietly for a while, drinking coffee and having some lunch. Just thinking.

“No,” I said, after a long time, “this isn’t for me, I’m better off alone. Just an old fuddy duddy, of no use to anyone, least of all Lucy or

Jessica.”

I resolved to visit Marsha then cancel dinner with Jessica and get a flight home in the morning. Maybe a debt collector or data entry clerk job was the best. Just quietly live alone until I, too, shed this mortal coil.

I took a taxi to the unpleasantly named Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park. We stopped off on the way at a florist where, incredibly, they had some Kangaroo Paws, Marsha's favourite flowers. At the cemetery I asked the curator where Marsha was interred and he looked up her details and marked her memorial on a little map so I could find it.

Marsha's parents had interred her ashes in the Rose Garden with a small, but tasteful granite plinth and a neat plaque. It was a lovely warm, sunny afternoon and the Park overlooked the sea rolling in from Botany Bay. There was the tang of salt in the breeze and the roses nodded and whispered to each other. It was a beautiful setting. I wouldn't mind being interred there myself when the time came.

“Hello Marsha,” I said. “I'm sorry it's taken me so long to visit you, but I'm here at last. Look, I brought you some Kangaroo Paws, aren't they lovely?”

I had the strangest feeling Marsha was pleased to see me. Absurd of course, but a host of memories of Marsha, the woman I had loved and still loved, the woman who had been my wife flooded over me and tears welled up in my eyes.

“I've missed you,” I said, “so very very much.”

I sat cross legged on the gravel path in front of the plinth and told her about how much I missed her and my life since she'd gone and about Clancy. I told her about the pictures of her I had around the house and how I thought of her everyday. It was wonderful just talking to her again.

I don't know how long I was there but occasionally people passed by, giving me a wide berth to respect my privacy. They knew and understood. The sun was getting low in the sky when I finally stood

up and dusted down my trousers. My bottom was numb.

“Well, Marsha, it's time for me to go,” I said. “I'm flying back to England tomorrow but I'll try and visit you again one day.”

I turned to go.

“You're never better off alone,” said Marsha. “Buy that girl a drink and move on.”

I whirled around but there was no one there. Just the roses and the sea breeze. Everyone else had gone and the shadows were long.

“Was that you, Marsha?” I said, but there was no reply. The Kangaroo Paws smiled happily at me.

I slowly walked back to the entrance and looked around for a taxi to take me back to the hotel. One drove past and I flagged it down.

“The Wynyard Hotel in Clarence Street,” I told the driver and he dropped me at my hotel. It was getting dark now.

“It would be rude of me to just not turn up,” I thought to myself. “After all, I really ought to explain to Jessica why I just don't feel up to taking this job with Lucy and I feel bad about not seeing Tom either. She can explain things to him.”

I started walking down the to Malaysian restaurant where we had had dinner the night before and had arranged to meet tonight. We both knew where it was so it was a convenient meeting place even if we decided to eat somewhere else. Not far from the restaurant I spotted a cash machine and decided I ought to get some cash out so I stopped and pulled out my wallet then berated myself. Not having an Australian bank account I couldn't get cash out. Old habits die hard.

“Gettin' some cash out mate?” said a voice behind me.

“No,” I said, turning around, “I'm just ...”

There were two young men standing there. One of them held a large

knife that glinted in the street light.

“I said yer getting some cash out,” said one of them, “get it out, now”

They both stepped up close.

“I can't,” I said, “I don't have an Aus ...”

The one without a knife hit me on the side of my head and my knees buckled and I fell back against the cash machine.

“Grab 'is wallet, Wayne,” I heard the other one say.

“Hey, is that you, Tom?” shouted Jessica's voice. “Leave him alone or I'll call the police!”

There was a rush of footsteps and she jumped in front of me. I saw the man without the knife punch her in the face and she collapsed on the ground.

“Hey, what's going on?” shouted another voice, male. “I'm calling the police.”

The man with the knife grabbed my wallet and the two of them ran off into the darkness. Two other men and a woman came over and one of them helped Jessica to a sitting position.

“I called the police,” said the other man, “they'll be here in a minute.”

Jessica was groaning and holding her face.

“Are you hurt,” I said, bending over her, my head throbbing.

“I thing by nose if broken again,” she said, holding her face, “oh thit,”

A wave of emotion hit me. Jessica had tried to save me. She'd jumped in front of my attacker to protect me. Marsha was right, I wasn't better off alone.

“Will you marry me?” I said in a whisper.

“Wha?” she said, squinting at me.

“Will you marry me?” I said, more loudly.

She said something but I didn't hear what it was because of the siren from the police car. They took us to the nearest hospital as it was quicker than calling for an ambulance. While Jessica was being treated the police took me into a small side room off the emergency department and questioned me closely as they obviously suspected me of assaulting her. Fortunately the two men and the woman who'd seen it had stayed to give statements and the police finally released me when another report of an attempted mugging came in with descriptions that were very similar to mine.

When I finally emerged from the side room, a nurse took me to a curtained cubicle where Jessica was lying in a bed, her face bandaged.

“Was her nose broken?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the nurse, “and the x-rays show that she's had a broken nose before.” She looked at me accusingly.

“We were mugged,” I said. “Two men at a cash machine. The police are looking for them.”

I don't think she believed me. I stuck my head around the curtain. Frankly I didn't care what the nurse thought, I was more concerned with Jessica.

“Hey, you're awake,” I said, relieved.

She tried to smile but winced instead. She held up a hand and made writing motions over it with her other hand so I pulled out my notebook and pen and handed them to her.

“Goddamned nose,” she wrote.

“Yes, this is getting to be a habit,” I said, “are you all right otherwise?”

She nodded then wrote again.

“Did you ask me to marry you or did I dream it?”

“Yes,” I said, “I did ask you but I didn't hear your reply because of the police car.”

She wrote again on the pad and held it up for me to read.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I said. “I, umm, I think I love you.” I was as surprised as anyone when I heard myself say that.

She was watching me intently although god knows what she could see since her eyes were puffing up and quite watery. She turned to a fresh page on the notebook and wrote something then handed it over.

“What did she write?” asked the nurse, who'd been watching and listening avidly.

“Yes,” I said, weak with relief, “she said 'yes',” and I showed her the notebook.

Funnily enough, it was the nurse who kissed me.