

Estelle

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the
Writer

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Chapter One

The steam iron narrowly missed my head, although the shower of shards of glass landed a little further away since they were more easily moved by the light breeze.

I jumped backwards and looked up, as you do when attacked from above, and knocked into the man walking behind me. He swore as his takeaway coffee sloshed onto the front of his jacket and shirt. He jerked backwards and thrust his coffee away from his body and it banged into my elbow, sloshing more coffee, only this time onto the ground.

“Jesus,” he growled. He pulled out a handkerchief and started to mop his front.

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it, “only a steam iron nearly hit me.”

“A what?” he said, barely half hearing me.

He undid a button and wiped his hankie inside his shirt.

“A steam iron,” I said. “Look.”

He looked where I was pointing. Sure enough, there was a steam iron there. It was quite badly distorted and the plastic upper parts had broken but it was undeniably a steam iron. There was a thin trickle of water coming from the cracked reservoir. The pavement itself also had some small cracks.

“Jesus,” he said, looking upwards. He seemed to be a man of few words.

He bent over the steam iron and nearly touched it with his finger.

“Feels pretty hot,” he said. “Someone must have been using it in one of those apartments up there. We’re both pretty lucky it didn’t hit either of us. ‘Specially the glass, would’ve made a nasty mess of your face.”

“I can't see any broken windows,” I said, peering upwards. The angle was wrong since I was looking almost vertically. I was tempted to cross the street and look from the other side but it seemed wrong to just walk away from a smashed steam iron on the pavement. “Should we just leave it here?”

“Don't see any point in taking it home,” he said. “Don't think it's going to be much use any more.”

“Right,” I said. Actually I'd meant about reporting it to the police or putting it in a rubbish bin or something but it all seemed a little surreal. A couple of people had walked past but hadn't said anything or appeared to notice the steam iron.

“I'm sorry about your coffee,” I said after looking back up at the apartments then down at the steam iron again.

“No harm done,” he said, although his crisp white shirt had a large wet, brown stain on it. The stain wasn't as noticeable on his dark brown jacket.

We both stood there and looked at the steam iron again.

“There's quite a lot of broken glass,” I said. “I hope no dogs or anything cuts their feet.”

“Ummm,” he said. “I don't suppose you have a broom with you?”

I had to admit that I didn't. Although I like to travel prepared I wasn't prepared for street sweeping. He started to scrape the broken shards of glass into the gutter with his foot. I'd have helped but high heels aren't designed for scraping things on the ground, not the way men's shoes are.

“Looks like your tie got a bit of coffee too,” I said.

He stopped scraping the glass and lifted the end of his tie.

“Good,” he said. “I've always hated this tie.”

“So why do you wear it?” I wanted to ask, except I didn't. There's something not 'English' about asking probing personal questions like that of a complete stranger.

“Oh, yes,” I said, uncertainly.

I gingerly picked up the iron. Absurdly I thought its damaged state might make it electrocute me but, of course, its plug wasn't plugged in. If it had still been plugged in it would have been dangling high up in the air, a hot little sword of Damocles hanging over the street and unsuspecting passersby.

“It's a Russell Hobbs,” I said, rather pointlessly.

The man had scraped most of the glass into the gutter and he took a sip of his remaining coffee while looking at me.

“You don't watch cop shows, do you,” he said.

“Umm, no,” I said, surprised by the change in topic. “Why?”

“You've just destroyed any fingerprints on it,” he said, with a grin. “It could have been used to murder someone and the murderer threw it out the window afterwards. Now the police will think you did it since it's covered in your fingerprints.”

I looked at the ruined iron in my hand then back at him.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “There's no blood on it.”

I looked at the crumpled, no longer smoothly flat base of the iron. There was some discolouration around the pointy tip where the steam holes were.

“What's that then?” I asked, pointing. The iron was still warm.

He peered at the tip.

“Probably lime scale,” he said. “This is a high lime area.”

“Right,” I said. “What do you think I should do with this?” I waggled the iron in my hand and a little water trickled out.

“No one seems to be claiming it,” he said, looking around then upwards.

There was a sudden commotion as a passing cyclist nearly came off his bicycle and we both turned to look.

“Bugger,” said the cyclist. He leaned over the handlebars to squeeze his front tyre.

“I’ve had a puncture,” he said, noticing us looking at him.

“Probably all this glass in the gutter,” said the man. “Some people just don’t care, do they?”

“Bloody hell,” said the cyclist, coming over to have a look, dragging his bike behind him. “Who the hell dumped all that there?”

“No idea,” said the man, looking completely guileless. I stifled a laugh.

The cyclist looked at the iron in my hand but didn’t say anything.

“Someone should tell the Council,” he said, darkly then turned back to his bike. “Looks like I’m going to need a new tyre, damn it.”

He scowled at us both then looked at the sky.

“At least it’s not raining,” I said.

“Will do this afternoon,” said the cyclist, gloomily. “I suppose I’m going to have to get the train home. I hate that, passengers with bikes are always a bloody nuisance.”

He sighed then hoisted the bike onto his shoulder and started to trudge off up the road.

“That wasn't nice,” the man said, looking at me.

“What wasn't?” I asked, puzzled.

“Laughing at that poor man,” he said.

“I wasn't laughing,” I protested.

“You were inside,” he said, “I could see.”

“Well, at least it wasn't me who gave him a puncture,” I said.

“He should have been looking where he was going,” said the man. “Anyway, he deserved to have a puncture, wearing lycra like that with nothing underneath.”

“Well, yes, I have to agree with you there,” I said.

I looked around for a rubbish bin or a skip or something I could put the iron into. There were none to be seen.

“My name's Nick,” said Nick, transferring his coffee cup to his left hand and holding out his right.

“Estelle,” I said, “although most people call me Telly.”

“Pleased to meet you, Telly,” he said. “Ummm, I lost half my coffee when you walked into me so I'm going to go and get another. Can I offer ...?”

“I didn't walk into you,” I said. “I jumped backwards when this thing,” I brandished the iron at him, “nearly landed on my head. You were too close behind.”

“Are you a lawyer?” asked Nick.

“No,” I said.

“Good,” said Nick. “We don't have to argue liability, then.” He waggled his coffee cup at me. enquiringly.

“OK,” I said, glad we weren't going to argue liabilities. “Where?”

“I got this one just back there,” he said, gesturing down the road. “It's not far, that's why the damned thing was so hot.”

I looked back down the road. I could see, maybe fifty yards away, a sign saying “Blue Brew Takeaway Coffee”.

“Just the one, though,” I said.

“One each?” he asked, “or do you want to share mine?”

“One for me,” I said. “How many you have is up to you.”

“Ohhhh,” he said, looking at me narrowly. “You are a lawyer or is pedantic your middle name?”

“You're the one that's being pedantic,” I said. “Most people would assume 'just the one' means 'only one for me', not one between us.”

He scratched his eyebrow with one finger.

“OK,” he said. “That's the second time you've referred to 'most people'. What would 'most people' do in a situation like this?”

“They'd put their money where their mouths are,” I said, “and actually get the coffee they've promised someone.”

“Right,” he said. “Come on then. Although, Miss Telly Pedantic, I didn't promise you a coffee, I just asked if you'd like one.”

“Actually you didn't,” I said, pedantically, following him as he set off towards the coffee shop. “You said 'can I offer' but you didn't say what you were offering, or even to who.”

“What would you like me to offer?” he asked, “my soul?”

“Coffee will do for now,” I said. “We'll see about your soul later.”

He laughed and held the door of Blue Brew open for me. “I like you,”

he said, “even though I'm convinced you're a lawyer.”

“Are liking me and me being a lawyer mutually exclusive?” I asked. “And is this going to be takeaways or sit down?”

“Sit down, I hope,” said Nick.

“OK,” I said. “I'll sit over there. Cappuccino, please, no sugar.”

He went off to the order counter and I went to sit at the small table in the corner as it was the only one unoccupied. I plonked the iron on the table since I was still carrying it and sat down, facing into the room.

“Jesus,” said a man sitting at the next table. “What state's your boyfriend in then?” He laughed uproariously and the man with him smiled.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“You hit your boyfriend with the iron, then?” he said, gesturing at the iron.

“He wanted me to do his ironing,” I said, prodding the iron, “so I did, while he was still wearing the clothes.” I gave him my sweetest smile.

The man winced and went back to his conversation with his friend, although he kept giving me, or possibly the iron, furtive sideways glances.

Nick plonked a metal stand with '29' on it on the table and sat in the other chair.

“I've been trying to think of jokes about the name 'Telly',” he said. “All I could think of was 'I was watching some dvds back to back with a friend. Luckily I was the one facing the Telly.’”

“I'm thinking of changing my name,” I said, “since it's jokes like that that turn this Telly off.”

“Oh, I wasn't trying to turn this Telly on,” he said. “That's rude when you've got company.”

“But your friend's not watching,” I said.

“What friend?” he said, looking puzzled. “Oh, duhhh. You're running circles around me, I can't keep up. What do you do? I mean, when you're not walking the streets?”

“I'm an athlete,” I said. “I run in circles round people.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I asked for that,” he said. “Seriously though, what do you do for a living?”

“I'm unemployed,” I said. “Actually I was just on my way back from a job interview when ...” and I gestured at the iron.

“Right,” he said. “Do you think you'll get it?”

“No,” I said. “I got the feeling they didn't like me.”

“How could anyone not like you?” asked Nick.

The man who'd commented on the iron glanced at me again and shifted his chair an inch or two further away.

“I have no idea,” I said, “since I'm incredibly hard working and very lovable. What do you do?”

“I'm a film producer,” said Nick.

I burst out laughing. “Yeah, right,” I said.

He grinned. “Actually it's true. I work for Proctor & Smart Plastics. We make all sorts of plastic film for the catering and packaging industries. Do you like bubble wrap?”

“Who doesn't like bubble wrap?” I asked. “Of course I do. I can spend hours sitting there bursting the bubbles.”

“Just say the word,” he said. “I can get you all the bubble wrap you want.”

“You really know how to impress a girl,” I said admiringly. “Which word? Bubble or wrap?”

“Either, Miss Telly Pedantic,” he said. “Ah, that looks like us.”

A nondescript teen-aged girl with a messy pony-tail was weaving her way towards us with two mugs and a plate of muffins.

“Spresso?” she muttered without looking at either of us. She plonked both mugs on the table.

Nick held up a finger. “That’s me,” he said. She pushed a glass mug of black coffee half an inch towards him and put down the plate of muffins.

“Do you have any artificial sweetener?” asked Nick.

The girl glanced at the table next to us and leaned over and grabbed a small earthenware pot. She dumped it in front of Nick.

“Thank you,” he said.

“s right,” she said and weaved her way back to the counter.

“I like to see young people in a career they love,” said Nick. “I got a blueberry muffin and a white chocolate and raspberry muffin. I was hoping you wouldn’t like either.”

“Oh dear,” I said, looking steadily at him. “Much as I love white chocolate and raspberry muffins, ...” I paused for dramatic effect then snatched the blueberry one. “... I love blueberry ones even more.”

“Bugger,” he said, picking up the raspberry one and starting to peel it.

“Thank you,” I said.

“That’s why I have artificial sweeteners,” he added. “So I can eat more

muffins.”

“As good a reason as any,” I said. “I’m guessing you’re in Sales.”

“Why do you think that?” he asked, putting his peeled muffin on the plate and picking two sachets of sweetener out of the pot.

“You have a way with people,” I said.

“Do I really?” he asked, tearing the tops of the sachets and tipping them both into his coffee.

“Yes,” I said, “you have the ability to make people relax.”

“Are you relaxed?” he asked, stirring the coffee.

“Yes,” I said, “although I shouldn't be.”

“Why's that?” he asked. “You think I'm trying to have my way with you? You being a person, after all.”

I laughed and broke a piece off my muffin.

“I've never had coffee with someone I've just met on the street before,” I said and popped it into my mouth.

“What do you usually have with people off the street, then?” he asked. “Meths?”

I started laughing again and nearly choked on my piece of muffin.

“Oh, you know what I mean. I don't go out with strange men.”

“You think I'm strange?” he asked. “Is it because I like raspberry muffins? Although, technically, you aren't going out with me. You were already out, I just brought you in.”

“Yes,” I said. “You're very strange, but it's not the muffins.”

“What is it then?” he asked and ate some of his own muffin.

I spooned some of the froth from my cappuccino into my mouth.

“I don't know,” I said. “Maybe not strange, just unusual.”

“Well, that's better,” he said. “I'm happy being unusual. I don't want to be like 'most people',” putting finger quotes round the 'most people'. “You, on the other hand, are entirely ordinary.”

“Well, thank you,” I said. “I'm perfectly happy to be ordinary. I don't want to stand out. But that's what I meant when I said you're strange ...”

“Unusual, please,” he interjected.

“... you seem to be able to say quite rude things without causing offence.”

“Oh,” he said. He seemed a little taken aback. “Have I been rude? I really didn't mean to be.”

There was a rumble from outside and I glanced up to see a Council street sweeper truck grind past.

“Looks like they're going to clean up the glass,” I said. “No, I don't think you try to be rude, although I can't decide if you're trying to be funny or if you're really like this normally.”

“Well,” he said and paused to drink some of his coffee. “That's a bit of a conundrum for you, isn't it.”

“So which is it?” I asked. “Are you trying to be funny or are you just a bit weird?”

“Hmmm,” he said, picking up the other half of his muffin. “Maybe it would help solidify your thoughts if you tell me whether you want me to be funny or weird?”

“I want you to be yourself,” I said, diplomatically.

“Really?” he asked. “So if I turned into a werewolf or something at this

table you'd be happy?"

He wolfed the rest of his muffin as if to make a point.

"Well, umm, no, not really," I said. "Why? Is that likely to happen?"

"Who knows what's going to happen when you tell someone to be themselves," he said, "unless you know that someone very well, which you don't."

I laughed again. "Oh come on," I said, "you know very well what I mean, Mr Pedantic."

I wanted to get back at him for calling me Miss Pedantic.

"You see?" he said. "That's why you like me, we're both the same. Mr and Miss Pedantic. If we get married neither of us will have to change our names."

"Hey," I said, smiling, "it'll take more than a coffee and a muffin for me to marry you."

He pulled out his wallet and rifled through it. "Hey," he said, holding up a twenty pound note, "I've got a twenty, is that enough?"

I had to laugh.

"Is that a yes?" he asked and without waiting for an answer he turned to the two men at the next table. "She said yes!" he said, beaming.

"Was it you she hit with that iron?" the one who hadn't spoken to me before asked.

"Right in the heart!" said Nick. "I'll never get over it."

He turned back to me and pushed the twenty pound note over. "Just name the day," he said.

"It's Tuesday," I said, since it was Tuesday. I picked up the twenty pound note and put it in my pocket. For a fleeting moment I thought I

might have carried the joke a little too far. After all, twenty pounds is a decent amount of money and he might not have realised that I was going to give it back before we went our separate ways, so I pulled it out again and put it on the table.

He laughed happily.

“Keep it,” he said. “I haven't had so much fun for years.”

“I don't take money from strange men,” I said, sliding it over to him.

“I'm not a strange man,” he said, pushing it back. “I'm unusual, you said so yourself and you're never wrong.”

“That's what makes you so unusual,” I said, sliding it back again. “Most guys can't seem to grasp the fact that I'm never wrong.”

“If neither of you wants that twenty,” said the man at the other table, “I'll have it.”

“If you're never wrong,” said Nick, putting the twenty under the iron and ignoring the man, “how come you are unemployed?”

“Bosses don't like it,” I said, picking up the last piece of my blueberry muffin.

The two men at the next table got up and left.

“See what you've done?” I said. “He's pissed off you wouldn't let him have your money.”

Nick just shrugged.

“Would you like some more coffee?” he asked, “or another muffin or something?”

“No thanks,” I said. “Shouldn't you be getting back to work?”

“You're trying to get rid of me?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “I just don't want you to get into any trouble.”

“Ohhh, so you do care, then,” he said.

“Of course I care,” I said. “I wouldn't want anyone to lose their job, except maybe that guy who interviewed me earlier.”

“I'm glad you care,” said Nick. “That means when I ask you to have dinner with me you won't want to hurt me by rejecting me.”

“Are you asking me to dinner?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Yes,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Are you married?”

“No,” said Nick, “are you?”

“No,” I said.

“Great,” he said. “Then it's settled.”

“No, it isn't,” I said. “I hardly know you.”

“Which is why you're having dinner with me,” he said. “So we can get to know each other.”

I had to admit he had a valid point there.

“Right,” he said. “I'd better get back to work. How about I meet you here at, say, seven?”

I blinked a couple of times. This was suddenly going very fast.

“OK,” I said. After all, it wasn't as though I was doing anything else that evening.

“Great,” he said, standing up. “Until this evening, Miss Telly Pedantic.”

I watched him leave the cafe. “What just happened?” I wondered.

I finished the last of my coffee and squashed a couple of muffin crumbs with my finger and licked it.

“Oh well,” I said, “I can always just not turn up.”

I stood up and picked up what I was beginning to consider to be my iron. The twenty pound note was still underneath it. I picked it up and stared at it then folded it slowly and put it in my pocket.

“Bugger,” I said to myself. “I suppose I'll have to turn up now, to give him his money back.”

Chapter Two

“That you, Tel?” called out Ron when I opened the front door.

“Yeah,” I called back, “where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen,” came floating back. “Want a coffee?”

“Please,” I called.

I put the steam iron on the table in the hall and went to my room to hang up my jacket and change out of my interview clothes. Harem pants and a sloppy tee shirt are so much more comfortable.

“So how did it go?” asked Ron, looking over from where she was spooning instant coffee into mugs.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I got the feeling that the guy who interviewed me didn’t like me but you never know. Just have to wait and see, I guess.”

The kettle clicked off and Ron backed up to grab it then came forward again to pour the hot water into the mugs.

“Grab the milk would you, sweetie,” she said.

I opened the fridge and pulled out the milk carton.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find something soon. These things take time, and you’ve only just started,” she said.

I poured milk into our coffees and put the carton back in the fridge.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “I just find job hunting disheartening.”

I picked up my coffee and followed her into the lounge.

“I’ve got another on Thursday and one on Friday,” I added, sitting on the couch. “Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you, I’ve got a dinner date!”

“Ooooh, tell me more,” said Ron, brightening up considerably. Possible husbands were far more interesting than possible jobs.

“I was walking back to Euston Station after the interview,” I told her, “and this iron came flying out of some apartment window and nearly hit me ...”

“What iron?” she asked, looking confused.

“A steam iron,” I said. “Anyway, that doesn't matter. The thing is I knocked into this guy behind me and made him spill his coffee and we got talking and he took me to get some more coffee and then he asked me out to dinner.”

“What's his name?” she asked.

“Nick,” I said. “He's a salesman, I think. Anyway he works for a plastic company.”

“Is he married?” asked Ron, anxious to get this point clear. She was happily married and wanted me, her baby sister, to get started on that path as well. She also knew I had a tendency to get involved with the wrong sort of men, like ones who were already married and had no intention of breaking up their domestic harmony.

“That was just the once,” I said. “Don't look at me like that, I've learnt from it.”

Actually it was twice but Ron didn't know about the other one since he didn't last very long. And, yes, I had learnt from the experiences. I'd learnt from the first one not to tell Ron about them, if nothing else.

“Well?” she said, fiddling with the arm of her chair.

“He said he wasn't married,” I said. “Although he may have lied.”

She screwed up her face as if to say “all men are liars”.

“So where are you going for dinner?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “He said to meet him at the cafe at 7 but the sign on the cafe door said they shut at 5 so I guess we'll be going somewhere else, unless he brings a takeaway with him. What should I wear, do you think?”

“Do you want to dress to impress,” she said, “or keep him at a distance?”

“I don't know,” I said, slowly. “I've been thinking about that. I only made up my mind to even go a couple of minutes ago.”

“Oh really?” said Ron, looking at me intently. “What's wrong with him?”

“He's strange,” I said. “No, not strange, unusual,” and I recounted as much of my conversation with Nick as I could remember.

“Look,” I said, pulling out the twenty pound note, “here's the twenty he left.”

“Interesting,” she said, thoughtfully, “so he's already thinking in terms of marriage.”

“Oh god, no,” I said. “He was just joking, you know, fooling around.”

“Men never joke about marriage,” she said. “They think it's too risky.”

“I'm pretty sure he was joking,” I said. “I don't think he said anything serious the whole time. It was all playing on words and twisting things to make them funny.”

“Yeah,” she said, “he does sound strange, at that. But he's got a job, right?”

“Yes, Ron,” I said, “Nick's got a job. Hey, will Max let me borrow the car?”

“Probably,” she said, “we won't be using it tonight, although he may not be back in time. Want me to see if he's working late?”

“Would you mind?” I asked.

She reached for her mobile.

“In Euston Road?” she said. “No, you’ll be better off using the tube. Parking’s a bugger round there.”

“Really?” I said. I was not particularly familiar with London. “I’ll take your word for it. I’ll take the underground instead. Can I have a bath?”

“No need to ask,” she said. “My house is your house, at least until we get sick of you, anyway.”

“Well, it has been a week,” I said getting up and heading for the door. “So I’ve got, what, another two maybe three days grace left?”

“Maybe four,” said Ron with a grin, “if you’re exceptionally nice and Max will help you carry your stuff at the weekend.”

I gave her a thumbs up. “Great, better make the most of the bath, then,” I said, “seeing as how my next doss will be a gutter somewhere.”

“Oh, don’t be so silly,” said Ron. “You’ll find a gutter with a drain, don’t worry. Plenty of running water and maybe a nice juicy rat or two to eat as well. What more could you want?”

“A cat?” I said. Ron didn’t like cats, they made her sneeze. “I could bring it with me when I visit you.”

“I suppose we could always eat it,” she said, “maybe with a nice garlic and cream sauce. Go and have your bath, you don’t want to be late for your fancy man.”

I had a nice long soak in the bath and even washed my hair although I didn’t bother to shave my legs since it wasn’t that kind of dinner date. I’d just got out when I heard the garage door rumble open then close and I was towelling my hair when Max came in the front door.

“Ron, I’m home,” he called out.

I didn't hear Ron call back, but I did hear the panic in Max's voice a moment later.

"Oh god, oh my god, Ron!" he shouted.

I heard his feet thud up the stairs.

"Where are you, Ron?" he shouted. "Ron?"

"Oh god," I thought. "Something's happened."

I dropped the towel I'd been using on my hair and ripped open the bathroom door.

"Where's Ron?" cried Max, spotting me.

"She was in the lounge," I said, "when I went for a bath. What's happened?"

He'd already disappeared down to the lounge.

"She's not there, oh god," he said.

I started to panic myself, as panic is contagious, especially when you have no idea what's going on. He ran into their bedroom and she wasn't there either.

"Try the garden," I said and we crashed into each other trying to get into the kitchen to get to the back door. Being bigger he forced his way past me and leapt for the back door.

"Oh thank god," he said and ran into the garden.

I stopped in the back doorway. Ron was sitting in the back garden, beside the sundial. She looked like she'd dozed off in the late afternoon sun.

"What's the matter?" she said to Max, blinking.

"Are you OK?" he said, looking down at her anxiously. "Only I saw

the ...”

“I must have dozed off,” she said. “Sorry, didn’t hear you come back.”

“What happened to the iron?” he asked, taking her hand.

“What iron?” she said, looking puzzled.

“I saw the iron by the front door,” he said. “I thought there’d been an accident and you’d been hurt.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said. “Sorry, that was me.”

I went back in through the kitchen and picked up the iron and took it out into the garden.

“Is that the iron that nearly hit you?” asked Ron.

“Hit you?” said Max, “what the hell’s been going on here?”

“Telly was nearly hit by an iron after her interview,” said Ron.

“Wow,” said Max, “that bad, huh?”

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t the interviewer, someone dropped it out of an apartment into the street when I was walking back to the station. It nearly landed on my head!”

“When I came in and saw it I thought Ron had been using it and it had exploded or something,” said Max, inspecting the iron. “I panicked and when you didn’t answer I thought you were dead or in hospital or something.”

He gave me back the iron and squeezed Ron’s hand.

“Mine’s a Bosche,” said Ron. “I’d never use a Russell Hobbs.”

“Like I’m expected to know that?” said Max.

“Sorry,” I said. “I brought it back for some reason and dumped it in

the hall and forgot about it.”

“Why are you dressed in a towel?” he asked.

“I’ve just had a bath,” I said.

“Telly’s moving into a gutter,” said Ron, “before the weekend.”

He stood there blinking for a moment. He never quite knew when we were serious.

“It’s so I’ll have fond memories,” I said. “Hot water, bath oil, loving sisters, things like that. Souvenirs of a squandered past.”

“Right,” he said. “You’re moving out? Already?”

He looked at Ron then at me then back at Ron again.

“Your darling wife is sick of me,” I said, “since I can get a man and she has to put up with you.”

“You want another husband?” he asked Ron, plainly baffled.

“Of course not,” she said, kissing the back of his hand. “Telly’s just teasing you. She didn’t get the job but she did get a date.”

“What kind of weird interview was this?” he asked, looking at me. “They try to hit you with an iron then ask you for a date but they won’t give you the job?”

I laughed. “Nooooo, that was all after the interview. I was walking back to the station, like I said, and when this iron came flying out of nowhere I walked into this man and I’m going out with him for dinner. He wasn’t anything to do with the interview.”

“Well, it’s all as clear as mud,” said Max. “The important thing is we don’t have the expense of feeding you tonight, is that right?”

“That’s right,” I said. “You can give your left over scraps to the poor and needy instead.”

“We wouldn't waste perfectly good scraps on them,” said Ron. “Max can have the scraps for lunch tomorrow.”

“So you were having a bath before you went out?” asked Max. He was a paralegal with a medium sized law firm in London and liked to get things straight. He and Ron were a great match, it was just that when Ron and I got together he sometimes got a little confused.

“Yes,” I said. “And I've got to go very soon. Any chance you could give me a lift to the station?”

“Sure,” he said. “Do we need a new iron? I can get one from Currys on the way back?”

“We don't need a new iron,” said Ron, firmly. “I'll go and put dinner on.”

She trundled off across the flattened grass and Max watched her go.

“I was so scared,” he said quietly to me. “I thought she'd had another accident.”

“I'm really sorry,” I said, putting my hand on his arm. “I should have put the iron in my room, or dumped it or something. It was stupid of me. Thanks for giving me a lift.”

“That's OK,” he said as we followed in Ron's wake. “Will you need picking up, after?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I've no idea when I'll be back but I'll walk or get a taxi or something. Don't wait up. Hey, I'll just go and get dressed then we'll go, OK? Before Ron's finished doing dinner?”

I put the iron in my room in case Max forgot and saw it again. He worried a lot about Ron.

* * *

“Hello, Miss Telly Pedantic,” said Nick at five to seven. “Didn't think you'd come.”

He was sitting on the step of the cafe, leaning his back against the door.

“I had to,” I said, waving his twenty pound note. “I’m hoping there are a lot more of these going spare.”

I held it out to him but he didn't take it. He just stood up and dusted off his backside.

“Sorry,” he said, “there aren't any more, that was my last. All I've got left are fifties.”

“So I didn't even rate a fifty, then?” I said and pretended to turn to go.

“I just got the fifties out of the cash machine a few minutes ago,” he said. “If I'd had them earlier I'd have given them all to you.”

I had to laugh.

“I was only joking,” I said. “Here, take your twenty back.”

“Will it make you happy if I do?” he asked. “Or are you just trying to be cute?”

“Yes, it will make me happy,” I said, “and whatever you do I'll still be cute.”

He laughed this time and took the twenty. He put it in his wallet and I could see there weren't any fifties in there.

“So where are all the fifties?” I asked, pulling his wallet open and making a show of peeping inside.

“They're in a suitcase in my car,” he said. “Beside the dynamite I needed for the cash machine. McDonald's all right or would you rather go downmarket?”

“Oh, I'm not really dressed for McDonald's,” I said. “I am unemployed, after all.”

“Downmarket it is, then,” he said. “I know just the place. It's not far down the road, shall we walk or go in the car?”

“I'm wearing heels,” I said. “Let's go in your car.”

“It's just up there,” he said, pointing up the road. “Did you have to come far?”

“Holloway,” I said.

“Oh? Not the women's prison, I hope?”

“No,” I said. “I think that closed a few years ago. I'm staying with my sister and her husband for a while. How about you?”

“Camden,” he said. “So we're practically neighbours. You never did tell me what job you were being interviewed for.”

“No, I didn't, did I,” I said. “But you never confirmed if you were in sales or not.”

He laughed. “OK, tit for tat it shall be then. No, I'm in buying, not sales. I was here today to talk to them,” and he pointed at a building we'd just walked past, “about some compounds for plastic production. Your turn.”

“I was being interviewed for a job with a Literary Agency,” I said. “They're further back.”

“Here's the car,” he said, stopping beside a rather nice, new looking, Ford Mondeo. He held the passenger door open so I could get it and shut it behind me. A nice touch. I put on my seat belt while he went round the driver's side and waited for a couple of cars to go past.

“How come you are unemployed?” he asked, starting the engine.

“I walked out of my last job,” I said, as he indicated and pulled out.

“Didn't you want to find another job first?”

“I, err, didn't like how I was being treated.”

“Weren't they nice to you?” he asked.

“My boss was a bit of a sleeze,” I said.

“Ahh, enough said,” said Nick. “Yes, those types exist in every business. Was that a Literary Agency as well?”

“No, it was a publishing company,” I said. “I was an assistant editor.”

“So you want to move into agency work?” he asked.

“I wouldn't mind,” I said, “although I'm applying for editing jobs as well. I've got an editing interview on Thursday and another on Friday with a book seller. Why did you go into plastics?”

“I've a degree in chemistry,” he said, “but I wasn't good enough to go any further so chemical engineering was out but a degree is good enough for a buyer. I just need to know enough chemistry to make sense of buying requirements. Why don't you become a writer, like whats-her-name, Harry Potter, you know?”

“Oh, I don't have what it takes to be a writer,” I said.

“What does it take to be a writer?” he asked.

“A story to start with,” I said, with a laugh. “A writer without a story to write isn't going to get very far.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” he said.

“So where are we going?” I asked.

“Just down to the river,” he said, “not far.”

“OK,” I said. “I don't really know London, you mean the Thames?”

“Yup.”

“What sort of restaurant is it?”

“Well, ahh, it isn't really a restaurant,” he said. “See that building there?” He pointed to the left. “That's the British Museum.”

“Oh really?” I said, peering at it. “I've been meaning to go there, now I'm in London.”

“Well worth a visit,” he said, “if only for the high quality graffiti in the toilets.”

I laughed. “The restaurant,” I prompted.

“I thought since it's a nice evening and it's a pain finding a restaurant when you don't have a booking that we might have a picnic.”

“A picnic?” I confess I was a little taken aback.

“Yes,” he said. “Down by the river. There's a lovely view of the gasworks and when the wind is right there's a romantic aroma from the fish markets.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said, thinking the opposite and hoping he was joking. I'd have crossed my toes as well as my fingers but my shoes were too tight.

Nick pointed out a couple more sightseeing highlights on the way then pulled up in a row of parking bays on the other side of the road to the River Thames.

“Here we are,” he said, getting out.

I got out. It looked like a moderately busy London street and not the sort of place for a picnic, although there were some trees.

“Umm, where are we going?” I asked. I wondered if I should take my high heels off ready to run for it if he said “those trees over there.”

“See that path up there?” he said pointing. I looked and there was indeed a broad path going into the trees, with people walking along it.

“Up there. Give me a hand, would you?”

I joined him at the boot of the car and took the blanket he thrust at me. He pulled out a wicker basket and slammed the boot shut and locked the car.

“Now,” he said, moving on to the pavement. “I know I’m a strange man, well, unusual at any rate.” He gave a little laugh. “So just to orientate you since you’re not a Londoner, this road is Embankment and that’s the River Thames.” He pointed to something that was undeniably a decent sized river.

“Now, we’re going up that path to some gardens behind these trees. The gardens shut at sunset so we won’t be there in the dark but if anything spooks you, just come back down that path and you can get a taxi or you can go that way,” pointing to the right, “and Embankment underground station is maybe a hundred and fifty yards. From there get the Northern Line to Euston Square which is where we came from.”

“Do you normally give a safety speech when you take someone to dinner?” I asked, reassured, as I could just make out the sign for the underground station.

“God no,” he said, setting off up the pavement. “I’ve usually strangled them in the car long before we get here.”

I figured a murderer rapist probably wouldn’t be this open about it although I didn’t really want to dwell on the theme.

“What is this place?” I asked, following with the blanket.

“Victoria Embankment Gardens,” he said. “Lovely little spot, and usually a fair number of people but it’s still peaceful.”

“Where are the gasworks?”

“I was joking about that,” he said. “If I told you it was a romantic little hideaway you might have got the wrong idea.”

“And the fish market?”

“About five miles upriver,” he said. “The smell doesn't reach this far.”

The short path opened out onto a roughly diamond shaped area of grass with neat colourful flower beds. There were a fair number of people wandering around and sitting on the ground.

“Let's go over there,” said Nick, pointing, “under the trees.”

We wandered over and he took the blanket off me and laid it on the ground.

“It's nice here,” I said, looking around.

“London's full of nice little spots,” he said, “if you know where to look. This place is a bit touristy but it's still nice.”

He started to unpack the wicker basket.

“I'm hoping you're not a vegetarian,” he said, pulling out a cooked chicken and pulling open the supermarket foil wrapper. “Although I've got coleslaw and bread if you are.”

“No I'm not,” I said, sitting down on the blanket.

He got out a tub of supermarket coleslaw and a stick of French bread.

“Shall I be mother?” he asked with a grin and piled food on two plates. “Do you want a knife and fork?”

“Just a fork,” I said, “for the salad.” He passed on over.

“Did you bring any salt?” I asked. Of course he had. And pepper.

“Wine?” he asked, producing a couple of wine glasses with a flourish.

“Please,” I said.

I have to admit I was quite impressed. He'd obviously been out and

bought everything and put more effort into this than just hustling me off to a restaurant somewhere. The wine must have been a decent one too since he had to use a corkscrew rather than just unscrew the cap.

He poured me a glass of wine and we clinked glasses. Real glasses, not plastic ones.

“Cheers,” he said. “So why are you living with your sister?”

“I’m from Canterbury,” I said. “That’s where my job was but most of the publishing is done in London so I thought I’d come up and see if I could find a window of opportunity here.”

I ate a forkful of coleslaw and broke off some bread.

“Ron, that’s my sister, has been in London for, ohh, ten years or thereabouts and I thought I could save a little money. Do you live alone?”

“No,” said Nick. “I live with two cats. Don’t worry, this is a freshly washed blanket.”

I laughed. “How nice,” I said, “I love cats. What sort are they?”

“Oh, just moggies,” he said. “One’s a tabby and the other’s almost entirely black. Is your sister in publishing as well?”

“No,” I said. “She used to be a chef.”

“Why did she stop?” asked Nick. “To have a family?”

“No,” I said matter of factly, toying with my chicken leg. “She was hit by a car and she’s permanently in a wheelchair now.”

Chapter Three

“Oh,” said Nick, pausing his chewing of some chicken and looking searchingly at me.

“Yeah,” I said, waving my chicken leg and rolling my eyes. “Bit of a conversation killer, isn’t it.”

Nick swallowed his mouthful.

“Well, yes,” said Nick. “I try to see the funny side of things but I rather think that would be inappropriate here.”

We sat in silence for a while and gazed at the grass. I broke off a hunk of the French bread and used one of the knives to slice it lengthwise and filled it with coleslaw.

“How long ago?” he asked.

He looked at his chicken and then moved as though to put it back with the carcass then changed his mind and took a bite.

“Four years or thereabouts,” I said. “She was walking along the Holloway Road on her way to work and someone lost control of their car while talking on a mobile phone. It wasn’t particularly bad in the sense that she didn’t get mangled or anything but the car hit her just at the right angle and damaged her spine. She’s paralysed from the waist down.”

“Is it permanent?” asked Nick.

“The doctors say so,” I said and took a bite out of my coleslaw sandwich.

“What happened to the driver of the car?” he asked.

“He got three years for causing serious injury by dangerous driving,” I said, “not that it matters since it wouldn’t give Ron her legs back.”

“Well, no,” he said. He fell silent again.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t really have told you. It puts a dampener on things. Can I have some more wine?”

Nick topped up my glass and I was pleased to see he didn’t top up his own. After all, he was driving.

“So tell me about you,” I said.

“Why is it women always say that?” he asked.

“Umm, I don’t know,” I said. “I guess we like to know everything there is to know about other people. What they are like and what makes them tick and so on.”

“Well, I expected you to ask,” he said and leaned over and grabbed the jacket he’d laid on the ground behind the hamper. “So I skipped out of work early and went home and got these.”

He pulled a thin sheaf of papers out of one of the inner pockets and handed them over. They were folded in half lengthways and held together with a paper clip. I unfolded them.

“That’s a photo of me,” he said, pointing to the photo on top. “I was about 1 at the time.”

“And very cute you were too,” I said admiringly, “although I don’t much like the hat. Do you still have it?”

“No,” he said. “My mum chucked out her peg basket when she got a drier which was a shame since I liked wearing it. Made me feel important.”

“Do you still have the dimples in your bottom?” I asked, innocently.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” he said, coyly. “Now, if you’ll turn your attention to the first document.”

I lifted the photo to read his school report from 1995.

“You were, what, eight years old?” I asked. He nodded. “You seemed to

be doing OK.”

“Well, I did choose the best report,” he said. “They weren't all as good as this one.”

I laughed. “I'd love to see one of the bad ones,” I said.

“Oh no,” he said. “Those are in a secured bank vault and will never see the light of day again. The next one's from my secondary school. I was 13. They didn't really like me there.”

According to his report he had been struggling in most subjects, including science, and his form teacher had suggested in the general comments that “Nick would benefit from losing weight”.

“What a nasty thing to say,” I said, frowning. “It's none of their business what you weighed.”

“Well, maybe,” he said. “I was a fat little shit then since I hated every moment of that school and ate to compensate. My parents moved me to another school at the end of that year and I started losing weight immediately. I liked it there and that's when I started to get interested in science, as you'll see from the next one.”

It was his degree certificate in Chemistry from the University of Manchester.

“Impressive,” I said. “So do you know how to make explosives and poisons and stuff?”

“Of course,” he said. “I was doing those before I finished Sixth Form College.”

“So what did you cover at Uni then?”

“Oh, mostly crap about petrochemicals and stuff like that,” he said. “Nowhere near as interesting as blowing things up. That's why I only got a Second, not a First.”

“OK,” I said. “What's this one?”

“That's one of my performance reviews from my first job,” he said. “I was a very junior chemist at an ice cream plant. My job was to work on the flavours. Look, I got a 4 out of 5 for Attitude and Commitment!”

“Yes, I can see that,” I said. “But it was the only one you got a 4 for. The rest are 3s and that's a 2.”

“Yeah,” he said. “The pay wasn't good and I could only afford a clapped out old banger and it was forever breaking down. That's why I was often late for work.”

I turned back to the photograph.

“You did look kind of sweet then,” I said. “What went wrong?”

“Ageing,” he said. “Although I've a lot more hair now.”

I smiled and passed the documents back to him and he tucked them away.

“So what about girlfriends?” I asked.

“What?” he said, feigning astonishment. “You want performance reviews from them too?”

“Nooo,” I said. “I just wanted to know more, that's all.”

“They'd say pretty much what my school reports said,” Nick replied. “Must try harder!”

“So you're not good at relationships, then?” I asked.

He screwed up his face. “Let's just say that as guys go, I'm probably about average. Maybe when I find Miss Right I'll get better. Hey, it's nearly sunset so we ought to pack away before they lock us in.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. “Let me help.”

“No, I can manage,” he said, tossing things into the hamper. “Do you

want to finish the wine?"

"I'll finish the glass," I said, "but not the bottle. Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"No, of course not," he said. "It's just that I can never get the cork back in so I'll just dump it in a bin. Ummmm, just a sec."

He looked around and spotted a rubbish bin and went over to put the wine bottle in it.

"I left it upright," he said, grinning, when he came back. "In case someone else wants to finish it."

"How considerate of you," I said, getting up.

I picked up the blanket and folded it. The Gardens were emptying and we slowly walked back to his car.

"Shall I drive you back to Euston?" he asked, "or can I take you home?"

Actually, I had enjoyed the picnic and it was still early and I didn't want to go home yet. I liked him.

"How about we go for a walk along the river?" I asked.

"That would be nice," he said, "but you're still in high heels." He looked down my legs to make sure.

"Yes," I admitted, "but we don't have to walk all the way to the sea."

He shut the boot of his car and locked it.

"Let's cross the road," he said.

We waited for a decent gap in the traffic then walked quickly across.

"So have you had lots of boyfriends?" he asked.

“One or two,” I said, not wanting to admit that I'd actually had quite a few.

“But you've never wanted to get married? Unless, of course, you have been married.”

It was getting dark and the street lights were coming on. I could see the lights on the south bank of the river reflecting on the water.

“No, I've never been married,” I said. “I guess I'm a bit like you, never found Mr Right.”

“Ahh, Miss Telly Pedantic,” he said, “since you're always right, you'll never find him. They'll always be Mr Wrong.”

“I live in hope,” I said.

“That's nice,” said Nick, “although I've often thought that denial is more comfortable.”

“I've never been to Egypt,” I said, “so I have no idea what the Nile is like to live in.”

“Actually I think it's much like the Thames,” he said. “Just as wet, only bigger. Speaking of the Nile, do you know what that is?”

He pointed to a tall column up ahead.

“No,” I said. “I don't know much about London.”

“It's Cleopatra's Needle,” he said. “God only knows how big the cloth she was sewing must have been.”

“What's Cleopatra's Needle?” I asked.

“It's a big obelisk,” he said. “Something like fifty or sixty feet high.”

“What's it for? I didn't know Cleopatra ever came to London.”

“I don't think she did,” said Nick. “I think it was a gift from the

Egyptians for something but I'm not sure what.”

Now that we were up close I realised that it was taller than it looked since its base was below street level. There were steps leading down to the platform, past a couple of rather impressive sphinxes. I tried to read the plaque on the side but it was getting too dark.

“Can we go down?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Here, take my hand.”

They were perfectly ordinary stone steps but I took his hand anyway. His hand felt strong and warm and not in the least bit clammy. We stayed holding hands for a couple of paces after the bottom of the steps. It was nice.

“Hey, it's huge,” I said, craning my head backwards to look at the top. “Can I get a photo of you standing in front of it?”

“Sure,” he said, striking a silly pose.

“Stand normally,” I said. Ron wouldn't want to see him in a silly pose, and I knew she'd want to see a picture of him. I pulled out my phone and activated the camera.

I took a couple of steps backwards and held up the phone and it flashed.

“Not bad,” I said, looking at the display, “except it looks like you're standing in front of a stone wall. I want to get the Needle itself in as well. Go and stand back there again.”

He dutifully went back to stand against the plinth of the Needle and I squatted down to get an upward angle shot. I couldn't get the whole Needle in so I half stood up and took a step backwards and tried again. Still not enough so I stepped back again, except there was nothing there.

Fortunately I dropped the phone as I fell into the Thames otherwise it would still be on the river bed, adding to the pollution. Nick told me

later that he didn't see the splash but he heard it and felt some droplets of water and apparently I gave a gurgly kind of half scream. Anyway, as soon as he heard the splash he ran to the water's edge, without stepping on my phone which was clever, and saw me thrashing about in the water and spluttering a lot. He managed to grab one of my hands and dragged me through the water to the steps at the side of the platform and helped me get out of the water.

I was deeply embarrassed more than anything. Well, soaking wet too. And I'd lost both my shoes, not that saving one would have been any particular benefit.

"Are you all right," asked Nick anxiously.

I stood there dripping, holding my hands out to the side and staring down at myself. I could feel my hair clinging wetly to my neck. So much for washing it.

"I fell in," I said, disbelievingly, "I fell in the effing water! Look at me, I'm effing soaking! And I lost my shoes!"

I stared at Nick and he stared back at me. The stone platform was cold on my wet feet.

"Yes," he said, desperately trying to keep a straight face. "You fell in the river."

"Don't you dare laugh," I said, pointing at him and glaring.

It didn't work. His shoulders started to shake then his mouth started to laugh then he put his hands over his mouth to stop the laughing and made a series of choking, stifled noises. I glowered as fiercely as I could but in the end I started to laugh as well. Until I realised what the cool night breeze was doing to my wet chest. I stopped laughing and crossed my arms, glad it was quite dark.

"Where's my phone?" I said, noticing it wasn't in my hand.

"I heard something fall," said Nick, looking back to roughly where I'd gone off the edge.

He pulled out his own phone and used the light from its screen to look around.

“Here it is,” he said after a moment and bent to pick it up.

I reached for it.

“Probably best not to drip all over it,” he said.

He wiped his hand on his trousers then touched its screen. The screen lit up.

“It seems to still be working though.”

“Great,” I said. “Can we go now? I'm getting chilly.”

“Oh god, of course,” he said. “Get you back to the car and wrap you in the blanket. Hold on, did you swallow any water?”

“Sure I did,” I said. “I fell in the frigging river, didn't I.”

“Try to be sick,” he said. “Come on, kneel down at the edge and try to make yourself throw up. The water's not that healthy.”

“Are you serious?” I said, feeling queasy at the thought of trying to make myself sick.

“Yes,” he said. “It wasn't that long ago the river was so polluted nothing could live in it. They've cleaned it up and fish are coming back but you really shouldn't drink it. Come on.”

He made me kneel down at the water's edge. I stuck two fingers down my throat but all I could manage was a couple of retches. I was acutely aware of my dress clinging very tightly to my backside, which was sticking up in the air.

“Oh well,” he said, helping me up. “Let's get back to the car and start drying you off.”

We walked back to the car, a lot faster than before. Several passers by

stared at me and one or two smiled but no one said anything.

“I wish I'd taken a video,” said Nick, glancing at me. “Would look good on YouTube.”

I stuck my tongue out at him as I couldn't think of a witty and cutting response. Back at the car he got the blanket out of the boot.

“You know,” he said hesitantly, “it would be best if you stripped those wet clothes off. You'll dry faster that way.”

“Where?” I said

He shook the blanket out and wrapped it around my shoulders.

“Try to undress inside the blanket,” he said. “If you face me, no one will see anything.”

“Oh god,” I said. I was soaking though and I knew he was right.

He opened the passenger door to provide a little screening and held the blanket closed around my neck. He conscientiously gazed over my shoulder while I struggled to remove my dress.

“You a performance artist?” said an American voice, just as my dress fell to the ground around my feet. “When's the next show?”

I craned my head around to see a middle aged couple standing a little further down the road, watching me try to get undressed. The man was holding up his phone, filming me.

“The lady has had an accident,” said Nick, letting go of the blanket to step between the man and me. “Please give her some privacy and stop filming.”

Predictably the blanket slid off my shoulders and I managed to grab it before my wetly clinging underwear got recorded for posterity. Nick turned back to hold the blanket on my shoulders.

“Oh,” said the man and lowered his phone. “So you're not street

performers.” He was watching me intently.

“Come on, Hank,” said the woman. “Ain't nothing to see here. Let's go.”

They ambled off, Hank looking at his phone. Presumably he was checking to see how much of me he'd recorded.

“Umm, probably best to keep your undies on,” said Nick.

I pulled the blanket tightly around myself and got in the car. Nick picked up my dress and squeezed it to get some of the water out then dumped it in the boot. He got in the driver's side and started the engine and turned the heating on full.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Totally bloody stupid,” I said honestly. The interior light went off, mercifully, leaving us in darkness.

“No, I meant your stomach,” he said. “Any pains, nausea? Should I head for a hospital?”

“No,” I said, shivering slightly from the cold draught from the fan, “I feel fine, just embarrassed.”

“Shall I take you home?” he asked, “or shall I drop you at the station?”

“Seriously?” I asked, as sarcastically as I could. “You think I want to get the train home?”

He laughed, and slipped the car into gear. “Holloway it is, then. Are your hands dry?”

“Yes,” I said.

He indicated and pulled out into the road.

“Here's your phone.”

He pulled my phone out of his pocket and handed it to me. I fiddled with it and it did seem to be working.

“The heating’ll come on in a moment,” he said. “Then you’ll be toasty warm. Did you lose anything other than your shoes?”

“I only had my purse and my phone,” I said, “and I left my purse in the boot.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Shouldn’t take too long, the traffic’s died down now.”

The clock on the dashboard said it was 22:47, still quite early for a romantic evening out. The car was warming up nicely.

“Whereabouts in Holloway are you?” he asked after a while.

I gave him the address and we fell silent again. I stared out of the window and tried to overcome my embarrassment. After a few miles I started to laugh. Nick glanced over at me.

“I bet this wasn’t how you planned the evening would end,” I said.

“Actually it turned out better than I expected,” he said. “Do you usually take your clothes off on a first date or was it just my lucky day?”

“Honestly?” I said.

“I expect nothing but honesty from you, Telly Pedantic.”

“It was your lucky day,” I said, lying. No way was I going to tell him that I had, once or twice, taken my clothes off on a first date. He might get the wrong idea.

“Awesome,” he said. “So, before my luck changes, can I see you again?”

I’d already decided what my answer would be if he asked that question and it wasn’t his fault I’d fallen in the river. Actually, he’d coped very

well.

“OK,” I said and gave him my phone number.

“Here we are,” he said, pulling up outside Ron and Max's terrace house. “Umm, here's something I've never said at the end of a first date before. Go see a doctor in the morning.”

“I'm fine,” I said, not wanting to leave the warmth of the car.

“Better safe than sorry,” he said.

He got out and went around the front of the car and opened my door for me so I had to get out. He shut the door of the car and I stood there, wrapped in a blanket, my damp hair bedraggled, my bare feet cold on the pavement. I had a sneaky feeling my makeup was a mess as well. He opened the boot and got my purse out.

“Are you sure you're feeling OK?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “What about my dress?”

“I'll get it laundered,” he said. “Unless you need it again before I next see you?”

“That's very kind of you,” I said. “But there's no need and it was my own fault.”

“It's nothing,” he said. “I'll, umm, call you tomorrow?”

“OK,” I said. “Good night and thank you for a lovely evening, well, up until I fell in anyway.”

“Next time we'll stay away from the river,” he said. “Go on, get inside before you get a chill.”

I started up the path and turned to give him a wave before he drove off. Max had thoughtfully left the outside light on for me so I was able to miss the front door step when I threw up.

Chapter Four

“I heard you in the night,” said Ron the next morning. “You sounded like you had a good evening.”

I'd slept fitfully and been to the toilet more than once.

“I'm not feeling too good,” I admitted. “I need coffee.”

“Oh you didn't eat seafood, did you?” said Ron, putting the kettle on.

“Kind of,” I said, sitting at the table and holding my head in my hands. “I fell in the river.”

“What, the Thames?”

“Uh huh.”

“All the way in or just up to your knees or something?”

“All the way in,” I said. “Arse over tit.”

“What were you doing down there?”

“Nick took me to see Cleopatra's Needle. Where's the coffee?”

“Cleo's Needle?” said Ron, sitting more upright. “Isn't that down at Embankment?”

She reached for her phone and started thumbing it.

“Yes,” I said. “Coffee?”

“Bugger,” she said, scanning the screen then she rang someone.

“Hi,” she said brightly after a few seconds, “this is Veronica McGregor. Any chance of an appointment today for my sister?”

There was an indistinct muttering from the phone.

“No, she hasn't been there before.”

More muttering.

“She fell in the Thames, down at Embankment.”

More muttering.

“Yes, all night.”

Mutter mutter.

“Estelle Bennett.”

Mutter, mutter.

“Great, thanks.”

She hung up.

“I've got an appointment for you with Doctor Singh as 11:15,” she said.
“We'll take a taxi.”

“I don't need a doctor,” I groaned. “Just coffee. Pleassssee?”

She was on the phone again.

“Hi Fezan, this is Veronica McGregor. Hi, yeah, not too bad, thanks.
Listen, is Arif available to take me to the doctor at 11?”

She waited a couple of heartbeats.

“Awesome. You've got my address, right? Great, thanks. That's 11
o'clock. Yeah, bye.”

You want coffee, hon?” she said. “Kettle's just boiled.”

“Mmmm,” I said.

She made me some coffee.

“Arif will be round at 11,” she said. “He’s the one with the wheelchair taxi.”

She plonked a mug of black coffee in front of me.

“Milk?” I asked.

“Not on a gippy tummy,” she said. “Stay with black until the doctor’s seen you.”

I couldn’t be bothered to argue. I just clasped the mug with both hands and slowly sipped it. Things were happening in my bowels.

“I don’t need a doctor,” I said.

She smiled. “Yes, you do, hon. Embankment is where the sewage for all of West London goes into the Thames.”

I nearly threw up on the kitchen table.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Fraid not. How much did you have to drink?”

“Just a couple of glasses of wine,” I said.

“And to eat?”

“Some chicken and coleslaw.”

“What kind of restaurant did he take you to then? Doesn’t sound too good.”

“We had a picnic at some gardens down near the Needle,” I said. “Oops, back in a minute.”

“It might be food poisoning,” said Ron, ten minutes later when I got back from the toilet. “Especially if the mayo for the coleslaw was a bit iffy. But I’m 99% certain you drank a pretty nasty little cocktail of bacteria. Probably enough cocaine to make you stoned as well. Did

you feel very happy after your swim?”

“No,” I said, sitting down and feeling around my bowels with my mind. “I was embarrassed and felt stupid.”

“Ahh well, probably not that much cocaine after all, then. You look like shit. Go lie on the couch and I’ll wake you in an hour.”

Actually that sounded like a good plan to me so I did. I must have dropped off again since almost immediately Ron was shaking my shoulder.

“Wake up Tel, come on, wake up.”

“Wha’?”

“The taxi’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Oh god, back in a minute.” I ran out of the room.

I’d just finished washing my hands when Arif arrived with the taxi. He had a van with a roll on hoist for Ron which made things pretty speedy.

“Hello, Veronica,” beamed the receptionist. “Haven’t seen you for a while. How are things?”

“Oh fine, thanks, Chaaya,” said Ron. “How’s Sam and the kids?”

“I’m dying here!” I said loudly in my mind. “Can we move things along?”

“Oh, Samaj has got a little cold, but the boys are fine,” she said. “I don’t see an appointment for you?”

“It’s for my sister,” said Ron. “Estelle Bennett, Dr Singh, 11:15.”

Ahh,” said Chaaya, “here we are.”

She glowered at me and handed me a clipboard.

“Just fill out this form,” she said. “Doctor Singh's only running twenty minutes or so late at the moment. The waiting area is over there. Bring it back when you've filled it in.”

She casually waved her hand at a crowded room off to one side.

I found a seat and Ron parked in front of me. I was actually feeling a little better and my stomach wasn't pretending to be a washing machine any more.

“Oh,” I said, starting to fill in the form. “I don't remember my National Insurance number.”

“Use mine,” said Ron, so I did.

“Shall I use your address as well or mum and dad's in Canterbury?”

“Use mine,” she said. “That way it'll match the NI number.”

“Good thinking,” I said. “Am I pregnant?”

“Probably, knowing you,” she said with a smile.

“Pffffh,” I said. “Hope you get a puncture. Ummm, allergies? Sisters, I guess. Ummm, that's about it.” I signed it with a scrawl instead of my usual flourish.

“I'll take it back,” said Ron grabbing the clipboard, “otherwise you'll lose your seat.”

I leaned back on the hard plastic chair, squashed between an extremely large lady with thin, lank, greasy hair and a spotty youth with a runny nose. I'd have moved the chair but they were bolted together.

“What you 'ere for?” asked the large lady.

“I'm throwing up a lot and I've got diarrhoea,” I said without opening my eyes. “How about you?”

“Me feet,” she said. “They don’t ’alf ’urt something chronic. You pregnant, then? I always puke and squirt when I’m pregnant.”

“No,” I said. “Chance would be a fine thing. How many kids do you have?”

“Eight,” she said.

I wondered if it was only her feet that hurt.

“Charmayne?” called a voice.

“That’s me,” said the large lady, hoisting herself to her feet and using my knee as a lever. She tottered off, putting her feet down gently. I rubbed my knee and her seat was immediately taken by a man in overalls with a filthy bandage around his hand.

“Where’ve you been?” I asked then Ron re-appeared.

“Chatting with Chaaya,” she said. “Oh and I told Arif to bring the taxi back around 12.”

“You seem to know them quite well,” I said, slouching and leaning forward. There was an unpleasant smell, rather like someone had farted.

“I used to come here every week,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I said.

“The toilet’s down the corridor,” she said.

There’s something about doctors’ waiting rooms that squeeze the life out of you so we fell silent. The second hand on the cheap clock on the wall seemed to have stopped moving.

“Estelle?” said a voice, several weeks later.

“That’s you,” said Ron, tapping my sore knee. “I’ll be outside, in the sun.”

I followed the tall, thin, turbaned man through a maze of corridors to an office the size of a large kennel.

“Take a seat,” he said and sat in a rickety old office chair in front of a computer screen. I sat on a hard, plastic chair that differed from the one in the waiting room only by having a thin cushion on it. Our knees were almost touching.

“What seems to be the trouble?” he asked.

“I fell in the River Thames last night,” I said, “and I’ve been throwing up ever since.”

He typed this laboriously into his computer.

“Diarrhoea too?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He added that snippet as well.

“Which part of the Thames?” he asked.

“Embankment,” I said.

“Oh dear me,” he said, stopping typing. “About what time?”

“10,” I said.

“So, nearly fourteen hours ago,” he said, thoughtfully. “Be glad it wasn't the Ganges or you'd be dead by now.”

He thought this was very funny. I just stared at him so he went back to typing. Abruptly he stood up and his chair nearly fell over backwards. He rummaged inside a battered old grey filing cabinet and pulled out a small screw top plastic container.

“If you could get me a sample of your diarrhoea,” he said, handing me the container, “we can get some tests done.”

“What, now?” I asked. “Here?”

There was nowhere to hide in his kennel.

“There is a toilet just up the corridor,” he said and sat back, looking at me expectantly.

It is surprisingly difficult to fill a small container underneath your bottom without getting any on your hands but fortunately there was a sink in the toilet with what smelled like industrial strength antiseptic.

“Here you are,” I said, going back into the kennel.

Unsurprisingly he was typing on his computer.

“Pop it in here,” he said, holding an envelope open for me. He peeled off a thin strip and stuck the flap down and wrote my name on the outside together with a list of abbreviations.

“We will send that off for tests,” he said. “You may have some particularly nasty bacteria in your system although most likely we’ll just find micro-plastic. The tests will be back in two or three days so, in the interim, here are some general antibiotics.”

His printer whirred and spat out a sheet of paper which he signed and gave to me.

“Take one every six hours,” he said, “and drink plenty of fluids.”

He glanced at his computer as if he missed every second he was away from it.

“Oh, but not Thames water, of course,” he laughed. “Call Reception in three days to see if you need to come back. Is there anything else?”

He’d turned back to his computer before I could admit that there wasn’t. I showed myself out.

“He gave me some antibiotics,” I told Ron, showing her the prescription.

“We’ll get them from the chemist on the way home,” she said. “Arif will be here in a minute.”

“I, umm, need to ...” I said.

“We’ll wait,” said Ron as I went back inside to find the toilet.

“Was he worth it?” she asked in the taxi.

“Who, Dr Singh?” I asked.

“No, that man you saw last night.”

“Ohh, Nick,” I said and smiled.

She laughed and patted my hand. “Well if the worst he ever gives you is an upset stomach, I’ll be happy,” she said. “So tell me everything.”

The antibiotics seemed to do their stuff since my bowels settled down not long after I took the first tablet and I happily ploughed my way through a plate of scrambled eggs and a pile of toast for dinner.

“Hello, Nick,” I said when my phone rang that evening.

“Awesome,” he said. “You’ve got me in your phone. How are you?”

“I’m going upstairs,” I whispered to Ron and Max. We’d been playing Boggle and I was lying in third place so I was happy to abandon the game.

“I’m feeling a lot better,” I said, going up the stairs. “The doctor gave me some antibiotics.”

The mere mention of antibiotics seemed to worry him so I had to explain that I’d thrown up once or twice which seemed to make him feel better.

“Will you be well enough for your interview tomorrow?” he asked.

“Oh god, yes,” I said. I’d forgotten about the interview. “You’ve got a

good memory.”

“Not really,” he said. “What was your name again?”

“Cleopatra,” I said, curling up on my bed. “Stop needling me.”

“Ohhh, bad name,” he said. “Hey, listen, if I ask you out again should I bring a first aid kit?”

“What makes you think I’m going out with you again?” I asked. “You make me sick!”

“I can’t really stomach your attitude,” he said. “How about Friday?”

“OK,” I said, giggling, “so long as it’s not a romantic river cruise.”

“How did you know I was planning that?” he asked, “Any other suggestions? I’m swimming in the dark here.”

“Hey, did you know that Embankment is where the sewage for West London comes out?” I asked as I couldn’t immediately think of another funny twist on the meme.

“No, I didn’t,” he said. “Well, at least you got the better class of sewage. All that posh crap. You can tell your sister I gave you something from Harrods!”

“Is Harrods in West London?” I asked.

“Yes, Knightsbridge,” he said. “That’s where the money is in London.”

“Why don’t we go to Knightsbridge, then” I asked. “Or the West End.”

“Because I don’t have any money,” he said. “I’ve spent that twenty you gave me.”

“I didn’t give it to you,” I said, “I gave it back to you. There’s a difference.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Hey, by the way, your

dress is being cleaned and pressed so you don't need to wear anything on Friday. You can just put that dress back on when I pick you up.”

“Yeah, you wish,” I said.

“Actually I do wish,” he said, “but then, I'm just a dirty old man.”

“Maybe I should wash you in the Thames?” I said.

“I'd rather have a bed bath,” he said.

“Why?” I asked. “Does your bed have bed bugs?”

“Nooo,” he said. “My bed isn't bugged. Nothing interesting ever happens there.”

“Maybe you could play I Spy when you're in bed,” I said.

“Would you play with me?” he asked.

“No point,” I said. “I wouldn't find it interesting.”

“Because I'm so boring?” he asked. “Next time someone throws an iron at you you're on your own.”

“You didn't even see the iron,” I said, “you were too busy looking somewhere else.”

I reached over and touched the crumpled steam iron on my bedside table.

“OK, you've got me there,” he said. “You win that round.”

“It's better than Boggle,” I said.

“OK,” he said. “I don't understand that, but never mind,”

“How can you not understand Boggle?” I asked. “It's an easy game.”

“I do understand Boggle,” he said, “just not why we're talking about it.”

Do you want to play Boggle on Friday?"

"I was playing Boggle with Ron and Max when you rang," I said. "I was losing badly."

"I wondered why you answered," he said. "If you'd been winning you wouldn't have."

"You've got it," I said. "I like to win."

"It's fortunate you met me, then," he said. "I like to let you win. So what would you like to do on Friday? Nightclub?"

"Hmm, not really," I said. "I'm getting too old for those places."

"Thank god for that," he said with a deep sigh. "I can't dance. How about bingo at the old people's home?"

"That's more my style," I said. "Hang on a minute."

I put the phone on my bedside table and ran downstairs.

"Can I ask Nick to dinner on Friday, Ron?" I asked.

"Hmmm?" she said, concentrating on the Boggle grid, "oh yeah, Friday, sure."

"Who's Nick?" asked Max.

"Telly's fancy man," she said. "Ooooooh, I've found a six letter word!"

"You're out of time," said Max.

She pouted.

"Well, you were interrupted," said Max. "You can have it."

"Thanks," I said and run back upstairs.

"You there?" I asked, picking up the phone.

“Sadly, yes,” he said. “I’d rather be where you are.”

“Then it’s your lucky day,” I said. “Would you like to come here for dinner on Friday? Meet Ron and Max?”

“Is that your sister?” he asked, “or two other guys?”

“My sister and her husband,” I said.

“That would be delightful,” he said. “Is there anything I should bring?”

“My dress would be useful,” I said.

“Of course, but I was thinking wine or a cake or something.”

“Ron’s a chef,” I reminded him. “She makes quite good cakes.”

“So you’re not cooking?” he asked.

“If you want me to cook you’d better bring a can opener,” I said.

He laughed. “Well, I do like baked beans.”

“Do you like burnt toast too?” I asked.

“I love burnt toast,” he said. “Oh, by the way, I got you a present today.”

“Really?” I was quite surprised. “What did you get me?”

“I was in a shop and I saw it and thought of you,” he said.

“Come on,” I said. “I hate surprises, what did you get me?”

“Actually I was lying,” he said.

“You didn’t get me a present?” I asked. I felt quite disappointed.

“Oh, I did get you a present,” he said. “It’s just that I was thinking of you before I saw it, not the other way round.”

“Damn, you're smooth,” I said, laughing.

“Hey, you've seen my baby picture,” he said. “How much smoother can I get?”

“You're right,” I said. “Smooth as a baby's bum. So what did you get me?”

“You'll find out on Friday,” he said. “Are you still at the same address?”

“Did you think I'd move as you found out where I lived?” I asked.

“You never know,” he said. “The Thames can do strange things to people. Hey, maybe I should bring some dip for dinner?”

“Ha ha,” I said drily. “That wasn't funny.”

“That's the effect you have on me,” he said. “You drive my wits away.”

“I'm sure there's a joke there,” I said, “only I can't think of one.”

“Awesome,” he said. “I drive your wits away too. I can sleep contented tonight. Anyway, I mustn't keep you from your Boggle, maybe you'll start winning now. What time shall I come round?”

“When do you finish work?” I asked.

“Wow, are you that desperate to see me?”

“God no,” I said. “I just want my present. Forget dinner, just leave it on the doorstep.”

He laughed. I liked his laugh.

“No dinner, no present,” he said.

“Oh, all right then,” I said. “If I have to. How about 7?”

“I knew you'd pick the perfect time,” he said. “Is one can opener

enough?”

“You'd better not have got me a can opener for a present,” I said.

“I've still got the receipt,” he said. “You can always change it for something else.”

“You're irrepressible,” I said.

“Is that what you want to do ?” he asked, “repress me?”

“No,” I said. “That's the last thing I want to do.”

“The last thing? What do you want to do before that then?”

“Open my present,” I said. “And it had better be impressive, not repressive.”

“That could be a problem,” he said. “I've been wracking my brains about how to impress Miss Telly Pedantic and not come up with anything.”

“Keep trying,” I said.

“I intend to,” he said. “Friday at 7, then.”

“Yes,” I said, not wanting to hang up.

“Well, hang up then,” he said.

I laughed. “No, you hang up.”

This was beginning to remind me of when I was 15.

“Ladies first,” he said.

“A gentleman wouldn't insist I hang up first,” I said.

“Hmm,” he said. “We seem to have reached a deadlock. How about we both hang up at the same time?”

“OK,” I said. “Umm, how do we know when to hang up?”

“On the count of three?”

“OK, 1 ... 2 ... 3 ...”

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“You should have hung up,” I protested.

“Well I wasn't clear if we were to hang up on 3 or after 3,” he said.

“1, 2, 3, hang up,” I said.

“Only three hang ups?” he said. “You're a keeper, all right.”

“Don't start again,” I said. “1, 2, 3, hang up, OK?”

“1, 2, 3, hang up,” he said. “Got it.”

“OK, 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... hang up,” I said.

He hung up. I felt very let down.

Chapter Five

“Morning,” I said happily, sticking my head round Ron's study door.

“Morning, Tel,” said Ron. “You're looking a lot brighter.”

“I'm feeling much better,” I said. “Want some tea?”

“Not right now, thanks.”

“What're you up to?”

“I'm polishing an article on pies in London restaurants for that new magazine, The Epicurean Traveller,” she said, “3,000 words.”

“Wow,” I said, pausing in the doorway. “3,000 words on pies? I didn't know restaurants did pies?”

“Not that many do,” she said with a half laugh. “And those that do are mostly sweet pies, not savoury but, hey, they're paying me so I go where the money is.”

“How do you know which restaurants do pies?” I asked. “Have you been to all of them?”

“God, no,” she said, putting her glasses on the desk. “I just rang around and asked then Max and I went to the ones that do to see what they're like. Useful to check out their disabled facilities as well for my channel.”

“Cool,” I said and disappeared into the kitchen to put the kettle and toaster on.

I added Marmite to the shopping list Ron kept in the kitchen since the jar was down to the last few scrapes and took my breakfast into the lounge. There's something special about toast and Marmite first thing in the morning, even when first thing is rapidly approaching mid morning. I checked my phone but there were no missed calls or messages so I started to scan the news.

I heard the postman then, maybe ten minutes later, Ron go down the hallway to the letterbox hanging on the front door. She appeared in the lounge doorway with a small pile of envelopes of assorted sizes.

“There’s a couple for you,” she said and tossed them over.

I looked at the first one and my gut tightened.

“It’s from that Literary Agency,” I said, holding the envelope up to try to see what was inside. “Too thin to be a contract, bummer.”

“That was quick,” said Ron. “Your interview was only the day before yesterday. The post isn’t usually that fast.”

“What’s the date today?” I asked, looking at the postmark.

“18th,” said Ron, reading one of her letters.

“This is postmarked the 15th,” I said, “which was Monday. Why would they send me a letter on Monday when my interview was on Tuesday?”

“Better open it and see,” said Ron. “Tossers.”

“Who are?” I asked, glancing over.

“The Department for Work and Pensions,” she said, enunciating carefully as if to demonstrate contempt. “They sent someone round a month ago to reassess my condition ...,” and put finger quotes around ‘condition’, “... and have decided to increase my PIP by 13p a week. Isn’t that nice of them?”

“What’s PIP?” I asked.

“Personal Independence Payment” she said, opening another envelope, “Disability Living Allowance, as was. Ooooh, that’s more like it.” She waved what looked like a cheque in the air. “I’ve finally been paid for an article that was published five months ago. Max’ll be pleased, he was just about to take them to court. Aren’t you going to open it, then?”

“No point,” I said, “it’s a rejection. Feels like a single sheet.”

“You never know,” she said, giving me a stern look. “It could be they want to start negotiating a huge salary with golden handshakes and everything.”

“If it was that,” I said, trying to slit the envelope with my little finger and ripping it in half instead, “why would they post it before the interview?”

I managed to rip the letter as well.

“Dear Ms Bennett,” I read aloud. “Thank you for your interest in the above position. We regret, however, that your application has not been successful and it’s signed by a squiggle.”

“Tossers,” said Ron. “They can’t see gold when it’s sat in front of them. They don’t deserve you, hon.”

“I knew he didn’t like me,” I said. “But why bother to interview me when they wrote the rejection letter before the frigging interview?”

I held the ripped envelope together to check the postmark. Definitely the 15th.

“I guess I was just there to make up the numbers,” I said. “Stuff it, I didn’t want to work there anyway.”

I balled the tattered remains of the envelope and letter and tossed them on the couch.

“This one’s postmarked the 16th,” I said, looking at the second envelope, “although there’s no franking. I wonder who it’s from?”

“You’re definitely a child of the internet, aren’t you,” said Ron sarcastically. “You just don’t know how to handle snail mail, do you. Open the damned thing and read it.”

“OK, OK,” I said. This one didn’t rip as I opened it and I pulled out the single sheet of paper.

Hello

I trust you are well?

I just wanted you to know that it isn't just me. Everyone else hates you too!

Iron Man

I read it twice.

“What the frig is this?” I exclaimed and turned it over to see if there was anything on the back. There wasn't. I read it again.

“What's up?” asked Ron, looking up.

“Look at this,” I said and passed it to her.

She took it and read it and looked at the back as well.

“It's bullshit,” she said. “I don't hate you although I'm not too sure about Max.”

I looked inside the envelope to see if there was anything else but there wasn't so I looked at the back of the envelope. It was blank.

“Max doesn't hate me,” I said. “He loves me.”

“He'd better bloody not,” said Ron, sniffing the sheet of paper. “No smell.”

“What did you think it would smell of?” I asked.

“If it was a woman who sent it it might smell of perfume or hand cream or something,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “good point.”

I took the letter back and sniffed it too. “Hmmm. I wonder who sent it?”

“Someone who knows you're living here,” said Ron, “which must narrow it down from the thousands you've pissed off over the years.”

I pulled a face at her.

“Well, there's mum and dad,” I said, “and a few companies I've applied to, oh and you and Max. Hey, it wasn't you, was it?”

She laughed. “I wouldn't waste the postage,” she said. “I'd tell you to your face. What about Ben?”

Ben was a guy I'd been seeing in Canterbury.

“No, he doesn't know your address,” I said. “Although mum might have given it to him. I'll ask her next time I ring.”

I read the letter again and looked at the envelope.

“Nah,” I said. “It's too literate for Ben. No F words, to start with and he wouldn't have sent it to Estelle either, he'd have put Telly.”

“Maybe it's from an author you rejected,” said Ron.

“Doubt it,” I said, “no half decent author would put 'just' twice in a sentence like that. They'd have used 'only' or left the first one out.”

I help up the envelope and squinted at the postmark.

“Does that say Taunton? Looks like Taunton to me.”

“Maybe that's why you rejected him,” she said. “Let's have a look.”

I passed over the envelope and she squinted at it too.

“Yup, definitely looks like Taunton,” she said. “Did very well to get here in two days.”

“That's in Somerset, isn't it,” I said thoughtfully. “You know, I think there was someone who sent in an article from Somerset, although I'm pretty sure we published it. Anyway, I was only an assistant. I didn't

accept or reject anything, I just checked the spelling and flow and stuff. Why would he hate me?"

"You're taking it too seriously," said Ron. "I get hate stuff over the net all the time. Just bin it and forget it. If you keep it, its bad aura will hang over you."

I crumpled the letter then opened it out again.

"Iron Man," I said. "Iron Man? Wasn't there a movie called Iron Man?"

"No idea," said Ron. "Anyway, some of us have work to do. When is your interview?"

"3," I said. "Hey, you don't suppose Iron Man has anything to do with that iron, do you?"

"What iron?" she said, pausing in the doorway.

"That one that nearly hit me on Tuesday," I said.

"What, you reckon someone threw an iron at you then hurried off to Taunton to post you a letter?" said Ron. "Seems unlikely. That's got to be a couple of hundred miles."

"They could have posted the letter first then come to London," I pointed out.

"I guess, but how would they know you'd be in Euston Road?"

"Maybe whoever it was followed me from here," I said. "After all, he knows this address."

"Bin it," said Ron, "and forget it, otherwise you'll screw yourself up in knots over it."

"Yeah, you're right," I said, screwing up the letter.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me" said Ron, backing back into the lounge.

“Did you say someone's coming to dinner tomorrow or did I imagine it?”

“Nick,” I said, collecting the crushed envelopes and letters. “You did say it's OK.”

“No, that's fine,” she said. “I was supposed to be going to some Tupperware party but we've got plenty of the stuff so I'm glad to get out of it. Are you cooking or am I?”

I smiled hopefully at her and she laughed. “Jesus,” she said. “OK. What does he like to eat?”

“Chicken,” I said, “and coleslaw and bread and muffins. That's all I know.”

She frowned. “Is that all?” she asked.

“I hardly know him,” I said. “He probably does eat other things too.”

“Is he fancy or basic?” she asked.

“I'm guessing pretty basic although he brought a corked wine not a screw top,” I said. “He's a buyer for a plastics company so he's probably not a gourmet or anything overly fancy. The picnic was all shop bought.”

“OK,” she said, musing. “Skinny or chunky?”

“Bit on the chunky side,” I said. “He looks like he knows what a knife and fork are for but he's not fat.”

“OK, meat and veg and plenty of it.” She grinned. “How about a steak and kidney pie and chips?”

“Sounds perfect,” I said. “Thanks.” I was just happy Ron was going to cook, not me, and Nick, I guessed, would eat anything put in front of him rather than risk offending Ron. I gave Ron a hug on my way to the bin.

There was a car parked a little way down the road, facing towards me, when I left the house to go for my interview. I looked closely as I walked towards it and there was a man sitting in the driver's seat, not doing anything, although he had one hand on the steering wheel and was carefully not looking at me.

“Hmmm,” I thought. “Should I say something?”

There's something very daunting about going up to a stranger in the street and demanding to know if they are following you so I decided not to bother and tried to memorise his features so I'd recognise him again. Like on the train, perhaps. As I walked past he looked away through his side window across the road.

“Doesn't want me to see him up close,” I thought. “Better get his number.”

I walked on another ten steps or so then turned to read the car's registration number. A door slammed and a teenage girl came bounding out of a house across the road and ran over to the car.

“Sorreeee,” she screeched and jumped into the passenger seat. The man started the car and it drove off up the road, away from me.

“Oh well,” I said, turning my attention to the old lady walking along the pavement towards me. Was she really leaning on her walking stick or just pretending to be old?

“Oh get a grip,” I said to myself. “She's hardly following you if she's walking towards you.”

At a rough estimate thirty or so people got on the same train as me and I studied the faces of those that got in my carriage. Every single last one of them looked suspicious and affectedly casual. One man tried to hide his identity by blowing his nose and a young guy in a hoodie was obviously watching me closely since he had his eyes closed so I couldn't see where he was looking. He had ear buds connected to a smart phone which was undoubtedly a sensitive directional microphone disguised as a smart phone. It probably recorded video as well. He got off two stops later so he'd most likely passed over the job

of watching me to the pregnant woman with the stroller whose toddler was asleep. More than a hundred people surged up the escalator with me, many of them deviously staying in front of me.

“Can I help you?” asked the Receptionist at Dewlap and Portman Publishers.

“Did you send me hate mail?” I asked, although it came out as “I’m here to see Mr Asken.”

“What was your name?” she asked.

“Estelle Bennett,” I said. As if she didn’t already know!

It looked like she had a laser printer beside her on her L shaped desk. That letter had looked like it had been printed on a laser printer. Very suspicious.

“Estelle Bennett to see you,” she said into a phone. She waited a moment then hung up.

“Mr Asken will be down shortly,” she said. “Please take a seat.”

“Why do you hate me?” I wanted to know but smiled sweetly instead and went and sat down.

Several people walked through the reception area and studiously ignored me. A short man with black rimmed glasses and a jacket whose buttons strained to contain his stomach looked at me and muttered something to the receptionist. She muttered something back and pointed at me with her biro. I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Ms Bennett?” he asked, walking over. His trousers looked almost as old as he was.

“Yes,” I said, jumping up.

“Asken,” he said tersely. “Come with me.”

He lead me through a dirty grey door into a smallish open plan office

with three people at desks. None of them looked delighted to see me.

“Take a pew,” he said, sitting behind a fourth desk. His swivel chair creaked ominously.

I sat on the edge of the seat with my knees together and my hands clasped primly in my lap, trying to look every inch the efficient Assistant Editor.

“So you found us all right?” he asked, picking up my résumé and adjusting his glasses.

“Yes,” I said, smiling enthusiastically.

“Let me see, hmmm, a degree in Modern History, good, three years with Mollinson and Montmorency, hmmm. You were Assistant Editor at Osbourne and Offstedt in Canturbury?”

I wondered if he thought I'd falsified my résumé.

“Yes,” I said, smiling enthusiastically.

“So, umm, why do you want to be Assistant Editor here?” he asked. “Surely you should be looking for a step up.”

“Dewlap and Portman are well respected London publishers,” I said, enthusiastically. “I would regard working here as a very definite step up.”

He seemed a little surprised by this.

“I'm very excited by the opportunity,” I added, smiling enthusiastically.

“Quite,” he said and leaned back. He undid his jacket buttons and his belly flopped forward gratefully.

The air felt foetid and thick. There was a faint odour of oranges and fried onions.

“So why did you leave Osbourne and Offstedt?” he said, suddenly.

“I felt the time had come for me to seek opportunities elsewhere,” I said, smoothly delivering my prepared response.

“Obviously,” he said, “otherwise you wouldn't have left. But why did you feel that the time was right after only three months?”

“Ummm,” I said. Obviously I couldn't tell him that my boss there, Jackie Fitzherbert, was a creepy sleazebag since Mr Asken seemed even creepier. Unfortunately I hadn't got as far as preparing a response to an unexpected supplementary question like this.

I smiled enthusiastically. “I felt I had more to offer, particularly in a modern competitive environment.”

He rolled his eyes a little behind his glasses.

“Right, let's move on then,” he said. “Have a look at this and tell me how many mistakes there are.”

He picked up a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

Lacy's veranda overlooked the cemetery
and I was conscious of a sense of foreboding.
“Don't worry” she said. “They're all dead, for
now anyway.”

I counted six mistakes and read it through again, just to be sure.

“Six,” I said, “or perhaps seven, depending on your policy for dialogue.”

“What are they?” he asked.

“Verandah', 'cemetery', 'conscious', 'foreboding' and 'they're' are spelt incorrectly,” I said, “and there should be a comma after 'worry', inside the quotes. It's common to have the dialogue begin on a new line but it may be your policy not to do that.”

“Veranda' is not spelt incorrectly,” he said.

“That's the American spelling,” I said. “The British spelling has an 'h' at the end.”

“No, it doesn't,” he said. Someone behind me tittered quietly and he glared over my shoulder.

Don't you just hate it when your interviewer makes a mistake? Do you let it ride and risk failing a test or him thinking you're wrong or that you lack the courage of your convictions or do you risk pissing him off by highlighting his error?

“Do you have a British English dictionary?” I asked, figuring it's better to be condemned for being right rather than for being faint-hearted.

He gazed distastefully at me then abruptly lurched up and grabbed a thick dictionary from the top of a filing cabinet. He sat heavily in his chair and thumbed through the dictionary.

“Hrrumphh,” he said and slammed the dictionary shut. “Bloody Americans.”

His look told me the interview was over, even though it dragged on for a few more painful minutes.

“Well, thank you for coming in, Ms Bennett,” he said as soon as he decently could, his body language saying that his thanks were purely notional. “We'll let you know.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Asken,” I said, smiling a little less enthusiastically. “Shall I show myself out?”

“Yes,” he said, grumpily. “Goodbye.” The 'good riddance' hung unspoken in the air between us.

Chapter Six

“Never mind,” said Max. “You don't want to work anywhere where your boss won't acknowledge the talent working for him. There are plenty of other publishers out there.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “Although I thought it would be easier, coming to London. I thought, I don't know, maybe that with all the hustle and bustle there'd be more opportunities. Instead all I get is interviews with crappy little outfits who don't like me.”

“You've got another tomorrow, haven't you?” asked Ron. She was lying on the couch with her feet in Max's lap while he massaged some sort of special cream into them.

“Yeah,” I said, unenthusiastically. “Muggs and Darcy, Antiquarian Booksellers. What the hell do I know about old books? I did history and I know how to write a decent essay, that's all.”

I sat in my armchair pondering the iniquities of life. Ron and Max seemed reasonably happy, under the circumstances. Max did have a decent job and Ron was slowly carving out a niche for herself online.

“Maybe I should go back to Canterbury and be a waitress or something,” I said.

“Maybe you should,” said Ron, looking over at me. It wasn't the answer I wanted.

“You think?” I said, worried.

“Yes,” she said. “You've been in London for almost two weeks and you've had two interviews. Obviously you're a born loser so none of the thousand of companies here will waste their time giving you a job although why you think anyone in Canterbury would want a sourpuss like you dishing up their fish and chips is beyond me.”

“Oh up yours,” I said, irritably but also relieved. “All I want is a high paid, executive position with a prestigious company, plenty of overseas travel and a dishy male secretary. Is that too much to ask?”

Max laughed and moved to the other foot. Ron stopped watching him and let her head fall back against the arm of the couch so her hair fell to the carpet. She'd be having a delightful foot massage if she could actually feel anything.

"Nothing from the agencies, then?" she asked.

"Nah," I grumbled. "They were all full of themselves when I registered but so far nothing has actually materialised, apart from that temp typing job."

"Well, if you are going back to Canterbury," she said, "at least cancel that guy who's coming to dinner tomorrow. I don't want lovestruck men stalking my house trying to find you."

"Who's coming to dinner tomorrow?" asked Max. "I thought you were going to a Tupperware party?"

"Telly's fancy man," she said. "You remember, she told us a couple of nights ago."

"Oh yes," he said. "I vaguely remember something about that. Weren't you cheating at Boggle again?"

"I never cheat at Boggle," she said. "You're just outclassed, admit it."

"I admit it," he said. "I prefer games with more pizzazz, like, oh, Monopoly."

"Obsessed with money, he is," said Ron, glancing over at me. "Gotta love him though."

They smiled lovingly at each other.

"What's his name?" asked Max.

"Nick," I said.

"Easy enough to remember. Anything I need to prepare myself in advance for?"

“Like what?” I asked.

“Oh, I don't know,” he said. “Will he be carrying a spear and have bones in his beard or anything?”

“He'll probably be carrying my dress,” I said, “but that's about it.”

“Ohhh, good friends are you, then?”

“He's the one I was with when I fell in the river,” I said. “He took my dress away to get it cleaned, that's all.”

“Oh him,” said Max. “Does he like jazz?”

“I don't know,” I admitted. “Probably not but then he is a little weird so he just might.”

“It would be nice if he does,” said Max, “since I'm losing my jazz night alone.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I forgot. Should I have made it for Saturday, then?”

“How about we go to the pictures Saturday night?” asked Ron. “Leave Max in peace for a couple of hours.”

She sat up and manoeuvred herself around so her head was now in Max's lap.

“Umm,” I said.

Ron laughed. “Check her out,” she said to Max, jerking a thumb at me. “She's hoping Nick wants to take her out on Saturday too.”

“I was just wondering if there was anything I wanted to see at the cinema,” I said hotly, glaring at her.

“Of course you were, sweetie,” she said. “If he does I'll go round to Margie's. Max needs his time off. It's hard on him, poor love.”

At 10:55 the following morning I stood outside Muggs and Darcy, Antiquarian Booksellers' premises in Rotherhithe. Somehow I had imagined the place to be like that bookshop in the book 84 Charing Cross Road but the reality was somewhat different. It looked more like a detention centre for juvenile offenders. I took a deep breath and pushed open the small door in the otherwise featureless brick wall. It opened into large room devoid of anything except an empty desk, a battered old armchair and a callow youth, no doubt one of the trustys working towards being rehabilitated in the community. He was holding an iPad.

"Wassup?" he said.

"I'm here to see Jerome Darcy," I said, wondering what the security arrangements were.

"That's me," he said. "You Elizabeth Bennett?"

"Estelle Bennett," I said. "About the job?"

"You sure it's not Elizabeth?" he said, looking puzzled. "Never mind, come on through."

He put the iPad on the desk and opened another door and disappeared through it so I followed.

"Jesus," I said, stopping in astonishment.

As far as the eye could see, which admittedly wasn't that far, were racks of books from floor to ceiling and movement was limited to narrow passageways between the racks barely wide enough to walk through. The place smelt strongly of old books.

"Yeah," said Jerome, "got a few books. This way."

I followed him into a large open area somewhere near the centre of the maze which had at least a dozen people packing books into cardboard boxes and padded envelopes. At the far end was a rack of computers. Jerome plonked himself down in a high backed office chair and gestured towards an arm chair so I sat in it.

“Ohhh, my mistake,” he said, picking up what looked like my résumé. “Wonder where I got Elizabeth from?”

“Pride and Prejudice,” I said. “Especially since your name is Darcy.”

“Yeah, could be,” he said. “You like Jane Austin?”

“Yes,” I said.

It didn't seem appropriate to say no, given that I was in a place filled with old books, even if it looked like no other bookshop I'd ever been in.

“OK,” he said and typed something into one of the computers.

“Suzie,” he called.

“Yeah?” called back a gaunt middle aged lady half hidden behind a stack of cardboard boxes.

“Find me JA620, would you sweetie? It's on BG6 slash 4.”

“K,” said Suzie.

“We're wholly internet based,” he said to me. “Every book we have is catalogued in here,” he tapped the computer, “so it's easy to find. So BG6 slash 4 means Basement, row G, section 6 shelf 4. You'll soon get the hang of it.”

“I thought this was a book selling job,” I said, confused.

“It is,” he said, puzzled. “We sell them online.”

“Umm,” I said, “so what exactly does this job entail?”

“Mostly cataloguing,” he said. “Ahh, thanks Suzie. Have a look at this.”

He handed me the book Suzie had handed him. It was an old book, unsurprisingly.

“Very nice,” I said, holding it gingerly. I was more used to cheap paperbacks.

“What can you tell me about it?” he asked.

“Umm, it's *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin,” I said, looking at the spine.

“Yes,” he said. “anything else?”

“Umm, it's hardback,” I said, “and obviously very old.”

He stared at me.

“It's octavo,” he said, taking it back and turning it over in his hands. “Finely bound in recent full green morocco with tan morocco label to spine lettered gilt, floral decoration to spine gilt, gilt floriate border to front cover, panel with onlaid vignette of Elizabeth Bennet in green, red, and brown morocco, edges and turn-ins gilt, marbled endpapers, edges gilt.”

“Oh yes,” I said, brightly. “How nice.”

“Did you understand any of that?” he asked, probably because my face was suggesting that I hadn't understood a word.

“Ummm, morocco bound is leather, isn't it?” I asked, taking a stab in the dark.

“Yeesss,” he said slowly. “It's goatskin. Ummm, so what would you value this book at?”

“Which edition is it?” I asked, trying to sound intelligent.

“1894, London,” he said. “The first illustrated edition.”

“It looks to be in good condition,” I said, searching his face for any sign of a clue.

“It's a fine copy,” he said.

“Ummm, well in that case, ummm,” I said, hoping the sweat on my hands wasn't visible, “perhaps £500?”

Jerome looked deeply shocked.

“Too high or too low?” I asked, nervously.

“A tiny bit too low,” he said. “£8,000 would be more realistic, although we currently have it listed at seven and a half plus VAT. Umm, are you sure you applied for the right job? We always need packers.”

“I think I made a mistake,” I said. “I thought this was a bookshop with people coming in off the street.”

“Have you tried W H Smiths?” he asked. “There's one at London Bridge station.”

“I'm sorry to have wasted your time,” I said, standing up.

“Let me show you out,” he said with a straight face. “The last candidate got lost and starved to death before we found her.”

I hoped he was joking.

* * *

“Don't ask,” I said before Ron could ask. “Just don't ask, OK”

“I'll put the kettle on,” she said, turning off the TV.

“Don't stop,” I said, slumping into the armchair. “What were you watching?”

“French Kiss,” she said, “with Meg Ryan and Kevin Kline. It's one of my favourites. Just about finished, though. Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee,” I said. “Thanks.”

She made me a coffee and some tea for herself and carried them in on

a tray on her lap.

“Thanks,” I said again.

“So, not good, then?” she asked.

“It was embarrassing,” I said. “I completely misunderstood the ad. I thought it was selling books to the public but he wanted someone who knew all about old books and how to value them and it's all online anyway. What the hell does 'octavo' mean?”

“Something to do with eight, I'd guess,” said Ron. “So, back to the drawing board?”

“Yes,” I said. “So long as it's not a bloody octavo drawing board with gilt something or others.”

“Go and have a bath,” she said, “and start thinking happy thoughts for your fancy man.”

“He's a chemist,” I said gloomily. “I never understood chemistry either.”

“Oh you are in a mood, aren't you,” said Ron. “Hey, he's got a job. Why don't you just marry him and let him look after you?”

“And what would I do all day? Watch old movies with you?”

“You could do that doctorate you wanted to do,” said Ron. “What was it?”

“The Impact of the Textile Industry on Social Class in Early Victorian England,” I said. “No, I couldn't go back to that.”

The comfy arm chair, hot coffee and familiar room were having their effect on me and Jerome Darcy and his detention centre were receding into that melting pot of unpleasant memories you try not to think about that sits a little way back from the front of your mind.

“What did you decide for dinner? Are we still having steak and kidney

pie?”

“No,” she said. “I didn't like the look of the butcher's kidneys so I thought a nice beef casserole.”

“Oh yum,” I said, cheering up. “With those little potatoes?” I held up my finger and thumb to show how small they were.

“Chat potatoes,” she said, “baked with herbs, since the oven's going to be on anyway.”

“Awesome,” I said, genuinely enthusiastic, as opposed to interview enthusiastic. “I love them.”

I was almost salivating since no one could do potatoes like Ron. Even her mashed potatoes, one of the most boring foods ever invented, were a delicacy, all fluffy and creamy.

* * *

I was halfway though doing my face when I heard the front door.

“Oh god,” I thought. “Surely it's not seven yet?”

I opened the bathroom door and listened intently. No, it was only Max, home from work. Relieved, I got back to work. When I'd exhausted my meagre makeup skills I got dressed and went downstairs.

“Hi Telly, you're looking even more gorgeous than ever,” said Max looking up.

“Thank you, Max,” I said, meaning it as my self esteem had been a little low all afternoon. “How was work?”

“Much as always,” he said. “Friday afternoons are always dull. Octavo is when a printed sheet is folded into eight before stitching and cutting.”

“Oh, so Ron's told you?” I asked.

“Must have been embarrassing,” he said. “When's Nick coming?”

“Seven,” I said.

“He's a bit late then,” said Max, looking at his watch. “It's seven fifteen.”

“I'd better go see if Ron needs any help,” I said.

“She doesn't,” he said. “She hates people in her kitchen when she's cooking and I've already laid the table. There's a red on the counter.”

“Oh, great, thanks” I said, wondering if Nick wasn't coming. I picked up my phone but there were no messages. I fiddled with it nervously and Max watched me.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“No,” I said then dropped my phone when the doorbell rang.

“I'll get it, shall I?” asked Max, a glint in his eye. I was already in the hallway.

“Sorry I'm a bit late,” said Nick. “I just wanted to let the tension build a little.”

“We weren't tense,” I said, trying to look stern even though I was quite pleased to see him. After all, I didn't want to be stood up in front of Ron and Max. He had a bunch of flowers in one hand and a bottle in the other.

“She dropped her phone when you rang the bell,” said Max, rather nastily I thought, coming up behind me. “I'm Max, come on in.”

“I was hoping someone would invite me in,” said Nick. “I'm Nick, pleased to meet you.”

“You bastard,” I whispered to Max as Nick came in. He just smiled happily at me.

“Come on through to the kitchen,” Max said, leaving me standing like a pillock at the front door. “I’ll introduce you to Ron.” I hurried after them.

“Ron, Nick’s here,” said Max.

“Nice to meet you,” said Ron, gliding over. She wiped her hands on a cloth and held one out to shake hands with Nick. “Forgive me for not standing up.”

“Delighted to meet you,” said Nick, putting a bottle on the counter and taking her hand. “I understand you are the chef tonight?”

“Telly can’t cook to save her life,” said Ron. “Get involved with her and you’ll live on salads and cheese.”

“I love salads and cheese,” said Nick, smiling at her. “I brought this for you.” He handed Ron the bunch of flowers, which irritated me a little since I thought they were for me. “And this is for you both.” He passed the bottle to Max.

“Thank you,” said Ron, clearly impressed.

“I’ll put it in the fridge,” said Max.

“Could you get me that tall vase from the top cupboard?” said Ron, smelling her flowers. “Lovely. Isn’t he sweet, Tel.”

“Yes,” I said. Where was my dress? Since I apparently wasn’t getting flowers, getting my dress back would be nice.

“I’ve got your dress in the car,” said Nick. “I couldn’t carry everything at once. I’ll just go and get it. Back in a sec, if you’ll excuse me.”

He disappeared down the hallway.

“Go with him,” whispered Ron, shooing me off with her hands. “Go on.”

I hesitated then followed after Nick.

“Just come to make sure it's my dress and not some other girl's.” I said when he turned to look at me halfway down the path.

“You look lovely,” he said.

Unfortunately it was still daylight so he saw me go red.

“Thank you,” I said, a little shyly. I hadn't expected a compliment since he was normally full of banter. “So do you.”

He was wearing a nicely tailored suit that suited him.

“I've got your present,” he added. “I'll just get the dress.”

He lifted my dress, still wrapped in a dry cleaner's plastic wrapper and slung it over his arm.

“Let's go back inside,” he said, locking the car.

Ron and Max were in the lounge when I followed him back in.

“This is for you,” he said, pulling a slim box from his pocket and handing it to me.

“Ohhh,” I said, “thank you.” It looked like a jewellery box.

I opened it and stared in astonishment. It was a cheap, everyday can opener.

“I had it engraved,” he said. “Look.” He pointed to one of the handles. Sure enough it had “Telly Beans” engraved on it.

“I don't know what to say,” I said, since I didn't know what to say. A can opener?

I glanced at Ron and she raised her eyebrows at me. A can opener. Oh goody.

Nick seemed oblivious.

“Where can I hang this?” he asked, lifting the coat hanger at the top of my dress.

“Let me,” said Max, taking the dress and hanging it from the edge of a shelf on a bookcase.

“I got you this too,” said Nick, holding out a neatly wrapped package that had been hidden under the dress.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, taking it, hoping it was a little better than the can opener.

Max and Ron were watching, fascinated.

I pulled the wrapper off and held it up. It was a tee shirt. Admittedly quite a nice shade of blue but, a tee shirt?

“Read the front,” he said. “I thought it was perfect for Miss Telly Pedantic.”

I turned the tee shirt around. “I may be WRONG but it's highly unlikely” greeted me.

“Very nice,” I said, nonplussed. Ron giggled and Max looked slightly embarrassed.

“Oh dear,” said Nick. “My little jokes aren't working the way I expected.”

“They're both lovely,” I said, using my interview enthusiastic voice.

“There's probably no point in giving you the other one then, I suppose,” he said, a touch sadly.

“You've got me three presents?” I asked, really not looking forward to the third one. “You shouldn't have.”

Ron wasn't going to let me forget this in a hurry.

“Probably not,” he said, “but it's done now. Oh well, here you are.”

He pulled out another, more boxy, jewellery type box.

“Not another frigging can opener,” I thought, taking it a little reluctantly.

“Open it,” he said encouragingly.

Ron and Max were silently watching and I couldn't imagine what they were thinking.

“Jesus,” I said, opening it and staring blankly. “Are those real diamonds?”

Chapter Seven

“Oh, I doubt it very much,” he said, smiling. “I picked them up at a church fete a while ago for a few pounds and I've been looking for someone to palm them off onto.”

“What are they?” piped up Ron, looking up at me.

“Earrings,” I said, passing the box to her. Spiral twist white gold stud earrings with a couple of diamonds, or whatever they were, in the centre of each.

“Ohhh, they're nice,” she said. “Are you sure they aren't diamonds?”

“They're probably zircona or moissanite,” said Nick. “I couldn't have afforded them if they were real diamonds, sorry. They're definitely not plastic though.”

“They look quite old,” said Ron. “Something granny would have worn. Still, very nice though.”

She gave them back to me and I looked at them again. They really were quite nice.

“I thought they'd go with your green eyes,” said Nick, looking at me. He seemed to have less of his self assurance than usual.

“They're lovely,” I said, meaning it. “Thank you.”

I fumbled the box trying to get them out but managed not to drop it. I was wearing a pair of cheap hoops from Baublebar and I slipped them out quickly and put in Nick's spirals and checked them out in the mirror over the mantelpiece. They did seem to go with my eyes quite nicely. I flicked my hair back behind my ears so the earrings would stand out better.

“They suit you,” said Max, looking at me in the mirror.

I had to agree but I kept looking at them a bit longer since I couldn't decide whether to give Nick a thank you kiss on the cheek or the lips.

I turned and grabbed his hand and kissed him on the cheek. After all, Ron and Max were there too.

“Thank you,” I said again, giving his hand a squeeze.

“Dinner's ready,” said Ron, disappearing into the kitchen.

“Damn,” said Max, striding off behind her. “I forgot to let the wine breathe. I'll go and open it now.”

“We ought to go through,” I said to Nick, starting off towards the kitchen but he didn't let go of my hand.

“Do you really like them?” he asked.

I came back and stood close.

“Yes,” I said, looking into his eyes, “I really like them.

I thought he was going to kiss me on the lips but he didn't. He just looked into my eyes with his grey-blue ones then he gave a soft smile and his eyes crinkled.

“Good,” he said. “Come on then.”

We walked into the kitchen holding hands.

“Lordy,” said Nick, suddenly stopping. “It's huge.”

“We gutted the original kitchen,” said Max, “and knocked out a wall before fitting a new one. Do you want to sit here? Telly, you sit there.”

We sat as directed and Max leaned on the back of his own chair.

“You see where the ceiling drops a couple of inches?” he said, pointing. “That was where the old wall was but it made for a very small kitchen.”

“I can see that,” said Nick. “This is a much better layout.”

“The old kitchen was a bit pokey,” said Ron, coming over and plonking a basket of bread rolls on the table. “Max, would you get the casserole out? It was just about OK when I could stand but in this chair I couldn’t turn around or get to anything. It seemed a waste having an extra room we hardly used so we knocked this one into the kitchen and that gave me lots of room to manoeuvre.”

Max brought the casserole dish over and put it on a woven mat on the table.

“Is it my imagination or are all the units lower than normal?” asked Nick.

“Yes and no,” said Max, going back to the oven to get the potatoes. “They’re all adjustable, actually, look.” He pushed a button on the edge of one of the counters and it started to rise up. “That’s so they’re not too low for anyone standing up.”

“Impressive,” said Nick. “Must have cost a lot.”

“A fortune,” said Ron, bringing over a dish of peas. “But we did it through the insurance.”

“You remember I told you Ron was hit by a car?” I asked. He nodded. “The driver’s insurance company wouldn’t pay out so Max’s firm took them to court.”

“I’m a paralegal,” said Max. “The company I work for did it pro bono which was nice of them.”

“Right, that’s everything, let’s eat,” said Ron.

“Wine, Nick?” asked Max.

“Please,” said Nick.

“Damn, forgot the serving spoons,” said Ron.

“I’ll get them,” I said, jumping up. I brought them over and Ron started to dish up the food. I casually pulled the plate of potatoes

closer to me but Ron grabbed it and passed it to Nick.

“That was fortunate,” said Nick. “What would have happened if you hadn't worked for a law firm?”

“We'd have still probably gone to court,” said Max. “No point in asking you if you want wine, is there, Tel.”

“No,” I said, “and don't scrimp. We've got Nick's to get through as well.”

He laughed and poured me some wine then Ron and himself.

“No, it would have been Legal Aid though,” he continued, “and the final payout would have been less, a lot less. We were able to make a lot of modifications to make Ron's life easier.”

“They're trapped though,” I said, willing Nick to take fewer potatoes. It didn't work and the pile on the plate was noticeably smaller by the time he passed it on.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“Nick doesn't want to know that sort of stuff,” admonished Ron.

“They can't afford to move,” I said. “Another place would need to be modified all over again and this place would be difficult to sell.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Nick. “Oh, this is absolutely delicious, and these potatoes ...”

“Potatoes are fattening,” I said. “Better not have too many.” There were barely enough for me to have seconds so I ate a little faster so I'd get first dibs.

He just smiled and ate another one pointedly.

“I don't suppose you like jazz, Nick?” asked Max.

“Some,” he said. “I prefer swing and dixieland to the more modern

stuff. I used to play a little myself, a long time ago.”

“Oh really,” said Max, perking up. “What, you played an instrument?”

“Saxophone,” said Nick. “I was in the school jazz band.”

“Oh god,” said Ron, smiling, “another jazz fanatic. Don't invite him round again.”

“Take no notice of that philistine,” said Max. “It was my misfortune to marry into an uncultured family. Do you know what that one likes?” pointing at me.

“Justin Beiber?” asked Nick.

“Worse,” said Max, grimacing. “She likes techno. Can you believe it?”

“At least you can dance to it,” I retorted. “Not like that discordant racket you listen to.”

“Music isn't meant to be danced to,” said Max. “It's to be listened to and appreciated.”

“Jazz is for old farts who can't get off the couch,” I said.

“Personally, I like Barry Manilow,” said Ron.

We all ignored her.

“What sort of jazz did you play in your school band?” asked Max.

“Mostly Glen Miller and things like that,” said Nick.

“Did you keep it up after school?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I went to uni and more or less forgot about it. I've still got my sax somewhere but I haven't touched it in years.”

“He did chemistry,” I said.

“You must be very clever,” said Ron. “I didn't go to uni and Max failed his law degree.”

“It was beyond me,” said Max. “It went completely over my head. Criminal law and tort weren't too bad but trusts and tax law, ugh.” He shuddered. “Telly's the clever one in the family. She nearly did a doctorate.”

“I'm impressed,” said Nick, looking over at me. “You've never even hinted at that. What subject?”

“Modern history,” I said. “Easier than ancient history.”

“So why didn't you do a doctorate?”

“I couldn't really see the point,” I said. “A doctorate in history doesn't really take you anywhere unless you want to be a history professor, which I didn't. Not like chemistry. You could have made some wonderful discovery and made a fortune or saved lots of lives.”

“Telly said you're a buyer for a plastics company?” said Ron.

“Yes, Proctor & Smart Plastics, up in Highgate.”

“That must be very interesting. Would you like some more casserole?”

I hurriedly scooped the remaining potatoes onto my plate.

“Oh, yes, please,” he said. “Shall I help myself? No, it's really quite dull. I spend my days arguing with chemical companies. How've your interviews been going Telly? Had any offers yet?”

“Waste of time,” I said. “Hey, you remember that one I'd just had when I met you?”

“Literary agent?” he said. “You said they didn't like you.”

“Worse than that,” I said. “I had a letter from them yesterday turning me down. They'd only posted it the day before the interview!”

“That's not very good,” he said. “It must have been an internal appointment and they got outsiders just to make it look unbiased. I hate it when that happens. How about the others?”

“She corrected the interviewer when he made a mistake,” said Max. “Then she wonders why she didn't get the job.”

Nick laughed. “Doesn't surprise me,” he said.

“So you think I should have agreed with him?” I asked.

“No,” said Max. “You should have corrected him. Let's just hope that your next interviewer knows what he's talking about.”

“Maybe I should wear my tee shirt to the next one,” I said. “So they know what to expect.”

“Take the can opener too,” said Ron, “to show you're flexible and willing to pitch in whatever the task.”

“And there was me thinking I'd ballsed the present up,” said Nick.

“It was touch and go for a while there,” I said, touching my earring.

“My jokes don't always work,” said Nick. “Not for me, thanks, I'm driving.”

Max topped up my glass without asking and Ron shook her head so he topped his up instead.

“You're doing fine,” said Ron, glancing at me. “It's nice to have a bit of humour around here. I'm on my own most of the time and no one jokes around in a law firm, do they, Max.”

“God no,” he said. “If anyone cracked a joke there'd be a defamation suit or something.”

“So have you any more interviews lined up, Telly?” asked Nick, using the butt end of a roll to mop up the last of his casserole.

“No,” I said. “Word’s got around that I’m in London and all the decent jobs have gone into hiding. Much longer and I’m going to have to go on benefits.”

“That’s not good,” he said. “A friend of mine was on benefits for nearly a year. He got very depressed.”

“I know the feeling,” I said. “It’s soul destroying when you can’t find a job.”

“What do you do, Ron?” he asked. “It must be difficult for you being tied to a wheelchair.”

“It was dreadful to start with,” she said. “I used to be a chef and worked in a big restaurant kitchen and it took me a long time to come to terms with not being able to do what I used to do. Anyway, I’m a writer now.”

“Awesome,” he said. “What sort of writing? Novels?”

“No, restaurant reviews and food articles mostly, and I’ve got a food blog aimed at those with disabilities. We just haven’t figured out how to monetise it yet.”

“But it keeps you occupied?” he asked.

“Not really. It’s building but very slowly. I’ll miss Telly when she goes back to Canterbury.”

“You’re going back to Canterbury?” said Ron, looking at me, horrified. “When?”

“That’s news to me,” said Max, also looking horrified but considerably less so.

“I’m not going back to Canterbury,” I said.

“You said you were going back to become a waitress,” said Ron, looking pleased for some reason.

“That was only because of that crappy interview,” I said. “I didn't mean it. Something will turn up here sooner or later.”

Nick looked relieved. “Definitely,” he said. “Everyone in London's on the move. Things are opening up all the time. All you have to do is keep applying and sooner or later it will all come together. Umm, where's the toilet?”

“You're not feeling sick, are you?” asked Ron, anxiously. “We haven't had dessert yet.”

“Oh god, no,” said Nick. “I just need a pee. Too much coffee at work this afternoon on an empty stomach, trying to stay awake.”

“Down the hall on the right,” said Max. “The light comes on automatically when you shut the door.”

“Great, thanks,” said Nick, standing up. “I'll be back in a minute or two.”

“What the hell did you say I was going back to Canterbury for?” I whispered angrily when he'd gone.

“To see how he'd react,” Ron whispered back. “Did you see how horrified he was?” She gave me a grin and a double thumbs up.

“So you like him then?” I muttered.

“Yes, and Max loves him,” she whispered, “but do you?”

“What are you two whispering about?” asked Max, coming back from the kitchen with a rhubarb crumble.

“Oh, nothing,” said Ron, “just girl talk. Would you warm the custard in the microwave for 45 seconds, hon?”

“Sure,” he said, going back to the other end of the kitchen.

“Did you make the bread yourself?” asked Nick, coming back.

“Ron makes wonderful bread,” I said.

“I thought it didn't taste like shop bread,” he said, sitting down. “I got some bread from the supermarket last week that smelled like sweat.”

“That was probably the bleach some places use for the flour,” said Ron. “I only ever use unbleached flour.”

“Is it more expensive than bleached?” he asked.

“Yes, but it tastes a lot better and it's healthier too.”

“I had a thought in the toilet,” said Nick.

“Did you wash your hands afterwards?” I asked.

“I did, yes, but it wasn't a dirty thought, don't worry,” he said.

“Are you going to share it with us?” asked Max, bringing over the custard.

“Is that rhubarb crumble?” said Nick, suddenly looking excited. “I haven't had that since I was a kid. I used to love it!”

“You're up against his mum's cooking, now, Ron,” said Max. “Brace yourself for bad news.”

She laughed and piled a couple of serving spoonfuls into a bowl and handed it to Nick. “Help yourself to custard.”

We sat and watched him eat the first spoonful. He theatrically closed his eyes and moaned with pleasure.

“Forgive me, mum,” he said, looking towards heaven, “but that's the best rhubarb crumble I have ever tasted.”

Ron beamed and I rolled my eyes. Nick winked at me and shovelled in another mouthful.

“So what was your thought?” I asked as Ron dished out smaller

helpings for the rest of us.

“Well,” he said, “I was standing there, ...”

“Too much information,” I said. “Get to the thinking bit.”

“Isn't that what men think with?” asked Max. “That's what Ron's always telling me.”

“Not funny, dear,” said Ron. “You were saying, Nick?”

“Yes, I was thinking, since you and Telly have time on your hands, why don't you make lunches and sell them on the industrial estates?” said Nick.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, take where I work, for example,” he said then put another spoonful of crumble into his mouth so we had to wait. “There's no cafes around for miles so if people don't bring in anything for lunch there's nowhere to go. Like me today.”

“So you're saying set up a cafe?” asked Ron. “I can't manage a cafe.”

“No,” he said. “I was thinking more of things like sandwiches and rolls. You could make them and Telly could sell them on the estate and you could split the profits. That way Telly's making some sort of income and won't have to go back to Canterbury.”

“Would it make any money?” I asked.

“Don't see why not,” he said, “unless you give them away. And you could always expand to other estates.”

“What if there are cafes there?” asked Max, “or other people selling sandwiches?”

“That's why I asked if Ron made the bread. If she makes the bread for the sandwiches like these rolls then you'd see off any competition. They wouldn't begin to be able to compete using shop bought bread.”

“Actually it's an idea,” said Ron. “But how would we sell them? What do we make? How many? If there's any left over we'd make a loss.”

“It was only a short pee,” said Nick. “I don't have all the answers.”

“Actually, a couple of ways spring to mind,” said Max, thoughtfully. “You could distribute leaflets with a list of what sandwiches and rolls you're offering and take them round or you could get people to phone through their orders before a certain time and just make what's been ordered. Maybe a few extras for those who forget.”

“Worth thinking about,” said Ron. “I do miss working in a kitchen and I could do my writing in the afternoons.”

“I can see a big problem,” I said. “Since I'll be doing the sales and distribution side, I can't take all that many sandwiches on the bus. Couple of bagfulls, tops.”

“Could be a problem,” Nick admitted. “Hadn't thought of that.”

“We can get around it,” said Max. “You could use our car for the first few weeks and I can take the train to work. Then if it takes off it would be worth getting a cheap little van or something and if it doesn't, you can give up and I can go back to driving to work.”

“What if I get a job?” I asked, quite reasonably I thought. “After all, you all say it's going to happen sooner or later.”

We all pondered this, seemingly unlikely, problem.

“I guess we'd just fold the business,” said Ron.

“Or you could take on someone to sell the sandwiches and you carry on making them,” said Max, “if that's what you want to do.”

“You could even sell the business if it's picked up,” said Nick. “You know, a going concern. It could go for as long or short a time as you want it to. When you get sick of it or Telly gets a job, just walk away. You've no premises to worry about or staff or anything, just yourselves.”

“It's certainly an idea to think about,” said Ron. “Help me clear away the dishes, would you, Max.”

Max and Ron started clearing away the dishes and stacking them in the dishwasher.

“Should I offer to help?” whispered Nick.

“No,” I whispered back, shaking my head. “Ron's very independent.”

“What are you whispering about?” asked Ron, coming back for some more dishes.

“I was just asking Nick if he wanted to come to the pictures with us tomorrow,” I said.

“I'm sure he'd rather I wasn't there,” said Ron.

“I'd love to,” said Nick, “only I have to go away this weekend.”

“Ohh? A romantic weekend getaway with your girlfriend?” I asked, hoping that he'd say no.

“Sort of,” he said, grinning. “I'm going kayaking with a friend of mine, down on Wimbleball Lake, on Exmoor.”

“She likes kayaking?” I asked.

“He loves it,” said Nick. “He's down there for the week but I'm not that much of a fan and I've work commitments anyway so I could only go at the weekends. Last weekend and this. But, umm, if your free, maybe sometime in the week ...?”

He glanced at me then at Ron.

“Oh, I'm busy all week,” she said. “But Telly's a layabout. She's free every night.”

“I'm a very busy person, too,” I said. “I'm starting evening classes.”

“What in?” asked Nick.

“Applications and Techniques for Can Openers,” I said. “It's a very demanding course.”

He laughed.

“Maybe I could call you when I get back Sunday evening?” he said. “You'll have had time to find a slot for me in your hectic schedule.”

Ron yawned. “Oh god, I'm sorry,” she said apologetically. “It's just nearly my bedtime.”

“No need to apologise,” said Nick, looking at his watch. “I really mustn't outstay my welcome and I've got an early start in the morning. I'd better be off. Thank you for the most delightful dinner. It's been a pleasure.”

“I hope we'll see you again,” said Ron.

“Yes,” said Max. “Next time I'll play you some of my jazz collection.”

“That would be wonderful,” said Nick, “if I'm ever invited again.”

“Oh, I'm sure you will be,” said Ron.

“I'll show you to the door,” I said, before Ron could organise my love life for me. She wasn't always as subtle as she thought she was.

“Your lipstick's smeared,” said Ron when I came back ten minutes later.

“You're just jealous,” I said, grabbing a tissue from the box.

“When ...?” she started.

“Wednesday,” I said. “OK?”

She smiled. “We're off to bed, see you in the morning.”

“Before you go,” I said. “Where’s Exmoor?”

“It’s in Devon, I think,” said Max. “Look it up on your phone.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, looking it up on my phone. “Well some of it is anyway. The rest is in Somerset. Oh, there’s Wimbleball Lake. What is kayaking anyway?”

“Some sort of canoeing, I think,” said Max. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Wimbleball Lake’s only 20 miles from Taunton,” I said. “You have to go through it to get to London. Oh shit.”

Chapter Eight

“No,” said Ron. “It’s just a coincidence.”

“Hell of a coincidence,” I said, sitting on the arm of the armchair. “I don’t even know where Taunton is and suddenly I meet a guy who was there when a nasty letter to me was posted.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous, Telly,” said Ron. “Thousands of people go through Taunton and visit Exmoor every day, especially from London. There’s no reason to think it was Nick.”

“Think what was Nick?” asked Max, hovering in the doorway.

“Tel had a poison pen letter a few days ago,” said Ron. “It was postmarked Taunton last Monday.”

“A poison pen letter? What? Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Max, frowning.

“It wasn’t a biggie,” I said. “Someone just said everyone hates me.”

“But you think it was Nick?” he persisted.

“I was just surprised by the coincidence,” I said. “I met him on Tuesday and got the letter yesterday and today I find out he was near Taunton when the letter was posted. He didn’t know I existed last weekend so it can’t be him.”

“It is possible he’s been stalking you for a while, I suppose,” said Ron, “but how would he know where you’d be on Tuesday?”

“That’s right,” I said. “It’s absurd.”

“Anyway, it’s obvious he doesn’t hate you,” said Ron, putting her hand on my arm.

“Have you just had the one letter?” asked Max, “or have there been others?”

“Just the one,” I said. “I binned it.”

“Hmm,” he said. “The sender just said everyone hated you? Nothing else? No threats or anything?”

“No,” I said. “It was very trivial. It was even quite politely written, no swearing or accusations or anything.”

“So you're not bothered by it?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I was a little when I first read it but I got over it very quickly.”

“Come on, let's go to bed,” said Ron. “The world's full of strange people and Nick seems to be not too far off normal although why he gave you a can opener is beyond me. That tee shirt was spot on though.”

“Oh, that was my fault,” I said. “I was joking about not being able to cook and said something about only opening cans so it wasn't as weird as it looked.”

“So long as you think so,” said Ron, “although if Max had given me a can opener I'd have dumped him there and then. Anyway, don't over think it and go jumping to silly conclusions. That letter could even have been meant for someone else. Just because someone's a weird freak it doesn't mean they never make mistakes.”

“Good point,” I said, sliding back into the chair so my legs hung over the arm. “It was probably meant for you anyway. One of your net weirdos has found out where you live and got the name wrong.”

“What net weirdos?” said Max, alarmed.

“The net's full of them,” said Ron. “Anyone who's a regular contributor online gets attention from people who won't take their medication. It's par for the course.”

He stared at her for a few heartbeats. “Why does no one in this damned house ever tell me anything?” he demanded.

“Because you always overreact with anything that might upset me,” said Ron calmly, taking his hand, “and I love you for it but there’s nothing you can do about it. Glaring at me like that won’t help, either! Come on, let’s go to bed, I’m exhausted.”

Max subsided but I had a feeling this wasn’t going to be the end of it. I stayed up for another hour or so and tried to read a book but I kept thinking about Nick. Mostly nice thoughts but that letter didn’t entirely go away from my mind.

* * *

“Have you had any thought’s about Nick’s idea about sandwiches?” Ron said unexpectedly the next day.

Max had been cutting the grass while Ron and I had made helpful comments from the patio and I’d made some tea and brought it out to help us recuperate from the joint effort. It was a nice day even though it was fairly cool.

“Yes,” I said, “although I wanted to see what you thought first, since you’ll have the hard part making them. I’ll just be handing them out and taking the cash.”

Ron laughed. “I thought it was the other way around,” she said. “Making them’s the fun part, it’s dealing with the public that’s a bummer.”

“Sounds like you both think it’s a good idea,” said Max.

“Seems to me that’s there’s nothing to lose,” said Ron. “Worst case is I make some and no one wants them so we eat them for dinner and don’t bother after that.”

“Yeah, I thought the same,” I said. “Outlay a couple of quid for some plastic wrap and petrol and if it’s a no goer we haven’t spent much, especially if Nick can get us plastic wrap cheap. It’s not like you need any extra equipment.”

“Actually, some more bread tins would be useful,” said Ron, “although

I can just do rolls to start with. I was thinking about it this morning while Max was asleep. If I freeze the dough after the first rise it'll only need an overnight rise before baking which will streamline things in the mornings. It's just a matter of keeping organised."

"How much would you charge?" asked Max. "It seems pointless if the two of you work your butts off for a tenner a day each."

"I was thinking about that," I said. "It seemed to me that if we go for quality then we can be quite expensive and if someone tries to undercut us on price they'll suffer on the quality."

"Makes sense," said Max, "especially as you won't be able to produce hundreds of sandwiches a day so keep them expensive and a bit exclusive."

"Can you do fancy sarnies, Ron?" I asked.

"How fancy do you want?" she snorted. "How about Mortadella, roast pork and apple or porcini and Taleggio? That gourmet enough for you?"

"What's Taleggio?" I asked.

"It's a soft rind cheese," she said, "with a bit of a fruity taste."

"I think we're going to have to do a lot of experimenting," I said, beginning to salivate. "How about we start today?"

"You'd better not eat all the profits," she said, wagging a finger at me.

"Got to check the flavour combinations," I said. "Especially as people might ask me what they taste like."

"She's got a point," said Max. "Wouldn't mind a cheese and mushroom sandwich for lunch myself."

"I haven't got any porcini or Taleggio," she said, "but there's some left over casserole."

“How about other things, like dim sims and samosas and scotch eggs?” I asked.

“No problem,” said Ron “although where will you sleep when we install all the extra ovens in your room?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I forgot that stuff’ll need cooking. Maybe salads? I love salad rolls.”

“I’m going to have to do a menu of some sort, aren’t I?” said Ron. “Hmmm.”

She pulled a notepad and pen out of the pouch on the side of her chair and subsided into thought, scribbling and crossing things out.

“Well that’s the last we’ll hear from her for a few hours,” said Max. “Have you thought about marketing?”

“I thought maybe drawing up a list with prices and just handing them out round the businesses saying I’d be in a certain place at a certain time each day.”

“Be easier if we got people to phone in,” said Ron, coming out of her menu mode momentarily. “Then I can just make what’s been ordered and you could deliver direct to the door and collect the money.”

“OK,” I said. “Sounds better than hanging around on street corners.”

“I’d have thought you’d be used to that by now,” said Ron before returning to the world of food.

I ignored her pointedly but she didn’t notice, just scribbled some more.

“Why don’t we go and do a leaflet on your computer, Max?” I asked, feeling proactive and enthusiastic. “Then we can print some out and I can deliver them tomorrow.”

He thought about it for a few moments.

“Actually, I think it would be a good idea to have a look at the industrial estate first. It might be huge or full of tiny little places and you'd need to walk round for hours.”

“Fair point,” I said, “and it would be a good idea to check out possible spots to stop as well if that turns out to be the way to go. Come on, let's go and see.”

I finished my tea and jumped up.

“Hold on,” said Max. “Where is it?”

“Ahh,” I said, sitting back down again. “Buggered if I know.”

“What was the name of Nick's company?” he asked. “I'll just get my phone.”

He got up and went inside.

“Something Plastics,” I said when he came back out. “I think he said it was in Highgate.”

“That's a great help,” he said, sitting down.

“Something and Something Plastics,” said Ron, “two words. How about smoked salmon and dill mayonnaise?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “I'm famished.”

She ignored me.

“Proctor & Smart?” asked Max, looking at his phone. “That's the only one I can find in Highgate.”

“Sounds familiar,” I said. “What's the address?”

“Telron Industrial Estate,” he said. “That sounds auspicious.”

“You're kidding,” I said. “Hey Ron, did you hear that?”

“Yeah, it’s a sign,” she said. “Do you think I should do both chicken and turkey sandwiches or just one?”

“Just chicken,” I said. “Turkeys are huge and will take up all your oven.”

“Good point,” she said and crossed something off the list. “Will twenty choices be enough do you reckon or should I do more?”

“Any vegetarian?” asked Max.

“Umm, seven,” she said, scanning the list.

“That’ll be fine,” I said. “We can always change things as we go and if anyone asks for anything in particular I’ll make a note. Shall we go?”

“Go where?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Nick’s industrial estate,” I said. “Check out how many businesses there are and how big it is and so on.”

“Oh, good idea,” she said. “I’ll come too, then we can see where Nick works.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, trying to pretend I hadn’t thought of that. “Good idea.”

It took about an hour to get there, mostly getting ourselves organised.

“Big place,” said Max, pulling up at the main entrance to Telron Industrial Estate.

He peered over at the large sign listing the businesses.

“Looks like there are sixty four of them. No, sixty three, there’s no number thirteen.”

“Nick’s number eleven,” I said, for no good reason. “Shall we have a look round?”

“There are some pretty big businesses here,” said Max as we drove round. “I’d say some of them have twenty or thirty staff. You know, if you made £2 profit on each roll and sold just two to each business you’ll be making over a hundred quid a day each.”

“That’s a hundred and twenty rolls a day,” I said. “Can we cope with that many?”

“How many can you do at a time, Ron?” asked Max.

“Probably sixteen,” said Ron. “Say, twenty minutes a batch that’s, what, fifty an hour?”

“More or less,” he said.

“So if I started baking the rolls at 8 in the morning I could have a hundred and fifty or so by eleven. Put in the fillings as the next batch are baking so all done by say 1. Better start at 7 to be safe.”

“If we get people to phone through before 10 we’d know how many to do,” I said, “and it would still give at least an hour and a half before I had to leave. Ohhh, look, that’s where Nick works!”

It was one of the bigger businesses on the estate and looked to be fairly prosperous. I wanted to stop to peer in the windows but was embarrassed to ask.

“So what do you think?” asked Max on the way home. “Viable?”

“I think so,” said Ron. “Tel?”

“When shall we start?” I asked.

“How about Monday week?” she said. “We need some time to get organised. You’ll need some trays or something to carry them in, you can’t just chuck them in the back of the car and we’ll need to get some paper bags and serviettes and things. We’ll need to eat some of the stuff in the freezer too to make room and I’ll start making the dough during the week. When do you want to do the leaflets?”

“Not too early,” I said. “People will forget if I do. How about Thursday?”

“Good idea,” said Max. “And you can ask Nick about plastic wrap when you see him on Wednesday.”

“Oh, I'm sure she'll be talking to him before that,” said Ron with a knowing smile.

“He said he'd ring on Sunday, when he gets home,” I said. “I wonder where he lives?”

“Probably Taunton,” said Ron, laughing.

“Not funny,” I said. “Just for that I'm putting your phone number on the leaflets.”

“Ahh, no thanks,” said Ron.

“That's a point,” said Max. “We'd better get another phone, just for the business. Don't want any cranks calling Telly all hours of the day and night since she'll be visible. I'll stop at the supermarket on the way back and see if they're any cheap ones on special.”

* * *

I had another letter the following Wednesday, also postmarked Taunton, that Monday.

Hello Estelle

I really hate bitches like you. Just wanted you to be quite clear on that point.

You deserved it.

Iron Man

“Another one,” I said, passing it to Ron. “This is beginning to annoy me.”

“Don't let it get to you, hon,” she said, reading it. “That's what he wants you to do. I wonder what it was he thinks you deserved?”

“God knows,” I said. “Maybe he just means I deserved the letter.”

Ron passed it back and I put it in the envelope.

“Bin it,” said Ron. “If you keep it you'll only worry about it.”

“Nah,” I said. “I'm going to ask Nick about it. See how he reacts.”

“Ohhh, you really think that's a good idea?” she asked, frowning.

“If it is him I need to know,” I said, “before I get too involved.”

“And if it isn't him he might be really pissed off that you think it might be,” said Ron.

“That's a risk I have to take,” I said. “Anyway, I'm hoping he'll be more concerned than pissed off, assuming it wasn't him.”

“Ooh Kay,” she said slowly. “It's your life. Umm, rather than ask if he sent it, why not tell him about it and say you're giving it to your lawyers who are looking in to it, the other one as well. See if that makes him nervous.”

“You mean Max?” I asked. “Actually that's not a bad idea. That way I'm not even remotely accusing him.”

“Oh god,” she said, looking worried. “Just suppose it is him sending them, not that I'm saying it is, what's he going to do when you say you're giving it to lawyers? What if he panics and gets nasty?”

“Then I'll know,” I said, “and stop seeing him.”

“No, I mean, what if he hits you or something?”

“Shit, I didn't think of that,” I said. “No, all the more reason to show him. And if he's the type that's going to hit me I need to know that as well.”

“Is he picking you up here or are you meeting him at the restaurant?”

“He's picking me up,” I said. “You think I should bring up the letter here?”

“Yes,” she said. “But wait until Max is back before you do, just in case. I'm no use if things turn nasty.”

“Oh for god's sake,” I said. “Things aren't going to turn nasty. Nick's not sending these things. It's just some random fruitcake.”

“Then why mention them to him?” she asked.

“Because I need to know,” I said. “Before I get to like him too much.”

“Well, there is that, isn't there,” she said. “So you think that's going to happen?”

“Back off, Ron,” I said, with a laugh. “I'm not organising bridesmaids after two dates.”

“I don't want to be your bridesmaid,” she said, looking serious. “But it's interesting that that's what you thought of. I'll do the catering, though.”

“Oh faf,” I said. “You're not doing the catering either. Stop trying to marry me off!”

“Hey, it wasn't me who brought up the subject,” she said. “I was just asking how much you liked him.”

“I like him,” I said. “I like him enough to hope that it isn't him who's sending me these letters but if it is him, I don't like him enough to put up with it, that's for sure.”

* * *

“Hello, Nick, come on in,” said Max that evening, opening the front door.

“Is that Nick?” I shouted down the stairs. “Tell him I’ll be down in a minute.”

“She’ll be down in fifteen minutes,” said Max.

“One minute!” I shouted. “Maybe two.”

“I’ve brought a 250 metre roll of plastic food wrap,” said Nick. “What shall I do with it?”

“Oh, that’s very kind,” said Max, “let me take it. Come into the kitchen. Ron, here’s Nick’s. He’s brought some plastic wrap.”

“Awesome, thank you,” said Ron. “Just put it on the table, Max. How much do we owe you, Nick?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s a gift.”

“Oh, how kind,” said Ron. “Come on, bend down and let me give you a kiss.”

“Oi!” I said, coming into the kitchen. “Get your paws off my boyfriend!”

“Just thanking him for the wrap,” said Ron, pushing Nick away.

“Boyfriend, huh?” said Nick, grinning from ear to ear.

“Just a turn of phrase,” I said, feeling embarrassed. “Don’t read anything into it.”

“Of course not,” he said. “I didn’t hear what you said anyway. Your sister had her tongue in my ear.”

Ron gasped and side swiped him with her hand.

“You see? She can’t keep her hands off me!” said Nick.

“I’ve no idea what’s going on,” said Max looking confused, as he always did when humour broke out, “and I think I really don’t want to

know. Some coffee, Nick?”

Nick looked enquiringly at me.

“Sure,” I said. “A quick one, why not.”

“Thanks, Max,” he said. “Oh, and I've got those bakers' trays I promised. Four of them. You should be able to fit two in the boot and the other two on the back seat. I'll just go get them.”

“I'll open the garage,” I said. “We can put them in there for now.”

“If you need any more, let me know,” he said, stacking them in the garage. “We make a couple of hundred a week.”

“Oh, four will be more than enough,” I said. “We'll need a bigger kitchen and some staff before we need any more than that. Come on, let me show you our leaflet.”

I closed the garage door and turned out the light and we took advantage of the darkness for a few moments before going inside the house.

“They sound delicious,” said Nick, reading the leaflet. “I'll take two every day and if you give me a handful of leaflets I'll pass them around at work and recommend you.”

“Great, thanks,” I said. “How many?”

“Umm, twenty if you can spare them. That way I can give everybody one.”

“Come on into the lounge,” I said, counting out twenty. Max could always print off a few more. “There's something I want to show you.”

Ron was already in there and Max followed us with the drinks.

“What do you want to show me?” asked Nick, sitting on the couch in Max's spot.

I handed him the letter.

“What's this?” he asked, taking it and glancing at it. “You've written me a letter?”

“It's hate mail,” I said. “Read it.”

He opened the envelope and pulled out the letter and read it. He frowned and his face hardened.

“Who ...?” he said, looking up at me.

“We don't know,” I said, “but I'm passing it to my lawyers for them to deal with. I just wanted to see what you thought first.”

“Me?” he asked. “I don't know anything about hate mail.”

He reread the letter then looked at the envelope.

“Ohhh,” he said. “Taunton. You think I sent it?”

Chapter Nine

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

Had something shifty passed momentarily through his eyes or had I imagined it?

“It's postmarked last Monday and I was near Taunton last weekend,” he said, looking at the envelope again. “I'd think the same if it was the other way around.”

“You think I'd send hate mail?” I said hotly.

“Calm down, Tel,” said Ron, tapping me on the hip.

Nick looked at me sadly.

“No,” he said. “I don't think you would send hate mail. I was merely saying it's not unreasonable for you to wonder if it was me. After all, I only met you last week and a few days later you get hate mail from somewhere I was. Have you taken it to the police?”

“No,” I said. “Do you think I should?”

“It's too late now,” he said. “My fingerprints are already on it and, thinking about it, my fingerprints not being on it wouldn't prove anything anyway. I might have used gloves or something to handle it.”

“Tell him about the other one,” said Ron.

“There have been others?” he asked, frowning.

“I got one last week,” I said. “Also from Taunton, also postmarked Monday.”

“The day after I was there then, too? Damn, no wonder you think it's me.”

“I don't think it's you,” I said. “It was already in the post when I met you and since we'd never met before and I'd only just moved here, I

don't see how or why you'd do it.”

“I might be the friend or relative of someone who hates you,” he said, looking back at the letter. “They could have given me your address and I could have arranged to bump into you.”

“I suppose it's possible,” said Max, “but it's getting pretty far-fetched. For what it's worth, I've met any number of guilty people and you didn't react like a guilty person.”

“Well, at least someone believes me,” said Nick, looking at me again. “Maybe I should take Max to dinner instead.”

“Don't be silly,” I said. “Max is married to a professional chef, why would he go to dinner with you?”

“For my sparkling wit and repartee?” said Nick. “Incidentally, this looks like a perfectly ordinary envelope and photocopy paper that you can get in any office supply store. I'd say it was a bog standard laser printer, as well, so there's no information to be had there. Sherlock Holmes would be clueless in our modern mass produced world. Why Iron Man, do you think?”

“Some underdeveloped inadequate little tosser, I expect,” said Ron, “trying to compensate for having no life.”

“Maybe,” said Max. “Hey, I wonder if it's an anagram? They do things like that in thrillers and crimes stories so the author can show off how clever they are.”

We all fell silent as we tried to think of an anagram for 'Iron Man'.

“Marino,” I said suddenly, “Marino's an anagram.”

“Marino?” said Ron. “What the hell does that mean? Do you know anyone called Marino?”

“No,” I had to admit, “but I've heard the word.”

“I think it's some sort of sheep,” said Nick. “There's a lot of sheep in

Somerset.”

“No, it isn't,” said Max. “You missed an 'n'. Iron Man has two ns and marino only has one.”

“Bugger,” I said.

“Armenian,” said Ron, who was writing on her notepad. “No, that doesn't fit.”

“Romanian? No, that doesn't fit either,” said Max.

“I'm going on the net to find an anagram thing,” said Nick, pulling out his phone. “OK, do any of these mean anything to you?” He read out a list of words.

“No,” I said, shaking my head.

“I'm looking at a site that gives multiple word anagrams,” said Max, looking at his phone. “How about 'I Norman'?”

“I used to know a Norman,” I said. “But that was back at Uni and he wasn't the type to send hate mail. He was in the Uni's rugby team and if you upset him he'd just rip your arms off there and then.”

“So you like men like that?” asked Nick.

“God no,” I said. “But he was shagging my friend Amy and she dragged me along to a couple of matches.”

“So are you two staying here all night?” asked Ron. “Only dinner's nearly ready and if you're both staying I'd need to whip something else up.”

“I don't know,” said Nick. “I'm a bit confused, actually.”

“I'll get my coat,” I said. “Umm, that's if you still want to.”

“I do,” he said, standing up, “but I don't know if you want to now or not.”

"I'd like to," I said, "but you may not want to since I almost accused you of, well, you know."

"Oh for god's sake," said Ron. "Come on, Max, dinner's ready. Leave them to sort themselves out. There are some takeaway menus on the board in the kitchen if you need them, Tel."

She headed off towards the kitchen.

"Umm, if you're not going," said Max, a little diffidently, "I, erm, got a new record in the post yesterday. It's a 78 of Bix Beiderbecke's 'Since My Best Gal Turned Me Down' from 1936. Maybe you'd like to listen to it with me?"

"I'd love to, Max," said Nick. "But if we're not going out I'm not sure I want to hear about being turned down by my best girl."

"Oh god, that was insensitive of me," said Max. "You've got to go out with him now, Telly."

"Well, OK," I said, putting my jacket on, "but only since Max told me to. Come on, let's go."

"Don't go out with me unless you want to," said Nick, staying where he stood.

"She wants to," said Max. "She's never done anything I've said before. Owwww, that was my foot!"

"Sorry," I said, sweetly. "Didn't see it there. My bad."

"MAX!" shouted Ron from the kitchen.

"Coming!" called back Max. "Have fun! Bye."

Glancing back from the doorway I could see Nick was still standing in front of the couch, looking at me, irresolute, so I beckoned with my finger and he came running. I like that in a guy. We walked down the drive and got into his car in silence.

“Where are we going?” I asked after a while, mostly to try to ease the tension that pervaded his car, although it could have been the little pendant air freshener that hung from the rear view mirror.

“There’s a little Italian I know,” he said.

“Is he cute?” I asked, jokingly.

“A restaurant,” said Nick, shortly.

“I’m sorry,” I said, after an awkward pause. “I didn’t really think it was you, but I had to ask, just in case.”

“I quite understand,” he said, watching the road very carefully. “Very sensible of you.”

“Oh god, I hope it’s not going to be a thing,” I said twisting round to look at him. “Is it?”

“Why would it be a thing?” he asked. “You thought I was sending you hate mail. Hey, it happens to me all the time, I meet a nice girl, send her hate mail, just part of the romance.”

“Aha!” I said, jokingly. “So you admit it then?”

“Oh for crying out loud,” he muttered then suddenly pulled over to the side of the road. A car behind hooted angrily.

“How can I prove it wasn’t me?” he said, tensely, keeping both hands on the wheel. “How? Tell me and I’ll do it.” He thumped the wheel in his frustration and turned to look at me.

I stared out through the windscreen at a dead tree a few yards up the road. There was a man standing patiently while his dog peed against the tree. It didn’t provide any inspiration.

“You can’t,” I said, quietly. “That’s the horrible thing about it. It’s not what that sod said, that’s pretty trivial. The problem is how it sows the seeds of suspicion. I’ve even wondered if Ron or Max sent them. It destroys trust, that’s what’s so hateful about hate mail, not so much

the letters themselves.”

“Yeah,” he said, heavily. “Tell me about it.”

We sat in silence again then slowly he started the car.

“I’ll take you home,” he said, sighing and put the car into gear. “If you can’t trust me this is all rather pointless.”

“No,” I said, impulsively. “Don’t take me home.”

“I don’t want to go to a restaurant like this,” he said. “I’ll take you home then whenever you find out who is doing this, maybe you can ring me, OK?”

I sighed.

“Turn the engine off,” I said. “Turn it off.”

He turned the engine off and looked at me. The dog had finished peeing and was dragging the man past the car. He looked curiously at us but I ignored him.

“I should have done what Ron said,” I said. “I should have binned the letter and forgotten about it but I was trying to be clever, you see.”

I leaned over and took one of his hands in mine.

“I’m really sorry,” I said. “I didn’t think it all the way through.”

“It doesn’t actually matter,” said Nick. “Either way you still don’t trust me.”

I let go of his hand, my mind made up.

“OK,” I said. “Take me home.”

He started the engine again, his face deeply sad. There was a convenient gap in the traffic and he made a rather nifty U turn.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I’m taking you home,” he said, looking puzzled as well as sad now. “Like you said.”

“Not my home,” I said. “Yours. It’s back that way.” I gestured with my thumb towards the rear window.

“Are you serious?” he asked, looking at me.

“Yes,” I said. “I trust you. I hope you can cook 'cos I’m starving and I didn’t bring my can opener.”

Fortunately he was a good driver with excellent reactions and managed to just miss the car in front when it stopped at a pedestrian crossing to let the peeing dog with its attendant cross the road. Presumably the trees on the other side needed watering as well.

“Oops,” he said. “Sorry about that.”

The man with the dog must have thought we were mad since he watched Nick do another U turn while his dog inspected a road sign that said 'No U-Turns' and watched as we drove off up the road.

“He’s probably taken your number,” I said, impressed with my relative calmness and the quality of Nick’s car’s seat belts. “Although the cops can probably trace you from the skid marks on the road.”

“Who has?” asked Nick, looking puzzled again, although he wasn’t looking sad anymore.

“That man who crossed the road,” I said.

“What man?” he asked, looking in his side mirror.

“Never mind,” I said, happily. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it hadn’t been Nick who’d sent the letters. Don’t ask me how or why I knew, it was just intuition.

“So what’s for dinner?” I asked a little while later. The tension had

gone but the air freshener hadn't so that hadn't been the cause.

"I've been thinking about that," he said. "I've got some stuff in the freezer but most of it'll need defrosting so either it's frozen supermarket pizza or we stop somewhere and get a takeaway."

"I'm not eating it if it's frozen," I said. "I like my pizza soft and chewy not hard and crunchy."

"Jesus, for someone who can't cook you're incredibly fussy and demanding," he said.

"You'd better believe it," I said. "Demanding is my middle name."

He laughed. "Mine's Greyson," he said. "Dreadful isn't it."

I had to admit it was.

"That's not the worst part though," he said. "My surname's Keeling."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"My initials," he said. "NGK."

"So?"

"Haven't you heard of NGK spark plugs?"

"No, I haven't," I said. "But I have now, Sparky."

"That was my nickname at school," he said. "What was yours?"

"I didn't have one," I said. No way was I telling him it was 'Jelly Telly' because I was a little overweight as a child.

"No, I don't imagine you did," he said.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" I asked, a little taken aback.

"It's usually the fat or ugly ones who get nicknames, or maybe the

weird,” he said. “You would never have been any of those.”

“Which were you, Sparky?”

“All three,” he said. “Well, here we are.”

He slid the car into a gap on the side of a quiet back street.

“Which one's yours,” I asked when we'd got out of the car.

“Just down there,” he said, pointing across the road. “Number 31.”

The road was full of three story terraced houses and we were parked outside number 48.

“One of the ones with the green door?” I asked, counting backwards down the road.

“That's right,” he said. “Come on.”

“Nice looking place,” I said, as we got closer. “What is it, three bedroom?”

“Sort of,” he said, grinning.

“Who's the blonde next door?” I asked, catching a glimpse of an attractive blonde standing looking out of the window of the house next door, the other one with a green front door.

“That's Charlotte,” he said. “You'll love her.”

I'll love her? What?

“Ummm?” I said, not sure how to react.

“Just a sec,” said Nick, unlocking the front door. He pushed some buttons on a small panel just inside the door.

“Come on in,” he said.

“You've got a burglar alarm?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I collect junk but some of it looks expensive. I don't want anyone passing by to get any ideas.”

“What sort of junk?” I asked. The hallway looked very ordinary. He took my jacket and hung it on a rack next to a couple of his overcoats.

“Oh, just stuff I pick up in car boot sales, jumble sales and things like that,” he said. “Cheap rubbish but I like them. Come into the lounge.”

“Jesus,” I said when he turned the light on. “Wow.”

It was a fairly ordinary room with a three piece suite and so on, but the walls were covered with paintings. I went in and slowly rotated. There were perhaps a dozen of them, all modernistic.

“These are fairly modern works,” he said. “That one is a Juan Gris, he was a cubist. He did that one in 1915.”

I went to have a closer look.

“Is this original?” I asked, “only I can see the brush strokes in the paint.”

“Oh, I wish,” he said, coming to stand close beside me. “No, they're all cheap reproductions. I can't afford the originals.”

“Very nice,” I said, moving away to look at another.

“That's a Jules Pascin,” he said. “You don't really like Modernism, do you.”

“It's OK,” I said. “Although I prefer the Impressionists.”

“I've got a few of those upstairs,” he said. “Would you like a tour or shall I put dinner on?”

“Put dinner on,” I said. “I could eat a scabby donkey, we can do the tour later.”

He laughed. "Come through to the kitchen," he said. "You can help me."

I followed him out through the hallway and down a couple of steps into a fairly large kitchen, almost as big as Ron's.

"Impressive," I said. "Nice and spacious. You live here all alone?"

I wanted to be quite clear on this point although I was planning to clarify 'Charlotte next door' in the very near future.

"Yes," he said, opening a chest freezer. "I like my space. Do you fancy Pepperoni, Hawaiian or BBQ Chicken?"

Was 'I like my space' a reference to lots of rooms or something more subtle?

"What are you having?" I asked.

"You first," he said.

"Hawaiian," I said, decisively, not really caring one way or another.

He checked the instructions on the back and turned on the oven then slipped the Hawaiian and the Pepperoni onto the racks.

"Coffee? Tea? Wine?" he asked. "Oh damn, I nearly forgot. I've got you another present but I left it in the car. Do you like those earrings or are you just wearing them to be nice?"

"I like them," I said. "Some wine would be nice."

"Great, because this goes with them. They're a set. There's some white wine in the fridge. Do you want to sort it while I pop to the car? Glasses are in that cupboard."

I opened the fridge and got out the closest of the three wine bottles. Its label said Arbois Savagnin Domaine Tissot 2011, which didn't mean a lot to me which meant it probably wasn't that cheap. I knew the cheap wines quite well. I'd just found a corkscrew when Nick came

back.

“There you go,” he said, “Happy Wednesday.”

“Wow,” I said, opening the box. “I don't know what to say.”

It was a white gold necklace with three of the twist spirals with fake diamonds to match my earrings, only they were bigger and each had three diamonds instead of the two inside the earrings.

“Then don't say anything,” he said. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” I said, fingering the necklace. “Thank you.”

I was going to kiss him to show my appreciation but he didn't give me the chance. He took the necklace out of the box and stood behind me to put it around my neck.

“There's a mirror through here,” he said. “Come on.”

We went back into the hallway and he opened a door opposite the lounge.

“It's another hallway,” I said puzzled, when he put the light on.

“There's the mirror,” he said. “What do you think?”

I had to admit it was a lovely necklace and went well with my hair. This time he didn't try to hide behind me when I kissed him so I took my time.

“That was nice,” he said when I let him go. “I must give you presents more often.”

“How come you've got two hallways?” I asked, remembering and looking up and down the hallway. It looked very similar to the hallway we'd just been in, although the rooms and stairs were on the other side.

“Oh, it's the house next door,” he said. “I bought them both and had a

doorway put in to go between them without having to go outside. We've got a few minutes before the pizzas are ready. Come and meet Charlotte, she's in the front room.”

Chapter Ten

“Hey, Charlotte, I’ve brought someone to see you,” said Nick, opening the door to the front room of the house next door.

I could see Charlotte standing beside the window, as she had been when we arrived. Her perfect figure and long, blonde hair softly lit by the glow from the street light outside. She completely ignored us. Nick flicked on the light and I had to laugh. Charlotte was a mannequin, life sized and gorgeously lifelike but inanimate.

“I think she likes you,” said Nick. “Why don’t you shake hands?”

He twisted Charlotte’s hand and it separated from her arm. He held it out to me to shake.

“You really are weird, aren’t you,” I said, laughing but strangely reluctant to touch the hand. It all seemed a bit surreal.

“Am I?” he asked. “I thought every house should have a woman’s touch,” and he ran Charlotte’s fingers across the top of an armchair and inspected them for dust.

“A real one,” I said, “not a dummy.”

“She’s no dummy,” he said. “She’s clever enough to always agree with me.”

He pulled up the sleeve of Charlotte’s silk blouse and reattached her hand.

“So is that what you want?” I asked, “someone who always agrees with you?”

“I like people to be agreeable,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean they have to agree with me.”

“Good save,” I said. “So why do you have a dummy, sorry, a mannequin?”

“She a model,” he said, “but she looks after the house while I’m out. The pizzas should be about done now.”

“What do you mean she looks after the house?” I asked, following him back into the hallway.

“She stands in the window so people passing think the place is occupied,” he said, going into the other hallway. “And since she’s cute she tends to attract eyes away from anything else they might see through the windows. Great, they look about done.”

He deftly slid a pizza from the oven onto a chopping board and neatly sliced it into six and slid the slices onto a large plate.

“Where did you get her?” I asked. “A car boot sale?”

“No,” he said. “I saw her in the window of a dress shop that was closing down and they were having an ‘everything must go’ sale. I thought she looked very sad and disillusioned, standing there completely naked and bald in an empty window so I went in and offered them fifty pounds for her. One of her arms had fallen on the floor too, poor love.”

“So you got her a wig, then?” I asked as he put the other pizza on another plate.

“I got her two,” he said. “The other one’s black. Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

“Umm,” I said cautiously, “what for?” He seemed to be moving things on a little faster than I expected.

“To cover her baldness,” he said.

“No, I mean, why are we going upstairs?”

“Ahh, sorry. You don’t like the modern art,” he said. “I’ve got some Impressionist stuff upstairs which you’ll probably like better. We’ll eat there so you don’t get indigestion. Do you want to bring the wine?”

OK, that seemed more reasonable than what I'd thought he meant.

“So how come you have two houses?” I asked, as we trooped back to the other hallway and up the other staircase. “You must be very rich.”

“My parents left me that one,” he said, “and when this one came up for sale I bought it. It was just about affordable on my salary and I've been lucky with my investments. Would you open the door for me?”

He had a plate of pizza in each hand so it was a reasonable request but I had a wine bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other so I put the wine bottle on the floor and opened the door. This room just had a couple of basic armchairs in it but the walls were also covered with paintings.

“Just dump them on the table,” he said, putting the plates down on a simple pine table that looked to have come from Ikea.

“That one's nice,” I said, going over to look at a painting of some boats on a river.

“You have good taste,” he said, coming over and relieving me of the wine bottle. “That's one of Alfred Sisley's early works, before he became moderately well known, not that he was ever that famous.”

“It's beautiful,” I said. “I really like it, although that one's a bit gloomy.”

Beside the Sisley was another painting, a little smaller, of what looked like a deserted street in the rain with bare, leafless trees.

“Utrillo,” said Nick. “One of the British Impressionists. Have some pizza while it's still hot.”

“So are all the rooms full of paintings?” I asked sitting down and grabbing a slice of pizza.

“I guess you could say it's my hobby,” he said, smiling. “I pick up these pictures and have them on the walls for a while then when I get bored with them I get rid of them and get some more.”

"I'd never have guessed you were an art lover," I said. "It's a shame they're all reproductions."

"It's amazing what you can pick up when you rummage around," he said. "The originals of all these are in private collections so I'd never get to see them otherwise."

"So is that what you do in the evenings?" I asked. "Sit in your rooms and look at your pictures?"

"More or less," he said. "I've got a TV downstairs but I only use it to watch a dvd every now and then. Anyway, I'm away at the weekends quite a lot."

"Kayaking?" I asked.

"Yeah, sometimes," he said.

"What is kayaking? I've heard of it but I don't know what it is."

"It's much like canoeing," he said.

"What's the difference?"

"They're much the same," he said, with a laugh. "Small boats on water. What do you do at weekends?"

"Oh, mostly sit around and talk with Ron and Max," I said, wondering if I'd like kayaking. I prefer sunbathing on beaches to messing around on the water. "Since I don't know anyone in London, apart from you."

"We must do something one weekend," he said. "What do you like? Nightclubs, theatres, museums? I'm guessing since you're a historian you like castles and things."

"I did modern history," I said. "All the castles are medieval. I was more into social history and the class system. Wealthy industrialists like you oppressing the downtrodden masses like me."

"I'm not a wealthy industrialist," he said, "and you don't seem

particularly downtrodden.”

“I’m one of the unemployed underclass,” I said, “enslaved by you capitalist bourgeois exploiters as you sit in your gilded halls paid for by the toil and sweat of the oppressed.”

“Oh,” he said, staring at me, a half eaten slice of pizza forgotten in his hand. There was a small piece of pepperoni hanging desperately to a thin thread of golden cheese. “Is that what you really think of me?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I was just spouting some of the stuff I studied at uni. I was just teasing you.”

“Good,” he said, “so you don't mind?” gesturing around the room with the pizza slice. The dangling pepperoni gave up the struggle and landed on the floor.

“Why would I mind?” I asked, surprised. “It's your house. Why shouldn't you fill it with what you love?”

“You don't really think I'm weird?” he asked.

“Yes and no,” I said. “But then there's good weird and bad weird. You're certainly unusual but in a nice way. So why aren't you married?”

He seemed startled by this unexpected change of topic.

“I guess I haven't found the right woman yet,” he said. “I've had girlfriends, of course, but I've never had a relationship for more than a year or so.”

“Do you want to be?” I asked. “Some guys steer away from long term relationships.”

“Yes,” he said, seriously and took a mouthful of pizza. “I would like to settle down. All this is nice but it does get a little lonely sometimes. How about you?”

“Me?” I asked and snorted. “I am cursed with poor judgement when it

comes to men. I always seem to end up with the unreliable ones. Like Ben, he was the guy I was dating before I moved to London.”

“What happened with Ben?” he asked. “More wine?”

“Thanks,” I said, holding out my glass. “He was a nice guy, fun, always cheerful, all that sort of thing. I just thought he was a little shy of commitment, you know, like some guys are. Turned out, after I'd been seeing him for, ohhh, seven and a half months, he had a wife and three kids. I never had a clue.”

“Jesus,” said Nick. “So he wouldn't leave them for you?”

“I wouldn't have wanted him to,” I said. “I'm not a family breaker. Anyway, why would I want him after he'd been lying to me all that time?”

“I suppose it can be difficult” he said thoughtfully. “Especially if he thought it was just fairly casual to begin with and as things got more serious he probably couldn't figure out how to tell you the truth.”

“Are you defending him?” I asked.

“Oh god, no,” he said. “It's just that sometimes things aren't always completely open up front and you get locked into it and it gets difficult to explain later. Like, for example, several years ago I met a girl in a club and she told me her name but because the music was very loud I didn't quite hear what she said. It could have been Mandy, or Sandy or even Candy but when I rang her a couple of days later to ask her out I couldn't ask her what her name was as she might thought I'd forgotten and been insulted.”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling, “works both ways. I haven't always known who I've been out with either. So what did you do?”

“I managed to avoid using her name for several dates until we ran into a friend of hers who called her Mandy,” said Nick. “The thing is, the longer it goes on the more difficult it is to sort out. Being older and wiser I should have simply said 'I didn't quite catch your name' when I rang her but I was young and didn't want to look stupid so I didn't.

Thank god we met her friend though. Imagine if I still hadn't known her name after six months."

"Yeah, I can empathise," I said. "But being married's a little different though, isn't it."

"True," he said. "But even so there are things we don't tell other people when we first get to know them that we become afraid to tell them when they start to become important to us. Like you, maybe you've got a kid and you know that if you tell a guy that when you first meet him you'll never see him again so when do you tell him?"

"I'd tell him up front," I said.

"Really? Even if you know that when he gets to know you a little better the issue of a child may not be as important to him?"

"No, you've got to be up front with things like that," I said. "You've got to take that risk."

"Even if it doesn't start off serious but then becomes serious?"

"Even then," I said. "Or at least be honest when it starts to become serious."

"Hmmm, maybe," he said. "Would you like a tour of the house? That way you can check there's no one else living here."

"I'd love to," I said. "But maybe your wife lives somewhere else and you go kayaking with her at weekends."

He burst out laughing.

"Yeah, it's possible," he said. "And I've no way of knowing if you've a husband and fifteen kids back in Canterbury or somewhere else."

"Well, I haven't," I said. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

"I believe you," he said. "Where would you like to start the tour?"

“Anywhere,” I said, putting down my wine glass and standing up. “But I know where I want it to end.”

* * *

“I was wondering if you'd show up today,” said Ron, smirking at me. “Kettle's just boiled. Good night?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Nick dropped me back on his way to work. Do you want some toast?”

“Already had some,” she said. “Hey, did Nick give you that necklace?”

“It matches the earrings,” I said, bending over so she could get a good look.

“Very nice,” she said admiringly. “You know these are very good imitations. They look just like diamonds. Imitation ones always seem to be larger. So tell me everything.”

“He's got two houses,” I said, going over and slotting bread into the toaster. “Next door to each other, with a connecting door, isn't that cool?”

“Wow, he must be rich then.”

“I guess so, although he says not. And they're both full of art. Reproductions, all over the place.”

“He can't be that rich if they're only reproductions,” said Ron. “Anyway, art's cool, says he's a stable sort of guy, unless they're sick or something.”

“No, they're proper artists,” I said. “Impressionists and art nouveau and stuff. He had some modern stuff which I didn't much like but none of it was nasty. Not like Tad, you remember?”

“Oh god, I'll never forget,” she said, laughing. “That room, religious icons all over the walls. I've never been so embarrassed and he was so proud of it all. Jesus. I couldn't wait to get out of there.”

I poured some hot water into a coffee mug and waited for the toast to pop up.

“Are you seeing him again?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going to a club on Friday night.”

“So you don’t think it was him who sent those letters?”

“No, absolutely not.”

I told her about the conversation Nick and I had had in his car and how he nearly took me home.

“Sounds about right,” she said. “I was watching him carefully when you brought up the letters and I’d swear it was a surprise to him. So is it getting serious?”

“I think so,” I said. “Especially as he got a little weird last night.”

“What do you meant weird? He isn’t kinky, is he?”

“Nah, I don’t mean that. No, he was going on about when you should tell someone something serious when you’re getting to know them.”

“How do you mean?” asked Ron, looking confused.

“Well, he was saying if I had children would I tell someone as soon as I met them or would I wait until the relationship was starting to get serious.” I said.

“Does he have children, then?” asked Ron.

“I wondered that,” I said. “I figured he was building up to telling me about a wife or kids or something but he didn’t. Anyway, he says he doesn’t. He said he’s never even had a girlfriend for more than a year or so.”

“So you think maybe he’s a commitment phobe or something?”

“He says not. He said he just hasn't found the right woman yet.”

I buttered my toast and put some strawberry jam on them.

“And you believed him?”

“This is me, Ron,” I said. “Of course I believed him. I always believe them which is why I'm always ending up with married guys and wasters and losers.”

“Married guys?” she said, frowning. “Plural? You mean it wasn't just Jake?”

“No, no,” I said, hurriedly backtracking. “Jake was the only married one, I meant losers, plural.”

“So why's Nick different?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said, sitting down and looking at my toast thoughtfully. “He just is, even though he's got that doll in the window.”

“A doll?” she said. “What, like a Barbie doll, you mean?”

“Well, I suppose she is a Barbie,” I said. “She's taller and slimmer than me and she's blonde and got legs that go all the way to the ground. He calls her Charlotte. She was, like, a mannequin in a dress shop.”

“In the window? Is he pretending he's got a girlfriend or something?”

“He said it's so the house looks occupied when he's out,” I said. “So people don't steal his art and stuff.”

“Hmm, I suppose that makes sense,” she said. “So does he like you?”

“Seems to,” I said. “He looked really sad when he thought I was dumping him over the letters.”

“Were you dumping him?” she asked. “I didn't think you thought it really was him.”

“I didn't,” I said. “But he got it into his head that I'd never trust him so I guess he decided to dump himself or something.”

Ron started to laugh. “Why can't you find yourself a normal boyfriend?” she asked

“You mean like Max?” I asked. “You think he was normal? He was so scared of you that you ended up having to ask him out and then when he turned up! Oh my god, do you remember that suit he was wearing?”

“Don't remind me,” said Ron, closing her eyes and shuddering. “Still, at least he let me find him some better clothes.”

“At least Nick's got some clothes sense. I wonder if I'll bump into him today?”

“Will you be giving his plastic company some more leaflets?”

“I kind of thought I might 'cos I want to see what it's like inside,” I said, “but it'll look strange giving them leaflets when they've already got some.”

“So why don't you just go in and see him?” asked Ron, “seeing as how you want to.”

“I don't want to disturb him at work,” I said. “You know how some guys get funny about that.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Max is like that. It's like he's a different person at work.”

“I thought about it last night when we were talking about going out again,” I said, “but he only wanted to talk about the weekend.”

“Maybe he wants you to stay with him for the weekend,” said Ron, “rather than just see you for a lunch.”

“Could be,” I said, pushing my empty plate across the table and attacking my coffee. “Would you mind if I did?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Just as long as you're here early Monday morning in case we get any orders. Once we get the hang of it it'll be fine but we don't want to stuff up on the first day.”

“If I do stay I'll come back Sunday afternoon,” I said. “Is there anything we need to practice?”

“We can't really,” said Ron, “unless we make a hundred rolls just to play with which seems a waste. Do we need to write a script for answering the phone?”

“I thought I'd say 'what would you like to order?' and take it from there.”

“Yeah, we can over complicate things. Hey, Max designed an order form last night. Come on, I'll show you.”

We went into Max's music room where he kept his computer.

“Name, company, rolls, quantity and total price, yeah, looks good,” I said, studying it.

“And after they've placed the order,” said Ron, showing me another sheet, “we summarise it here so we've got the running totals so I can see how many to make of each one then we go back to the order form to bag them and staple the form to the bag and put the bag in the crates in company order so they're easy to deliver.”

“OK,” I said, trying to visualise the procedure in my mind. “Let's hope we don't get too many orders on Monday until we've ironed out the bugs. Remind me to go to the bank on Friday to get plenty of change.”

“Do it today,” said Ron, “While you're out.”

“OK,” I said. “Hey, what do we do if someone texts an order but doesn't say who they are?”

“I guess we ring them, assuming their number isn't hidden. It's a worry though. Do you think we should make the order in case they find you and ask?”

“Oh, god, I don't know,” I said. “I suppose we ought to, for the first few times anyway. I don't want to be abused for not bringing someone's lunch. Hey, Nick said he wants an order everyday. What if others want to as well? Maybe we should get Max to design some sort of standing order thingy so they don't have to keep phoning or texting?”

“That's a point,” said Ron. “Carry some order forms with you in case anyone wants to order the next day's rolls when you deliver them.”

“Good thinking,” I said. “I'll put some in the car now. Actually, I'll just have a pee then I'll go off and do the leaflets.”

Chapter Eleven

“Oh, stop it!” said Ron irritably. “You're making me nervous.”

“Sorry,” I said.

I stopped pacing and sat down at the small folding desk we'd put in the kitchen for me to use to take orders. Ron had commandeered the kitchen table which was slowly filling with plates of sliced meats and salad veggies, dishes of sliced fruits and cheeses and pots of pastes and god knows what else. I perched my heels on the edge of the seat, wrapped my arms around my legs, rested my chin on my knees and stared mournfully at the clock. It said 07:38.

“Do you think anyone will ring?” I asked.

“I'd be surprised if no one did,” said Ron, pausing in her slicing of a small beef sirloin she'd roasted the night before.

I jumped up and wandered over to inspect it.

“It's still raw,” I said, pointing.

She waved the carving knife alarmingly near my throat.

“If you'd bother to look at it properly,” she said, narrowing her eyes, “you'd see that the outside is well done and it graduates through to rare in the centre. That way I can do a beef roll whatever way people want it.”

“Ohh,” I said, “what's that?” pointing to a bowl of sliced pink things.

“Poached quince,” she said. “It's just got to cool a bit longer then I'll make it into a paste.”

“Ohh,” I said and looked at the clock. It flashed over to 07:39 while I watched.

“Max get off OK?” she asked.

“Guess so,” I said. “I dropped him off but didn't wait to see if he caught the train or not.”

“Put that on the table for me,” she said, handing me the plate of sliced beef.

“Anywhere in particular?” I asked, taking it.

“Beside the ham,” she said, taking the chopping board over to the sink to wash.

I put the beef on the table, as directed, and sat back down again.

“Doesn't the waiting bother you?” I asked, jumping up again.

“No, it's always like this in a kitchen,” she said. “Oh, do sit down,” so I sat back down again and nervously tapped my fingers on the table.

“In every restaurant I've been at,” she said, wiping the chopping board, “you do your basic preparation then wait until some customers turn up then everything turns frantic. The trick is to enjoy the waiting and not get stressed.”

“But what if no one rings?” I said, looking at the clock which was resolutely stuck on 07:39.

“Then you take Nick's lunch out to him and we'll eat all this lot for dinner,” she said.

The clock changed to 07:40 and the oven timer pinged, making me jump.

“First batch of rolls are done,” said Ron, opening the oven door. She pulled out a tray of delicious looking rolls and slid in another tray of dough and reset the timer.

“That'll be 32,” she said. “I'll hold off doing more until we start getting orders.”

I picked up my pile of order forms and rifled through them then

squared them off and put them neatly on my table. I picked up my pen and checked it still worked by scribbling on the back of Nick's order then put the pen neatly beside the pile of order forms then put the phone neatly beside the pen. Then I moved the order forms further over and put the phone the other side. I picked up Nick's order, which I'd filled in before I'd left his house the previous day, and checked that I'd correctly entered the details on Ron's summary sheet. So far, Ron had the grand total of two rolls to prepare in the next four hours or so.

07:42

I sighed and rearranged the forms, phone, pen and spare pen on my table.

"Nick said he wants to try every single one of your rolls," I told Ron.

"I know," she said, opening the fridge door. "That's the third or fourth time you've told me."

"Did I tell you that he's having two a day so that means we've got two weeks worth of orders already?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, taking out the milk and shutting the door. "Although if that's the only order we get we won't be in business for as long as two weeks. Want some coffee?"

"I'll make it," I said, jumping up and knocking my neat pile of order forms onto the floor. "Damn! I'm going spare just sitting and waiting."

I squatted down to pick up the forms and Ron went over and put the kettle on. I put the forms neatly back on the table and rearranged the phone and pens then double checked that Nick's order form was lying in the copy paper box lid that was the official place for orders that had been taken and put on the summary sheet but not yet filled. Unsurprisingly it was still there but it was beginning to look a little creased and worn.

"I think I'll have tea," I said. "Coffee'll make me even more hyper."

I went to the cupboard and got out a couple of mugs and put a spoon of coffee in Ron's and a tea bag in mine. Then I put the teabag back in the packet and put a spoon of coffee in mine instead.

"Thought you were having tea," said Ron, glancing up from her chopping board.

"Yeah," I said and tipped the coffee in my mug back into the jar and got a teabag out. The kettle clicked off and I poured water into both.

"Hey, where's the milk?" I asked, opening the fridge door.

"By the kettle," said Ron, caustically.

"Oh yeah," I said. I'd had to move it to get to the kettle to pour the water into the mugs. "Sorry."

I picked up the milk bottle and dropped it when the phone pinged to say there was a message.

"Shit, we've got an order," I said, staring at Ron.

Ron rolled over and picked up the milk bottle and handed it to me.

"Finish making the drinks," she said. "We may not get time when the orders start rolling in."

I unscrewed the top of the milk bottle and poured milk into both our mugs, the phone's aura dragging demandingly at my attention.

"There you go," I said, plonking Ron's coffee mug down on the counter beside her, sloshing a little as I did so. "Sorry."

Ron sighed and mopped up the spillage with a dishcloth. "Roll on tomorrow," she said.

"What's happening tomorrow?" I asked, trying not to spill the tea as I made my way back to the orders desk.

"You'll have calmed down," she said. "Or at least I bloody hope so."

“They’re early,” I said, picking up the phone. “It’s only 07:49. We said quite clearly on the leaflet that ordering is open from 8 till 10.”

Excitedly I checked the messages and fumbled the phone and nearly dropped it.

“Jesus,” I said when I finally managed to get the message open.

“What is it?” asked Ron.

“The phone company,” I said. “They wanted us to know that our introductory 10 days of credit expires in six days but if we get more credit before that they’ll roll over the unused credit into the new period.”

“Oh goody,” said Ron. “Let’s wait and see if we get any orders before getting more phone credit. Now, what have I forgotten? I know I’ve forgotten something.” She stared at the table then the cooker then the fridge. “Damn, what have I forgotten?”

I deleted the message and put the phone back down.

“Do you think one spare pen’s enough?” I asked.

Ron ignored me and pointed to things as if ticking them off in her mind.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Butter,” and beamed at me before going to the fridge.

I leaned back in my chair and sipped my tea.

“I wonder what time Nick starts work?” I said, watching the clock. “Do you think he starts at 9 or maybe earlier? Maybe he’s already left for work or maybe he’s still in bed.”

“Why don’t you ring him and ask?” asked Ron, sarcastically.

I picked up the phone and opened Contacts to ring him but he wasn’t listed. In fact, no one was listed.

“Where are all my contacts?” I said, horrified.

“In your phone,” said Ron, picking up her coffee mug.

“No, they're n..., oh duh,” I said, realising that this wasn't my phone, it was our official business order hotline phone. My phone was in the lounge, where I'd left it so I wouldn't get confused with which phone to use. “Probably not a good idea to ring Nick just before he goes to work on a Monday morning, hey.”

“Up to you, hon,” said Ron. “I'm sure Nick would love to sit in a traffic jam and listen to how stressed out you are.”

“You think?” I said then it dawned on me that she was probably telling me not to ring Nick so I put the phone down.

07:57 said the clock.

I couldn't think of anything to say so I sat there, slowly shredding an order form. Ron picked up the dish of quince and started to mash it with a fork. She added some sugar and mixed it in then tasted it. She wrinkled her nose and added a few slivers of Brie and mashed it all up then tasted it again. She muttered something about vanilla and tasted it again and shook her head and put the dish back on the table.

“It's eight o'clock,” I said.

The tension was palpable. Ron came over and parked beside me, the quince fork sticking out of her mouth. We sat there, watching the clock. 08:01 eventually appeared.

PING!

I grabbed the phone but there were no messages.

“It's the oven,” said Ron.

She went over and took the second batch of rolls out of the oven.

“Shall I or shan't I?” she said thoughtfully. “Ohh, what the hell.”

She put the third tray of roll dough in the oven and firmly shut the oven door.

“I thought you were going to wait till we had some orders,” I said.

“I changed my mind,” she said. “I don't want to refreeze the dough.”

“OK,” I said, tapping the pen against the pile of order forms. “Why's no one ringing? It's after 8.”

The phone rang, half scaring me to death.

“Hello?” I said, answering it in a strained voice, my throat constricted and dry. “Umm, hello?”

“You those rolls people?” said a cheerful male voice.

I suddenly remembered the script I'd worked out for myself.

“Would you like to place an order?” I asked, trying to sound like a efficient catering executive rather than a castrated duck.

I was very glad that Max had designed the form as all I had to do was go through it, item by item and get all the needed information so I didn't forget to get his name or what he wanted for lunch. Impressively my pen didn't run out.

“Wooooooo!” I screamed after hanging up. “We've got an order! We've got an order!”

I jumped up and did a little victory dance then gave the form a little kiss. “Yay!”

“Awesome,” said Ron smiling. “What's it for?”

I was about to tell her when the phone went again and my life got very frantic for about fifteen minutes. No sooner did I answer one call when beeps on the line told me there was another call waiting.

“I'm knackered,” I said, leaning back in my chair when the phone

stopped making noises at me. “Jesus, fourteen orders. We’ve had some messages too.”

I started to go through them, filling out the order forms. Only one hadn't given a name but their number wasn't hidden so I was able to ring them back.

“We've had twenty two orders, Ron,” I said. “Isn't that awesome!”

“We should get some more when the office people start,” she said. “Pretty cool, though. What are people ordering?”

“Give me a mo' and I'll do the summary sheet,” I said.

“Way too early to tell yet,” she said, perusing it thoughtfully, “but the Mortadella, pork and apple is looking popular.”

“Do one for me as well,” I said, taking the sheet back and adding myself to it. “I'm famished. I haven't worked so hard for years.”

“Twenty minutes,” scoffed Ron. “The youth of today have no staying power, no wonder you can't find a job.”

“It's a steep learning curve,” I said, defensively. “I'm not a trained customer service operative.”

“Pffft,” said Ron, “you're on the phone most of the time and never for less than twenty minutes. How long were you talking to Nick last night?”

“Fifteen minutes,” I said huffily. Ron didn't need to know that Nick's phone had died or that he'd phoned back when he'd found his charger.

“And the rest,” she scoffed. “There you go.”

“Damn, that's nice,” I said after taking a large mouthful. “Although I don't know that the Mortadella adds anything.”

“That's because you're a Philistine,” said Ron. “Go back to your

burgers and fries if you can't appreciate quality.”

I was trying to think of a suitably scathing retort when the phone went again and I lost the moment.

* * *

I pulled up outside unit 6 at the industrial estate and retrieved their order; one smoked salmon, cucumber and cream cheese roll for Dave. I knew it was delicious because I'd had one on Friday in my role as guinea pig. The place didn't seem prosperous but who knows, maybe they didn't waste their income on paint.

As this was my first ever delivery I wasn't too sure on protocol so I knocked on the door. If it had been open I'd have just gone straight in but I was a little nervous. I felt almost like I was trespassing. No one opened the door and no voice called out 'come in'. I waited for a few moments while I convinced myself I had every right to be there then took a deep breath and opened the door. There was no one in the tiny office although there was a back door in the office and it was wide open.

“Hello?” I called. “Hello? Is there anyone there?”

All I could see were racks of metal things that looked like parts for plumbing which didn't seem unreasonable as the sign on the door had said “DJS Plumbing Supplies”.

“Hello?”

I took a couple of steps forward and the door behind me creaked and slammed shut, making me jump.

“Hello? Lunch Rolls?” I called.

It looked like my first delivery was going to be a failure. I decided I'd do the rest of the deliveries and come back to this one afterwards. Maybe someone would be here then. I reached out for the door handle but there wasn't one, just a thin metal bar protruding from a hole where a door handle had once been.

“Bugger,” I said under my breath. “How do I get out?”

I tried pulling the thin metal bar to see if the door would swing open but it didn't. All that happened was the bar came out and I heard the handle on the other side land on the floor. Still, it looked as though there was enough room between the mechanism and the edge of the hole to get a finger in so I stuck my finger in and tried to pull the door open. It was firmly shut.

“Jesus,” I said.

“Close enough,” said a thin reedy voice behind me. “How can I help you?”

“The door's shut,” I said, turning round.

The owner of the voice was himself thin and reedy and looked lost in his grey overalls.

“Yer, doors're like that,” he said. “You trying to get out?”

“I brought your roll,” I said, nervously holding it up like a talisman. This wasn't working out the way I had planned it; Ms Efficiency breezing in with welcome food and out with welcome money. Getting trapped hadn't been part of imagery.

“Oh right,” he said, advancing on me. “So you wasn't wanting any piping then.”

He suddenly raised one hand which seemed to have a small hand gun of some type in it and I cowered back against the door.

“Fell off, like,” he said. “Went to get a screwdriver. 'Scuse me, miss.”

He reached for the edge of the door and I slid away.

“Now where did that spindle go?” he muttered, looking at the floor.

“Do you mean this?” I asked, holding up the thin metal bar that had come off in my hand.

“Yerss,” he said, looking suspiciously at me.

“It came off in my hand,” I said. I wasn't entirely sure he believed me but why would I want to steal a thin metal bar from the inside of a door handle?

He pushed the spindle back into the mechanism and fitted the handle back onto the spindle and let it dangle while he searched his overalls pockets.

“Ahh, gotcha,” he said after an eternity and pulled out two long screws.

“So you sell plumbing supplies,” I said, trying to be proactive so he'd stay as a customer.

“Yers,” he said, trying to screw in one of the screws. It didn't seem to work so he pulled the handle off and peered into the hole in the door.

“Escutcheon's gorn,” he said and stood up again.

“I heard something fall off when that thingy came out,” I said, trying to be helpful. “Are we trapped in here?”

He grunted and fitted the handle back on the spindle and held it in place with one hand while he twisted the handle with the other. Miraculously the door opened. He bent to pick up the escutcheon and deftly fitted it in place and screwed everything together.

“Great,” I said. “Are you Dave?”

“Yup,” he said. “You're that girl who brought that food leaflet, arn'cha.”

“Yes,” I said. “I left it on the desk since there wasn't anyone here.”

“I'm usually out the back,” he said. “That's where pickups and deliveries go.”

“Oh right,” I said, holding up the paper bag again. “So I should bring

the rolls round the back next time then?"

"Yers," he said. "That's where I'll be. Is that me roll?"

"Yes," I said. "Nice and fresh."

I don't know why I said that but 'yes' on its own didn't seem sufficient.

He fumbled in the back of his overalls and pulled out a tatty wallet.

"Only got a tenner," he said, holding it out to me. "Can I give you that on account?"

"You mean for tomorrow's order?" I said. "I've got change."

"Can't be bothered with change," he said. "I'll 'ave same again tomorrow."

"Great," I said, taking the tenner and pocketing it. "I'll make sure you get it."

"Ta," he said, opening the bag and looking inside. "See ya."

"Byee," I said.

I got back in the car and tried to fill out an order for Dave but I didn't have anything to rest the paper on. I got out and filled it in leaning on the roof of the car and wrote 'paid in advance' on it as well. Then I wrote 'get a clipboard' and 'get some sort of account book' on the back.

"All good," I said to myself. "Who's next?"

The next delivery was two orders for Albertini Printing at unit 7, which was next door. I didn't see the need to drive there since it was maybe ten yards away on the other side of a low chain link fence. I got the two bags from the back of the car and went over. The door was shut but I was feeling more confident now that I had successfully negotiated my first delivery.

“Lunch rolls for Melissa and Cass,” I said breezily, in accordance with my pre-planned modus operandi.

“Oooh,” said the girl at the counter, “I’m starving. Here you go.” She turned and yelled over her shoulder, “Casssssss, your roll’s here.”

I took the proffered money and gave her the change. Cass suddenly appeared.

“There you go,” said, presumably, Melissa, handing her a bag.

“Would either of you like to pre-order for tomorrow?” I asked, breezily. I hadn’t planned to say that but since Dave had pre-ordered it occurred to me that it might be an idea to put in people’s minds.

“Dunno,” said Cass, “might be crap,” and she laughed.

“They’re made by a chef,” I said, “with the finest ingredients. You’ll love them. See you tomorrow.”

“Piece of cake,” I said to myself. “Who’s next? Oooh, Nick!”

Well, not just Nick, of course. He’d done a good job of promoting us since there were five other orders from his company as well as his. I had to drive there since it was a fair way down the road and it seemed pointless leaving the car at unit 6 and walking everywhere. There was a small car park out the front of Nick’s which was almost full but I squeezed the car into the slot at the end. I gathered up the half dozen bags and headed off towards the entrance.

“‘Allo gorgeous,” said a rough voice behind me. “Give us a kiss, then.”

Chapter Twelve

I turned round cautiously.

“Nick!” I cried. “Hey!”

“I saw you arrive,” he said, leaning out of a window, “so I waited 'til you'd gone past to surprise you.”

I gave him a kiss. “So is this your office?” I asked, peering in. It looked like a fairly ordinary office.

“Not much for a life,” he said, grinning. “How're the sarnis going?”

“Pretty good,” I said, “We had forty two orders which Ron says is very good for our first day. We should get more when word of mouth spreads. Oh, here are yours.”

I dug through the armful of bags I was holding and passed his through the window.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked, pulling his wallet out of his jacket which hung over the back of his office chair.

“Nothing,” I said. “On the house.”

“Oh, I insist,” he said, pulling out some notes. “You'll never make a profit if you give them away.”

“You're family,” I said. “Don't be silly. Anyway, it was your idea.”

“Hey Nick, if you have to give women money, could you be more discreet about it?” said a voice. “It's bad for our image.”

Nick looked over my shoulder and I turned. The voice belonged to a tall man with a respectable belly who was walking across the car park to the main entrance.

“Hi, John,” he said. “This is my girlfriend, Telly.”

“Delighted to meet you,” said John. “I, err, apologise for my bad sense of humour. I didn't mean to imply anything.”

“That's OK,” I said. Well, what else can you say?

“John's the managing director,” said Nick, “and one of the owners. It's usually a good idea to pretend whatever he says is funny.”

“Oh, you mean like when I say 'You're fired, Nick!'?” he said.

“Especially when you say that,” said Nick.

I looked uncertainly from one to the other, unsure of the dynamics.

“Telly's delivering sandwiches,” said Nick. “She's got a catering business with her sister.”

“Oh, that one you gave out the leaflets for?” asked John. “Yeah, Carol told me. Good for you, umm, Telly. I like people with a bit of gumption. New business is it?”

“Yes,” said Nick and I simultaneously.

“Great,” said John. “So, what, rolls are they?”

“Yes,” I said, “gourmet rolls.”

“I like ham and pickle, myself,” said John.

“We do a roast pork and radish pickle roll,” I said.

“Why don't you order one for tomorrow?” asked Nick, giving me a little nudge.

“Maybe I should move you into sales,” said John.

“I'm happy as Buyer,” said Nick. “Why don't you give John a menu?” to me.

“Ohh, if you're buying I'll have four then,” laughed John.

“Ummm,” I said. “I ought to deliver these,” and I lifted my armful of bags to show them what I had to deliver. Nick nudged me again.

“Ummm, perhaps I could give you a menu after that?” I added, hoping that was what Nick's nudges meant.

“Charge him double,” said Nick. “He can afford it.”

“After what I pay you?” said John. “Damn, we barely break even. Here, let me give you a hand.”

He grabbed four of my five bags.

“Don't forget, Nick. Meeting at four.”

“On my calendar, John.”

“Come on, Miss, umm,” and he headed off.

“Telly,” I said. “It's short for Estelle,” following a couple of steps behind.

“Nice,” he said, barging in the door.

The young girl on Reception closed her eyes and winced as the door banged noisily open.

“She thinks I'm going to break it,” said John to me. “This is Estelly, the rolls girl,” to the Receptionist.

“Who are they for?” she asked, “I'll let them know you're here.”

“Where's the money?” said John. “Are they paid for?”

“Umm, no,” I said. “I collect the money when I deliver.”

He frowned.

“Inefficient,” he said. “How much are you owed for these?”

I told him. "That's for all five," I added.

He pulled out his wallet and handed me the money.

"Tell people to leave their money with you," he told the girl on Reception. "Estelly's a busy girl with hundreds of deliveries to make. She can't wait around all day for people to come and pay her. Tell 'em they owe me today."

"Yes, Mr Proctor," she said.

"Cancel that," said John. "Be better if people ordered through you. That way they can pay you when they order and you can phone through one large order. Efficient. Yes, I like it. Good. I like it when we can make the system more efficient."

"Do you want me to cancel them paying you?" asked the Receptionist.

"Of course not," he said. "Where's Carol?"

"I'm here," said Carol, appearing in a doorway.

"Ahh, good, send out a memo to all staff telling them that if they order their lunch from Estelly here that they'll get a 15 percent, no, make that a 10 percent discount but that all orders have to go through Reception and with cash up front."

"Umm, we can't afford to give discounts," I said, getting worried. He ignored me.

"Yes, John," said Carol, making a note on her pad. "Effective when?"

"From tomorrow," he said. "When do you need the order by, Estelly?"

"Umm, ten in the morning," I said, "but we really can't ..."

"Hear that, Sue? Ten in the morning," he said.

"Yes, Mr Proctor," said Sue, the Receptionist.

“And make up the discount from petty cash,” he added. “Oh and Carol, tell Accounts to charge the discount to Staff Welfare.”

“Yes, John,” said Carol, making a note.

“Good, good,” he said, smiling at me and rubbing his hands together. “I like to see efficiency and a bit of gumption. Excellent. Well, nice to meet you, Estelly. Pickles, good. So you're Nick's girlfriend, then?”

Carol and Sue's ears pricked up at that. I guessed everyone in the company would know before I'd got back to the car.

“Umm, yes,” I said, feeling a little bewildered.

“Good, good. Well, haven't got all day. Come on, everyone, back to work. Nice to have met you, umm, Estelly.”

“Yes, and you,” I said. “Umm, thank you,” but he'd already gone.

I tapped on Nick's window as I walked past, heading back to the car.

“Is he always like that?” I asked.

“Like what?” asked Nick.

I explained what had happened in Reception.

“Yeah, sounds about right,” said Nick. “He's a good man but he sometimes gets a bit over-enthusiastic. Still, a discount should get you more business.”

“But why's he making up the difference?” I asked.

“He likes to keep the staff happy,” said Nick, “and I think he probably liked you too although I don't expect he'll ever have one of your rolls.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“He's usually entertaining clients and he takes them to lunch. Am I still seeing you on Friday?”

“Of course,” I said, “if you still want to. Hey, I’ve got to go, I’ve still got most of the deliveries to do.”

“You should do us last,” he said. “Then you can have lunch with me every day.”

* * *

“Deliveries go all right?” asked Ron on Thursday when I got back from my deliveries and lunch with Nick.

“Yeah,” I said, emptying my pockets onto the table. “I need a better system for handling the cash. Maybe we should get a tin or something.”

I counted out the money and deducted my change float.

“Looks like I’m missing ten pounds.”

I checked my pockets again then went back to the car.

“Found it,” I said. “It was on the floor of the car. Do you think we should do something about taking credit cards?”

“I guess we could.” said Ron. “Although it’ll slow things down and it’ll leave a trail.”

“You mean, like, for tax?” I asked.

“Max said if we treat all this as your income we won’t have to pay tax for a while and we’ll probably never have to register for VAT but the more we can keep in cash the better.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I hate paying tax. I wouldn’t mind if I was on a decent income but it stings since I’m not. Like someone making a million a year pays a lot of tax but they’ve still got over half a million left afterwards. If I make fifteen grand I pay tax on it and I’ve got less than fifteen grand afterwards. Doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“I know,” said Ron. “Be nice to make a million or two though wouldn’t

it. Oh, there's a letter for you”

“Shit,” I said, freezing. “It's not from Taunton, is it?”

“No, it's from Yeovil,” she said. “At least, that's what the postmark says. I thought the same.”

“Where's Yeovil?”

“Not sure, somewhere in the West country, I think.”

“I hope it's not that frigging Iron Man again,” I said. “I don't know anyone in Yeovil.”

“Want me to open it?” asked Ron.

I did actually but I couldn't admit it.

“Nah, where is it?”

“In the lounge,” she said. “I put it by your chair.”

Hello Estelle

Bitches like you are only good for one thing and I'm coming to get it, ha ha ha.

See you soon.

Iron Man

“Oh god,” I said and sat down on the chair.

“Iron Man?” asked Ron.

“Yeah,” I said. I didn't feel too good. “Here, read it.”

“This is not good,” said Ron after reading it.

“Is he saying what I think he's saying?” I asked.

"It's not going to happen," she said. "He's just trying to scare you."

"It's bloody well working," I said. "Where's Yeovil? I need to know where Yeovil is."

I pulled out my phone and looked up Yeovil on Google Maps.

"Oh god," I said. My hands started to shake.

"Well?" demanded Ron. "Where is it, then?"

I held out my phone.

"It's fifteen miles from Taunton," I said. "Oh Jesus. On the way to London."

I felt empty inside, apart from some quaking in my stomach. Ron studied the letter again.

"I think we need to tell the police," she said.

"What can they do?" I said. "No way are they giving me an armed guard."

"They can check for fingerprints, if nothing else," said Ron, "Maybe whoever is sending these has his fingerprints on file. I'm going to ring Max."

She got her own phone out.

"Hi Max," she said after a few rings. "Sorry to bother you at work but Tel's had another letter."

"No, Yeovil, it's this side of Taunton on the way to London."

"That's right."

"Ummm, 'Bitches like you are only good for one thing and I'm coming to get it.'"

I wondered if she really needed to enunciate it quite so clearly.

“Yes, that's right. I thought so too.”

“Exactly.”

“You think?”

“OK.”

“Yup, we'll go now. Thanks.”

“Yeah, love you too, hon, bye.”

“What did he say?” I asked, not really wanting to know.

“He said there's not much the police can do at the moment, especially as there's no specific threat ...”

“No threat?” I said heatedly. “That bastard's coming to get me!”

“Umm, Max said that coming to get 'it' isn't really a threat,” she said cautiously, “since 'it' isn't specific. It could just be a badly worded way of saying he's coming to get a package or something.”

“Right,” I said sarcastically. “So now I'm a storage business for unknown weirdos. Great.”

“Max said that if they did arrest someone for sending that letter any half decent lawyer would get them off. It's not a nice letter but until they actually make a specific threat the police can't do much.”

“Oh great,” I said. “So what am I paying my taxes for?”

“Umm, you're not paying any taxes,” said Ron.

“Not funny, Ron,” I said. “So what am I supposed to do? Wait until he's knocking on the frigging door? Let him in and and say come and frigging get it?”

Max said to go to the police anyway,” she said. “They can at least log it and take fingerprints and so on.”

“Oh right,” I said. “So they can match it up with when I get frigging raped and say 'at least we got the dates right'. I feel so much better now.”

“Yes, I know,” she said sadly. “Doesn't seem a lot of point really, does there. Unless they just happen to have some fingerprints that match.”

“How likely is that?” I said. “Anyone who's been fingerprinted before isn't going to be stupid enough to leave their prints all over this, are they. And even if they have, then what? So long as that bastard doesn't say specifically what he's going to do in the frigging letter he can do what he wants. Shit.”

I was on the verge of tears and Ron sat there, looking at me, not knowing what to say.

“Come on,” she said after a few moments. “It's a start. We'll go see the police and if there are any more letters we can dump them on them. We've got to do something.”

“No,” I said, heavily. “What's the point? You know as well as I do that if he does rape me he'll probably get away with it. You read the papers, same as I do. He'll probably say I was playing some sort of sex game with him or something and the judge will let him off and there's no way I'm going to let them tear me to pieces in court. They'll try to make out I'm some sort of amateur hooker or something because I didn't marry my first boyfriend or some shit like that.”

“Are you going to tell Nick?” asked Ron after we'd sat there in silence for a while.

“No,” I said slowly, thinking about it. “What can he do? He'll only worry and that'll stress me even more. This is my problem and I've got to deal with it somehow.”

* * *

“You're very quiet tonight,” said Nick.

We were sitting together on his couch with some music playing quietly in the background.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I've just got a lot on my mind, that's all.”

Sasha, one of his cats, came in and jumped up onto the arm of the couch, wanting Nick to scratch her head. The other one, Princess, I had yet to meet as she was scared of strangers and so far hadn't put in an appearance when I was there. Sasha wasn't scared of me but treated me with complete contempt.

“You were quiet at lunch as well,” he said. “Have I upset you?”

“Oh god, no,” I said, making myself more comfortable in the crook of his arm. “You haven't upset me.”

Having satisfied her itch, Sasha sedately made her way along the back of the couch to the other arm where she pointedly lay with one hind leg sticking straight up in the air, licking her bottom. Every now and then she gave me a suspicious look.

“So what's bothering you?” asked Nick.

“Oh, nothing,” I said.

“That makes sense,” he said. “You've got a lot to think about, about nothing.”

“That's about right,” I said.

“You've had another letter, haven't you,” he said.

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Do you think I sent it?” he asked.

“No,” I said, twisting to look in his eyes. “It was sent last Monday, from Yeovil.”

“Yeovil? That's near Taunton. I drove past it coming back to London.”

He thought for a few moments. “Same guy? Iron Man?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I didn't really want to talk about it since I felt safe sitting there with his arm around me.

“Yeovil,” he muttered.

I could almost hear the whirring going on inside his brain.

“He said something, didn't he,” said Nick suddenly. “Something more specific.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, sitting up.

“He's coming closer,” said Nick. “I'd say he's threatening you in some way.”

“He could have just been in Yeovil that day,” I said, trying to rationalise things to myself as much as to Nick.

“I suppose,” said Nick.

Sasha was staring angrily at me and I wondered if she knew how to use a laser printer.

“So what did he say this time?”

“Oh, nothing really,” I said.

“So he just sent a blank sheet of paper, then?”

I sighed. Nick obviously wasn't going to let this go.

“He said bitches like me are only good for one thing,” I said. “Is there any wine left?”

Nick leaned forward and tipped the last of the wine into my glass.

“That’s all?” he asked. “Nothing about what the one thing is?”

“No,” I said, “although he did say he was coming for it and he’d see me soon.”

Nick froze.

“That’s why it’s from Yeovil,” he said, after what seemed like an eternity.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s only a few hours from Taunton to London,” he said. “If he really was coming to get you he’d just come and get you, if you see what I mean. But by sending you another letter from Yeovil, which isn’t that far from Taunton, he’s just trying to scare you. Make you think he’s coming but even walking he wouldn’t spend a week getting to Yeovil.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. “I was just freaking out because he’s getting closer.”

“I’d say he’s going to send you more letters, each time from closer and closer to London. I think I saw a movie about this once. Might have been a Hitchcock movie or something.”

I pondered this for a while.

“So you think after I get a letter from somewhere in London, he’ll just stop?” I asked hopefully. “How did that movie end?”

“The hero caught the guy outside the girl’s apartment,” said Nick.

“Oh freaking wonderful,” I said. “All I need now is a goddamned hero.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have mentioned it,” said Nick. “Sorry.”

He lapsed into silence, staring at the empty wine bottle on the floor. I

took advantage of this to push Sasha off the arm of the couch and she stalked out of the room, her tail rigidly indignant.

“Have you been to the police?” asked Nick.

I repeated what I'd said to Ron. Had he looked relieved there for a moment? I watched his face closely but he just looked concerned. I must have imagined it.

“I hear what you're saying,” he said. “I read in the paper that few rape cases end with a conviction and for some reason they always seem to attack the woman's behaviour. I've never understood what relevance the number of lovers a woman has had in the past but that's the way it is.”

I didn't say anything because I really really didn't want to think about it.

“I'm sorry to say this,” said Nick, hesitantly.

“Oh, say it,” I said. “I've probably thought it already anyway.”

“Well,” he said, “we can hope it's all going to fizzle away and if it does, that's great.”

“But?” I said. “I just know there's a 'but' coming.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But what if it doesn't? What if he really is going to come to London and he really is going to attack you?”

“Gee, thanks,” I said, sarcastically. “You really know how to cheer a girl up, don't you.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just thinking we ought to plan for contingencies.”

“So I'm a contingency now, am I?”

“No,” he said. “I don't want you getting hurt.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” I said. “Now if we can just convince Iron Man ...”

“It seems to me,” said Nick, ignoring my outburst, “that you are most vulnerable when you’re doing your deliveries. Someone following you could easily find out your route and maybe lie in wait in your car while you are delivering to one of the units.”

“Yeah, I’d thought of that too,” I admitted. “I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Oh that’s easy,” said Nick. “I’ll come with you.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Thanks for the offer,” I said, “but you've got a job to do.”

He smiled. “True, but I'm entitled to a lunch break every day and if I choose to spend it with you that's entirely up to me. Unless you don't want to have lunch with me, of course.”

“You sod,” I said, punching him on the shoulder to hide how pleased I was with the idea. “That's blatant emotional blackmail and you know it. It's got nothing to do with whether I want lunch with you or not.”

“What's it got to do with, then?” he asked, rubbing his shoulder vigorously. I hadn't hit him that hard so it must have been more emotional blackmail to get some sympathy or something.

“It takes me an hour and a half,” I said “and if we get more business it could take longer. John's not going to like you taking two hour lunches.”

“Just how busy do you think a buyer in a small plastics company actually is?” he asked. “Most of what we buy in comes from our usual suppliers so a lot of what I do is simply tracking prices on spreadsheets and I can stay a little later to do that. OK, very occasionally I have to have lunch with a possible supplier but your admirer isn't going to know when that'll happen.”

“But it could go on for months,” I said.

“Let's hope so,” said Nick, smiling and stopped rubbing his shoulder to rub my knee. “I can't think of a better way to spend my lunch breaks than ...,” he burst into song, “... riding along in my automobile, my baby beside me at the wheel!”

He sang that last part rather badly. I had to laugh.

“Besides,” he added, “if I do the driving we'll save some time since you can sort out the next delivery, run in, deliver it and run back and I can wait outside with the engine running rather than parking.”

1 Chuck Berry – No Particular Place To Go, 1964

“That's what this is really all about, isn't it,” I said. “You just want me running around after you, don't you.”

“Actually no,” he said, “I want you running around in front of me, not after me. Naked, ideally, although if it bothers you that much, I suppose you can wear some clothes. A skimpy bikini, perhaps?”

“I need pockets,” I said. “Where am I going to put the money if I don't have pockets?”

“We'll keep a cash tin in the car,” he said. “Pockets will just destroy the aesthetics of your form. Actually you'd probably get more customers if you do that, at least among the men anyway.”

“Oh you'd like that, wouldn't you, you dirty old man,” I said, laughing, “showing me off naked to all your friends.”

“Please,” he said, holding up a hand and looking pained. “Dirty I may be but old I am not. Get your facts right.”

“You're older than me,” I said. “And that's a fact.”

“Fair point,” he said. “I concede that, although I do need to look further into this business of you being naked. Stand up.”

“So you've already forgotten what I look like naked?” I said, standing up. “I'm hurt.”

“Show me where it hurts,” he said, pulling up my tee shirt, “and I'll kiss it better.”

“There,” I said, pointing. “And there, and there, and there as well, and ...”

He was as good as his word and I have to admit it didn't hurt when he kissed me in all of those places.

I woke up the following morning on my side with Nick's arms around me and Sasha's face in mine, nose to nose and eyeballing me. I jerked my head back in surprise and banged it against Nick's nose, waking

him.

“What you do that for,’ he grumbled, rubbing his nose and checking his fingers for blood.

“Your cat was deciding which of my eyes to rip out first,” I said, twisting round to face him.

Sasha took advantage of my back to start kneading the bed covers, raspily purring as she imagined her claws repeatedly embedding in my flesh rather than the linen.

“She likes you,” said Nick, kissing me. “Good morning.”

“Feels like you do too,” I said, kissing him back.

“I need the bathroom,” he whispered romantically, “back in a moment.”

He threw back the covers on his side and started to get out of bed then froze.

“Shhh,” he whispered, staring intently at the half open door, “don’t move.”

Subconscious concerns about Iron Man probably caused me to react a little more than I might normally have done and Sasha gave a muffled mew of protest as I half rolled on her. She scrambled her way out and started kneading the bedclothes again, staring intently at me.

“What?” I said, peering at the door.

I was half expecting a knife wielding figure with a balaclava over its head but all I could see was a little fluffy face peering around the door worriedly.

“It’s Princess,” he whispered, “stay still. She might come in.”

The little face anxiously stared at Nick then checked the rest of the room for danger.

Nick made a few, strange clucky noises and patted the bed.

“Come on Princess, don't be scared, come and meet Telly,” he said softly. “Come on.”

Her face withdrew and a few seconds later reappeared, her ears flat against her head. She came further into the room and she sniffed the bottom corner of the door as though it was fascinating.

“Come on, Princess,” said Nick again and made more clucky noises.

Princess came fully into the room and stood there, nervously. Her tail flicked from side to side and she stretched her neck to see what other dangers were on the bed. Sasha stopped kneading and rolled over and gave a short, sharp “meh”.

My neck was beginning to ache so I half twisted my hips to change the angle and Princess leapt a foot off the floor and ran under the bedside table.

“Stupid cat,” said Nick and got out of bed.

He padded over to the door, heading for the bathroom. Princess, and I, watched his every move. A minute or so later the toilet flushed and Nick reappeared in the doorway and Princess carefully watched him go back to the bed. Sasha lost interest and stalked off to the bottom of the bed and curled up, pressed against the side of my foot and covered her eyes with her tail.

“Now where was I?” said Nick, moving his hands over my body as if to try to remember where they had been. “Oh yes, I remember.”

I lost interest in Princess which must have annoyed her as she jumped onto the bed and started to sniff my hair. Irritatingly, Nick took his hand away from what he was doing and reached out and stroked her head. She stared at him with a mixture of haughty contempt and anxiety then she sat beside the pillow and started to wash behind her ears with a paw.

“I can see why you called her Princess,” I said. “She's beautiful.”

Her long fur was predominantly white and dark greys but was shot through with hints of brown and her eyes were almost pure gold. Sasha, on the other hand, was pure black, with a hint of grey on one leg.

Princess must have decided I was no threat after all and climbed over me to rub her cheek against Nick's shoulder.

“Beautiful but deadly,” he said, stroking her back. “She's one hundred percent pure killer. That one,” gesturing at Sasha, “only eats cat food but this one lives for mice. Two or three times a week I find a few remnants in the kitchen, maybe just a tail or half a head. A couple of times I've woken up to find a half eaten mouse in bed with me. Like in the Godfather only not a horse.”

“Yukky,” I said, screwing up my face. “She'd better not do that when I'm here.”

“I think it's a bonding thing,” he said, “so she might if she decides to be your friend. Anyway, enough about cats, we've got more important things to do.”

He lifted Princess off the bed and put her on the floor and turned his full attention back onto me so I pushed Sasha off the bed with my foot. Fortunately she didn't seem to mind. Either way, she was going to have to get used to it.

“Do you fancy going out for some dinner?” he said, a few hours later, “or do you want to stay in bed all day?”

“If you like,” I said, although the idea of staying in bed seemed to have merit.

I stretched then rolled onto my side and propped my head on my hand to look at him.

“I thought we could go to a little cafe down the road then go to The Castle and see if they've got a decent band tonight,” he said, lying on his back. “I can't take much more of this without some food.”

“You're such a wimp,” I said. “No staying power. Is the Castle a pub or a real castle?”

“It's just a pub,” he said. “You should bring some of those rolls with you.”

“Pah,” I said, “and there was me thinking you were just after my body when all the time you were only thinking of your stomach. You need to eat less and get more exercise.”

“Are you going to be my personal trainer?” he asked, taking a lock of my hair and stroking my cheek with it. “We could do some endurance training.”

“You haven't got any endurance,” I said. “After four hours you have to stop to eat! Wuss.”

He laughed. “That's why I need training, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Come on, let's go get something to eat.”

“OK,” I said. “Let me have a shower first.”

With a supreme effort I rolled out of bed and headed off to the bathroom.

“I'll go feed the cats,” said Nick, not moving.

He'd gone when I came back into the bedroom and I started to get dressed.

“Oh god,” I suddenly thought as a wave of anxiety passed through me. “Is that effing Iron Man sod writing me another letter ready to post on Monday?”

I sat on the edge of the bed since my knees were suddenly weak. What if he's really coming to get me?

“What's up?” said Nick, coming back into the bedroom. He was already dressed.

“Nothing,” I said, giving him a bright smile. “Aren't you going to have a shower?”

“God no,” he said. “I want everyone to know what I've been up to with you,” and he gave me a dirty grin.

“Where's the next one going to come from?” I wondered then rigorously suppressed it. I told myself that stressing over an, almost, imaginary threat wasn't the way to go. I even tried to believe it.

“Are you worrying about those letters?” he asked as I finished getting dressed.

“What letters?” I said, trying to think tough.

“What would Gina Carano in Haywire do?” I wondered. “Jesus, even she can't fight an enemy who isn't there.”

“He's just playing with your mind,” said Nick. “You mustn't let it get to you.”

“It isn't getting to me,” I said. “Come on, let's go. Is this place far?”

“Down in Camden High Street,” he said. “It's not far, let's walk.”

“Oh, so you've got enough energy to walk to get food,” I said with pretended sarcasm, “but not enough for me.”

“Once I get some food,” he said, “I'll have more energy than you can handle.”

“Get off,” I said, slapping his hand away. “You wanted food so now you're getting food. Come on.”

The cafe was only fifteen minutes away and was one of those cafes that was almost, but not quite, a restaurant.

“I often come here,” said Nick, holding the door open for me, “when I can't be bothered to cook, which is most of the time. That's one of the drawbacks of being on your own.”

“Seems a real benefit to me,” I said, sliding into one of the booths towards the back. “I can't cook much.”

“I know,” he said, sitting on the bench seat opposite me, “only canned food. Still, I quite like to cook but it's tedious when you're doing it just for one.”

“I'm helping Ron with the sandwiches,” I told him proudly, “once the orders are done, although I can't make the bread. Ron said I needed to be able to at least make them when she has one of her bad days.”

“Does she have bad days very often?” asked Nick.

“No, just every now and then when her pain meds don't seem to work.”

“I thought she had no feeling in her legs,” he said. “I'm going to have a kebab and chips, what do you fancy?”

“I'll have the same,’ I said as I felt too ... energised wasn't the right word ... to bother with menus. “No, she doesn't but she gets quite a lot of pain in her hips and back. She controls it with a mixture of meditation, pain killers and sheer bloody-mindedness.”

“Well, Max seems very supportive,” said Nick when he came back from ordering. “I got you a lemonade, is that OK?”

“Great,” I said. “Yeah, Max is a sweetie. He'd do anything for her. He'd probably give up his infernal jazz if she wanted him too but she's got more sense than that.”

“So you've never thought of getting married?” he asked.

“I've thought of it,” I answered, leaning back in the booth so I could see him better.

“And?” he asked, leaning back himself.

“No one's ever asked me,” I said. “Simple as that. Well, not seriously anyway.”

“Who asked you as a joke then?” he said with a laugh.

“Ohh, I worked in a pub one summer, a few years ago. Blokes in there were always asking me to marry them but they were mostly half drunk at the time. Probably already married too.”

“Right,” he said. “I can see that sort of proposal probably wouldn't get anywhere.”

“How about you?” I asked. “None of your hundreds of girlfriends were the marrying kind?”

“Hundreds! I wish,” he said. “Six, that's all. How many boyfriends have you had?”

“Eight,” I told him, reducing the number significantly so he wouldn't get the wrong idea. “Is that a lot?”

“Not by today's standards,” he said. “As far as I know. Ahh, here's our kebabs.”

“Are you having garlic sauce?” I asked, looking at the bottles of garlic, tomato and barbeque sauce and mayonnaise in a neat little wooden rack on the side of the table.

“No,” he said, “just mayo.”

I opted for the mayonnaise as well since it didn't linger on the breath. It wasn't as good as Ron's own mayonnaise.

“Nice little place, this,” I said between mouthfuls. “Quite busy which is always a good sign.”

“They mostly do takeaways in the evenings,” he said, “although during the day they get the coffee and muffin people. Some rolls too but not as good as yours.”

I thanked him for the compliment. We chatted about nothing in particular for a while then decided to move on and see what was happening at the pub. Nick waited for a couple to pay for their

takeaway before paying for our meal and we followed them out the door.

“Looks like a nice evening,” said Nick. “Warm but not sticky.”

The couple with the takeaway were walking almost as slowly as we were and were maybe three or four paces ahead of us. They were walking hand in hand with the guy carrying their takeaway in his other hand. They seemed as engrossed in each other as we were. Nick hesitantly took my hand and I let him. It seemed right, somehow.

A screeching of tyres ripped the air and car horns blared as a car on the other side of the road did a sudden U turn a little way down the road behind us. We both turned to look. The car lurched as it mounted the pavement and screeched to a halt, narrowly missing a rubbish bin. Nick grabbed me just as a man leapt out of the car and pointed at me.

“There’s that fucking bitch,” he shouted, “I’m gonna get her.”

He leapt towards me and another man jumped out of the driver’s seat.

“Oh god, oh god, it’s him,” I screamed as my legs buckled in terror. Nick threw me against the window of the dry cleaner’s and jumped in front of me.

“You fucking whore!” shouted the man as he roughly shoved Nick out of the way and hurled himself at the girl walking with the man a few steps ahead of us. He viciously slashed the back of his hand across her face and she screamed and stumbled backwards.

“Get in the fucking car, you fucking whore,” he shouted and raised his hand to hit her again. The man carrying the takeaway rammed the takeaway bag into the attacking man’s face. The attacker swung his fist into the man’s face and they started to fight. The other man from the car grabbed the girl and started dragging her back to the car, her nose streaming with blood.

I started to sob, cowering against the dry cleaner’s window, and Nick grabbed me in his arms and started to half drag half carry me away

from the fight just as the second man came running back. He joined his companion in what looked to be a fairly one sided and ferocious assault. The girl, who'd been half thrown into the car, came running back, hitting all three of them indiscriminately with one of her high heeled shoes until she was elbowed hard in the face and collapsed on the ground. The two men ignored her and started kicking the man on the ground.

"I'll fucking deal with you later," one of them shouted, "get in that fucking car." He gave her a kick and turned back to finish the job on the man on the ground. He looked to be unconscious.

A ramrod erect elderly gentleman in a suit with, presumably, his wife and a small dog on a leash stopped walking. The dog looked fascinated and sat down to watch.

"The natives are restless tonight, dear," said the elderly gentleman.

"Do you think we should call the police, dear?" his companion asked.

"Dear me, no," he said. "Don't get involved. Come on, dear."

He tweaked the dog's leash and the dog reluctantly stood up and followed them as they gave the fighters a wide berth.

"Are you all right?" said the elderly lady to the girl on the pavement. She was sitting with her legs askew and her face in her hands, tears and blood flowing copiously.

"Did they kill him?" she murmured.

"Come on, dear," said the man. "Don't get involved."

The lady gave the girl one final look and the three of them sedately walked on. The two men gave the body on the pavement one last kick. One of them grabbed the girl by the hair, the other by her arm and between them started dragging her towards the car. She lashed out with her foot but missed. They picked her up and bodily threw her in and slammed the door. The men got in the front and the car reversed off the pavement, nearly colliding with an oncoming car.

With the commotion over, the pavement fell eerily silent. The body on the pavement groaned and tried to sit up but toppled over onto the remains of the takeaway and a discarded high heeled shoe. The other shoe lay pathetically on the pavement a few yards away.

“Are you all right?” Nick asked me from the relative shelter of a bus stop thirty yards away.

He had his arms protectively around me and I was sobbing onto his chest, shaking.

“It's all over now,” he said quietly, stroking my hair. “It's all over now. They've gone.”

“I thought it was me,” I said, brokenly. “I thought they were coming for me.”

“It looked like some girl's boyfriend caught her cheating on him,” said Nick. “I don't think he's dead though.”

I tried to turn to look but Nick wouldn't let me. Someone came out of the cafe and went over to look at the man lying on the pavement. He turned to us.

“Welcome to Camden,” he said with a laugh. “Cops'll be here in a minute.” He went back inside the cafe.

“Come on,” said Nick, “we'd better go before the police get here.”

“Aren't we witnesses, or something?” I said. I'd stopped sobbing but I was still very frightened.

“Best not to get involved,” he said. “Come on, let's go home.”

We could hear a distant police siren as we walked off down the road. Nick kept his arm around me as I was walking unsteadily.

“I was so scared,” I said after a while.

“I bet you were,” said Nick.

“I’m going to be sick,” I politely informed him and he watched helplessly as I dropped to my knees and threw up in the gutter.

“We’re nearly home,” he said, when I’d finished. “I, umm, didn’t bring a hankie. Are you going to be sick again?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Actually I was feeling a lot better although my face felt clammy with cold sweat.

“I’ll just turn the alarm off,” he said, opening the door. “There we go. Now you go and clean yourself up and I’ll make some tea.”

Fifteen minutes later I was all nice and clean and neatly wrapped in Nick’s dressing gown. I was sitting on the couch with a cup of tea in my lap and a cat each side of me. Nick put his own tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits on a low table and pulled an armchair over so he could sit close to me.

“Well,” he said. “Waste of a perfectly good kebab, that was.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, seriously. “I was just very scared.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “It was just my bad joke. How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” I said, “although I’m still a bit wobbly inside.”

“Have some biscuits,” he said, putting the packet beside me. “Plenty of carbs will calm you down.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking a chocolate biscuit and nibbling it. I didn’t want it but it seemed easier than arguing.

Nick sat and watched me silently until I’d finished the biscuit so I took another before he told me to.

“That creep’s really got to you, hasn’t he,” said Nick, “with those letters.”

“He must have,” I said, sipping my tea. “I didn't think he had but I really thought it was him when that car appeared and those men got out.”

“I can imagine,” he said.

He seemed about to say something else then stopped uncertainly.

“Listen,” he said. “Umm, I've probably got the timing all wrong and I've probably got the wrong end of the stick anyway, but I think you should move in.”

Chapter Fourteen

I just stared at him stupidly, too surprised to think.

“You what?” I said. Possibly not the best comeback ever but it was the best I could manage under the circumstances.

“I said I think you should move in,” he said, a strange, unreadable expression on his face.

“Here?” I said, not sure I was hearing him correctly. “Move in here?”

“Yes,” he said.

“With you?” I still wasn't processing this development.

“Well, I guess so,” he said, “since I wasn't planning on moving out, although I suppose you could use the house next door if you'd rather.”

I got the funny feeling he was struggling to process my reaction.

“Oh god,” I said.

“I've got the wrong end of the stick, haven't I,” he said.

“Listen, Nick,” I said, “ummm, I really like you. I do but, ummm, we've only known each other for three weeks. Don't you think this is a little, ummm, hasty?”

“I thought you'd feel safer if you moved,” he said after a pronounced hesitation. “That creep knows your address but if you moved, he wouldn't know where you were so he wouldn't be able to find you.”

“So it's only for my safety?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Why else would I suggest it?”

I confess to feeling more than a little miffed by that. I wasn't totally averse to the idea of moving in with Nick and even daydreamed about it a couple of times. Annoyingly, though, the one and only person

who'd asked me to move in with him was doing it for safety reasons and not because I was the love of his life. Maybe I wasn't destined to be in a long term happy relationship.

"I'd have to go back home every day for the rolls," I said. "All he has to do is wait and follow me."

"Right," said Nick. "You've probably got a good point there. Let's forget it, OK?"

"Thanks for the offer, though," I said.

Conversation was a little strained for a while after that. Well, for most of the evening actually.

* * *

"Hey, I thought you were going to teach me how to make the bread," I said when I got home on Sunday.

Ron was kneading a large batch of fresh dough and there were a couple of other piles of dough under cloths going through their first rise.

"I was bored," she said. "I'm struggling to write about cooking now I'm back doing it properly, but I'll show you what to do when these have risen before they go into the freezer."

"OK," I said, sitting down at the table. To be honest, making bread looked like hard work. "Where's Max?"

"He bought himself one of those record players that records to MP3," she said. "He's in his room doing some recording so he can listen to his music on the train."

"So he's not too bothered about the car?" I asked. "Only it's probably going to be a while before we'll be able to buy one."

"Actually I think taking the train was pissing him off," she said, "which is why he's organising some music to listen to."

“Let's hope that works,” I said. “I feel bad enough about taking his car as it is. Hey, guess what, Nick asked me to move in with him.”

“Wow,” she said, stopping kneading to peer intently at me. “Isn't that a little sudden? You've only know him a couple of weeks.”

“Nineteen days,” I said. “Yeah, that's what I thought. You know, I like the guy and everything and yeah, maybe in a few months but anyway, it turned out all he was doing was thinking about those letters.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Well, there was a street fight after we had dinner,’ I explained, “and I stupidly thought that it was this Iron Man freak coming to get me and I got scared.”

“A fight?” she exclaimed. “Were you hurt? Did Nick hit someone or something?”

“Oh god, no,” I said, picking up an apple from the fruit bowl. “Some guy caught his girlfriend cheating on him and he beat three kinds of shit out of the guy she was with.”

“But neither of you were involved?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I just got scared because it was all so sudden and when that guy jumped out of his car and pointed at me and screamed 'there she is' I thought he meant me.”

I put the apple back in the fruit bowl since I didn't really want it.

“Why did he point at you?” asked Ron, puzzled.

“His girlfriend was just behind me,” I said. “He had to push Nick out of the way to get to her. I think he broke her nose. He probably gave her a hard time when he got her home as well.”

“Well, yeah” said Ron, “if he's the kind of man that fights in public but more fool her for cheating on him. She must have known what he was like. So when did Nick suggest you move in?”

“When we got back to his place,” I said. “He made me have a shower and got me some tea then he said to move in.”

“To be safe?” she asked, looking puzzled again.

“That's what he said,” I said. “He thought that since this tosser knows where I live he wouldn't be able to find me if I moved.”

“Right,” said Ron, her face clearing. “I thought you meant that he asked you to move in with him, like romantically.”

“That's what I thought at first,” I said.

“At first?” said Ron, looking puzzled again. “Weren't you talking about safety and stuff then?”

“No,” I said. “That's what's so strange about it all. He just said it out of the blue.”

“So what did he say, exactly?” asked Ron.

I picked up the apple again and juggled it from one hand to the other.

“Umm, I think he said something like he thought he'd probably got the timing wrong but that I ought to move in with him,” I said.

“But this was right after the fight?” asked Ron. “Wasn't that the right time?”

“I dunno,” I said, putting the apple back again and picking up an orange. “He also said something about getting the wrong end of the stick.”

“I don't understand,” said Ron, abandoning the dough and coming over. “What stick is there to get the wrong end of?”

“I don't know,” I said, rolling the orange across the table. It fell off the other side.

“So what did you say?” she asked.

“I didn't know what to say,” I said. “He took me completely by surprise. Umm, I said something about not having known him for long, I think. That's when he said it was for my safety.”

“So why didn't he say that to start with?” mused Ron.

“God knows,” I said, fishing under the table with my leg to try to reach the orange. “I never know what guys are talking about half the time. Although he did say he thought he'd got the wrong end of the stick.”

“I thought he said that before saying about moving in?” said Ron. Her look of puzzlement was fast becoming permanent.

“I'm pretty sure he said it twice,” I said, giving up fishing. I got up and went round the other side of the table and picked up the orange.

“So let me get this straight,” said Ron. “He said he thought he'd got the wrong end of the stick then suggested you moved in and you said no, so he said it was for your safety and then he said he'd got the wrong end of the stick again?”

“More or less,” I said, trying to balance the orange on top of the apple.

“You're a twat,” said Ron. “You deserve to stay single.”

“What did I do?” I said, taken aback. The orange fell off but landed inside the fruit bowl.

“He was asking you to live with him,” Ron said impatiently, “and you said 'no' so he changed it into a safety thing so he didn't look stupid.”

“You what?” I said.

“Men get embarrassed about emotional things,” she said. “Haven't you learnt anything from all those guys you've dated or were you too busy shagging them to bother to ever talk to them?”

“I talked to most of them,” I said defensively. “So you're saying he

actually was asking me to move in with him, like, you know, as a couple?"

"Yes," said Ron, going back to her kneading.

"So why did he say I could use the other house?" I asked. "This isn't making any sense."

"Oh Tel," she said sadly. "Do you really think he's going to give you a house for the fun of it? I bet he said that after he said it was for your safety."

"Ummm," I said. I was getting confused about who said what and when. Nick was asking me to move in with him???

"How did the conversation end?" she asked. She seemed to be hitting the dough harder than usual.

"Umm, I pointed out that all that creep had to do was follow me when I did the deliveries and he'd find out my new address," I said. "And Nick agreed and gave up on the idea."

"Just like that?" she said, looking up from the dough. "That was the end of it?"

"Yeah," I said, "why?"

"I've only met Nick the once," she said, "but he didn't seem the type to give up on something so quickly, especially something important like safety."

"So?" I said.

"So your safety wasn't the issue," she said. "He asked you to move in, you said 'no', so he gave up to avoid embarrassing himself."

"But why would he ask me to move in with him?" I asked.

"You really are a twat," she said and sighed. "I'm embarrassed to admit I'm related to you."

She put the dough in a neat pile and covered it with a cloth.

“Are you saying he loves me?” I asked, disbelievingly.

“No,” she said sarcastically. “A man with a job and two houses who wants an unemployed and virtually homeless girl to move in with him is obviously only after your benefits money. How would I know if he loves you? For sure he obviously likes you enough to ask you to move in with him and your safety gave him a good cover in case you turned him down, which you did.”

“Well, it's only been three weeks,” I said defensively.

“Which is a perfectly good reason,” said Ron, wiping down the counter to get rid of the flour. “And there's no reason why you should move in with him if you don't want to, just don't be surprised if he never mentions it again. He doesn't seem the type to relish humiliation.”

“But ...,” I said then petered out since I couldn't think of a valid counter-argument.

“I guess that would explain why the conversation was awkward afterwards,” I said after a while. “I thought he just wanted a shag but didn't know if I'd be up for it.”

“Oh god,” I thought. “Have I really stuffed it up again?”

“Fancy some tea?” asked Ron. “I'm about done here.”

“What?” I said.

“Tea,” said Ron, “want some?”

“Oh, yeah, please. Do you think he'll break up with me?” I asked.

“I've no idea,” she said, putting the kettle on. “Are you seeing him again?”

“Yes, tomorrow,” I said and told her about Nick wanting to do the

deliveries with me.

“That’s nice of him,” she said. “Do you want to keep seeing him?”

“Yes,” I said. “I really like him.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t find an excuse not to do the deliveries with you, then,” she said. “Bang on the wall, would you?”

“Oh great,” I said, banging on the wall. “As if I haven’t got enough to worry about. Now I’m going to worry all night about Nick breaking up with me.”

“I’m confused,” said Ron. “You just want to stay dating him? Don’t you want more than that?”

“Well, yeah, I do,” I said, sitting back down. “It was just all so sudden and unexpected.”

“What was so sudden and unexpected?” asked Max coming in.

“I made you some coffee, hon,” said Ron. “Nick asked Tel to move in with him.”

“Oh, that’s nice, said Max. “Is she pregnant?”

“Oh for god’s sake,” I said, irritably. “Is that the only reason you can think of?”

“She’s only known him three weeks,” said Ron. “She wouldn’t know if she was pregnant yet.”

“Right,” said Max. He sat next to me and picked up his coffee mug. “So when are you moving out, Tel?”

“She turned him down,” said Ron, joining us.

“Oh,” said Max. “So we won’t be seeing him again? Shame, I quite liked him.”

“I'm still seeing him,” I said, hoping this was going to be true.

“What for?” asked Max, “if you're never going to live with him?”

“I didn't say I'd never live with him,” I said.

“Did you tell him that?” asked Ron.

“No,” I admitted.

“You realise he probably won't ask again?” said Max. “He seemed quite a proud man, not the sort to risk humiliation.”

“I told her that already,” said Ron. “Maybe you should write him a note excusing her behaviour, saying it was just her immaturity. She could give it to him tomorrow.”

“Don't you dare,” I said. “I'll deal with this in my own way.”

“Oh well, that's the last we'll see of Nick then,” said Ron. “Have you got the next one lined up?”

“Why?” asked Max, looking confused, as he so often did when Ron and I got into a groove.

“Don't worry about it, Max,” said Ron, squeezing his hand. “I've a funny feeling we're going to be seeing a lot of Nick.”

“OK,” said Max, looking relieved. “So you're not moving out for a while, then?”

“No,” I said. “Doesn't look like it.”

“Right,” he said. “Only I had the house contents insurance renewal last Friday.”

He looked expectantly at me.

“Oh yes,” I said, not getting his point. I probably wouldn't have anyway but I was still thinking about Nick.

“Your necklace and earrings,” he said. “The ones Nick gave you.”

“What about them?” I asked, puzzled. Was this something else with symbolic meaning that I should have realised meant something I didn't have a clue about?

“We're supposed to list every item valued at more than £250,” he said, patiently, as if I ought to know these things. “If we don't and it gets stolen or lost they'll only pay out the £250 and not the full valuation.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “You think they're worth more than £250?”

“Probably,” he said. “Even though the stones are imitation, there's still all that gold and the setting. They might even be worth as much as £500, as a set.”

“Wow, really?” I said. “Surely not.”

All my other jewellery combined might be worth £100, on a good day.

“Better get them valued, hon,” said Ron. “Be dreadful to lose them and find out they were worth millions. When's the renewal due, Max?”

“End of the week,” he said.

“I could do it after the deliveries,” I said. “Where do I go?”

“There's that place in the Holloway Road,” said Max, “with the funny name. What's it called, Ron?”

“Oh, you mean thingy's?” said Ron. “Ohhh, ummm, Eingelt and Jeskins.”

“OK,” I said. “I'll pop round. Do they charge for valuations?”

* * *

“ill b ther in 10” I texted Nick when I was nearing Telron Industrial Estate on Monday.

I was very tense, wondering if he'd make excuses or if he would come with me on the deliveries like he'd said. My tension only increased when he didn't reply.

I pulled up in Proctor & Smart's car park and sat there for a few moments, wondering if he'd appear or if I had to go get him. There was no sign of him so, with great trepidation, I got out and walked over to his window. He was sitting at his desk, studying columns of numbers on his computer.

"Looks like he's busy," I thought to myself sadly. "Jesus, what do I do now?"

His subconscious must have alerted him to the fact that he was being watched and he turned to look at the window.

"Hello!" I heard through the window as he smiled and waved. "Won't be a moment."

He turned back to his computer, typed in a couple of things and closed whatever he was doing. He grabbed his jacket and disappeared out the door. Half a minute or so later he emerged from the main entrance.

"Hello, gorgeous," he said. "Your car or mine?"

"I wasn't sure if you were still coming," I said shyly. I'd more than half convinced myself he wouldn't be, especially as he hadn't replied to my text.

"Didn't you get my text?" he said.

"What text?" I asked.

"Saying to knock on the window," he said. "Just a sec."

He fished his phone out of his jacket pocket and stared at it.

"Ooops," he said. "Forgot to press Send, sorry."

“Don't you just hate it when that happens?” I said, delightedly and gave him a kiss. “How've you been since yesterday?”

“Missing you,” he said. “Your car or mine?”

“Mine's easier,” I said. “Saves having to move the crates.”

“Have you done ours?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I wanted to check you were still helping me first.”

“Why wouldn't I?” he said. “Anyway, you do them and I'll get the car sorted. Who's next on the list?”

“Dave at DJS Plumbing,” I said, “go round the back. I'll just drop these in with Sue on Reception. What shall I do with yours?”

“I'll take them,” he said. “I can eat them while waiting for you.”

I handed him his bag of rolls and took the others for Proctor & Smart inside and collected the money from Sue. Nick had the car waiting outside the entrance with the engine running.

“Always wanted to drive a getaway car,” he said grinning and revving the engine. “Next stop Dave.”

I felt ridiculously pleased that he was here, driving the car. I desperately wanted to talk with him, face to face, about the moving in business as it had rolled around in my mind all night and I wanted to find out if Ron was right and I'd blown it or if Nick really had just been concerned about my safety and, if so, where those concerns might be heading. Unfortunately, as I had to keep running in and out of buildings delivering rolls we couldn't get any conversation going, assuming I'd even be able to get a conversation like that going without causing offence or embarrassment.

“One hour, fourteen minutes,” said Nick, pulling up in Proctor & Smart's car park afterwards. “I told you it would be quicker.”

“Are you sure it won't be a problem?” I asked.

“God no,” he said. “Anyway, John likes you. If I tell him what the problem is he’ll probably hire a bodyguard for you.”

“Here’s your chance,” I said to myself.

“Wow,” I said, “that’s nice of him. I wouldn’t have thought my safety would be on his agenda.”

“Yeah, great opening,” I said to myself, “how do I convert that into moving in?”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “Aidan Smart had some hate mail himself a few years ago from an ex-employee. Anyway, I ought to get back to work. Same time tomorrow or will you text me?”

“I can’t be sure of the time,” I said, “Did you want me to move in because you love me?”

“What was that?” he asked, getting out of the car as a big truck drove past, noisily changing gears. “A damn great truck just went past and I didn’t hear you.”

“I said I’ll text you,” I said, feeling very embarrassed, “since I can’t be certain of the time.”

He gave me a thumbs up and disappeared off to the the main entrance.

“Ron’s right,” I mused to myself, driving home. “And it isn’t just men who get embarrassed about emotional things. Still, there’s always tomorrow.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Can I help you, madam?” asked the girl with the feather duster in Eingelt and Jeskins.

I'd spent a few minutes looking in their window and I'd seen a nice watch that would suit Nick. I'd half toyed with getting it for his birthday, assuming I ever found out when his birthday was. All I knew was that he was a Leo which meant his birthday could be in as little as two weeks. Anyway, it was a nice watch. Very masculine looking with a cool black face and chunky hands and a sleek expanding bracelet. Well, that was until I caught sight of the little price tag attached to the watch.

“Holy crap!” I said, in shock. “£2699 for a frigging watch? I'll get him some socks or something.”

I scanned the other watches and discovered that this was one of the cheaper ones.

“Can you believe this?” I said to a woman who had come up to look in the window. “See that watch there? That one with no case so you can see its mechanism? It's £41,000!”

“Nice though,” she said, a little wistfully.

“You think?”

Actually I thought it looked cheap and tacky. A bit like a novelty watch you could pick up in a petrol station for £3.99.

“It's a Roland Du Boissant,” she said. “Classy.”

“Ohh, right,” I said. Who the hell was Roland Du Boissant?

I nearly went home there and then. After all, a jewellers who considers £2000 to be a 'cheap' watch wasn't going to be impressed by my cute little necklace and earrings. On the other hand, it was now Friday and Max had to pay the insurance and he wasn't at all impressed that I hadn't got around to having them valued yet. Not that he nags,

though. He just asks then sits there with a sad, long-suffering aura that pervades the whole house and makes you want to scream.

I forced myself to push open the old fashioned door and go inside. The whole place sparkled like a fairy land as artfully placed spotlights illuminated what looked like half of Fort Knox's entire gold reserves. There were two women behind the counter, one middle aged who was clucking over a young couple who looked to be choosing an engagement ring and the other, a lot younger, who was running a feather duster over a display of cigarette cases. I thought the younger one might be more understanding of the unemployed but up close she looked to be about fifteen and seemed to be wearing several million pounds worth of jewellery. She even had a tiny diamond inset into one of her gorgeously long fingernails.

“Can I help you, madam?” she asked, her eyes appraising the likely amount of commission she'd be making from me and barely managing to refrain from walking away in contempt.

“Ummm,” I said, feeling very intimidated, “I was hoping to get a valuation.”

She gave a small sigh. Clearly her estimate of her potential earnings from me had dropped even further.

“Is this for personal interest or for insurance?” she asked, putting the feather duster under the counter.

“For insurance, I guess,” I said. “Does it matter?”

“Insurers need a valuation certificate,” she said, “for which we charge a small fee as Mr Kreisman will have to inspect the items and certify them.”

“Umm, how small a fee?” I asked.

Her look clearly said that if you need to ask then you can't afford it.

“Between £20 and £100 depending on the valuation,” she said.

She probably expected me to leave but, to be honest, Max's aura was more powerful than hers.

“OK,” I said. I figured that a £20 outlay was worth it if the necklace and earrings turned out to be in the region of £500.

She reached under the counter again and brought out a receipt book.

“If you would care to give me the item and your contact number,” she said, flicking through the book for a blank page, “we will contact you when Mr Kreisman has completed the certification.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I need it today. The insurance is due today, you see.”

“Oh dahling, that is so not me,” drifted over from the couple looking at engagement rings further along.

I glanced over and the woman was holding her hand out at arms length with an expression of distaste on her face.

“I will see if Mr Kreisman is free,” said the girl. “One moment.”

She marched off and I pretended to look at the displays while feeling very small and insignificant.

“You have an item you need certifying?” said a deep husky voice.

“Oh,” I said, nearly stepping backwards into a display of crystal decanters that would have kept me in debt for the rest of my life if I'd knocked them over. “You startled me.”

He, presumably Mr Kreisman, was shorter than me and probably around 300 pounds heavier although his suit was a perfect fit and must have given his tailor nightmares.

“My apologies,” he said. “If I may see the item?”

“It's a pair of earrings,” I said, “with a matching necklace.”

I took them out of my jeans pocket and plonked them on the counter. He prodded the resealable plastic sandwich bag I'd put them in for safety with his pen, rather disdainfully.

“What valuation do you anticipate?” he said.

“Umm, maybe £250 to £500,” I said, cringing inside.

“Hmm,” he said.

“They're imitation diamonds,” I said, trying to redeem myself, “although the white gold might be worth a little.”

He ignored me and inspected the resealable part of the plastic bag as though he'd never seen one before.

“Aha,” he said and pulled it open.

He bent to look under the counter and brought out a spotless cloth which he spread on the glass then tipped my earrings and necklace onto the cloth. He picked up the necklace and ran it through his fingers.

“This isn't white gold,” he said, after a few moments.

“Oh well,” I said. “Sorry to have wasted your time.”

I picked up the earrings to put them back into the plastic bag since obviously they were really cheap crap.

“No, no,” he said so I put them back down. “The style is from the 1950s and white gold has a protective lacquering. After all these years there would be extensive signs of wear. These show no significant wear.”

He rummaged in his pocket and brought out one of those magnifying lenses that jewellers screw into their eyes and picked up the necklace.

“You see this?” he said, holding one of the pendants out to me and pointing to something tiny and indecipherable on the back with his

pen.

“What does it say?” I asked, peering at it.

“PT950,” he said.

“So that's, what, a serial number or something?” I asked.

“Oh, dear me no,” he said. “It's platinum, 950 pure.”

“Platinum?” I said, rather taken aback. “Isn't that expensive?”

“Yes,” he said, absently, checking the other two pendants on the necklace.

He put the necklace down and checked each of the earrings.

“Very good,” he said. “They are all platinum. Now let's see about the stones.”

“Are you sure it's platinum?” I asked.

“I am a qualified jewellery appraiser and a Fellow of the Institute of Registered Valuers,” he said, peering through his lens at one of the stones in one of the pendants. “Of course I am sure. If nothing else, white gold of this age would be distinctly yellow whereas these have a grey patina.”

“Right,” I said, wondering if a grey patina meant it was platinum.

“Oh yes,” came the engagement ring lady's voice. “This one is perfect.”

“Are you quite sure, darling?” said the man. “I think there's still a few we haven't seen yet.”

I glanced over and the man was looking a little irritated although the woman seemed enthralled at the ring on her finger. The cluster of stones on it looked to be slightly larger than the car in which I'd taken my driving test. Judging by the smile on the sales lady's face, her

retirement years were now financially secure.

“Excellent Round,” said Mr Kreisman, “VVS, approximately one carat.”

He closely inspected the other stones in the necklace and the earrings.

“Impressive,” he said, laying the last of the earrings on the cloth. “It’s unusual to find thirteen diamonds in a set such as this that match in colour so closely. They are all faint to very light.”

“Very light what?” I asked, feeling faint to very light myself. Did he say *diamonds*?

“Yellow,” he said, staring at my jewellery on the cloth. “Only the best diamonds are flawless, of course, and most have a yellow hue.”

“So is very light yellow good?” I asked.

“Fairly good,” he said, “although faint is better.”

“So they’re not fake diamonds, then” I said, wanting to be clear on this point.

“Oh my word no,” he said, smiling at me. “Zircon, zirconia, quartz, moissanite and so on are generally flawless. These are indisputably real diamonds.”

“Wow,” I said. “So, umm, what are they worth?”

“That is the tricky part,” he said, rocking back on his heels. “The weight of the platinum and the diamonds is straightforward but, of course, as finished jewellery they are worth considerably more. On the downside, however, the style is from the 1950s and is somewhat old fashioned for modern tastes and they have yet to acquire the value of antiques.”

“So they’re worth more than £500, do you think?” I asked.

He laughed happily and gently placed the earrings and necklace back

in their sandwich bag.

“This valuation is for insurance purposes,” he asked, “or for resale?”

“Insurance,” I said.

“They are worth more as a set,” he said, gazing at the plastic bag. “Do you want a single insurance valuation as a set or separate valuations for the earrings and the necklace?”

“Just one, for the set,” I said, wondering if maybe they were worth as much as a thousand pounds. Wow, that would be unreal!

“Right,” he said, seemingly coming to a decision. “I’ll just get Madeline to prepare a certificate.”

“Umm,” I said. “How much do you think they are worth?”

“Oh, sixteen to eighteen thousand pounds,” he said, looking round for Madeline. “Perhaps a thousand more if they were cleaned and polished but you appreciate I have to value them as is. Ahh, Madeline, could you prepare me a certificate?”

He and Madeline, the older woman who'd just sold an engagement ring, went into a huddle as Mr Kreisman gave her the details while I leaned on the counter and tried very hard to look nonchalant.

Eighteen thousand pounds?

Nick had given me eighteen thousand pounds worth of jewellery?

Holy crap.

I was still standing there, leaning nonchalantly on the counter, when Madeline came over with an envelope. She reverently drew a document from the envelope and showed it to me, pointing out its highlights, such as Mr Kreisman's signature and the date. The valuation was in both words and numbers. In black and white. Indisputable. Madeline put the certificate back in the envelope and I reached over to take it. She withdrew it a couple of inches.

“That’ll be £60,” she said.

“I thought valuations were £20,” I said, my ingrained sense of poverty triumphing over my new found wealth.

She stiffened as though I had said something rude.

“Valuations range from £20 to £100 depending on the complexity of the items being valued,” she said. “These pieces have thirteen diamonds. £60 please.”

I handed over my credit card, wondering if thirteen had been unlucky or lucky for me. On the one hand I was £60 poorer but on the other hand I was £18,000 richer. Tricky one, since I’d have to sell them to get the cash and I didn’t want to do that. On balance I had a feeling I was poorer.

I clutched my plastic bag of jewellery tightly in my hand as I walked home, eyeing every passerby suspiciously. Twice I checked to make sure I hadn’t lost an earring on the way.

“You’ll never guess,” I said to Ron, bursting into her office.

“Guess what?” she said, looking up from her computer screen.

“I had Nick’s necklace and earrings valued,” I said, waving the envelope at her. “Read it.”

“Jesus,” she said, reading it, “they’re really real?”

“He said they were excellent,” I said, pointing to ‘excellent’ on the certificate.

“I think that’s the type of cut,” said Ron, reading it again. “Jesus, though. Do you think Nick knew?”

“He said they were imitation,” I said. “Oh, do you think he wouldn’t have given them to me if he’d known?”

“I’m sure he would have,” said Ron. “Max is going to be pissed off

though.”

“Why?” I asked. “What, you think he'll be jealous or something?”

“Oh god, no,” she said. “It's just that he's got to pay the insurance premium.”

“Bugger,” I said. “I hadn't thought of that. I guess I'd better pay it. Umm, do you think it'll be expensive?”

“I have no idea,” she said. “Max handles all that.”

“Maybe I can pay a little each week,” I said. “Oh shit.”

“What?” said Ron.

“I can never wear the damned things again,” I said sadly. “What if I lose one?”

* * *

“Hi, gorgeous,” said Nick as I got into his car. “What shall we do tonight?”

“Surprise me,” I said. “Hey, you'll never guess what happened today?”

“Oh I haven't got a clue,” he said. “Tell me. I can see you're bursting.”

“You know those earrings and necklace you gave me,” I said.

“The ones you're not wearing?” he asked. “Don't you like them anymore?”

“I love them,” I said, “I just don't dare wear them.”

“How come?” he said, looking puzzled.

“I had them valued today,” I told him.

He froze slightly for some reason.

“Why?” he asked.

“Oh, Max had to renew his house insurance,” I said, “and he thought they might be worth insuring as a valuable item.”

“Right,” he said. “So, umm, who valued them?”

“That jeweller in the Holloway Road,” I said, “with the funny name.”

“Oh, Eingelt and Jeskins or Finklemanns?” he asked.

“Thingy and Jeskins,” I said. “Don't you want to know what they said?”

“Sure I do,” he said, “umm, did they want any identification?”

“Identification? What for?”

“Oh, just wondered,” he said. “I was half thinking about something at work, take no notice.”

Ron had taken a photograph of the certificate with her phone and printed it out for me to show Nick so the original could go safely somewhere in Max's filing system. I pulled my copy out of my hip pocket and unfolded it.

“They said the diamonds are real,” I said, “and that the white gold's actually platinum. 900 apparently, whatever that is.”

“It's the purity,” said Nick. “900 means 90% pure. Are you sure they said 900?”

“Sorry,” I said, checking the certificate. “950. Does that mean 95% pure?”

“Yes,” he said. “So, umm, the diamonds are real?”

“Yes,” I said, happily, “all thirteen of them. Lucky for you you got them in a jumble sale. Guess what he valued them at?”

“£15,000?” he said.

“How did you know that?” I said, twisting to look at him.

“Just a lucky guess,” he said, pulling up at some traffic lights. “Can I see the certificate?”

“Actually he said 16 to 18,” I said handing him the copy. “More if they’re cleaned.”

He read through the certificate carefully. “Interesting. Are you going to get them cleaned?”

“Probably not,” I said. “It sounds expensive. You know they charged me sixty quid for that valuation?”

“I wouldn’t get them cleaned,” he said, handing back the certificate. “They look more sophisticated on you the way they are. All bright and sparkly wouldn’t suit you, you’ve got too much class.”

“That’s me,” I said. “Pure class. Hey, when’s your birthday?”

“August 15th,” he said. “Why?”

“There was a lovely watch in their window,” I said. “I wanted to get it for you for your birthday but it was like two and a half grand. I can’t afford that much.”

“Oh, you don’t have to get me anything for my birthday,” he said. “I’ve got everything I need.”

“I want to,” I said. “Anyway, presents aren’t about what you need. Maybe I’ll get you some nice socks.”

“I’ve got plenty of socks,” he said.

“Yeah, but they’re all black,” I said. “Boring!”

He laughed.

“Yeah but it's never a problem if I lose one. When's yours?”

“November 1st,” I said. “Are you going to give me some more jewellery?”

“Ohhh, you're getting the taste for it now, are you?” he said, teasingly.

“God, no,” I said. “I'm too scared to wear expensive jewellery in case I lose it.”

We pulled up just down the road from his house. Charlotte was in the window as usual, except she was now a brunette and was on the other side of the window, looking down the street instead of up it.

“Maybe you should get some of Charlotte's jewellery valued,” I said. “Some of hers might be worth something as well.”

“Oh, luck like that doesn't happen twice,” he said.

“Yeah, you're probably right,” I said. “Do you think the person who gave my earrings to that jumble sale knew what they were worth?”

“Wouldn't have thought so,” he said as we went into his house. “Do you want to go out for dinner or find something in the freezer?”

“Oh, let's stay in,” I said. “We haven't really had a chance to talk all week.”

“I wasn't thinking about talking much,” he said, putting his hands around my waist.

We had a few entertaining moments in the hallway then I broke away.

“We need to get you fed,” I said, “make sure you have enough energy.”

“I've got all the energy I need,” he said, grabbing for me again.

I dodged out the way and headed for the kitchen. “But have you got all the energy I need?” I called back. “Is that frozen lasagne still there? I'll put it on while you feed the cats. Shall we watch a dvd or

something?"

"What do you fancy?" he said, opening a couple of sachets of Whiskas while I peeled the lid off the lasagne and put it in the oven.

"Oh anything," I said, "so long as it's not too heavy."

"How about one of the Star Trek films?" he asked, going through the dvds in the lounge.

"Anything but Star Trek," I said, picking up another dvd. "How about Sleepless in Seattle?"

"If you like," he said, taking it from me and turning on the dvd player.

"Come on, don't look at me like that," I said. "You bought it."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I," he said, grinning. "I'm just a romantic softie at heart."

"Hey," I said, sitting on the couch, "I wanted to ask you something."

"OK, sure," he said, sitting beside me. "Fire away."

"Umm," I said, not sure how to ask even though I'd been thinking about it all week. "You remember, last weekend, you suggested I move in with you."

"Yes," he said. "Why? Have you changed your mind?"

"Umm, I was thinking," I said, a little nervously as this could conceivably end up very badly, "umm, were you only thinking about my safety or was there some other reason?"

"Ahh," he said. "Would you like some wine or something?"

"No, don't get up," I said, reaching for his hand. He sat down again, not quite as close as before.

"I, umm, yes, you said something about getting the wrong end of the

stick,” I said, trying again.

“Yes,” he said. “We all make mistakes, though. Maybe a coffee if you don't want wine? I ought to check the lasagne anyway.”

Did that mean he'd changed his mind or that he thought I was making a mistake by bringing it up again?

“No, don't go,” I said. “I've been thinking about what you said and, umm, I was wondering, umm, well, if maybe it was me who got the wrong end of the stick.”

Oh god, this was difficult.

“What do you mean?” he asked, unhelpfully.

“You took me by surprise,” I said. “I wasn't expecting it and I need to know if you were just thinking about my safety or if there was any other reason.”

He moved further away on the couch and stared thoughtfully at me.

“Did you get another letter this week?” he asked suddenly. “Only you didn't say anything when we were delivering.”

“Yes, I did,” I said, wondering why he was bringing it up. “Except I didn't open it. Why?”

“Where was it from?” he asked.

“Newbury,” I said.

“So they're still coming closer, then,” he said, “so your safety is still an issue.”

“So that's all it was?” I asked. “You wanted me to move in just for safety?”

“Oh god,” he said. “This is getting intense. Are you sure I can't get you a drink or something?”

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know guys hate emotional scenes but I need to know."

"Why do you need to know?" he asked.

"Because I don't think it was about my safety," I said. "I think it was more serious than that and I think I made a mistake."

"You mean us?" he said, waving a finger between himself and me. "Our relationship?"

"Yes," I said, sliding closer to him.

"Umm," he said, looking like he desperately wanted to run away. "So, umm, you think we're getting serious?"

"Yes," I said. "Or at least, I think so. I need to know what you think."

He nodded a couple of times then realised he couldn't move back any further since he was up against the arm of the couch.

"OK," he said, decisively. "I don't know about you, but I'm serious. It's just that ..."

"Oh god," I said, "just what?"

Now it was my turn to start edging away.

"Well, umm, you remember what you were saying, about being up front with each other," he said, "and you said you'd tell someone something when you first met them or at least when things started to get serious?"

"Shit," I said, aghast. "You're married, aren't you."

"Oh god, no," he said. "There's no one in my life at the moment, except you."

"So what is it you need to be up front with me about?" I said.

“OK,” he said. “Jesus, this is difficult. I’ve, umm, never told anyone this before and, whatever you decide to do, I just hope you never tell anyone.”

“Whatever I decide to do?” I said, feeling very confused. “Tell people what? I know you’re not gay.”

“No,” he said, “I’m not the least bit gay. It’s just that, well, I hope you understand how much I’m trusting you here.”

“Tell me,” I said. “The suspense is killing me.”

“I’m a thief,” said Nick.

Chapter Sixteen

“Oh come on,” I said laughing. “You're having me on.”

“No, I'm not,” he said, looking very serious.

“So what have you stolen?” I asked. “That food wrap you got for us?”

“Your earrings and necklace for a start,” he said. “I knew they were diamond and platinum, and I reckoned they were worth round £15,000 so that valuer was pretty accurate. Mind you, I didn't know the cut was Excellent.”

“But, ...” I started, then stopped. He had known the value before I showed him the certificate.

“But,” I started again, “why did you ask about identification?”

“The police circulate details of stolen jewellery to jewellers,” he said quietly. “If that valuer had spotted they were stolen and had your name and address you might have got a visit from the police.”

“Is that why you didn't want me to get them cleaned?” I asked.

He nodded.

“OK,” I said, after what seemed like several minutes. “So you stole a necklace and some earrings. I suppose we can just return them and forget all about it. It's not the end of the world, is it.”

“There's more,” he said.

“You're more than a thief?” I asked, puzzled.

“I meant I've stolen a lot more than that,” he said.

“What else?” I asked.

“Take a look around,” he said.

I looked around but everything seemed much the way it had done. I looked back at him blankly.

“All these artworks,” he said. “They're not reproductions, they're the originals. I keep them here for a while before I move them on and there's a lot more jewellery upstairs.”

“But you said you got all this stuff from jumble sales and things,” I said. I was struggling to take it all in.

“I lied,” he said. “It's my standard cover story if anyone asks.”

“So that's real?” I asked, pointing to the Juan Gris.

“By real do you mean original?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Yes,” he said.

“How much is it worth?” I asked. He'd stolen it?

“Difficult to say. On the open market perhaps a million dollars. Another of his sold for \$56 million a few years ago but it's a fickle market.”

“Jesus,” I said.

He sat there, waiting for me to ask more questions. I sat there, waiting for him to tell me he was joking.

“Just a minute,” I said after gazing around the room and wondering just how much it was all worth, “you gave me some stolen jewellery?”

“Uh huh,” he said. “I, umm, wanted to give you a present and I thought you'd like them.”

“But doesn't that make me an accessory or something?”

“Oh god, no,” he said. “You weren't involved in any way. I suppose

technically you could be charged with receiving stolen goods but you didn't know they were stolen.”

“But I do now,” I said, starting to feel angry. “Jesus!”

“Well, yes,” he said, looking uncomfortable. “You, umm, you did say you wanted to know about things if we got serious.”

I opened and shut my mouth a few times, wanting to say something but not having any idea what to say. This was all terribly wrong and not at all the way I had hoped it would turn out.

“I can't process this,” I said abruptly and jumped up. I heard the oven timer ping and half turned towards the kitchen. “I've got to go, I can't handle this right now.”

I turned back towards the front door as Nick jumped up.

“I'll take you home,” he said.

“No,” I said, turning to face him. “Stay away from me. Jesus, is that car stolen as well?”

“No, of course not,” he said, looking puzzled. “It's a company car. Why would I steal a Ford Mondeo?”

I had a strong need to move, to do something. I was all agitated and my brain was in shock.

“I'll, umm, I'll see you round,” I said and ran out the front door.

It was still light outside, much to my astonishment. It had seemed like hours had gone by but in reality it couldn't have been long at all. I hurried aimlessly along the streets for ages, my head spinning. “Nick's a frigging criminal” going round and round.

I don't know how long I walked for but it was starting to get dark when I finally figured I ought to stop being aimless. I pulled out my phone and keyed in 'where am I'.

“How the hell did I end up in Kilburn?” I said out loud. I wasn't even entirely sure where Kilburn was, although I knew it was in London, somewhere.

“You must have done some evil deeds in a past life,” said the homeless man bundled up in the doorway behind me. “Spare us a fiver?”

“Sorry, I haven't any cash on me,” I said automatically.

“I accept Google Pay,” he said, pulling a battered mobile phone out from inside his filthy overcoat. “And bitcoin, although I prefer pounds or dollars.”

He scratched his chin through his long, matted beard.

“I suppose euros or yen if that's all you've got,” he added, “although the frigging exchange rates are all screwed up at the moment. I blame them there Americans.”

“Sorry,” I said, backing away, “I'd love to talk global economics with you but my boyfriend's waiting.”

My boyfriend? That thief?

“Roubles?” he asked and started coughing.

Two hundred yards up the road I stopped to check Google Maps to see how to get home. I could still hear the homeless man's hacking cough.

“Jesus,” I said. “I'm not walking five miles,” so I called up Uber. Fortunately there was still a little space left on my credit card.

The house was dark when I got home. Ron and Max were having dinner with some friends of theirs and wouldn't be back until late which was good news as it meant I could slink in unnoticed and hide in my room.

* * *

“What are you doing here?” asked Ron, looking up from the weekend newspaper in surprise when I came down in the morning. “I didn't expect you back 'til tomorrow.”

“I thought you wanted to teach me to make bread,” I said, trying to look as though it was true.

“You've had a fight with Nick, haven't you,” she said.

“No,” I said, putting the kettle on.

I had a bit of a dilemma as I wanted to talk about it with Ron but I didn't want to tell her Nick was a criminal as she might tell Max who might report him to the police.

“Sweetie, you can't hide anything from me,” she said, closing the newspaper. “I used to change your nappies.”

“Oh bullshit,” I said. “You're only four years older than me, you couldn't possibly have done.”

“Well, I would have done,” she said, obscurely. “Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened,” I said, “I was just missing being with you and Max. Do you want some coffee?”

“So are you seeing him tonight?” she asked, shaking her head.

Well, that was the nub of it. Was I going to see Nick again?

“Umm,” I said, “no, probably not.”

“Oh sweetie, has he broken up with you?” asked Ron, sadly.

“Why do you assume he's broken up with me,” I said irritably. “I could have broken up with him.”

“Did you?”

“I, umm, well, I guess so,” I said miserably, pouring water on the coffee granules.

“Oh Tel,” said Ron, coming over and hugging my waist. “What happened?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” I said, desperately wanting to talk about it. “I just found out something about him, that's all.”

“Oh no, he's married,” exclaimed Ron. “No, it can't be that. That's never stopped you before.”

“Oh ha bloody ha,” I said. “No, he's not married.”

“He's got secret kids, then?” asked Ron.

“No,” I said, “I could probably cope if he had a kiddie or two.”

“Well, he's not gay,” she said, looking thoughtful. “Oh, he's not a satanist or religious nutter or anything, is he?”

I had to laugh. “No, he isn't.”

“He's not a paedophile, is he, like Mr Smith-Atkins?”

“Jesus, no,” I said. “Whatever happened to him?”

Mr Smith-Atkins had been our neighbour in Canterbury when I was just finishing primary school.

“He got eight years,” she said, “but he never got out.”

“How come?” I asked. I hadn't thought about him for years. One day he'd been our neighbour and the next day he wasn't. I hadn't really given him any thought.

“They don't like people like that in prison,” she said. “Or so I heard. He didn't last a year, according to mum.”

“Oh no, Nick could go to prison,” I thought to myself, gripping my

coffee mug firmly to hide my trembling hands. "What if they don't like him in prison?"

"Where's Max?" I asked, to change the subject.

"Hmmm," said Ron, thoughtfully. "Max? Oh, he's doing the shopping. So you've decided you want to learn how to bake bread, then?"

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe you could teach me to make cakes as well."

"So you can put a file in one for Nick when he's arrested?" asked Ron.

"What?" I said, in surprise.

"I said I'm doing a fresh batch of dough tomorrow," said Ron, "so I'll take you through it. Why do you want to makes cakes?"

"I was thinking maybe we could diversify," I said, defensively. I had no idea why I'd asked about making cakes. Maybe I'd subconsciously been thinking about visiting Nick in prison.

"Cakes are a bit specialised," she said, "and there's probably not a lot of call for them for lunches, although maybe some simple buns. So he's a crook then."

"Who is?" I asked.

"Nick, of course, who else?"

I hesitated too long before denying it.

"Crying shame," she said, "I really thought he was the one."

"So did I," I thought but I couldn't say it. "Bugger."

Ron and I had worked out a simple little system. Whatever money we made from the lunch rolls we saved until the end of the week and Max used it to buy whatever supplies we needed for the following week when he did the weekly shopping. Whatever was left over we split between us, after putting a little aside towards the electricity bill and a

few pounds for petrol money. When Max got back we divvied up the money and my share amounted to the princely sum of £112 which barely left me with £30 after paying for the valuation and the Uber home the night before, assuming I actually did put the money towards my credit card. Fortunately Ron and Max didn't charge me board. So, retail therapy wasn't a serious option but I went shopping anyway.

“I wonder why he does it?” I thought, studying the shoes in a shoe shop window. “It's not like he needs the money. He's got a good job and a steady income. I wonder if he's a secret gambler and has to steal to pay off his gambling debts?”

I pulled out my phone to ring him to ask then decided it probably wasn't a good idea.

“Jesus, there must be millions of pounds worth of stuff in his house,” I realised. “What the hell does he do with it all? He must have a serious gambling problem if that's what it is.”

I went into the shop to try on a rather nice pair of shoes, even though I wasn't going to buy them. It's nice just to try them on and see how they look, all nice and new. I figured I could see if they had any cheap trainers while I was in there.

“Maybe he's got a really sick relative who needs a lot of expensive medication,” I thought.

I pulled out my phone to ring him to ask while the shop assistant went to find a pair in my size then decided that probably wasn't a good idea either.

“Do you get many people trying to steal shoes?” I asked her when she came back with the shoes.

She gave me a funny look.

“No not really,” she said, “it's difficult with shoes, not like clothes shops where people try things on then pretend they were wearing them all the time. With us it's people bringing them back.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, admiring the shoes. Damn they looked good!

“A lot of people buy some shoes, wear them in the evening then bring them back the next day,” she said. “They suit you. Shall I bag them for you?”

“Wow, I'd never have thought of that,” I said, wondering if they'd known all along whenever I'd taken shoes back the next day. “Yes, please.”

“How did that happen?” I wondered, standing outside the shop with a £40 pair of shoes in a bag. “Shit, I can't even take them back on Monday now.”

Still, there were a couple of dresses in the shop next door that looked like they would go with the shoes so they weren't wasted.

* * *

“The secret to perfect bread,” said Ron the next day, “is to get everything just right.”

“Oh really,” I said, trying to be enthusiastic, “so what's everything?”

“You need the best flour you can get,” she said, “and the yeast needs to ferment at just the right temperature.”

“What's the yeast for, again?” I asked.

“It makes the bread rise,” she explained. “When the yeast ferments it goes frothy and that aerates the bread so it's light and fluffy with a good consistency.”

“Got it,” I said, making a note on my notebook.

“You'll need 2½ ounces of yeast for ten pounds of flour,” she added, waving a large carton of yeast at me.

I took the carton and started to read the label and she snatched it

back.

“Take no notice of the label,” she said. “We need at least double the amount of yeast they say.”

“How come?” I asked.

“We freeze the dough after the first rise,” she said. “Freezing the dough kills about half the yeast so if you use what it says on the label the bread will turn out flat and yucky.”

“Right,” I said, making a note.

“They also say you need to mix the yeast with sugar to ferment it,” she said, “but I prefer to use honey which helps give the bread a better flavour. Use an ounce of honey for every pound of flour.”

“So that's ten ounces,” I said, making a note.

“Well done,” she said approvingly. “Now, you need to dissolve the honey in the water before adding the yeast but the water temperature has to be exactly 38 degrees. Too low or too high and the yeast doesn't ferment.” She waggled a thermometer at me to emphasise the point.

I wrote that down as well. “How much water do you use?” I asked.

“For this much flour, about two and a third litres,” she said.

“Then you mix it all with the flour?” I asked. It all seemed rather complicated, especially when buying a loaf of bread was so easy.

“No,” she said patiently, “you need to let the yeast ferment for fifteen minutes before adding it to the flour.”

I made a note of that as well.

“Right, you do this lot,” she said and watched me like a hawk as I stumbled my way through it, referring frequently to my notes, which were getting a little sticky from the honey.

“What do you do while the yeast is fermenting?” I asked.

“Have some coffee,” she said. “Want some?”

We had our coffee and watched the yeast ferment. It was surprisingly unexciting.

“Now for the fun part,” said Ron. “Good for the wrists and forearm muscles.”

“Why do you knead it?” I asked.

“It makes the glutens expand,” she said, “which is what gives bread its texture. If you don't knead it enough the bread will be flat and dense but if you knead it too much the bread'll be dry and nasty and the crust will be like a rock.”

“Phew,” I said, after kneading the dough for two or three minutes, “this is hard work. Is that enough?”

“And the rest,” she said. “At least ten minutes. You'll know when it's done because the dough will spring back when you poke it.”

I was too exhausted to poke the dough by the time she was satisfied but at least the flour had stopped my notebook being sticky although it was fast becoming illegible.

“This is the critical part,” she said, “although all the other parts were critical too. You need to let the dough rise but you need to keep it warm and out of draughts. Leave it for an hour and a half or so.”

“And you find this fun?” I asked.

“Shit, yeah,” she said, looking at me very seriously. “Bread is one of the most satisfying things to make. I love it.”

“Right,” I said, wondering if I should make a note of that as well, as a motivational aid. “Are we finished yet? My arms hurt.”

* * *

I pulled into Proctor & Smart's car park on Monday, uncertain and nervous. Nick hadn't rung or texted over the weekend and I had no idea what he would do. I had no real idea of what I would do either.

I gathered the bags for the others at Proctor & Smart and hesitated over Nick's.

"Oh bugger it," I said and picked it up as well.

He was standing at his window and my heart skipped a beat when I saw him open it.

"Hello," he said.

"Oh, hello," I said, unenthusiastically. "Umm, here are your rolls."

I held them out but he didn't take them.

"You, umm, didn't text me to say you were on your way," he said.

"Take them," I said. "I've got to take these in to Sue."

"Oh right," he said and took his rolls and tossed them onto his desk. "So, err, I'll be out in a moment, then."

"Oh god," I thought.

"Umm, listen, Nick," I said. "Umm, I'd rather you didn't help me with the deliveries anymore."

"Oh," he said, and just stood there. "Right then."

"Umm, thanks for all your help though," I said awkwardly.

He didn't say anything, just stood there, looking at me.

"I'll, umm, take these in then," I said and made a bolt for the main entrance.

He was still there at the window when I came back.

“Here's the money for the rolls,” he said, holding it out to me.

“They're on the house,” I said. “I'm not going to start charging you now.”

“So when can I see you again?” he blurted out.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath to try to calm my heart.

“I, umm, don't think that's a good idea,” I said, trying to remember how I'd broken up with other guys in the past. Somehow they'd been easier. A lot easier.

“Is it because I'm a ..., of what I told you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I'm sorry but I don't think I can live like that.”

“Right,” he said. “So it's goodbye, then?”

“Yes,” I said, praying he'd come up with an alternative. “It's goodbye.”

He didn't and I had tears in my eyes for the rest of the deliveries, and for much of the rest of the afternoon. He wasn't in his office on Tuesday so I left his rolls with Sue. On Wednesday Sue gave me the money for his rolls along with everyone else's, which made me sad.

Chapter Seventeen

“Another letter for you, Tel” said Ron when I got home from the deliveries on Thursday.

“Oh whoopee,” I said, irritably. “I really couldn't give a rat's arse.”

“What's happened?” she said, instantly alert.

“Nothing,” I said, stomping into the kitchen.

“What did he say?” asked Ron, following me.

“Who?” I growled wishing, just this once, she'd leave it alone.

“Nick,” she said, not leaving it alone. “Who else would piss you off like this?”

“I'm not pissed off,” I said. “I just need some coffee.”

“There's one in the lounge for you,” she said.

I stomped into the lounge. There was a tepid cup of coffee waiting, beside another of those letters.

“It's cold,” I said, stomping back into the kitchen to use the microwave. “Aren't you going to follow me back in?”

“Life's too short,” called back Ron. “I'll bump into you again sooner or later, have no fear of that.”

I stuck my tongue out at her and pulled a face. “Nyah, nyah, nyah,” I muttered.

The microwave pinged and I took my steaming mug of coffee into the lounge.

“It's from Twickenham,” I said, glancing at the postmark then flicking it contemptuously across the room at the window.

“I know,” said Ron, going over to pick it up. “I’m the one that got it from the letterbox, remember.”

I slumped in my chair and brooded over my coffee. Ron sighed and took the letter into Max’s office for filing with the others.

“He wasn’t there,” I said when she came back.

“So?” she said.

“He didn’t leave any money, either,” I said.

“He doesn’t have to,” she said. “He knows we’re not charging him. What did you do with his rolls?”

“I left them in reception.” I said, scowling. “What do you think it means?”

“He doesn’t have to be there all the time, you know,” said Ron. “Maybe he was somewhere else in the factory or he had to go out somewhere.”

“I think he’s ignoring me,” I said.

Ron burst out laughing. “Well if he’s got any sense he will,” she said, “seeing as how you dumped him. I suppose you expect him to spend the rest of his life moping after you.”

I glowered at her, since that was actually what I was rather hoping. The last thing I wanted was for him to get over it quickly.

“He probably took another woman to lunch,” said Ron, rubbing it in.

“Bastard,” I muttered and took a mouthful of too hot coffee and yelped.

“That’ll teach you,” she said. “Anyway, you ought to know by now that men get over these things faster than we do. You’ve broken up with enough of them.”

“But it hasn't even been a week,” I said. “Even Ben had the decency to wait four days before picking up someone else.”

“Nick's a lot better looking than Ben and has a good job and a house,” said Ron. “In fact if I wasn't already married ...”

I threw the TV remote at her and she caught it deftly so I curled my lip at her and blew on my coffee. She smirked annoyingly at me and turned the TV on to check the remote still worked. It did so she turned it off again.

“Twickenham's in London, isn't it?” I said, after a while.

“Out west somewhere,” she said.

“Oh sod all men,” I said. “I'm going to become a lesbian. Got any lessie friends you can introduce me to?”

“Only Bernadette,” said Ron, “but you don't like her.”

“That was before I became a lesbian,” I said. “What's her phone number?”

Ron pulled out her phone and read out Bernadette's number.

“I was joking,” I said. “I can't stand that bloody woman's laugh.”

Ron regarded me for a few moments.

“I suppose you could join a nunnery,” she said. “There's got to be one somewhere that's desperate enough to take you.”

“Oh, so you're trying to get rid of me too,” I complained.

“No one's trying to get rid of you,” she said, as the front door bell went. “I'll get it, you just sit there and fester. Don't mind me.”

I stuck my tongue out at her again as she made her way down the hallway.

“Hello, Nick,” she said. “We were just talking about you, come on in.”

What the ...?

I spluttered coffee down the front of my tee shirt and leapt up and managed to spill coffee all over my lap as well. Frantically I tried to look in the mirror and reach for the box of tissues on the occasional table at the same time. When Nick came in I was teetering on one leg with my bum in the air, my coffee wet tee shirt clinging to my chest and with a large wet stain on the crotch of my jeans.

He stood in the doorway and stared at me.

“Hello, Nick,” I said, getting one hand to the floor and managing not to fall on my bum. “I, err, spilt my coffee.”

“Take no notice of her,” said Ron, following him in. “She’s decided to become a lesbian so you’ve wasted your visit. Fancy a coffee?”

“Oh, umm, actually I wouldn’t mind, if it’s not too much trouble, Ron,” he said, continuing to look at me.

“I s’pose you want another, then,” said Ron to me. “Or are you planning to throw it over Nick this time?”

I glared at her, conscious of the dampness of my jeans and tee shirt and of being distinctly non-poised and non-elegant.

“I’m going to get changed,” I said, mustering as much dignity as I could. “If you would excuse me for a few moments.”

I marched out of the lounge and ran up the stairs. What the hell was Nick doing here and why did that bloody Ron let him in? I quickly pulled on another pair of jeans and a fresh tee shirt and ran a brush through my hair.

“What the hell did you let him in for?” I hissed to Ron when I met her in the hallway.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she whispered. “Hey, you threw him over and Max

is out. Maybe my luck has changed.” She grinned evilly.

“There you are, Nick,” she said, taking his coffee into the lounge. “You didn’t come here to see Telly, did you?”

“Actually, I did,” he said.

“That’s a shame,” said Ron. “So it isn’t my lucky day after all, then.”

“I’m sorry?” said Nick. “I don’t understand.”

I took a deep breath and walked into the lounge.

“Ignore her,” I said. “Her medication’s making her doolally. She’s always talked gibberish but it’s getting worse. Max is sending her to a specialist in Siberia.”

“Oh, right,” he said, looking confused.

“Don’t sit in that armchair, Nick,” said Ron, “it’s covered in coffee. Sit over here on the couch.”

Obviously I couldn’t sit on the couch next to Nick so I went and sat in the other armchair.

“So, urm, why are you here, Nick?” I asked.

“I think I know who is sending those letters,” he said.

Fortunately Ron hadn’t made me another coffee since I didn’t have another pair of clean jeans.

“Who?” I spluttered after a few seconds.

Ron sat there quietly, as composed as usual, although her eyes were fixed intently on Nick’s face.

“I think it’s a guy called Dwayne Almond,” said Nick. “Do you know him?”

“Dwayne Almond?” I said. “No, I’ve never heard of him. Ron?”

“Me neither,” she said, looking puzzled. “How do you know it’s him?”

“I’m not certain,” said Nick. “Tell me, did you get another letter today?”

“Yeah,” I said. “From Twickenham.”

“Was it on top of the other letters?”

I looked at Ron.

“Umm,” she said. “There were only three but, yes, I think it was. Why?”

Nick suddenly went pink.

“I, umm, had to come and see Telly again,” he said, “to, umm, well anyway, I parked outside about quarter to ten and was psyching myself up to come to the door when I remembered you take the orders up ’til ten o’clock so I decided to wait a bit.”

“Yeah, we usually get a few just after ten,” I said.

Interesting. Nick *had* to come and see me.

“Anyway, I sat in the car and waited ’til I was fairly sure you wouldn’t be busy and I was just about to get out of the car when the postman turned up.”

“He usually comes round between ten and half past,” said Ron. “So?”

“As soon as he’d gone to the next house, this guy appeared from nowhere and it looked like he put something in your letterbox,” said Nick. “Then he went back down the road again and got in a car. Now I was a little stressed so it didn’t click immediately but then I realised it was Thursday and you normally get the letters on Thursdays and I suddenly thought ‘what if he’s the guy sending you those letters?’ so I followed him.”

“What, all the way to Twickenham?” I asked, surprised.

“No, he lives just down the road,” said Nick, “at number 36.”

“What, this road?” I said, jumping up and peering out of the window.

“It's the other way,” whispered Ron, joining me and pointing. “I think it's up there, past that tree.”

It looked like all the other houses in the street. No gargoyles leered from dark corners, no black clouds threatened overhead, no bats circled, no ravens croaked. Just a couple of dispirited pigeons pecking the thin gravel, watched by a bored cat.

“Oh my god,” I whispered back, trying to hide behind the curtain.

“Why are you whispering?” said Nick. “They won't hear you from here. Anyway, like I said, I followed him to a gym in the Holloway Road and when he went inside he waved at the girl at the desk so I went and asked who he was. Apparently he's one of their personal trainers. I've, umm, booked an introductory session with him next Monday.”

“You're going to make him your personal trainer?” I said, coming out from behind the curtain, horrified.

Did Nick hate me now? Was he joining a 'We Hate Telly' club?

“I had to give an excuse for wanting to know his name,” explained Nick. “I said a friend of mine had recommended him but I couldn't remember his name so of course I had to book him. Had to join the frigging gym as well. Did you know they charge £20 for a mandatory and non-refundable locker key? It's bloody daylight robbery.”

“Well you'd know all about that, wouldn't you,” I said, tartly. Ron snorted.

“So have you any idea how he's sending the letters from all those places?” she asked.

“I don't think he is,” said Nick. “I was thinking about it while I was

waiting for him to come out of the gym. I think he's printing the postmarks himself which is why he's hand delivering them when the postman comes round."

"You mean he's been here all the bloody time?" I screeched, jumping away from the window in panic.

"Have you still got the envelopes?" asked Nick.

"All except the first," said Ron. "Max has filed them somewhere. I'll see if I can find them."

Nick and I followed her into Max's office and we stared at his four large, grey metal filing cabinets.

"How about I ring him?" she said and rang him.

"Top drawer, second cabinet," she said a few moments later. "Under 'Estelle Hate Mail'."

"Makes sense," said Nick, pulling open the top drawer as Ron couldn't look inside. "Ahh, here it is."

He pulled out a suspension file and spread the envelopes on Max's desk next to the one that had arrived today.

"They all look the same to me," he said after we'd all peered at them. "Only the town names have changed and the date but the rest of the postmark is identical. I'd say he's using some sort of photo editing software and scanned in a postmark from somewhere. The first one was from Taunton, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "When you were there."

"So maybe he had a letter from Taunton and scanned it in and printed it for the first one then decided to get creative and changed the names for the later ones."

We thought about that for a while and it seemed to make sense. After all, it's just as easy to print an envelope as it is a letter.

“But how does he know me?” I asked. “I’ve never heard of Dwayne Almond.”

“You might know him by another name,” said Nick. “It never occurred to me to take a photo of him though.”

“What does he look like?”

“Umm, mid 20s, very fit, tall, well built, dark hair,” said Nick.

“Could be Nigel,” I said thoughtfully, “but he’d be 30 now.”

“Did I ever meet Nigel?” asked Ron. “Was he the one who was going to be a vet?”

“No, that was Morris” I said. “Nigel was around the time of your accident, but Morris was pretty fit as well. Mind you, so was Ian. And Barney, but he was quite short, really”

“Why don't you make a list of all your past boyfriends and see if any of them might have a grudge?” said Nick.

“We don't have enough paper,” said Ron, “and they probably all hold a grudge.”

I glared at her and she raised an eyebrow at me. “Nick's not stupid,” she said. “How many did you tell him?”

“I don't remember,” I said.

“Eight,” said Nick.

“Oops,” said Ron. “Sorry, dear.”

“It doesn't matter now,” said Nick. “Telly doesn't like me any more.”

“You think?” said Ron, raising an eyebrow at him.

Nick looked at her then turned to look at me.

“What are we going to do about this Dwayne creep?” I asked, trying to get them focused on more important matters.

“Tell the police?” said Ron.

“Umm,” said Nick.

“Best not,” I said, hurriedly. “I don't want to be dragged through the courts and I'm sure Nick doesn't want to be either.”

“Could be difficult to prove anyway,” said Nick, “unless he stupidly left his fingerprints on them.”

“Well there's got to be something,” said Ron. “How about we get Max to send a solicitor's letter to him?”

“What if he denies it?” asked Nick.

“What if he attacks me anyway?” I said. “Maybe we could put a contract on him.”

“You watch too much TV,” said Nick. “Anyway, this isn't America and you really don't want to be charged with murder.”

“Well you think of something, then,” I said, the tension making me irritable.

“I think we should pay him a visit,” said Nick. “Find out what the score is and ask him very nicely to stop. How about this afternoon?”

Chapter Eighteen

“Oh shit,” I said as my blood ran cold.

Nick didn't seem to be joking and a confrontation with someone who was threatening to rape me or worse wasn't high on my list of fun activities to do that afternoon.

“I'm serious,” he said. “If this person was a real threat he wouldn't write you polite little notes about it, he'd have just got on with it and you'd have been another sad statistic in the police files weeks ago. Odds are that as soon as he's confronted he'll fall apart and give up and find some other outlet for his inadequate little fantasies.”

“That's easy for you to say,” I said, trying to hide a shake that had started in my leg. “You're not the one he's after. Only an idiot goes up to the lion's cage at lunch time and says 'here I am'.”

“You don't have to come with me,” said Nick. “I can easily go on my own but it would be better if you did.”

“I think he's right,” said Ron. “At the very least you'll be able to put a face to him in case you ever see him again and a lot of the problem at the moment is that this person is faceless. He could be anyone.”

“And, it'll prove once and for all that it isn't me,” said Nick. “I know you said you don't think it is but until you confront this guy there'll always be that tiny bit of suspicion.”

“You'll be there too, won't you, Nick?” I said. “You're not saying I should go on my own?”

“No way would I let you go on your own,” he said instantly. “Anyway, I'm going regardless of what you say and all I'm saying is that I think it would be a good idea if you came too.”

“Will you come too Ron?” I asked, desperate for as much support as I could get. Like half a dozen SAS at full combat readiness.

“No,” she said. “I'd just be a liability. You really don't want someone in

a wheelchair around at a time like this. It would be better if I watched from here ready to call the police if there's trouble.”

“Yeah,” I said, my other leg beginning to shake. “Let's talk some more about that point about 'trouble'.”

“There isn't going to be any trouble,” said Nick, confidently. “When we confront him he'll fall apart, I guarantee it.”

“He's a big tough trainer,” I said, “what if he also does martial arts or something and we confront him and he goes berserk and attacks me, or even you. What if he does it inside so Ron can't see? We could both dead before she even thinks to call the cops.”

“You can over-think this,” he said. “Let's take it back to basics. Do you want these letters to stop?”

“Well, I guess,” I said, although I was finding not opening them worked well enough for me.

“Well, then,” he said. “There's nothing left to say other than whether or not you're coming with me.”

“How about tomorrow?” I said. “Even better, let's wait 'til next Thursday and catch him as he's putting the letter in the letter box.”

“Interesting,” said Nick, looking at me. “I never thought you'd be a wuss about it. Okey dokey. Well, I'll be off, then.”

He stood up and started towards the door.

“Hold it, Nick,” said Ron. “God, you're even more melodramatic than she is, which I didn't think was possible. Go and sit down again.”

Nick gave her a long look but did as he was told.

“Take the letters with you so he can't deny they exist and when he sees some of them aren't even opened he may realise how ineffectual he was anyway,” she said. “And put my number in your phone so you can call me to let me know what's happening and don't go until I've found

the binoculars.”

“Good thinking,” he said and they sorted out the details while I sat huddled anxiously in the chair.

“How do you know he’s there?” she said, suddenly.

“I followed him back then came straight here,” said Nick. “I suppose he may have gone out again. Right, wish me luck.”

He gave us a thumbs up and walked out the door. Ron positioned herself by the window and picked up the binoculars. Her stiff back told me everything I needed to know.

“Oh for god’s sake,” I said. “I’m going, alright?”

She twisted round and smiled beatifically at me then banged on the window and waved Nick back.

“I’ll just put some shoes on,” I said, and went to get trainers in case I had to make a run for it.

Nick just smiled when I opened the door and waited while I sat on the doorstep to put them on.

“It’ll all be over in a few minutes,” he said. “Be strong.”

He marched off up the road and I followed, trying to think of slogans from motivational posters I’d seen. They seemed very trite and unconvincing now.

“His car’s gone,” said Nick when we got to the house.

“Right,” I said, “let’s go home then.”

“He could still be in the house,” he said. “His wife or housemate might have taken the car. Come on.”

He marched up the short path to the front door while I looked up and down the road for the guy’s car even though I had no idea what it

looked like.

“Tel,” called Nick. “Come on.”

Reluctantly I went to the front door as well.

“This place is two apartments,” said Nick. “Dwayne Almond is in the ground floor one.”

He pushed the buzzer and we heard it buzz inside. Other than that nothing happened.

“Maybe he is out,” said Nick, pushing the buzzer again. Still nothing happened so Nick pushed the buzzer for the upstairs apartment. Nothing happened there either.

“Everyone's out,” said Nick.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“Go inside and wait for him,” he said. “He's bound to come back sooner or later.”

“But the door's locked,” I pointed out.

“It's only a Yale,” he said. “Just a sec.”

He rummaged in one of his jacket pockets and pulled out a couple of paper clips. He straightened one of them out so the inner U section was at right-angles to the rest of it. The other one he straightened out completely then bent a few times so it had three V shaped kinks in it.

“Watch and learn,” he said with a little grin.

He inserted the U section into the keyhole and used the rest of that paper clip as a lever to rotate the lock slightly. Then he inserted the paper clip with the Vs and slowly moved it back and forward a few times while keeping pressure on the other paper clip. Suddenly the lock rotated and the door slipped open.

“Jesus,” I said, fascinated. “It’s that easy?”

“It’s that easy,” he said, opening the door fully and going inside. “Come on.”

“How did you know there wasn’t a security chain?” I said, following him inside.

He just looked at me and I felt stupid. People who go out can’t chain the door from the inside. Duh.

“Shut the door,” he said and knocked firmly on the door of the ground floor apartment. “Police,” he said loudly and authoritatively, “open up.”

He put his ear to the door and listened intently.

“No one there,” he said and did his paper clip trick again. The door creaked as it slowly swung open.

It was quite dark inside and smelt of unwashed men. Nick flicked on the light and we went in.

“Hello,” called Nick. “Anyone home?”

This room had a scruffy old blanket over the window, an old couch, a very large TV and a desk in a corner with a computer and a laser printer and a large poster of Lady Gaga. Over by the window were some barbells and scattered around the couch were discarded pizza boxes and some empty beer cans. At the far end of the room was a doorway and Nick headed off to see if there was anyone in the other rooms. I slowly rotated and got a strong sense of someone with very little in their life. Someone who spent their home time slumped on the couch, watching TV and eating pizza and occasionally pumping a little iron. I wandered over to the pile of DVDs on the floor beside the TV and squatted down. They were mostly action movies although there were a couple on bodybuilding competitions and a few that were, going by the titles, fairly mainstream porn. I wandered over to the computer.

“No one here,” he said coming back, “although you don't want to go in the bedroom. Dwayne doesn't seem to be much into doing the laundry or buying new clothes. That seems to be where most of the smell is coming from.”

“Shall I boot the computer?” I asked. “He might have copies of the letters on there.”

“Nah,” he said. “It's probably passworded and he may have a cam that'll record you. Do you want to give Ron a call and tell her we're going to wait for him to come back?”

“OK,” I said and called her.

“Ron wants to know what his car looks like,” I told Nick after a short chat. “She'll keep an eye out and call if she sees it.”

“Great,” he said, and gave me the details to pass on to her.

“Bit of a dump, isn't it.” he said when I'd hung up.

He moved some of the pizza boxes and cans with his foot and rotated the couch to face the door.

“I guess personal trainers don't get paid much,” I said. “So what do we do now?”

“We sit and wait,” he said, sitting on the couch and preparing to wait.

I wandered around the room and, for want of anything better to do, sat on the couch.

“What do we do when he comes back?” I asked.

“Play it by ear” he said.

“That's helpful,” I said. Nick laughed.

“We've no idea how he'll react so we can't plan much,” he said.

“What if he isn't alone?” I asked.

“He lives alone,” said Nick, “and I really don't see him bringing a woman back here. She'd walk straight out again. Look at the place. He isn't geared up for visitors.”

I had to agree and we sat in silence for a while. I tried not to look at the worn, stained carpet as it wasn't relaxing.

“You, err, managed to get in pretty easily,” I said tentatively.

“It's what I do,” said Nick, “although most places have better security than this.”

“Yeah, there's nothing here worth taking,” I said, then bit my lip. Nick just gave a half smile.

“So, erm, why do you do it?” I asked.

“You mean the art and jewellery and stuff?” he asked.

I nodded.

He thought about it for a while. “Partly social justice,” he said eventually, “But mostly for the thrill, I guess.”

“Social justice?” I said, disbelievingly, “you're kidding me. Where's the justice in stealing things from other people?”

“I only steal from people who've got rich through corruption,” he said. “Bent bankers, politicians who take backhanders, people who've made a fortune ripping off their employees' pension funds, people like that. No way would I steal from poor people. The kind of things I take no poor person could ever afford to have anyway.”

“So you do it to punish them?” I asked. It seemed a little iffy, to say the least.

“No, not really,” he said. “I'd be surprised if many of them actually like what they've got hanging on the walls and they just claim on their

insurance anyway so there's precious little punishment for them beyond a little inconvenience. No, what I do is take the stuff then sell it on after a while so it's more of a redistribution of assets."

"What do you do with the money?" I asked.

"I keep some for my own needs, I have to admit," he said, "although my needs are very small since I have a good job. My house, for example. My parents really did leave it to me and I've a mortgage on the other."

"Why haven't you paid it off?" I asked. "Surely you'd have enough from the proceeds to do that."

"Oh god, yeah," he said. "I could have bought the whole street by now if I did that but it would be suspicious. The last thing I want to do is attract attention and a mortgage is such a perfectly normal thing that no one thinks twice about it."

"So what do you do with the rest of the money?" I asked.

"I give it away to charities," he said. "It's no use to me, personally, and these guys really need the money."

"You serious?" I asked. I have to admit I was surprised.

"Yup," he said. "That's why I called it social justice. I take from the rich and corrupt and give to the poor and needy. I do what the government should be doing but what they really do is put loopholes in the laws so that the ultra rich can get away with being corrupt and, at the same time, avoid paying taxes which gives the government the excuse to cut back on social services. In a perfect world the government would stop the corruption, collect taxes from the wealthy and provide support services for the vulnerable."

"Sounds impressive," I said, wondering how much of it was true. "So what charities do you give to?"

"Oh lord," he said, "let me think. There have been so many since I try to avoid giving too much too often to the same ones in case too many

questions get asked, but I spread it around among the homeless, the disabled, victims of domestic violence, things like that. Oh, and the RSPCA, of course, I hate cruelty to animals. Last year I gave some to Cancer Research although I try to be ethical about it. I really don't support the abuse of animals for scientific research.”

“So you're a bit of a Robin Hood?” I said.

“Oh god no,” said Nick. “Robin Hood was a dispossessed nobleman trying to get revenge and he never gave a penny to the poor, that part was made up in the nineteenth century. Different mindset entirely.”

“OK,” I said, “I can see that. So, err, how much are we talking about here?”

“You mean how much do I give to the charities?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “ball park, I'm not asking for audited accounts.”

Nick burst out laughing at the idea of audited accounts.

“Ohh, let me think.” He stared at his fingers while seemingly doing sums in his head and ticking things off. “In the last year, somewhere around nine or nine and a half million pounds. No, maybe a little under nine since they get the money after legal fees.”

“Legal fees?” I said, startled. “What legal fees are there in fencing stolen goods?”

Did he say nine million pounds? £9,000,000? A year? Surely not.

“Oh not for that,” he said. “But to keep everything anonymous and untraceable, whatever I get from the proceeds goes through some Swiss and other bank accounts and a handful of offshore corporations. I've some lawyers in various places like the Cayman Islands and Vanuatu who handle the transfers without asking any questions about who I am or where the money comes from. If anyone ever did manage to trace the money all the way back from a charity to the source they'd never find me since I'm not personally involved at any stage. That's why I don't even offload all the, umm, takings from a job in

one go. Everything is staggered so there's no perceptible pattern.”

“Jesus, you must have been doing this for a while then,” I said.

“Yeah, a fair while,” he said. “It's too complicated for me to have set up in one go but it's evolved over the years and every now and then I set up another bank account or corporation to cloud the mix. Although when I originally got started it was all just cash in my pocket. The fancy stuff came along later.”

“So you didn't start out with a mission, then?” I said. “Your social conscience didn't stumble on this as a means of socialist redemption?”

“It started as revenge,” he said, “then became a thrill, like I said.”

“Revenge for what?” I asked.

If he tried to make out his mother had been a disabled, single woman and victim of domestic abuse I figured it would all be a fabrication, a kind of stereotypical Hollywood nonsense fantasy justification.

“I was bullied at school by a couple of older boys,” he said. “I was too little and too young to stand up for myself so I started to steal from them whenever I could to get revenge. It gave me a kind of power over them, especially as no one ever figured out it was me taking their lunch money or cricket bats. When they finally left school I stopped but found I was getting itchy fingers so I started up again on other bullies, even though I wasn't being bullied myself any more. It was mostly for fun. I figured when I'd left school there wouldn't be any bullies anymore and I'd stop then but, of course, when I left school I found that bullying was even worse, just more sophisticated. Like at uni. There were a couple of professors who deliberately downgraded papers then upgraded them again in exchange for sex. There were some corrupt Student Union people as well who creamed off some of the proceeds of student social events or manipulated student accommodation services so they could pressure cute but naïve overseas students. I also got to hear about a guy in the Immigration Department who traded student visas and various other people so I started to branch out.”

“So that’s how you got into the social justice side?” I asked, intrigued.

“Yeah,” he said. “Probably because I’m a sucker for a sob story. Like a friend of mind who was doing English Lit got blackmailed by one of the associate lecturers into buying drugs for him in exchange for grades so I started to steal from the lecturer and gave the proceeds to my friend to pay for the drugs. And I heard about a girl from Sri Lanka who was conned into shagging a landlord so I stole from him and gave her the proceeds so she could live somewhere decent that she couldn’t otherwise have afforded.”

“But surely Accommodation Services would never have let a thing like that happen,” I said. “They vet all the landlords.”

“Usually,” he said, “but this particular landlord had an arrangement with one of the guys in Accommodation Services. For a share of the rent he sent girls to this particular landlord and made sure that Student Support Services believed they were troublemakers and were trying to cause the landlord problems if any of them did complain.”

“Wow,” I said, stunned. It made my problems at Osbourne and Offstedt, where my boss had been trying to shag me which was why I left, seem fairly trivial.

“Then, of course,” continued Nick, “I moved out of the safe sheltered world of education and into the world of business and found there are no limits on how bad things can get. Corrupt policemen, corrupt judges, corrupt local government officials, corrupt politicians, corrupt stockbrokers, bankers, builders, salesmen, food producers. Jesus, you name it and someone in that area is ripping off as many people as they can and that’s without even mentioning the criminals, the drug dealers, human traffickers and so on. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying most police or businessmen are corrupt, even most criminals are fairly honourable in a sense. No, the corrupt are only a tiny percentage but that still amounts to a lot of people. So, I target the richest of them on the grounds that they are most likely to be the most successful at being, shall we say, morally deficient. After all, a corrupt but inept union official who is struggling to get by is hardly likely to be particularly effective in what he’s up to but someone who’s worth several hundred million from dirty dealing and has become virtually

untouchable within 'The Establishment' is likely to be victimising thousands of people and probably the most vulnerable.”

I stared at him, my mind a whirl since this was nothing like what I'd expected to hear and he just shrugged.

“So that's how it is,” he said.

My phone rang and I answered it.

“Oh god,” I said. “He's just pulled up outside.”

Chapter Nineteen

Nick leapt up and positioned himself behind the hallway door and held a finger to his lips to tell me to stay put and be quiet. It was surprisingly easy to do that since I'd gone limp with fear.

We heard someone open the front door and then closing it. A couple of solid footfalls. A key scraped into the lock of the hallway door. The door opened. A hand flicked on the light. I stifled a small scream as Iron Man stood there in astonishment, staring at me.

“What the fuck?” he said, freezing mid-step.

He was wearing cute little shorts, a tight, sweat stained singlet and big, clunky trainers. Nothing like the image I had built in my mind which alternated between a scruffy plastic mac loser with NHS glasses held together with sticky tape and a chainsaw wielding amalgam of the vile characters from various horror movies I'd seen over the years; Freddie Krueger meets Jason meets Chucky meets Hannibal Lecter. Iron Man was pretty ordinary.

“Hello,” I said, trying to sound sardonic and in control of the situation but the Minnie Mouse quality of my voice somewhat negated the effect. “We meet at last.”

“You what?” he said, stepping further into the room and glancing round to check his TV and computer were still in place. “What's happening?”

The door closed behind him and he twisted violently then froze again when he saw Nick behind him.

“Who the fuck are you?” he said.

“Oh, that doesn't really matter, does it,” said Nick succeeding with the sardonicism where I had failed. “What matters is that you are Dwayne Almond, otherwise known as Iron Man.”

“I remember you,” said Dwayne, his eyes narrowing. “You're that guy from the gym. You signed up today. How did you find me? What are

you doing here? How the fuck did you get in?"

"You left the door unlocked," said Nick. "We wanted to have a little chat with you about some letters."

"What letters?" asked Dwayne, looking puzzled.

"These letters," said Nick, pulling them out of his pocket and fanning them. "They're all addressed to Estelle Bennett and signed by Iron Man, which is you, isn't it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Dwayne, "but if you're still here in five seconds I'm calling the cops."

"I saw you put this letter in Estelle's letterbox this morning," said Nick, "and I followed you to the gym. So if you really want the police to come here and see them, feel free to give them a call. We're happy to wait."

Dwayne looked at the letters then at Nick then back at the letters. He licked his lips and seemed indecisive.

Nick pulled out his phone and held it out to Dwayne.

"Here, use mine," he said.

Dwayne didn't move.

"OK," said Nick, "I'll ring them, then," and swiped the screen of his phone.

"OK," said Dwayne, coming to a decision. "So what if I wrote them?"

"Estelle doesn't like them," said Nick. "She'd very much like you to stop and never do it again."

"Why can't she tell me that herself?" said Dwayne. "Too scared is she? Had to send you to do her work for her, did she?"

"I don't like those letters," I said, standing up. "I want you to stop

sending them.”

Dwayne glanced at me then turned back to Nick.

“Who the fuck's that?” he said.

“That's Estelle Bennett,” said Nick, looking slightly puzzled.

“No it isn't,” said Dwayne, also looking slightly puzzled.

“Yes I frigging am,” I suddenly screamed at Dwayne, my nerves breaking from the tension. “You goddamned, frigging, evil bastard.”

I leapt at him and started slapping and punching him. It felt good; the frustrations and fears of the last few weeks finally finding an outlet. Dwayne backed away under my onslaught, holding his arms protectively in front of him with his head lowered until I managed to trap him in the corner of the room. Nick leaned against the door and watched, hopefully in case Dwayne started to retaliate but maybe he got turned on by aggressive women.

Still, Dwayne didn't retaliate and I gave up after a few minutes.

“She really is Estelle Bennett,” said Nick. “Do you want to see her driver's licence?”

“Estelle Bennett's a bitch in a wheelchair,” said Dwayne, peeping out from behind his protective arms. “She ain't in a wheelchair.”

“A wheelchair?” I stared at him in shock. “You sent those letters to the woman in a wheelchair? You goddamned bastard.” I hit him a few more times and he still didn't retaliate. Nick still leaned against the door. I gave up after a while since I obviously wasn't strong enough to actually hurt him significantly.

“Why did you think the woman in the wheelchair was Estelle, Dwayne?” asked Nick.

“Keep her away from me,” said Dwayne, dropping his arms a bit and looking nervously at me.

“I will if you answer my question,” said Nick.

“I asked the postman,” he said, grumpily. “I asked him if Jenny Smith lived there and he looked at the letters he was delivering and said Estelle Bennett and Ron Someone lived there and I knew that bitch in the wheelchair lived with a guy so I figured she was Estelle.”

“You really stuffed that one up,” said Nick. “Ron is the one in the wheelchair and Estelle's her sister.”

“So who is the man then?” asked Dwayne, looking mystified but keeping his distance from me.

“Ron's husband,” said Nick. “I'm guessing he didn't get any post that day.”

“You really Estelle Bennett?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “So why've you got it in for my sister?”

He didn't answer, just stood there looking stupid. I advanced towards him. I wasn't in the least bit scared of him anymore.

“Tell me, you bastard,” I said vehemently and raised my hand to hit him. He cowered in the corner again.

“Tel,” said Nick, quietly, “go and sit down.”

I locked eyes with Nick but after a long silence backed down. It all seemed pretty pointless and rather pathetic now.

“So what's this all about?” said Nick when I'd sat down. “What did Ron do to you?”

“She's a cripple, isn't she,” said Dwayne, viciously. “I friggin' hate cripples, they give me the creeps. They should be put down like the vermin they are, not given money and be allowed to roam the streets. They're a drain on society, a friggin' cancer. They should all be exterminated. That Hitler had the right idea.”

Nick and I stared at each other and Nick gave a half shrug and shook his head.

“So how did you know her?” he asked.

“Saw her out the window, didn't I,” said Dwayne, sullenly. “So I followed her home.”

“And you were planning to kill her?” he said.

“I frigging wish,” said Dwayne. “Those bleeding left wing socialist tossers have wrecked this country. If I touched her they'd have me in prison. Me! I ask you. Shit.”

“So why did you send the letters?” asked Nick quietly.

“Just wanted to scare her, like,” said Dwayne. “Let her know what scum she is.”

Nick sighed. I didn't know what to say since I was torn between being horrified at Dwayne's attitude, being horrified at him threatening Ron and being horrified at myself for being relieved that it wasn't me after all. It wasn't a good mix and I wasn't feeling overly happy with myself either.

“Jesus,” said Nick after a while. “So what are we going to do?”

“Tattoo him,” I said, getting a flash of inspiration. “Like in that film *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*.”

“That's a good idea,” said Nick. I gawped at him since I hadn't really meant it.

“Dwayne,” he said. Dwayne looked at him. “I've got some friends, and they're going to be keeping an eye on you. You ever do anything like this again you'll be hearing from me. Do you understand? And I'll be giving you a tattoo, but it won't be a nice little tattoo of a skull or anything like that. Oh no. It'll be a tattoo that sends a message. And you know who that message will be aimed at?”

Dwayne stared at him expressionlessly.

“You’ll go to prison, one day, Dwayne” said Nick conversationally. “People like you always do and when you send anyone another of your nasty little letters I will make absolutely certain that you do go to prison. So do you know who will be reading your tattoo message, Dwayne?”

Slowly Dwayne shook his head, his eyes never leaving Nick’s face.

“I’ll tell you, Dwayne. Your tattoo will be for the other prisoners. And do you know what they’ll do to you in prison, Dwayne? They’ll see that tattoo and they will make your life a living hell. Do you know any hard men, Dwayne? Do you have any idea what a real hard man in a real prison with no hope of ever getting out again will do to amuse himself, Dwayne? With someone he doesn’t like? With a tattoo that tells him he can do what he likes with you? Think about it, Dwayne. Do think about it before you send any more letters because, you see, I don’t think you’ll like being the amusement of a real hard man in a real hard prison. Wouldn’t be surprised if you end up a cripple yourself, Dwayne. Unable to get away because you can’t run or even fight back. Just imagine that, Dwayne. You, a cripple, at the mercy of someone who has no qualms or scruples, someone who just likes hurting you, just for fun, just to pass the time. So you just think about that the next time you get an urge to send a letter.”

Dwayne stood there, motionless, watching Nick like a hunted rabbit. Nick gestured for me to go with him so I walked over to the door.

“Don’t forget, Dwayne. My friends will be watching you, You’ll never know who they are, they could be anyone. Someone at your gym, maybe the person living in the flat above, or someone in the street but you’ll be watched, have no doubt about that. Eyes will follow you wherever you go. And one day I’ll be seeing you again.”

Nick gently pushed me through the door and shut it behind him.

“Are you really going to do all that?” I asked, when we were back on the street and walking towards home.

“God no,” he said. “I don't know anyone who'd watch him and I have no idea what to put in the tattoo or even how to do one. It's just that other than going to the police I can't think of any way of stopping him doing it again to someone else so I was trying to make him scared. Still, I'm pretty sure you won't be getting any more letters.”

“Yeah, I couldn't think of anything either,” I said, “and I didn't want you getting involved with the police.”

“Yeah, thank you for that,” he said as we drew level with Ron's house. “Well, I'll be off then.”

He looked searchingly at my face as I stood there watching him as silently as Dwayne had.

“By the way,” he said, “probably not a good idea to tell Ron or Max. It's all over now and won't do either of them any good to find out it wasn't aimed at you after all.”

“Yeah, you're right,” I said, thoughtfully, much as I wanted to share my relief that it wasn't about me after all. “Well, umm, thank you.”

“Nice knowing you,” he said and abruptly turned away and headed for his car.

“Don't go,” I said, quietly, after he'd gone.

* * *

“Has Ron told you what's been happening?” I asked Max when I went inside. He'd come home from work while Nick and I were with Dwayne.

“We were watching through the window,” he said. “How did it go?”

“That guy won't be doing it again,” I said and told them what Nick had said to him.

“Actually, that'll probably work,” said Max. “By the sound of it he's an inadequate sort of person and he probably won't have the courage to

try again. Why did he pick on you?"

"I was just a random passerby," I said, "and he asked the postman what my name was. He just wanted to scare me, he really wasn't up to doing anything."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it," he said. "Life is just so random most of the time. Is there really any point in trying to make sense of it all?"

"I was too on edge to do any dinner," said Ron, "let's have a takeaway."

"Great idea," said Max. "Is Nick joining us? Didn't he come in?"

"They've split up, hon, I told you," said Ron.

"Oh, sorry, I thought they were back together again," said Max.

"I'll get some takeaway menus," I said, getting up to go in the kitchen.

"So why did they split up again?" I heard Max asking.

"He's some sort of crook," I heard Ron say. "Tel didn't like it."

"What kind of crook?" Max asked as I walked back in then fell silent when he saw me.

"She won't say," said Ron, looking challengingly at me. "She probably thinks you'll tell the police."

"Why would I tell the police?" asked Max, looking puzzled.

"Because you work for a law firm," I said. "You know, professional ethics or something."

Max burst out laughing.

"Oh my word," he chortled. "That's a good one, oh lord, professional ethics, wonderful!"

“Don't you have any, then?” I said, sitting down with a stack of takeaway menus.

“Are you serious?” he asked, suddenly becoming serious. “Have you any idea how much the global economy depends on crime?”

“I'm not in the mood for bullshit,” I said. “It's been a long and stressful day. What takeaway do you fancy?”

“I'm not bullshitting you,” he said. “Get rid of crime and I'm out of work immediately, along with all the world's lawyers who don't deal with divorce and disputes between neighbours. So are most of the police and the politicians who make the laws defining what is a crime as well as most of the law courts system. And, if you take away the lawyers, the courts and the police you'll destroy thousands of support businesses. You know, the people who supply them with everything from uniforms to food in the police canteens to the computer companies that supply the systems for everything from a registration number search to a list of stolen artwork. You'll also have to sack god knows how many teachers and professors who do all the training and the clerks who manage everything. The impact would be huge. So what sort of crook is Nick then? He doesn't look the violent type.”

It struck me that Max wasn't joking. He really was standing up for the economic and social benefits of crime.

“You won't tell the police?” I said.

“I promise,” he said, crossing his heart.

“He steals art and jewellery from people who've made a fortune from being corrupt,” I said.

“I knew it,” said Ron, triumphantly. “I just knew he was one of the good guys.”

“He's a thief,” I said.

“Balls,” said Ron. “He just takes back what's already been stolen. What does he do with the proceeds?”

I told them about the charities but not the bank accounts or offshore corporations, just in case.

“You know,” said Max, thoughtfully, “it’ll be interesting if he’s ever caught. It’ll be the instinct of the judges and the prosecutors to throw the book at him since attacking the property of the wealthy is still just about the worst crime you can commit but they’ll have a hell of a job convicting him. A lot would depend on the jury and any half decent defence team would stir up a public crusade. You know, I think my outfit would even defend him pro bono just for the incredible publicity. He sounds like just the sort of criminal that would capture the public imagination. There’s a lovely story about an Australian who rustled some cattle and managed to get them across the desert into Western Australia. He got arrested and went to court and the jury were so impressed by that, that they found him not guilty and the judge declared it a mistrial. At the second trial the judge warned the jury to take a strict legal interpretation of the facts. When they came back with their verdict, the jury said ‘we find him guilty but he can keep the bloody cattle!’ I don’t know how true it is but I think it’s a wonderful story.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ll be telling me next that what he does is good for the economy as well,” I said. “Come on, what shall we have for dinner?”

“Well, actually, yes, it is good for the economy,” he said. “Given the sort of people he steals from they will have a lot of insurance cover so they will make their claims and use the money they receive in compensation to buy more goods and services which keeps the money in circulation and stimulates growth. On the other hand, by donating to charities the proceeds go towards the purchase of goods and services at the other end of the spectrum which also stimulates economic growth and at the same time takes some of the pressure off government supported social services and allows the tax income that would otherwise be used for those social services to be used in other ways, such as education or health. I wouldn’t be surprised if your Nick is in some way indirectly responsible for quite a respectable little percentage of the Gross National Product of this country. It’s not like he mugs little old ladies for their weekly pension payout.”

“So you're saying I've treated him harshly?” I said sarcastically.

“Well, perhaps you're being a bit hypocritical,” said Max. “After all, you're a criminal as well, just on a smaller scale and without the social justice element.”

“Oh for god's sake,” I said, throwing the takeaway menus on the floor. “How do you make that out?”

“I seem to remember a week or two ago we were talking about how to avoid paying taxes on your profits from the rolls,” said Max. “That's purely for your personal benefit and is actually taking money away from those who need the social services your tax money would have provided.”

I wanted to protest but he was right and since I didn't think that what I was doing was wrong was it really fair of me to condemn Nick?

“Oh faf,” I said. “What if I got involved with him and he ended up going to prison?”

“Lots of thieves go to prison,” said Max, picking up the takeaway menus, “and their wives wait for them, well, most of them anyway. Just like the wives of people in the navy or those people who work on oil rigs or spend years in Antarctica studying the growth of bacteria or whatever. Lots of jobs involve time away from home. People just work around it. I'm thinking Chinese.”

“We had Chinese last week,” said Ron. “How about Thai?”

“I'm happy with Thai,” said Max, “how about you, Tel?”

“Oh yeah, whatever,” I said. “I'm not feeling very hungry.”

“Get her a Pad Thai,” said Ron.

“I'm going to have a bath,” I said and put the other menus back in the kitchen while Max went to the phone to order dinner.

“What?” I said as Ron followed me to the stairs.

“Talk to me Tel,” she said.

“What about?” I said. “I’m just going to have a bath, that’s all.”

“You love him, don’t you,” she said.

I stared at her then sat on the stairs.

“Yeah,” I said, miserably. “But he’s a frigging criminal.”

Ron sighed.

“Yeah,” she said. “There’s that, isn’t there.”

“I’m going to have a bath,” I said. “I’ll be down before the takeaway gets here.”

“Have you ever wondered just how many criminals there are in the world?” called Ron after me as I made my way up the stairs.

“No,” I said, “but there must be millions. Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” she said. “Although I wouldn’t be surprised if most of them are married or in a relationship. Enjoy your bath.”

“I wonder if she’d feel the same way if she knew who the letters were meant for?” I thought as I adjusted the taps so the bath wouldn’t be too hot.

“But then Nick isn’t that sort, is he?” I thought, getting undressed in my room. “Oh faf.”

I picked up my dressing gown from the bedside table where I’d thrown it that morning and it snagged on something. I gave it a jerk and it lodged solidly on something just under the edge of the bed.

“Bugger,” I said and knelt down to disentangle it.

It was the iron that had nearly hit me and caused me to knock into Nick.

“Oh jeez,” I said to myself, picking it up amidst a flood of wonderful associations. I stroked it and tenderly put it back on the bedside table. I must have knocked it off in the night a while back and not noticed.

I slipped on my dressing gown and went back to the bathroom and turned off the taps then went back to my room and sat on the bed, staring at the broken steam iron.

On impulse I pulled my phone out of my jeans pocket. There were no missed calls or messages so I called up Nick's contact info, hit Message and quickly keyed in 'fancy coming rnd 4 dinner 2mrw evng?' and sat there staring at it.

“Do I really want this?” I asked the steam iron.

It didn't answer, just looked back at me in a cracked, flattened sort of way. I knew how it felt.

“You really are an idiot,” I said, and clicked Send.