

Sheila

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the
Writer

Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
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Typeset, printed and bound by Richard Jefferis

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Chapter One

“Nice car,” he said. “Shame you don't know how to drive it.”

It was a nice day, a little chilly but the sun was shining. I'd just scrunched up my sandwich bag and thrown it at the rubbish bin beside the lamppost and, predictably, missed. A large car had pulled up in a parking space a few yards away, its engine throbbing lustily. I don't know much about cars but I recognised the shiny thing sticking up out of its bonnet as a supercharger intake. The car was a rather eye catching shade of vivid green. You don't get many cars like this in a small country town, at least not outside the combined public library and town hall. In fact you don't get much traffic in this street at all. It's all speed humps, one way signs and heavy speed restrictions and relatively few people visit the library or the town hall.

I took the orange out of my bag and started to peel it with my thumb, watching with mild interest. The driver had got out of the car, trying to look cool although when you're in your fifties and dressed for the office your image rather clashes with that type of car. A younger man, probably in his thirties, wearing jeans and a leather jacket who had been leaning against the lamppost beside the rubbish bin had gone over to the car when it arrived and was admiring it.

As predictably as my missing the bin, the older man was annoyed by the younger man's remark and made a rude comment. The younger man laughed.

“I've seen you round town,” he said. “You're so busy perving at the young girls you never take it out of second gear.”

The older man was larger than the younger man and went and stood closely in front of him and was clearly trying to intimidate him. I couldn't make out the words but it seemed rather intense and there was a fair amount of gesticulating. The younger man wasn't visibly intimidated. I started to pull my orange segments apart for something to do while waiting to see what would happen.

Things were obviously getting a little heated as the older man started poking the younger man's chest with his finger. The younger man just

smiled and matched him, eyeball for eyeball, without flinching.

“.... you chicken,” wafted over. There was tension in the voice and it sounded like the older man although I wasn’t sure.

Suddenly it was all over. The younger man walked away and the older man got back in the car and sat there, drumming the fingers of one hand agitatedly on the steering wheel. He was waiting for something. I finished my orange and glanced at my watch. I didn’t have to be back at work for another ten minutes so I decided to sit there and see what, if anything, was going to eventuate. Not a lot did. The man just sat there, fingers hard at work on the steering wheel. He kept glancing in the mirror and a couple of times ran the fingers of his other hand through his thinning hair.

I lit a post lunch cigarette and as I put the packet back in my bag I heard the crackle of a motorcycle coming down the street. It pulled up beside the vivid green car and the younger man in the jeans and leather jacket lifted his visor.

“Right then, let’s do it,” he said to the older man.

The older man started his car and revved it a few times to show that whatever ‘it’ was he was ready for it. His exhaust reverberated and a young woman on the other side of the road pushing a pram looked up nervously.

The older man backed his car out of the parking slot and moved off up the street. The man on the motorcycle walked his bike back a couple of steps then slipped it into gear and did a sharp U turn and followed the car. I lost sight of them as they went around the corner into the High Street.

“Damn,” I said to myself.

It had looked quite interesting but I wasn’t going to be around when they did whatever they were going to do. Which was a shame as I was bored to hell and even street arguments were interesting. So long as they didn’t involve me of course. Personally, I don’t like conflict but it’s often entertaining to watch other people’s conflicts.

It was time to go back to work so I wandered over to the rubbish bin and chucked in my orange peel and picked up my sandwich wrapper and dropped that in as well. Litter isn't nice in a public park. I walked past the library, turned left into McIntyre Street and slowly made my way past a couple of clothes shops and a shoe shop. I'd never been in those shops, although I looked in the windows most days as I walked past. They had some nice stuff but it was all out of my price range.

Halfway down McIntyre Street, I turned right into Crawly Road. There were no shops in Crawly Road, just a couple of estate agents, a law firm and a tattooist. The rest of the road was private houses although there was a dentist further along and a chiropodist, both operating out of converted houses. On the whole the road was quite nice. 1920's style houses with neat little front gardens and awnings over the front windows and lined with tall leafy trees. Up at the McIntyre Street end, however, the houses had been knocked down in the not too distant past and replaced with concrete office type buildings. They clashed with the almost genteel aura and made this end of the road rather ugly.

I worked in one of the estate agents. Morgan & Tilly. They called themselves a boutique agency because it sounded a lot better than small and fairly unsuccessful. They were slowly being pushed out of the market by the three other estate agents in town who were all considerably bigger. Mr Morgan had had a stroke a few years ago and never came in to work and Mr Tilly was more or less retired. He handled perhaps one sale a year, mainly for a friend, and solely in order to keep getting his share of the profits. The office was run by Vera Blackstone who had just two other agents, Norman and Stanley. I wasn't an estate agent. I was the receptionist and looked after our small portfolio of rental properties.

"Sheila, could you phone Mrs Warren and arrange an inspection for next Monday," called Vera from her office when I walked in.

"Sure," I said, taking off my coat and dumping my bag on my two tier desk. The top tier was for visitors to lean on and held four little plastic containers for our business cards. The bottom tier held my phone, my computer and a note pad. Our corporate philosophy was 'minimalist' with the intention of portraying quiet efficiency. One of our competitors, in the concrete structure next door had a corporate

philosophy of 'cluttered overwork'. It seemed the general public preferred a cluttered overworked estate agent to a minimalist one.

"Morning or afternoon?" I said to Vera, peering around her half open door.

"Either," she replied and picked up the phone.

I logged on to the computer and dug up Mrs Warren's phone number. She was selling her house in the newish suburb out of town and wasn't getting many enquiries because she wanted more than it was worth. This was actually our fault because the first job of any estate agent is to sign up the client to an exclusive sale contract. Without sellers we have nothing to sell which is a sad state of affairs for an estate agent. Unfortunately the easiest technique to get a client to sign was to tell them their house was worth more than it actually was, and more than the other agents were saying. Once signed we then put pressure on the seller to drop the price so the house was actually sellable. Mrs Warren was one of the ones who believed the inflated price and refused to drop it which is why she couldn't find a buyer.

I rang her on her mobile phone and we agreed 3pm on Monday.

"I'm sure this viewer will be very impressed with the house and put in an offer quickly," I said encouragingly.

"I do hope so," said Mrs Warren, "otherwise I'll be listing with Rogers and Moore."

They were the agents next door. I told Vera the appointment time and, a little gleefully I'm sad to say, passed on the message about Mrs Warren relisting. Vera wasn't pleased.

"Anyone want a coffee?" called Stanley.

Stanley was a newish agent, having been with us for only six months, and he was struggling to get clients. As a result he spent a lot of time hanging around the office and making coffees. Technically it was my job to make the coffees but I had no problem sharing the role with him. We all accepted Stanley's offer and he busied himself in the little

kitchen.

The phone rang.

“Morgan and Tilly, Sheila speaking, how can I help you?”

The caller's voice kept cutting out.

“I can't hear you,” I said sweetly. I'd been practising that voice for years. “You keep cutting out.”

Unfortunately the phone hadn't cut out when the man swore rather nastily then he hung up. Cutting out calls were fairly common as a number of people phoned us from their phones while driving and the satellites often struggled to track their moving signals. They never seemed to learn though.

I picked up the phone almost before it rang again. I was quite used to people pulling over and calling back and had the timing almost down to a second.

“Morgan and Tilly, Sheila speaking, how can I help you?”

“Can you put me through to Norman, please.”

It was the same man and he sounded much nicer than a few moments before. I thought I recognised his voice.

“May I ask who's calling?”

“John Yates,” he said.

It wasn't the person I thought I recognised.

“Putting you through.”

“John Yates for you, Norman,” I called out to Norman.

He didn't like to pick up his phone without knowing who was calling so I had to shout rather than tell him on the phone before putting the

caller through. We all have our idiosyncrasies. I heard him pick up the phone through my phone and put John Yates through.

Stanley brought me my coffee and I smiled a thank you. He was quite young and far too good looking to be an estate agent. People, mostly men, didn't trust him. I gave him another six months before he left to pursue another career. Norman, on the other hand, was middle aged, overweight and fairly unattractive but exuded a quiet trustworthiness and was by far our most successful agent.

I opened my email and printed the day's bank statement. On any given day there were usually ten to fifteen rental receipts and three or four times a month a settlement receipt from a sale. One of my tasks was to update the rental records of rents paid and chase up any arrears if someone was getting behind. Out of the one hundred and thirty two rental properties we managed, we had three who were on my watch list because of arrears which was pretty good.

"Don't forget I'm out of the office at three," I told Vera. "I've got an exit inspection to do in Carpenter Street."

Vera looked up from the computer game she was playing and nodded.

"You're not coming back to the office after?" she asked.

"Probably not," I said, "it'll take a couple of hours."

Even if it didn't it would, if you see what I mean. It would probably take less than an hour but I had no intention of coming back to the office afterwards. I had very few perks.

"Morgan and Tilly, Sheila speaking, how can I help you?"

"Hello Sheila, it's Jenny Barrett, I've got no hot water again."

I sighed. The owner of Jenny Barrett's rental refused to pay for a new hot water tank and the old one kept failing despite the best efforts of Dan our handyman.

"OK Jenny, I'll get Dan round again. I'll ring him right away and get

back to you.”

Hot water systems had to be dealt with within twenty four hours and Dan knew this full well which is why he charged extra for emergency hot water tank repairs. The owner of the property hadn't yet realised that he had paid more for repairs to the tank in the last six months than the cost of a new, guaranteed, tank. Some owners have blind spots.

I got Dan on the phone and he happily agreed to go round to Jenny's later that afternoon and I phoned Jenny back to let her know. Other than that, not much else happened that afternoon. All the tenants whose rent was due had paid and, apart from Jenny Barrett, no new problems had arisen that needed fixing, no new owners appeared wanting to rent their properties out and only two people made enquires about vacant rentals but neither chose to actually go and look at any. So at ten to three I got the keys to the property in Carpenter Street, switched the phone over to Stanley to answer in my absence, grabbed my coat and bag and disappeared.

The inspection was straightforward. The place was clean and tidy and the grass had been freshly cut. I noted on the inspection report a couple of scrapes on walls and a cracked window but other than that it was fine. I'd call the owner in the morning and find out if he wanted to claim any damages against the tenants' bond but I doubted he would. It looked like 'fair wear and tear' to me and he was one of the reasonable owners. I also found a few odds and ends that had been overlooked in the packing and took them with me. I'd phone the former tenants to find out what they wanted to do with them in the morning too. All in all it took barely forty five minutes so I set off for home.

There was a bit of a traffic jam on the bypass, which was unusual but it turned out to be because there had been an accident. We all crawled past using just one lane and as I got up to where the accident had been I saw to my surprise that it was a large, vivid green car. It was lying on its roof with smashed glass everywhere and several policemen were directing traffic. Just as I approached I saw a policeman putting an A board beside the road which said there had been a fatal accident there at about 1pm and would witnesses contact the local police.

Obviously I recognised the car. It was the one belonging to the older man I'd seen in my lunch break. I was quite shocked and clamped down hard on my emotions but even so too many memories surfaced from where they lurked not too far below my everyday mind and I had to pull over a little further down the road to get myself back together. Admittedly I didn't know the man personally but I had seen him alive and well only a few hours before. It didn't take long though for me to wonder if the little dispute I'd seen outside the library had somehow lead to this accident. What if they had gone to the bypass to race and put their manhoods on the line and it had all ended in tragedy?

I drove the rest of the way home wondering if I should tell the police what I had seen. I wasn't a witness to whatever had happened on the bypass but it was quite possible that the younger man on the motorcycle had been involved. My instinct told me not to get involved but my sense of civic duty told me I should report it as it could be important. Even if the biker wasn't directly involved he may have seen it. I drove into the driveway of my house, parked the car in the garage and walked back to the mailbox to collect my mail.

My house was the same as usual. Cold, empty and cheerless. I'd got divorced nearly seven years before and taken out a mortgage to buy out my ex and the mortgage was small enough to afford on my income. Unfortunately it was only just small enough to afford and didn't leave me much at the end of each month to do anything else so I had little in the way of things to brighten up the place and rarely went out as I couldn't afford to. My fortieth birthday was coming up in a couple of weeks and that wasn't the most exciting prospect either.

I walked into the house, looked around, dumped my post on the table and walked straight back out again. It was partly civic duty that prompted me to go to the police and partly an unwillingness to be in the house. I lived there because I had to, not because I wanted to. Back when I'd got divorced I should have bought somewhere else, or even rented, but I had foolishly decided to stay because it was familiar. It wasn't one of my better decisions.

"Umm there was a sign on the bypass this afternoon calling for witnesses to a car crash," I told the policeman at the front desk.

“Did you witness the accident?” he asked.

“No, but I recognised the car.”

He seemed to lose whatever interest he had. Clearly I was just another meddlesome member of the public. I told him about the incident I'd witnessed outside the library at lunchtime and he perked up noticeably.

“What time was this?” he asked.

“About twenty to one,” I said. “I had to be back at work at quarter to.”

“Would you wait for a few moments while I get the investigating officer?” he asked.

I sat in one of the hard chairs that lined the wall of the room. He came back a couple of minutes later.

“Inspector Johnson will be here in a moment,” he said to me then went to deal with someone else waiting to talk to him.

A few minutes later the secure door to the mysterious back area of the police station opened and a middle aged man in a dingy brown suit came out.

“Mrs Hutchins?” he asked. I nodded. I'd never bothered to change my name back to my maiden name.

“Would you come through, please?” He held the door open for me.

I don't know what I was expecting, cells with hardened criminals in them perhaps, but there were just some small, very untidy offices on the other side and a couple of rooms with signs that read 'Interview Room 1' and 'Interview Room 2'.

He led me into Interview Room 2 and sat me down on a hard grey plastic chair in front of a small, cheap grey desk. He sat down the other side. The room was otherwise bare, apart from a twin deck tape recorder and everything was a dull, featureless grey. There was a blind

over the window which cut out most of the sunlight and the bare bulb in the ceiling seemed to give off grey light.

“I understand you have some information concerning a fatal accident on the bypass at around 1pm this afternoon,” he said.

I nodded. I was feeling very intimidated. No doubt this was the intent of the room designers.

“If you could tell me what that information is” he prompted.

I told him the little I could remember of what had happened at lunchtime. He listened without saying a word then when I'd finished he took some paper out of a drawer and made a couple of notes.

“Now, if we could go through that again,” he said.

He took me through it four times, each time asking questions that prompted my memory so I was able to give a fair description of the younger man in jeans and leather jacket, the colour of the bike, part of its registration number and a few other minor details. It had four exhaust pipes for example, and the engine seemed very large and it growled. I suppose things like that helped narrow down the options when they checked the partial registration number.

This all took a couple of hours and I decided to splash out on a takeaway for dinner. After all, it was really quite exciting, even though someone had died and I felt a little guilty about that. Still, I had been helping the police with their enquiries! I felt a little like Sherlock Holmes. I picked up some fried rice and sweet and sour pork from the local Chinese takeaway. I love Chinese takeaways but they are fairly expensive so I don't have them often. I'd never been in a police interview room and I wondered what it would feel like if I was guilty of something and was being given the 'hard cop soft cop' routine I'd seen so many times on TV. I was pretty sure I'd crack almost immediately. I'm nowhere near tough enough or cunning enough to be a criminal.

My house was as cheerless as when I'd left it and a little colder so I put on the heating. Three years ago I'd splurged on a reverse cycle

unit which warmed the place in winter and cooled it in summer. The summer cooling was great because in this part of Australia it sometimes reached 45 degrees in the summer and when it's like that the nights stay in the twenties and it's impossible to sleep. It was early spring so the days were beginning to warm up but the nights were still very chilly.

I savoured every mouthful of my takeaway while half watching a very dull reality show on the TV. I'd seen several episodes before but I just could not relate to any of the impossibly perfect looking yet deceitfully evil doing people who were all twenty somethings. Quite why it was so popular was beyond me. Perhaps it was simply because it was shown at a time when people just slouched in front of whatever was on TV while they had their dinner after a long day at work.

Every cloud has a silver lining and the cloud of finishing my Chinese was coupled with the silver lining of the reality show ending, inconclusively as always. I dumped the tin foil trays in the rubbish and put my plate by the sink to wash up later and put the kettle on. I made some coffee and wandered back into the lounge, wondering whether to have a bath later or just go to bed. I decided not to bother with a bath and went to the bookcase to find a book to read and noticed the post I had dumped on the table.

"More crap," I said to myself but picked up the three envelopes out of habit.

The first was addressed to "The Owner" and was from a competitor estate agent exhorting me to contact them 'NOW' to get the best possible deal on selling my house.

"Don't tempt me," I said out loud.

If I ever sell this house it'll be through Morgan and Tilly because I won't have to pay any estate agents fees which would save me a fair amount. The second envelope was the monthly credit card statement which depressed me. At the rate I was paying off the balance I'd be long dead before it was cleared.

The third envelope was intriguing. It was a heavy cream envelope with

“Winston, Canbrace and Allthrope” neatly embossed on the top left corner and my name and address were beautifully hand written in a copperplate script with a neat little flourish at the end of each line. It reeked of class. I opened it carefully. Something about the envelope made it seem a violation to just rip it open, the way you do with credit card statements, for example.

It seemed Winston, Canbrace and Allthrope were a firm of solicitors in London. It seemed that they were acting on behalf of a client. It seemed that they wanted me to contact them if I was able to show sufficient evidence that I was Sheila Elaine Hutchins, née Lambert, daughter of Susan Elizabeth Lambert and George Henry Lambert.

“I wonder what on earth this is all about,” I said to myself. “It won't be good news, that's for sure. It never is.”

Chapter Two

That night I dreamt that it was me inside the vivid green car and that it had burst into flames and I was desperately trying to get out, beating at the fires that were starting on my clothes and struggling to breath with all the smoke. Finally some shadowy figure reached in and pulled me out but I couldn't see who it was. My own screams woke me and I was all scrunched up in my bedclothes and sweating profusely. I had to get up and make some coffee and have a ciggie before I calmed down enough to go back to bed. I'd had dreams like that before but never with a car on fire.

What was particularly strange was that the vivid green car hadn't caught fire. As far as I could tell when I drove past, the car had simply rolled and presumably the man inside was crushed when the roof collapsed. It took me a long time to go back to sleep. And, of course, I was still tired when my alarm woke me in the morning.

Over my morning coffee and ciggies I looked up what the dream meant on the internet. Apparently dreaming you are being burnt by a fire means your anger is building up and is beginning to get out of control. Which just goes to show that dream interpretation is nonsense really since I was not angry with anything, other than the empty life I was leading and the events that had caused it, and I was more resigned to that than anything. Certainly I wasn't 'about to lose control' angry about it. After all, lots of people are trapped in dead end and rather pointless jobs by their mortgage.

I unlocked the office door and picked up the Advertiser, which was our local daily newspaper. We got a free copy delivered every day because of the amount of advertising we did in it. Despite the heavy use of the internet for advertising properties for sale and to rent, most people still like to browse the colour photos in the local paper then go online to get more details of the places they are interested in. It's fair to say that without us and the other estate agents in town the Advertiser would have folded several years ago.

I dumped my stuff on my desk and booted the computer then hung up my jacket and put the kettle on. While waiting for the kettle to boil I glanced at the front page of the Advertiser.

Fatal Crash On Bypass

It was the only item on the front page and there was a large photo of the wreck. More photos were promised inside, to satisfy the public's desire for carnage. According to the article Mr Reginald Broughton, owner and managing director of Broughton Homes, was killed while speeding excessively on the bypass. According to a witness who saw the accident he was going "incredibly fast". The article went on to say that a statement by the police suggested that they were investigating the possibility that a motorcyclist was involved and that this may have been an illegal street race. The article also suggested that there may have been an altercation between the motorcyclist and Mr Broughton earlier in the day but I was relieved to see that my name was not mentioned. I didn't want my name in the papers.

Coffee made, I took the envelope from Winston, Canbrace and Allthrope out of my bag and reread their letter. It was no more informative than it had been the night before. I checked what the time was in London on Google and discovered that it was coming up to midnight there so ringing them wasn't really an option. Still, the letter did have an email address for Roger Allthrope, who had had someone indecipherable sign the letter on his behalf. I opened up my email program and sent a short, polite email confirming that I was indeed Sheila Elaine Hutchins, née Lambert, daughter of Susan Elizabeth Lambert and George Henry Lambert, and asking how they wanted me to demonstrate this to their satisfaction, given that I was in Australia and they were in London. I also asked, quite reasonably I thought, what this was all about.

Fridays are our busiest days because the advertisements come out in Thursday's Advertiser so we usually get a flood of enquiries the next day. Vera and Norman are usually quite busy on Saturday as well, taking people to viewings, although we take a sterner line with rentals and prospective tenants have to look at places on weekdays, which is fine with me since I'm the one that has to show them round. Unlike the agents I don't get paid a commission so I'm not willing to do the extra hours.

Anyway, because we were fairly busy I didn't have time to speculate about the solicitors and since they wouldn't get my email until six in

the evening my time, at the earliest, there was no way I was going to get a reply until Monday, so I forgot about it. It obviously wasn't going to be good news since I had had no good news in my life for a long time and although my mother was English she had come to Australia to marry an Australian and I was born here so it was unlikely that anything particularly nasty had cropped up in the last forty or more years that would involve me.

What was a little strange was that they knew my married name but who knows what databases solicitors have access to in this modern age when just about everything can be obtained through the internet. They probably had access to my medical records and tax returns and knew about that speeding ticket I got a few years ago and all the nasty details of when my life turned upside down which lead, within a year or so, to my divorce. There are no secrets anymore.

I didn't even have time to think about the crash on the bypass although when I went home I did wonder for a moment what it would be like to drive a big powerful rear wheel drive car like that vivid green one. I've only ever driven small, economy, front wheel drive cars like my current Nissan Tiida. I've never seen a movie where the hero gets involved in car chases and things like that with a little economy hatchback. I've never been on a motorcycle either, come to that. I don't particularly want to as they seem very vulnerable and scary.

Saturday is my house chores day although I had to rush through them since I was invited to my friend Carol's daughter's wedding. I try to avoid weddings as a rule since they bring back a lot of bad memories but Carol is my best friend and Amy is her only daughter so I couldn't really get out of it. I did have a couple or three drinks at the reception which made me maudlin and a little depressed so I left long before the end and went home. Carol was tied up with being the mother of the bride so I didn't get a chance to talk to her about the solicitor's letter.

On Sunday there was a huge storm and a power outage which lasted much of the day so I didn't manage to get my washing done. Otherwise it was a normal Sunday. Dull and tedious. It's strange how a normally dull day drags even more slowly when there is no electricity. I have no idea why since I don't watch much TV anyway. It's a shame I don't really like my job. If I did it would be a relief to get back to

work on Mondays.

There was an email from the solicitors waiting for me when I got in to work on Monday. They wanted me to email them certified copies of my birth certificate, my parents' marriage certificate, my own marriage certificate, my parents' death certificates, my passport, my driver's licence and any other documents I had available. They gave no explanation about why though so I printed out the email and took it round to Carol's that evening, together with the letter.

"It was such a beautiful wedding," I told her. Well, you have to, don't you.

"Oh yes, and it was such a shame you weren't feeling well and had to go."

Carol knows my history so we didn't talk about the wedding for more than the minimum necessary for social etiquette. Then she turned her logical brain to my solicitors. Carol does something very high powered with computers with one of the big banks so she's pretty analytical. She read the letter and the email and thought about them for a couple of moments.

"It can't be anything to do with an outstanding debt or a crime," she said, "since they want so much documentary evidence. And by the look of it they want evidence of your ancestry not just you. I bet it's an inheritance or something like that."

"An inheritance?" I said, "surely not. I've got no relatives in England. My mum's parents died donkeys years ago and she had no brothers or sisters. My only aunt is my dad's sister and she's in Perth. I haven't seen her for years but I'm sure she's still alive. She sent me a Christmas card last Christmas."

We talked it over for a while but neither of us could think of anything else so we abandoned it and talked about work. Being a high powered person Carol had high powered management problems with her staff whereas I didn't have much of anything with my job. I certainly didn't have anything more difficult to manage than getting my various tasks done while the phone keeps interrupting me.

The possibility of an inheritance, unlikely though it seemed, gave me a little motivation and when I got home from Carol's I rummaged through my paperwork. My birth certificate, passport and so on were easy but I had to go through all the paperwork for my parents' deaths to find theirs. Technically I had been their executor but Paul, my ex husband, did virtually all the work since I simply couldn't face it. He gave me papers to sign and I signed them and that was about it. But I managed to find my mother's birth certificate and their wedding certificate and, of course, their death certificates. I also found the other death certificate but managed to hide it away again before I got too tearful. Eight years still wasn't long enough.

If it was an inheritance it would be very small since if I had any rich relative I would undoubtedly have known about it. There just might possibly be some very poor relative in some backwater of England that no one ever mentioned, but a multi-millionaire? No, it was simply inconceivable.

I took them all around to the lawyers' office across the road from our estate agent's office the next day and for a surprisingly large fee they took photocopies, certified them all then scanned them and put them on a little USB drive for me to make it easier to email them to London. I attached them to the email, listed all the documents I had attached and for good measure gave the name and address of the lawyers who'd certified them. Then I sent it off. What little curiosity I had developed with Carol had already dissipated.

Vera had been out of the office all morning, which wasn't that unusual but normally when she's going to be out on inspections she lets me know. Anyway, she turned up at lunchtime and called me, Norman and Stanley into her office.

"I've spent the morning with Mr Morgan's representative and Mr Tilly," she said, looking serious.

She did this once or twice a year, mainly to go over the accounts. By the look on her face things were a little more serious this time.

"They have decided to end the partnership," she went on. "The business has been going downhill for some time and they have agreed

it is time to pull the plug. We're closing down."

I was shocked. Even though I didn't particularly enjoy my job it was my only source of income. I was going to be forty in a week and a half and that's not a good age for a woman with few skills to go looking for another job. Norman didn't seem surprised but then he would almost certainly walk straight into another job with one of our competitors. Stanley seemed a little upset. Vera herself was seething. She was fifty one and it was unlikely that one of the others would take her on since they all had office managers already and no employer wants an employee who is likely to tell the managers how to do their jobs. Still, I couldn't worry about Vera's problems.

There was some talk about putting on a united front and approaching Morgan and Tilly to ask for a reconsideration but no one took it very seriously. Neither of them had had much dealing with us in recent years and they probably weren't all that sympathetic. After all, they no doubt thought that if we were better at our jobs then the business wouldn't be failing.

"All properties in the process of being settled will be allowed to settle but we won't be handling any new sales from now on. Sheila, I need to have a talk with you later this afternoon about what to say to prospective buyers and sellers when they ring in and we need to contact all the rental owners to let them know we're not going to manage their properties any more."

"Do we have a date for ending?" I asked. I had a mortgage to pay.

"Not yet, I have to send the partners a list of settlements in progress and the business will formally end some time after the last of them settles. We're probably looking at a month to six weeks. We're all on a month's notice so I'll be giving you official letters in the morning."

"What happens if one of us finds another job before the month's notice is finished?" asked Norman, the only one of us with any chance of getting another job quickly.

"You won't be held to the month," said Vera, "since none of us will be getting any new business. So if you find another job, take it and you'll

still get the month's pay plus any commissions on the sales still progressing when they settle."

"What about me?" I asked.

"You'll probably have to stay to the bitter end," said Vera. "Although it depends on how quickly the owners move to another agent. OK everyone, go and get used to the idea. Sheila, can we get together about three to sort out what to tell people?"

"OK," I said glumly. We left her office and I went to the toilet and had a short cry. As usual my life was going nowhere and the pace seemed to have speeded up. When I came back out Norman had disappeared but Stanley was sitting at his desk with the phone in his hand, looking disconsolate. I got the feeling he wanted to talk to me but, frankly, I had enough problems of my own. I really couldn't face listening to his grief.

I saw Vera at three and we quickly sorted out a brief statement for me to give any new enquiries and discussed how to handle any questions they might ask. We also drafted a letter for me to send to all the rental owners. I was back at my desk sorting out a mail merge for the letter when Norman came back.

"I'm sorted," he said gleefully. "I'm starting with Collins Geeson in the morning. Just got to tell Vera then I'll clean out my desk."

What he meant by that was that he'd get all the details of clients currently on his books so he could take them with him to Collins Geeson. He was by no means a fool. While he was in with Vera, Stanley came out to talk to me.

"I'm thinking of setting up my own agency," he said, with a complete lack of confidence. "If I do would you work for me on reception, like you do here?"

"Sure," I said. "If you pay me the same."

That didn't cheer him up. He'd probably been hoping I'd throw in my lot with him and work for nothing until he was established. Given his

sales rate so far I wasn't prepared to take that risk. I had no capital and I needed an income.

I printed out the letters and sat there folding them into envelopes, my mind filled with one thought.

“What the hell am I going to do now?”

Norman and I left around the same time, me to post the letters and him to go home and prepare for his new job the next day.

“If Collins Geeson need a new receptionist,” he said to me on the pavement, “would you like me to put in a good word for you?”

“That would be great,” I said. Collins Geeson only employed young glamorous girls on reception and had two agents dedicated to rentals.

We shook hands and wished each other well. I posted the letters and went home. What could Vera say?

I spent much of the evening staring blankly at the TV, trying to come up with a plan. The best I could think of was to update my resume, approach both the employment agencies in town, wait for the Advertiser to come out on Friday with the latest job advertisements and pray. Around nine I phoned Carol to see if she had any ideas.

“As soon as you've updated your resume,” she said, “send it to all the bigger employers in town. You never know, one of them might have a vacancy they haven't advertised yet.”

“You think that will work?” I asked.

“You never know,” she said, unhelpfully. “Also register with some of the more reputable internet agencies. Would you be willing to move town?”

I thought about that for all of five seconds. The only thing holding me in this town was my job which I needed to pay the mortgage. With no job I wouldn't be able to pay it so why not sell it and get that monkey off my back as well. That way I'd be free to go anywhere for a job and

I'd be able to rent something.

"Which are the best agencies online?" I asked.

"I'll check and let you know tomorrow," said Carol. "I'll see if there's anything at the bank as well. It's a shame you don't know anything about data warehousing since I need a database programmer in my department."

"Would it take long to learn?" I asked.

"Four or five years," she replied.

"OK, maybe not then," I said. "Talk to you tomorrow."

I didn't get a lot of sleep that night, worrying about the future.

There was an email waiting for me when I got in to work on Wednesday, from Roger Allthrope. He thanked me for sending the documents so promptly and asked if he could ask me some questions over the telephone. He proposed to phone me at 9am London time which would be 6pm my time and asked that I confirm this would be feasible and if so let him have a phone number where I could be contacted at that time. I emailed him back with my home phone number since there was no way I was going to still be in the office at 6pm. I had no desire to be there at all anymore. I wanted to be out looking for another job. Towards that end I phoned both the employment agencies and made appointments to talk to someone.

It was a sad day in the office. Norman, of course, was at his new job and Vera and Stanley had absolutely nothing to do. Neither of them wanted to phone their clients who hadn't yet found a buyer to tell them to move to another agent as each of them might well find another job with another agency and would want to take those clients with them. Stanley gave up first and left around eleven. Vera held out until lunchtime then told me she wasn't coming back after lunch. I asked if it would be OK to put a new message on the answering machine and go myself. She thought about it for a moment.

"I don't suppose it matters anymore," she said. "Do what you think

best.”

So I did. I recorded a message, turned the answering machine on and went home.

The phone rang at 6.01pm.

“This is Roger Allthrope,” said a very British voice when I answered it.

“What's this all about?” I asked.

“I would like to ask you a few questions,” he said, ignoring mine.

“OK,” I said resignedly. If nothing else it provided a break from worrying about the future.

“When did your mother, Susan Elizabeth Lambert, emigrate to Australia?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I think it was a month or so before she married dad but I'm not sure.”

“Fine,” he said. I got the impression over the phone he'd ticked something off, probably on a legal notepad like they do on TV.

“Could you tell me the circumstances of your parents' deaths?”

“They were both killed in a car accident,” I said and gave him the date. It was forever burned on my memory.

“Was, erm, anyone else killed in the accident?” he asked.

Memories came flooding back and I fought off tears,

“My, ..., my dau ... , Claire,” I managed to stutter then hung up and burst into tears. My three year old daughter had been on an outing with my parents to Melbourne Zoo and the three of them had been hit when a stolen van mounted the pavement and ran into them. All three of them had died. My baby and my parents, all gone at the same time. I hadn't been able to cope very well and my marriage went within a

year. Along with my will to live.

To his credit, Roger Allthrope didn't phone back for fifteen minutes. He had the decency to give me time to pull myself together.

"I really am most dreadfully sorry to have caused you distress," he said. "I can only apologise and say that I really did need to confirm that you are indeed Sheila Elaine Lambert."

"Why?" I demanded. "What's so important that you need to dredge all this up again?"

He paused, as if to reassure himself that he had covered all bases.

"Did you know that your maternal grandmother had an illegitimate child as well as your mother?" he said, surprisingly calmly under the circumstances.

"No," I said. An illegitimate child? Who would have thought Granny would do a thing like that? She was always so prim and proper.

"Then it will undoubtedly come as a surprise to you to hear that you are the sole beneficiary of his estate."

Chapter Three

“Hello? Hello? Are you still there?” said Roger Allthrope.

“Ummm, sorry, yes,” I said. I was dumbstruck.

Not only did I have an uncle that I never knew existed, he apparently knew I existed and had never tried to contact me. Yet, despite this, he had died and left me everything.

“I take it that this is a surprise to you,” said Roger.

“Totally,” I said, trying to gather my wits. “Umm, what was his name?”

“Richard Wilson.”

I'd never heard of a Richard Wilson.

“Why isn't he a Lambert?” I asked.

“Ahh, he would never have been a Lambert,” said Roger, “since that was your mother's married name. I would imagine that as Richard was your grandmother's child before she married that his surname would have been Perkins but as he was adopted he had the surname of his adoptive parents.”

To my shame I didn't know that my grandmother's maiden name was Perkins, although I knew that her married name was Maybury. Unfortunately I had no living relatives left on my side of the family I could talk to about this. There were various relatives of my ex husbands that I was still in occasional contact with but they would have no idea about my parents and their relatives. My mother had been an only child, or so I had thought. Her mother had been an only child as well.

“Didn't Richard have any family of his own?” I asked.

“No,” said Roger. “He was something of a recluse most of his life and, I understand, his adoptive parents did not adopt any other children nor had children of their own. You can rest assured that you are his

only living relative.”

“So if he knew I existed, why didn't he try to contact me?” I asked. “At least let me know he existed.”

“As far as I am aware,” said Roger, a little cautiously, “I don't think he knew you existed. As I said he was reclusive and his will provides only that his estate be apportioned equally between all descendants of his mother still living at the time of his death plus a small bequest to a named individual.”

“Oh.”

“When he made his will in 1978 we identified only his half sister, your mother, as a possible inheritor. You were born in 1979.”

“How did you find me?”

“We instructed an Australian private investigator to ascertain to location of your mother and her descendants.”

“Are you sure I am the right person?”

“Quite sure. Our investigations have been very thorough.”

Well, that was that then. I wasn't sure what to say next. We both sat in silence for a few moments then Roger cleared his throat.

“Now, moving on. The estate essentially consists of two properties and a sum of money. The properties consist of a house in London and a small pig farm in Kent. The sum of money amounts to, after payment of relevant taxes, duties and fees ...” and he named a figure. “That is, of course, being managed by ourselves at the present time and is accruing interest.”

“Any idea what that is in Australian dollars?” I asked.

“You appreciate that the exchange rate fluctuates constantly and of course I cannot guarantee what the rate will be on any particular date, but in approximate terms, I would say something of the order of a

hundred thousand dollars.”

“Jesus.” It was just as well I was sitting down.

“Now I have a client in a few minutes,” he continued. “And, understandably, you need time to think about this. Could I suggest therefore that you consider your options and give us your instructions on how to proceed in due course?”

“Umm, yes I will,” I said. “What options did I have?” I wondered.

“In view of the time difference I suggest we correspond by email. There will be documents to sign but those will depend upon your instructions. That is, of course, if you are happy for us to continue to manage the estate for the time being.”

“Yes please,” I said, “if you would.”

After we'd hung up I sat and stared at the wall for several minutes, wondering if this was a joke. Then a thought occurred to me and I phoned Carol and told her about the conversation and my inheritance of a house and some money. She was delighted for me.

“I knew it would be an inheritance,” she said. “I'm so happy for you.”

“Do you think it's a scam?” I asked.

I'd read about people being defrauded by scammers in the papers.

“Oooh, there's a thought,” she said and thought about it. “Did he say the money was before taxes and fees or after taxes and fees?”

“I'm pretty sure he said after,” I said, “but I'm not sure. My mind's in such a whirl.”

“If it's a scammer they'd probably say the money can only be released to you after you pay them the so called taxes and then you'd never hear from them again. If the taxes have already been paid then it's probably genuine. What was their name and address?”

I gave her the details.

"I'm going to check on something. Call you back in a few minutes."

I made a coffee and had a cigarette. The money wasn't enough to pay off my mortgage but it would put a very serious dent in it. And no doubt the house in London was worth something. I had no idea of London property values but I was fairly confident that they would be at least comparable to Melbourne property prices. I wondered how many bedrooms it had and how to go about selling a house in a foreign country.

Assuming it was all legitimate of course. I didn't jump up and down with joy because good things don't happen to me and as this seemed to be a good thing it couldn't be happening. Simple logic really.

The phone rang.

"I've checked and they do have a proper looking website," said Carol. "And I checked the English Law Society website and Winston, Canbrace and Allthroe are a legitimate law firm. Established 1922 apparently, and their address and phone number are the same as on your letter. Tell you what, give them a ring and see if the chap who rang you works for them."

"What do I say if he does and they put me through to him?" I asked.

"Ummm, I know, ask him to confirm if the taxes and fees have been paid or if you need to pay them before the money can be released to you."

That sounded like a sensible idea to me so I rang them.

"Mr Allthroe is in conference, I'm afraid," said the receptionist, "can I take a message?"

"No, I'll try again later," I said. I wanted to hear his voice to see if it was the same voice that had spoken to me earlier.

"He should be free in about ten minutes or so," she said brightly. "I'll

let him know you rang.”

I rang again fifteen minutes later and the receptionist put me through.

“Hello, Mrs Hutchins, we speak again. How can I help you?”

It was the same voice.

“Ah, hello,” I said, trying to speak as brightly as his receptionist. “I just wanted to ask a quick question.”

“Indeed?”

“Did you say that the taxes and fees on the money from the estate have already been paid or are due to be paid?”

“They have not yet been paid,” he said. My heart sank. It was probably a scam then.

“The current tax year ends on 5th April,” he continued, “and monies payable are not due until January next. The figure I gave you, however, is net of taxes, duties and fees and those will be withheld by the estate. You will not be expected to pay those taxes, duties or fees yourself, the net funds will be transferred to you direct.”

“So I don't have to send you any money up front?” I asked, just to be sure.

He gave a deep, rich laugh.

“This is not a scam, Mrs Hutchins. We are not trying to exhort money from you, although there will, of course, be fees for any services we provide in the future. No, we are genuine solicitors and this is a genuine inheritance.”

I heard him open a file and rustle some papers.

“Do you have a pen and paper handy?”

“Just a moment,” I told him and went hunting. Why is it all the pens

nearby when you need one don't work?

"Yes," I said when I eventually found a highlighting pen and some paper.

"Write this number and date down," and he read out a number and date. I wrote them down in fluorescent yellow.

"That is the case number for the Probate Registry of England and Wales. Probate was granted on that date. Now, if you contact the Probate Registry they will be able to supply you with the public details of the application which include the name of the deceased and the executor who applied for probate, which is ourselves. This is not conclusive proof this is not a scam but it should help to allay your concerns somewhat."

I thanked him and phoned Carol back and gave her the number and the date. She phoned back a few minutes later to confirm that she had found the details in the Registry's online database. It was looking as though it might be genuine. Still, I wasn't going to get my hopes up yet.

I did sleep better that night though. Assuming the inheritance was genuine it would at the very least give me time to find another job if I lived off the cash. After all, it worked out to be slightly under three years pay and there wouldn't be any tax on it. On the other hand, if I paid off most of the mortgage I wouldn't have much left to pay each month which meant getting by on benefits wasn't an impossibility. And maybe another job would come along soon.

I was the only one who turned up to work the next day. Well, I had to since owners would be getting their letter saying we weren't going to handle their properties anymore so I was going to have to start getting documentation ready to send to their new managing agents and apportioning rental income, outstanding maintenance bills and so forth. Also, details of what action had been taken with the tenants in arrears. Still, by the end of the next week it should all be sorted out.

As it turned out there were only a handful of owners who had received the letter and acted promptly to find a new agent and the message on

the answering machine was doing its job so I had relatively few calls to deal with. Which meant I was able to read Roger Allthrope's email that had arrived overnight quite carefully.

A pig farm? I had inherited a pig farm? Had Roger mentioned that over the phone? I couldn't remember. I knew nothing of pig farming so probably the best thing to do with that was sell it. I assumed it was a going concern since according to Roger it was generating a small income. What on earth did my newly discovered uncle want with a pig farm? How strange.

His house, however, was a five bedroom property in a suburb of London called Bromley and was free of encumbrances, which meant there wasn't an outstanding mortgage on it. Roger had sent me the address and I looked it up on Google Street View. It appeared quite nice and the suburb seemed quite respectable. According to Google it was about thirty kilometres from the pig farm.

Thinking about it, the pig farm must have a manager of some sort since Richard Wilson had died some months previously and someone must still be looking after the pigs.

"Do you sell a pig farm with or without the pigs?" I wondered. "Oh god, I hope it doesn't need money spent on it to get it ready for sale. Like what do I do if it's been neglected and can't be sold?"

It occurred to me after a while that there must be thousands of farms in the UK of all sorts of types and there would undoubtedly be an established system for buying and selling farms. It was just a question of finding out what that system was.

I found an estate agent in Bromley online.

"Holy Crap!" I thought. I couldn't find a five bedroom house in Bromley for under a million pounds. Even if the house I was inheriting was worth only half that it would pay off my mortgage completely and might even let me get by without having to work again.

That sounded pretty good on the face of it but to be honest, I didn't just work for the money. OK I had to work for the money but working

also kept me busy. I had no hobbies or interests and when I wasn't working I struggled to find ways of occupying my time. There's only so much TV you can watch, after all, before your brain goes as numb as your backside. If I never worked again what on earth would I do with myself all day?

Still, the only real plan I'd come up with by the time I went home was to basically sell everything in London and pay off my mortgage here and try to think of something else to do. I had some capital now, by the look of things, so I might even be able to start a business. Assuming I could ever think of a suitable business to start. One thing was for sure, I wasn't going to finance Stanley.

I wasn't able to talk to Carol again until the weekend as, unlike me, she had a life. Even though she was divorced as well, she had more friends than I did. Actually that's not really true. I probably had just as many friends as she did, it's just that none of them were close. Carol was my best friend and had been since university whereas the others were friends going on acquaintances and since my life imploded they'd slowly stopped inviting me to things and I didn't do things that would be worth inviting any of them to.

So I spent Thursday evening updating my resume which didn't really take that long. I had a degree in Modern History which was of very little use to anyone, least of all me, and although I'd had a good job as a trainee claims adjuster and, later, trained claims adjuster with a national insurance company, I'd quit the job when, well, when 'it' happened. I just couldn't face the terrible human cost of some of the claims that came through anymore. I'd spent the next year or so moping around the house and making Paul's life such a misery that in the end he left me and started the divorce and I got the job at Morgan & Tilly as a temporary thing until I sorted myself out. I never really did sort myself out which was why I was still there, albeit not for much longer.

I suppose there was a possibility that I could get another job as a claims adjuster but I honestly didn't think I'd be able to cope, not even after all these years. Since I'd burst into tears when Roger asked me about it over the phone, how could I possibly handle an insurance claim for something similar? On Friday I phoned a couple of the local

doctors to see if they needed a receptionist but gave up when I realised what human tragedies can go through their hands as well. I thought I might try some accountants or solicitors on Monday.

“How's Amy getting on with married life?” I asked Carol when she came round Saturday evening.

“They've only had one fight since they got married,” said Carol with a smile. “She'll get used to it.”

I poured her some wine and we settled down to talk.

“What's happening with your inheritance?” she asked.

I told her about the pig farm and she found it hysterically funny.

“What on earth am I supposed to do with a pig farm?” I asked.

“Does someone manage it?” asked Carol.

“I suppose so or all the pigs would have died from starvation by now,” I said.

“Then why worry about it? Let the manager manage it and enjoy the profits.” said Carol. “That's what I'd do.”

Carol was very pragmatic.

“But what if he leaves? I couldn't manage it myself,” I said

“Get another manager! I'm sure there are agencies for that sort of thing.”

I thought about it.

“I suppose it is feasible,” I said, “even though I'm thousands of kilometres away.”

“What about the house?”

"The only thing I've come up with is to sell it and pay off my mortgage here," I said. "That way I can probably get by without having another job since it's not going to be easy to find another."

She went silent and thoughtful.

"That would be a big mistake," she said after a while.

"Paying off the mortgage?" I asked. "Why?"

"Listen hon," she said, putting down her wine glass and looking seriously at me. "I know what you've been through and I've seen you change from being a happy wife and mother to what you are now."

I started to protest but she held up her hand.

"I thought you would come out of it but it's been eight years now, seven since your divorce. You're becoming more withdrawn every year. When was the last time you went out?"

"Last Saturday," I said, "your daughter's wedding, remember?"

"Other than that?"

I shook my head. I couldn't remember either.

"If you don't have a job to keep you occupied you'll spend all day inside this, this, this mausoleum of memories. You'll shrivel up inside completely and end up one of those reclusive hoarders. You deserve better."

Even though I agreed to some extent I didn't really like hearing it coming from Carol, my best friend. Someone who was supposed to support me.

"Well what else can I do?" I said. "I'll be forty next week, I've lost my job and I have no skills to help me get another and I've a mortgage to pay. What else can I do but sell off what I've inherited in London?"

"I don't know," said Carol. "But you'd be an idiot to do it. Maybe you

should use your pig farm to learn pig farming then set one up in Australia.”

We both laughed at that and I poured some more wine for Carol. I'm not much of a drinker so I don't usually have more than one glass myself.

“You know,” she said after a while, staring into the rich redness of her wine, “I think you should take a holiday.”

“A holiday?” I said. “I need another job, not a holiday. Anyway, where would I go?”

“London,” she said, and brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Go to London and stay there for a while and chill. Have a good look at the house and farm. Don't make any decisions until you've at least seen them. You're mother was a Brit wasn't she? Well maybe your British blood will think of something over there rather than just selling them. At the very least you'll get a change of scenery and get out of this god forsaken house.”

I sat there quietly. It hadn't occurred to me to actually go to London but it wasn't a bad idea.

“And when you come back,” said Carol, “sell this place first. Go somewhere else and start a new life. You can afford it now.”

Chapter Four

It turned out that the only difficult thing was making the decision. I thought about it for the rest of the weekend and I was still undecided when I emailed Roger Allthrope on Monday morning to ask if he could send me some of the cash I was due as I wanted to fly to London to view the properties before making any decisions. He thought it was an excellent idea and transferred some money electronically so I had it in my account on Thursday morning. He also told me to let him know when I was arriving and he would arrange some inexpensive accommodation for me, London being considerably more expensive than Melbourne. For a country girl like me, Melbourne is expensive enough but I figured I would cope. It was only going to be for a week or two at the most.

I was still undecided when the transfer arrived but the expected rush of property owners I managed had happened and by Thursday there were only a handful left, probably a few who were travelling or their letter had simply got lost in the post. I went to the bank around lunchtime and checked my balance in the cash machine outside and, sure enough, the money was there. Just out of curiosity and with no intent in my mind I dropped in to the travel agent on the way back from the bank to find out how much flights to London cost, how readily available they were and how long the flight was.

To my surprise flights were a lot cheaper than I expected and there were seats available on most flights. The lady in the travel agent's was obviously an old hand at this since she answered my questions and proposed a flight on Sunday and, with her hand hovering over the mouse button, asked me if I wanted to book it, "so no one else books it in the meantime". I felt a little pressured and agreed there and then. I had to go back to the bank to take the cash out to pay for it.

"I just booked a flight to London," I nervously told Carol on the phone when I got back to the office.

"Awesome!" she said. "That's the first sensible thing you've done for years. When are you leaving?"

"Sunday afternoon." I had the printed e-ticket-thingy in my trembling

fingers.

"You don't mess around do you," she said approvingly. "I'll drive you to the airport. What time's the flight?"

"Four fifteen although I have to be there by two forty five."

"No problem," said Carol. "That's this Sunday right?"

"Yes," I said. "Umm, are you sure I'm doing the right thing?"

I was starting to get quite nervous since I'd only ever been to New Zealand before and that was with Paul.

"Definitely," said Carol. "Best thing you could do. Get away from everything here, go somewhere new and different where they speak English and come back when you know what you are doing. Clear your mind of the crap of the last few years. Where are you staying?"

"I don't know. That lawyer said he'd find me somewhere inexpensive."

"He's probably thinking of his place," teased Carol.

"Oh god, do you really think so?" I was a little shocked at the idea.

"I doubt it very much," said Carol. "But a bit of that would do you good as well. I'd love to chat but I've got someone waiting to see me. Talk to you tonight. Caio."

I stared at my e-ticket for quite a long time.

"Oh god," I thought. "I'm going to London. What the hell do I do now?"

Slowly I dragged my mind back to work. If I was going to London I had to leave things neat and tidy here. I hadn't seen Stanley all week and Vera flitted in occasionally but she hadn't been in that day so I thought about it for a few moments then made up my mind to dump the few remaining owners onto another agent and to hell with it. They could always move to a different agent later but I needed to get them

off my hands, now. I rang Collins Geeson, who had taken on Norman, and they already knew the whole story since they'd had a fair proportion of our owners move to them already and they agreed to take the rest. I sorted out the paperwork and took over the files later that afternoon.

When I got back Vera was there, wondering where I had got to. I explained about the last of the owners and she got a little huffy, saying that I should have checked with her first.

"If you had bothered to come in to the office I would have," I said. "But since we're closing down it really doesn't make any difference anyway."

She didn't really have much of a leg to stand on so she let it drop and just gave me a dirty look.

"What else are you planning to do?" she asked.

"Put the phone on divert to you and walk out of here," I said, surprising myself with my boldness. "My job here is pretty much finished anyway."

She tried to persuade me to sit in the office with nothing to do for the next two or three weeks.

"No," I said, "I'm flying to London for an extended holiday on Sunday."

She was surprised but I hadn't told anyone about my inheritance, other than Carol. More importantly she didn't have any effective argument as to why I should be there when the office manager couldn't be bothered so I put the phone on divert, handed her my office keys and said goodbye.

It was a very good feeling. Not quite one of those "you can take your job and shove it" moments since the job had more or less gone at that point but pretty close.

"Worst case, I just lose a couple of weeks pay," I told Carol that

evening on the phone.

“Have you decided what you're taking?” she asked.

“That's what I wanted to ask you,” I said, suddenly remembering. “I forgot to ask the travel agent. How many suitcases can I take on the plane?”

“Umm, two I think and a small bag inside the plane,” she replied.

Carol was a much more experienced traveller than I was. The bank usually sent her overseas somewhere every couple of years.

“Two suitcases should be enough,” I said.

“I wouldn't bother if I were you,” said Carol. “It's late autumn in London and it's a lot colder and wetter than here. Buy yourself some new outfits when you get there. That way they'll fit in with the weather and the local fashions. You won't look so much like a tourist.”

“I can't afford some new outfits,” I said.

“Sure you can, you're an heiress.” She laughed. “And by the way, wear something loose and comfy on the flight. How long is it?”

“About 28 hours” I said, “although there's an hour and a half in Singapore.”

“You really don't want to wear tight clothes for that long. Just take enough clothes and undies for two days, and the minimum of makeup and toiletries. Get what you need over there. Saves humping it all over the place.”

Actually that made sense and we talked clothes for a while. Then I remembered something else I'd forgotten.

“Could you email Roger Allthrope for me? I forgot to let him know when I was arriving.”

I hadn't bothered to keep our internet access going after Paul left me

and my mobile was one of those old ones that only did phone calls and text messages. On the rare occasions I needed the net I used the computer at work. Which I didn't have anymore. Carol got the flight details off me and emailed him while we were talking.

I was beginning to feel a little excited and, on Carol's advice, I browsed for some books in a bookstore for some things to read on the flight. I didn't know if I'd be able to sleep and twenty eight hours is a long time if you can't sleep. I also got some nicotine patches since twenty eight hours without a cigarette feels a whole lot longer.

I had some trouble getting to sleep on Saturday night. I kept having little panic attacks about being all alone in a foreign country and got up a couple of times to check I had my list of emergency contacts in my bag. Like The Australian High Commission, which is somewhere called The Strand in London. That meant nothing to me but I was fairly sure a taxi driver would know how to get there. I even had the phone number of my bank in case I needed to ring them. It was just possible I might stay long enough to need to put money in my account to cover my next mortgage payment and I'd want to be able to check it had arrived safely. After all, I didn't want to come home to find that that I'd missed a payment and they were selling my house.

Around three in the morning I leapt out of bed and ran to check my passport expiry date. It had another six years to run so I went back to bed in relief. I got up about seven am and went round the house turning off every electrical appliance and throwing all my remaining food out. I washed the inside of the fridge and the freezer and unpacked my carry-on bag and repacked it with some extra underwear and some panadol in case I got a headache. Then I alternated between sitting nervously and pacing nervously for three hours until Carol arrived.

She gave me a printout of Roger Allthorpe's email to her which gave the address of "a very nice bed and breakfast run by a friend of mine" and told me to take a taxi from the airport when I arrived "as they'll be expecting you from around eight am onwards". He also told me that he expected me to be badly jet lagged and that he had made an appointment for me to see him at midday on Tuesday. He also suggested that even though taxis were rather expensive it would be

better if I used them for the first two or three days rather than try to cope with public transport while jet lagged.

Not being a frequent flyer I think airports are deliberately designed to make people nervous and intimidated. Do they really need to make the ceilings so high and have all the plumbing not only exposed but painted in bright colours so you can't miss them? Surely they could be better laid out so that we don't need endless signs pointing the way to everything except where you should be going? Vast mausoleums with an infinity of signage and people scurrying every which way does not calm the nerves. Cigarettes, on the other hand, do calm you down so they make it virtually impossible, once inside the airport, to get back out again for a ciggie and woe betide you if you dare light up inside the building.

You can't even talk to someone who knows what's going on since, for speed and efficiency, you have to check yourself in on some computers dotted around. And, of course, there are no signs on how to use them. I wasn't the only person looking confused, especially as I had to choose my own seat without having a clue as to the relative advantages of different places.

"I suppose it would be safest to sit near an emergency exit," I thought to myself then stabbed blindly at the screen.

"That seat is not available," flashed up so I pressed "OK". It wasn't OK but I didn't have the option for pressing "Not OK".

I looked closely at the seat I had pressed and noticed it was a slightly different colour to some of the others so I pressed one of those and was told I had selected seat 34C. Well, whatever. So long as I had a seat I didn't really mind, even though the seat number sounded more like a bra size to me. I didn't fancy standing all the way to London.

I had no idea if it was near an emergency exit but I figured that in the event of an emergency they probably had a plan for everyone, not just those clustered around the emergency exits.

"Maybe those near the emergency exits will get crushed by everyone else stampeding to the exits in an emergency." Now that was a

thought. Someone behind me cleared his throat impatiently so I touched “OK” and picked up the printed boarding card that the computer spat at me.

I then spent fifteen minutes trying to find my way back out again for a much needed ciggie. After two of them I felt a little woosy. Probably from nicotine overdosing since I already had a patch on.

Given the amount of time you are required to spend sitting and waiting, you'd think the designers would provide enough seats and would make them a little more comfortable but they don't so you are forced, more or less, to go through that security doorway that beeps at you and then some irritated woman in a uniform waves a TV antenna at you while a man looks at your xrays. I'm sure it's supposed to be the other way around but maybe they don't get many perks in that job. And judging by what some of the people looked like from the outside it probably isn't that much fun looking at their insides anyway. I wonder what they do when a woman is wearing a metal underwired bra? Make her take it off? I will never know since Carol told me to wear a sports bra at airports “since it's easier” so I did.

Much to my surprise I fell asleep during the flight to Singapore. Not much happened during the first two hours then they gave us some food and I suppose my accumulated nervous tension wore off and the food made me feel a little drowsy. Maybe they drug it to keep the passengers docile. Anyway, they woke me up again several hours later for some more food, presumably with the antidote in it, and an hour later we landed.

Singapore Airport is a wonderful airport! Not only does it have an easy to find area for smokers, that area is a lovely, relaxing, cactus garden, on the roof in the cool evening breeze. Ahhh, thank you Eastern Philosophy! Zen And The Art Of Cigarette Smoking! If I had to live in an airport, like Tom Hanks in that movie, I would choose Singapore Airport. Apparently, Singapore Airport is built on the site of a notorious WW2 prisoner of war camp. Well, according to a man who talked to me in the cactus garden anyway. He'd been on the same flight as me from Melbourne and found it very funny that I was going to London to see my lawyer.

“Couldn't you find an honest lawyer in Melbourne then?”

I suppose it was quite funny, really.

Because I'd slept on the flight to Singapore I wasn't the least bit sleepy so I half watched four movies and chatted with the man in the seat next to me. He wasn't very interesting which is why I half watched the movies but I did get some sleep in the last couple of hours so I wasn't too tired when we arrived at Heathrow Airport. I saw the sense of Carol's advice when we arrived as I just grabbed my carry-on bag and headed straight for Customs and Passport Control without having to wait around for suitcases to be unloaded.

On the other hand, the Customs man was somewhat suspicious of someone who had arrived from Australia for a visit of unspecified duration and with no baggage. I was tempted to tell him that I carried heaps of baggage but it was all in my head. I didn't though because I thought he wouldn't understand and would think I was schizophrenic or something. Anyway, he had a wonderful time going through my underwear and reluctantly let me go when he couldn't find the guns or drugs I was supposedly carrying. His sniffer dog barely condescended to point its nose in my direction, which probably helped.

I found a taxi with an exceptionally nice gentleman from the Punjab driving it who allowed me to smoke in the taxi with the window open. He had a cigarette too while he was driving me to the B&B in Bayswater since he could blame me if anyone said anything about the smell. I asked him how far it was from Bayswater to Bromley and he said it was about fifteen miles, which is only twenty five kilometres, so I figured it would be easy to get to, although the traffic in London made Melbourne look like a quiet country village. I have no idea why people condemn smokers but still live in cities where the air is far more polluted from exhaust fumes than undiluted cigarette smoke.

Ajeet, my taxi driver, told me that he had been in London for over fifteen years and that London was nowhere near as crowded as his home town of Amritsar and that neither he nor his wife, Hananiah, had any desire to go back there. Life in London, he told me, was “wonderful”. I decided there and then that I would never go to Amritsar.

He dropped me off outside a long terrace of very white four story buildings and charged me a huge amount. I was too scared to convert it into Australian dollars as even in pounds it was more than they charge in Melbourne. I thought, unkindly, that he was deliberately overcharging an innocent foreigner but I kept it to myself.

My B&B had a tiny front yard with a path through the centre with five steps leading up between two pillars to the front door. Interestingly there were two rooms below ground level with a chunk taken out of the yard to let light down to their windows. Presumably they were originally the basement. I knocked on the front door and introduced myself to the middle aged man who answered.

His name was Nigel and he greeted me effusively and showed me to my room, which was one of the ones below ground level since they were the cheapest. Apparently the ones on the second floor were the most expensive as they were the biggest. The dining room and communal lounge were on the first floor with more bedrooms up the stairs. The English call the first floor the ground floor, which makes sense I suppose but I have no idea why they call the second floor the first floor. Anyway my room was quite a nice room, spotlessly clean with a queen sized bed and a heater and a TV.

Nigel also told me that breakfast was still available which was good news since my body thought it was around six in the evening and was wanting its dinner. I dumped my bag and had bacon, sausages, eggs, toast and coffee. A bit much for breakfast but very nice for an evening meal. Back in my room I unpacked my undies and the one casual outfit into the huge double wardrobe and sat in the chair, leaning back so I could look out of the window at as much of the street as I could see over the low white wall.

“Wow,” I said out loud, “I’m in London!” and giggled. It seemed totally unreal.

As I sat there an elderly man walked past and did a neat little pirouette, directly in front of where I was sitting. I was quite taken aback and wondered if he was a dancer or full of the joys of life or simply a madman. Then he walked past the gap in the wall where the path was and I saw he had a small dog so I guess the dog had wound

its leash around his legs. How cute to do a little dance, though.

“I’m going to like it here,” I thought to myself. “Now, it’s nine thirty in the morning so that means it’s really six thirty in the evening so I’ve got at least four hours before I can go to bed and I ought to stay up longer to get used to the time difference. What the hell am I going to do for the next few hours?”

It was an issue. So I went and found Nigel and asked him about taxi fares. He was quite impressed as it seems Ajeet had given me a discount, probably because I was a smoker as well. He also told me how much my room was and I told him I just wanted it for a few nights, I wasn’t planning on buying the whole house. He thought that was rather amusing. I didn’t. Still, on the bright side, he wasn’t going to charge me for last night as Roger Allthroe was a friend of his and I wouldn’t be there at all otherwise. Since I’d only had the room for an hour before ten am I thought it was a good idea not to charge me either. Apparently he too was giving me a discount on the daily rate. London really is a lot more expensive than I had anticipated.

Chapter Five

“So you're from Victoria in Australia then,” said Nigel.

“Yes.”

“Is that anything to do with our Queen Victoria?” he asked.

“Probably,” I said. “I forget when Victoria started as a state. I think it might have been the 1850s. When was Victoria Queen of England?”

“1837 to 1901,” said Nigel.

“How on earth do you know that?” I asked. “Are you a historian?”

“We get a lot of American tourists,” he said. “They love the Royals so I mugged up some facts about them.”

“OK, so if it was the 1850s then Victoria was Queen so yes, Victoria was probably named after her. Now I think about it there's a park with a lake in it in Melbourne called Albert Park which was probably named after Albert.”

“That's nice,” said Nigel. “There's a sweet little park just down the road with a lake in if you fancy a walk. Just behind Kensington Palace where Queen Victoria was born.”

“Are you serious?” I said. “There's a palace just down the road?”

“This is London,” he said dryly, “the place is full of them. Buckingham Palace, Kensington Palace, St James Palace, Kew, Richmond, Westminster and a few others, and then there's all the Bishops' palaces, like Lambeth, Eltham, Bromley, ...”

“There's a palace in Bromley? I thought it was just another suburb,” I said in surprise.

“I don't know much about it, except that it was built for some Bishop or other. What you've got to understand, being a colonial,” he grinned to show it wasn't meant insultingly, “is that London is full of history.

All the suburbs used to be towns in their own right way back. The original London is what is now called the City of London and it used to be a tiny little dump surrounded by forests and fields.”

“The taxi driver told me Bromley is about fifteen miles from the centre of London,” I told him.

“That would have been a day's ride on a horse, back in olden times,” said Nigel. “So whichever Bishop it was probably had it built as somewhere to stay overnight on his way to and from Westminster Abbey or wherever.”

I made a note to visit Bromley Palace when I went to Bromley.

“The park and palace are just down the road?” I asked.

“That's right, just head down to the Bayswater Road and turn left and you'll find the palace up a bit on the right and Hyde Park a bit further on. You can't miss them.”

“I think I might go for a walk and have a look,” I said. “I've never seen a real palace.”

“Better wear an overcoat, or take an umbrella at least,” said Nigel. “Forecast is for rain and a cold wind.”

“Oh,” I said. “I didn't bring one. Where can I get some warm clothes?”

I'd forgotten about the notorious English weather since the airport, taxi and B&B were all well heated and I'd been out in the cold for maybe a minute in total, going from one to the other.

“Ahh,” said Nigel. “Not really much around here, unless you want to go to Selfridges or Harrods but they're pricey. Bayswater isn't really known for being the centre of fashions. There's a big shopping mall a couple of streets over but it's closed down for a couple of years for renovations.”

“I didn't bring any clothes,” I said, regretting listening to Carol. “I was planning on buying some here. I don't even have any pyjamas.”

“How long are you staying?” asked Nigel. “I’ve only got you down for a couple of nights.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Probably a couple of weeks at least. I’m here to look at a house in Bromley so I’ll be going there in a day or two.”

“Right,” he said thoughtfully. “I’d go to Notting Hill then. There’s a whole bunch of clothes shops in Ledbury Road. Maybe ten minutes walk.”

“How do I get there?”

“Go left out of here,” he said, “and go to the end of the road and turn left into Westbourne Grove and go right at the roundabout.”

Sounded easy enough so I said goodbye and got my thin jacket from my room and went outside. It was decidedly chilly and the sky was beginning to look threatening but a brisk walk would help keep me reasonably warm. And he did say it was only ten minutes away. I lit a ciggie and set off.

I shopped for clothes for a good three hours and had great fun. In one, Matchless Fashions, I had a long chat with the bored assistant about the weather and she recommended a long, grey woollen coat which struck me as rather stylish. It had a high collar and the big buttons went up at an angle from the right hip to the left shoulder with a simple grey wool tie belt. I tried one on and I was surprised at how ... youthful ... I looked in the mirror. Still, it wasn’t too expensive and it was nice and warm and went to mid calf so I bought it.

I noticed the difference as soon as I went outside. I was warm! Well, most of me anyway as my feet and ankles were distinctly cold now that the rest of me had warmed up. I found a rather cute pair of matching grey boots which went a little above the hem of the coat in another shop and I got those too even though the heels were a little higher than I would normally get and to round it all off I bought a bright red woolly hat which seemed to go nicely with the greys and added a touch of colour. Unfortunately my new apparel showed up the lack of styling of my shoulder length hair but that would have to wait. I needed something to sleep in and a new dress or two.

I stopped off at a cafe for lunch and then continued with my shopping expedition and found a dress similar to what a couple of the girls in the cafe had been wearing and which went with the boots so I didn't need to get any more shoes and a very silly but cute pair of black pyjamas with pink kittens all over them.

When I decided it was time to go back to the B&B I discovered I was no longer in Ledbury Road. I retraced my steps and found that I still wasn't in Ledbury Road so I asked a passerby who, very politely, told me to go up there and turn left then right and I'd be in Ledbury Road. So I did and I wasn't. I asked someone else and she didn't know where Ledbury Road was. In fact she'd never heard of it and apologised profusely for her ignorance.

I spotted someone making a delivery from a van so I asked him.

"Sorry luv, haven't a clue. I just follow the GPS in the van."

"Could you ask your GPS how to get to Ledbury Road from here?" I asked.

He curled his lip but climbed into his van and pushed some buttons.

"Go straight ahead for seven hundred yards," he said after a moment, "and Ledbury Road is on the left."

I thanked him and he screeched off.

"If it's that close, you might have offered me a lift," I thought a little huffily. My legs were getting tired and even when I found Ledbury Road I'd still have to walk all the way back down it and then find my way back to the B&B.

I wandered up the road a little way to a junction and put my shopping bags down on the pavement, and leaned against a lamppost on the corner. The threatened rain still hadn't materialised so I pulled out my ciggies and lit one and discovered that I only had a few left.

"Oh great," I thought. "Now I'd got to find somewhere to buy cigarettes as well."

“Excuse me,” I said to a middle aged man who walked by. He stopped and looked in my direction without looking directly at me but didn't say anything. “Where can I get some cigarettes around here?”

He looked around vaguely as though he didn't know where he was.

“Ahah,” he said. “There's a newsagent just down the road on the corner of Ledbury Road.”

I thanked him and he said “Sorry” and walked off. I had no idea why he said “sorry” and it bothered me a little. Was he sorry there wasn't somewhere closer? Or was he sorry I smoked? I dropped my cigarette butt in a drain, picked up my bags and started to cross the road when I glanced at the street name and discovered I was on the corner of Hereford Road, which is the road where my B&B was.

“Oh god,” I said to myself. “Now what do I do? Do I go on to Ledbury Road then walk all the way back or do I go to the B&B and dump my bags and go out again?”

I double checked my cigarette packet and confirmed that there were, indeed, three more left which I figured would last a couple of hours and decided I'd go back to the B&B and have a rest and go out again later. Fortunately I was at the end of Hereford Road so I only had one way to go so I went that way. There are a surprisingly large number of identical looking white terraced houses in Hereford Road and I couldn't remember what the number was. I thought I recognised a tree outside one but the door was locked and the curtains in the ground floor windows – I was learning to speak English! – didn't look right so I carried on. I found the right place after a while. Fortunately my new boots were comfortable.

“Nice coat,” said Nigel, who was vacuuming the hallway when I went in.

“Thank you,” I said. “Do you like it?”

“Not bad,” he replied and carried on vacuuming.

“Not bad? Of course it's not bad” I thought crossly to myself. “It's

great.” I contained my irritation with him and asked if there was somewhere nearby where I could get cigarettes.

“There's a Sainsbury's in Westbourne Grove, just round the corner,” he said, “but there's no smoking in the house.”

“What's Sainbury's?” I asked.

“It's a supermarket.”

Awesome. I could get some food there too since Nigel only did breakfasts. I dumped my bags in my room and went out again. Sure enough, there was a small supermarket just around the corner as he said.

“I really like England,” I said to the checkout girl.

“Oh?” she said, “why's that?”

“Cigarettes here are half the price of those in Australia.”

She laughed and charged me 5p for a plastic bag. I went back to my room, dumped my small supply of food in the fridge and made a cup of coffee and took it out to the front yard so I could sit on the wall and drink it while trying out the cigarettes I'd bought. It was coming up to five pm, which meant it was really two am by my body clock so I didn't bother to have anything to eat when I went back in, I just went to bed.

I slept for twelve hours and had a lovely bath and a big breakfast when Nigel opened the dining room at seven.

I asked Nigel how to get to the lawyer's office in Southwark.

“Oh that's easy,” he said. “You can either get the Circle from Bayswater to Westminster then change to the Jubilee or go to Queensway and take the Central to Bond Street or you can take the 27 from Westbourne Grove to Paddington then the Bakerloo to Elephant and Castle and change to the Northern and get off at Bank.”

He smiled happily. I phoned for a taxi, which was easier, not least because it picked me up outside the B&B and dropped me off outside Winston, Canbrance and Allthrope's office and kept my new coat clean.

"Mrs Hutchins, do come in," said Roger Allthrope, "did you have a pleasant flight?"

"Yes, it was quite pleasant," I said. Pleasant? Strange word to use for a twenty seven hour plane trip.

"And the accommodation?"

"That's very good," I said. "Nigel does an excellent breakfast."

"Yes," agreed Roger. "Not bad, not bad at all."

"Well, it seemed very good to me," I said, confused.

"Indeed," said Roger.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm confused here."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"This is the second time someone has told me something's 'not bad' when I've thought it was very good."

Roger looked puzzled for a couple of moments then got slightly embarrassed.

"Ah, yes," he said. "It's the English way, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Ummm, we say 'not bad' when we mean something is very good."

"What on earth for? Why not just say it's very good?"

He laughed nervously. He was clearly uncomfortable.

"It's just our way," he said.

"OK," It didn't make a lot of sense to me. "So if you say 'not bad' when something is very good what do you say when something is actually quite bad?"

He broke out laughing in a very unlawyerly way.

"We'd say it was quite good."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, for example, if you asked my opinion on say, that coat of yours, and I thought it was quite dreadful, I'd say it was quite nice."

"So what do you think of my coat? It's new by the way, I bought it yesterday."

"It's not bad," he said, grinning. "Really not bad at all. It suits you."

"So you like it then?"

"Yes."

"Do the English always says things the wrong way around?"

"I don't think it's a question of saying things the wrong way around," he said thoughtfully. "It's just that we like to be polite and it wouldn't be polite to be openly critical of something so we give something that's not good some weak praise instead."

"But why 'not bad' when you like something?"

"Ahh, well we don't like to be too enthusiastic either. And you have to admit that if something is good then it is 'not bad' so it's not technically incorrect."

I pondered this.

"Are there any other phrases that the English will use that will confuse

me as well?" I asked.

"Undoubtedly," said Roger. "I just can't think of any at the moment."

He opened the file in front of him.

"Now, shall we move on to your inheritance?"

"OK," I said.

"Ahh, I've just thought of one," he said. "In fact I used it this morning with a client."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"I take your point," he said and laughed.

"I don't understand, what point?"

"If an Englishman says 'I take your point' it means he thinks your point is absurd and can't be bothered to think about it."

"So you're really saying 'I've heard your point and I'm going to ignore it'?"

"Quite."

"What does 'quite' mean?"

He was taken aback at that. "It means, errm, well, yes, absolutely or exactly."

"You're joking," I said.

He leaned back in his chair.

"I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said that the Americans and the English are two peoples separated by a common language. It seems to be applicable to the Australians as well."

"I take your point," I said dryly. He smiled at that.

"Which is not to be confused with 'point taken'," he said. "Which means 'I accept what you are saying'."

"So if I say something and you say 'point taken' it means you agree and if you say 'I take your point' it means you don't agree?"

"Quite," said Roger. "Nuance, you see."

"OK," I said. I wasn't planning to be in England long enough to need to worry about it.

Roger went through a number of documents, including a detailed tax statement which I would apparently need in order to avoid having to pay taxes on the inheritance a second time in Australia and another list of his disbursements and expenses for the estate which had already been deducted.

"Now, what are your instructions regarding the monies currently held in our trust account?"

"I wanted to ask your advice on that," I said. "It seems absurd to transfer it all to my bank in Australia while I'm here in England since I'll have to pay for things here which means two sets of currency charges and god knows what on the exchange rates."

"Quite," said Roger. "You could simply leave it here in our trust account but we would have to charge you a fee each time you withdrew some and, of course, it wouldn't be particularly convenient for you. I suggest that you open an account with a British bank and I transfer the monies to there. If you get a debit card on that account you can then pay whatever sums you need to pay while in England then when you go back to Australia simply transfer the balance."

That sounded like a sensible idea.

"Which bank do you suggest?" I asked.

"In this age of electronic banking it doesn't really matter. I suggest

that you open an account with Barclay's Bank as there is a branch just down the road so you can do it on your visit here today.”

That also sounded like a sensible idea so I said I would and would let him have the account details as soon as I had done it.

“Now moving on to the house,” he said. “I need you to sign this property transfer document to move it into your name ...”

I signed the piece of paper he slid over the desk.

“... thank you, and here are the keys. I took the liberty of having it cleaned when you told me you were coming over to inspect it. I trust that is acceptable to you?”

I acknowledged that it was acceptable.

“Otherwise you will find it as it was when Richard Wilson died. Can I ask your plans regarding the house?”

“I don't have any,” I said. “I'll decide once I've seen it.”

“If you decide to sell the property,” he said, “we would be happy to act for you in the sale and if you choose to rent it we would also be happy to act as your agent. It can be difficult to manage a property effectively from overseas.”

I thanked him for trying to sell me his services.

“Now, the matter of the pig farm,” continued Roger. “This is of course an ongoing concern and therefore its future profits will be subject to tax. Now, the farm is currently operating as a private limited company with Richard Wilson as the sole director and shareholder and myself as the company secretary. We need to formally transfer the one share to you and appoint you as the sole director. I have drafted a formal resolution to do this and to retain myself as the company secretary. Is that
satisfactory?”

I signed both the documents.

“You can, of course, sell the company at any time and we simply repeat this process with the new owner. Now the farm is Toska's Farm and is some twenty acres of pasture and woodland with a house and a number of outbuildings not far from Sevenoaks. It has been managed for the last nine years by Josh Ackland with two labourers. Mr Ackland is on a permanent employment contract with the company and lives in the house. He has expressed to me a willingness to continue in his present role under a new manager although understandably he is anxious to meet with you and discuss future plans. The two labourers are casual employees who do not live on the farm. The farm has a capacity of some five hundred pigs although I believe that there are currently a little under two hundred. The farm supplies primarily high quality free range pork direct to the restaurant industry under contract and Mr Ackland handles that side of the business as well. In terms of profitability the farm generates sufficient income to provide a small annual profit on top of its running costs, including the wages of four employees.”

“Four employees? Who is the fourth?” I asked.

“You, as director,” he replied. “Under the present arrangement you will receive a small annual salary plus, of course, whatever profits accrue. You will find the accounts for the last five years in this file.”

He handed me a file to go with copies of all the documents he'd given me so far. It looked like I was going to need to buy a briefcase to hold them all.

“Excellent, subject to transferring the monies to your bank account, the estate is now entirely transferred to you. Do you have any questions?”

“Just one, for the moment,” I said. He leaned back in his chair again, preparing his finely honed legal mind for any technical issue I might have.

“Why on earth did my uncle have a pig farm?”

Roger smiled and leaned forward, almost conspiratorially.

“He was, shall I say, perhaps a trifle eccentric.”

“Did you know Richard well?”

“I knew him, but not well. I only handled his affairs for the last ten years or so. Previously my father handled his affairs for, ohh, somewhere around forty years. My father is the Allthrope of Winston, Canbrace and Allthrope.”

“I thought it was you,” I said.

“In time,” said Roger. “When my father finally hands over the reins. Technically he is still a practising lawyer although he effectively retired ten years ago.”

“So he doesn't work here any more?”

“No.”

“Would it be possible to meet him? After all, I know nothing about Richard. I didn't even know my mother had a brother until you told me. I would love to know more about him.”

Roger thought for a moment then excused himself and left the room. He came back a few minutes later.

“I telephoned my father,” he said. “Would you like to have dinner with us tonight?”

Chapter Six

It was surprisingly easy to open a bank account. All they wanted was my passport and driver's licence and that was that. I asked for a debit card and they told me I could collect it two days later. I also spotted a bag shop on the other side of the road, opposite the bank, and dropped in there to get a briefcase to hold all the documents Roger had dumped on me. I found a very nice canvas and leather one in tan and red with a shoulder strap as well as handles which was far nicer than the chunky masculine style of most briefcases. It also had three zippered compartments big enough for holding documents without folding them. I have to say I felt quite upmarket walking back to Roger's office in my new dress, coat and boots with a briefcase that matched my woolly hat.

I didn't feel up to trying to get back to the B&B by public transport so I took another taxi. My head was spinning with all the information Roger had imparted and I was probably still jet lagged because all I wanted to do was lie down in a dark room for an hour or so. The taxi driver updated me on the latest developments in Brexit in more detail than I really needed but seemed to need no response from me other than an occasional "really?" I dumped my bag with all the paperwork on one side of the queen sized bed and curled up in my underwear under the covers on the other side and slept for a couple of hours.

Refreshed by my nap I had a bath and made a decision. Two decisions actually. Firstly I would go to Bromley and take up occupancy of my house. Roger had assured me that it was habitable, even if it wasn't necessarily to my taste. So I figured if I just assumed I was a guest it would be fine and it would be a lot cheaper than staying at the B&B. Secondly, I would hire a car to get around. Taxis are all very well but they're awfully expensive and once in Bromley I'd need to be able to get around easily and public transport wasn't, according to Roger, as pervasive there as it is in Central London. In particular there would be no other way to get me to my farm for a visit.

My house, my farm. They had a certain flair, even if I hadn't quite sorted it all out in my head. As of that afternoon I owned two houses, one in Britain and one in Australia, and a farm. Takes a little getting used to. Did this qualify me as a global property magnate or a jet

setter?

Probably neither since I couldn't even find my way to dinner without having to ask Nigel for directions. Although, since I would have to walk past the Embassy of the Russian Federation, the Embassy of the Czech Republic and the Embassy of Lebanon on my three quarter mile journey, I certainly seemed to be moving in a different circle to the one I moved in at home. Someday I might even get invited to these places rather than just walk past them. I still had no idea where the Australian High Commission was though.

Roger, it transpired, lived with his father, Charles, in a house as big as Nigel's although there was just the two of them. He welcomed me in and introduced me to his father. There was a pronounced family resemblance in their slightly soft, pale sleekness.

"I had a look in the cellar," said Charles, "but I couldn't find any Australian wine, I'm afraid, so all I can offer you is some of this cheap French plonk."

"More English understatement?" I wondered then I sipped the wine. Understatement wasn't the word as the wine was superb and clearly very expensive.

"Not bad," I said, very carefully, and Roger laughed.

"We had a chat this afternoon about English idioms," and he explained to his father about the 'not bad' issue.

We sat in their lounge making "getting to know you" conversation for a while which, in England, seems to be more geared to avoiding getting to know you than it would be in Australia. Still, I did discover that Charles' wife had died some years previously and that Roger was unmarried. I'm pretty sure the sub text was that Roger was not, shall we say, a ladies man.

I'd been there a good half hour, wondering when dinner was going to be as I hadn't had any lunch, when the doorbell rang.

"That'll be Willie," said Roger, "I'll get it."

“Are there going to be others for dinner?” I asked. Not that it was a problem but if another guest had arrived then dinner probably wasn't that far off.

“Oh no,” said Charles, “Willie's bringing dinner, not staying for it.”

“Ahh,” I said, wondering what he was talking about. Are people in England expected to bring their own food to dinners? Had I committed a social gaffe? Like turning up to an Aussie barbeque without a car load of stubbies.

“Willie's my brother's granddaughter's partner,” explained Charles. “He's training to be a chef so I asked him to do us a little something since Roger and I normally make do with something thrown together as neither of us can cook. He likes the practice you see. Shall we go through to the dinning room?”

Willie clearly had ambitions as a chef as the first course was figs stuffed with goat's cheese. Definitely outside my experience and not unpleasant to eat although I only had the one. The braised chicken in plum sauce was delightful though and Charles entertained us with some legal anecdotes which Roger had clearly heard before. It was over the white chocolate and raspberry cheesecake than we turned to Richard.

“I have to say I was dreadfully sorry to hear about Richard's death,” said Charles.

“Oh that's far too much,” I said, “a third of that if you wouldn't mind.”

Roger had proffered a huge slice of cheesecake and he deftly put it in front of Charles and served me a much smaller piece.

“Had you known him long?” I asked.

“About forty five years,” said Charles. “Very strange man, but a likeable chap once you got to know him.”

“Strange in what way?” I asked.

“He was dyslexic, I believe, which caused him a lot of grief at school as everyone just assumed he was stupid. This was the fifties, you understand, these days it would be picked up and dealt with but back then dyslexia was virtually unknown.”

“Did that make him seem strange?” I asked.

“I think it was more that he was teased and bullied a lot. Made him quite anti-social and withdrawn. Richard was a very intelligent man but his inability to read was a severe drawback and people who don't fit in at school really only have two ways to go. They can either become the school clown and be accepted that way or withdraw. Richard chose to withdraw. It didn't help when his adoptive parents told him he was adopted when he turned twenty one.”

“Why did they tell him?”

“I suspect they felt it was their duty,” said Charles, “although I can't be sure. Richard hardly ever spoke about his adopted parents.”

“Do you know why he was adopted?” I asked.

“Oh I would imagine that was fairly obvious,” said Charles. “He was born in 1948 and an illegitimate child in the 1940s would have been a serious stigma both for him and for his mother. I believe he was put up for adoption within a few days of his birth.”

I sat and absorbed this for a few moments. I don't think I could have abandoned my own baby but social attitudes had changed a lot since the 1940s. I couldn't imagine the pressures granny had been under.

“He never married, you know. I don't think he had any friends either. He was thirty one when I first met him and he was already a recluse.”

“What did he do for a living?”

“I don't know what he did when he left school. Some sort of labouring at London Docks, I believe but I don't know the details. He came to see me one day, I specialised in Patent Law at the time although I later joined forces with Winston and Canbrance and moved into general law.

He wanted to take out a patent on a mechanical toy he had designed. He was a fine engineer and largely self taught and he had no difficulty with technical drawing. It was written words that caused him a problem. As it turned out, we got the patent approved and he sold the design to Fisher-Price which was the opening of the floodgates.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, between then and 1998 when he abandoned toys he had around two hundred and fifty patents for various toys and most of them were being manufactured under licence. He was extraordinarily prolific and amassed a considerable fortune. Did you ever have a Candy Makeup Screen when you were a little girl?”

“Oh I remember those! I didn't have one but my friend Beth did and we played with it for hours!”

It was basically an electronic screen which let you put fairly garish makeup on a scanned photograph of yourself, or someone else. They had been very popular for a while, with young girls at least. Their mothers also appreciated their own makeup not being stolen for experiments.

“That was one of Richard's. Very inventive chap and surprisingly intuitive about children even though he didn't particularly like them. Or adults, to tell the truth.”

“Why did he stop?” I asked. I was pretty impressed that my uncle had designed the Candy Makeup Screen.

“The internet was starting to become popular and he foresaw that the next generation of children would play very differently. So he retired. I don't think he ever really understood the internet and, of course, being reclusive he could never have adapted his thinking to social media and multi-user online gaming.”

“Is that when he bought the pig farm?”

“Around then, I seem to remember.” He looked inquisitively at Roger who had been silently listening.

“Richard bought the farm in 2003,” said Roger, “eight years after he retired.”

“As long as that? My how time flies,” said Charles.

“Do you know why?” I asked.

“He told me it was an investment but why he chose to invest in a pig farm I do not know. Nor why he changed the name of the farm to Toska's Farm.”

“Did Richard ever meet his mother?”

I was curious about this as it seemed a little strange that an abandoned recluse who didn't like children would leave everything to his mother's descendants.

“Yes, he did. At one point, it must have been in the early eighties when he was becoming very successful, I suggested he thought about making a will. He thought it was rather an absurd idea as his adoptive parents were both dead and they had had no other children and he himself had no spouse or children but a few months later he came to me asking for my help in finding his biological mother. There were various legal obstacles to overcome but we managed. He had a meeting with his biological mother, Elaine Maybury, which I believe was very painful for both of them.”

“If this was in the early 1980s then granny would have been in her mid fifties,” I thought out loud. “Hang on, I would have been four or five then, and mummy would have been in her early thirties.”

“You couldn't possibly have been alive then,” said Charles gallantly, “you look far too young.”

I smiled in appreciation but kept my mind on family.

“I wonder if granny ever talked to mummy about it?”

“I couldn't say,” said Charles. “although in my limited experience of adoptions, the biological mother of the adopted child rarely wants

others to know what she did. Particularly if the child was illegitimate and she now has a stable life. These things can be quite disruptive.”

“You mean with her husband?” I wondered how gramps would have taken the news that his wife had had a baby with another man before he met her.

“Yes, but also with other family members,” said Charles. “How would your mother have reacted when she found out her own mother had a child with a different father to her? It can be quite scandalous in many families. And don't forget that even though times change and an illegitimate child in the 1980s was a very different concept than it was in the 1940s, your grandmother would be unlikely to have changed her own views, based on her upbringing. Was her own mother still alive then?”

“I don't know,” I had to admit. “I can only remember granny not a great granny. Although if gran was in her fifties then her mother would probably have only been in her late seventies or early eighties.”

“It is quite possible that your grandmother died during the war,” interjected Roger. “I don't have any details as we only researched forwards not backwards, but your grandmother would have been only nine at the start of the war so her mother was probably under thirty and they did live in London during the Blitz.”

“I'm sure I would have known if granny was orphaned,” I said. “But gran's mother could easily have died during the sixties or seventies.”

The conversation lapsed for a few moments while Charles went to get another bottle of wine. I declined some more as two glasses was more than enough for me but the two men got stuck in happily.

“In what way was he strange?” I asked. “Was it just his reclusiveness?”

“That was a factor most certainly,” said Charles reflectively. “Whether he was reclusive because he had no social skills, or he had no social skills because he was reclusive I really couldn't tell you. But certainly he was very uncomfortable with people.”

“In what way?”

“He was very literal, for one thing. Never did get the hang of, well, idioms, for example. As you were saying before.”

“You mean like 'not bad'?”

“Yes. He was the sort of person who would, if you said, for example, 'drop round anytime' would think they meant it literally. He would drop round anytime if he wasn't so reclusive.”

“I'm sorry?” I said. “You mean 'drop round anytime' doesn't mean that?”

“Oh Lord, no,” said Charles and both he and Roger laughed. “If an Englishman says 'drop round anytime' it means 'please don't ever come here again'.”

“Oh for God's sake,” I said. “Don't you English ever say anything and mean it or is everything coded?”

Charles and Roger looked at each other thoughtfully.

“Perhaps when ordering food in a restaurant,” said Roger, “but even then ...”

“So if you order steak you really mean fish?” I said sarcastically.

“No, but we often say something like 'oh, just a little cheesecake' when we really mean 'give me a great big slice',” said Roger.

“This is perhaps why I got on well with Richard,” said Charles. “Indeed, we both did. The law can be very pedantic and literal at times and I suspect Richard appreciated it. As a lawyer you need to be able to creatively interpret the law but on the surface it does appear to be safely literal.”

It seemed to me that the English had developed their language to exclude other people rather than include them but hey, it was their language and their country. I was going back to Australia where

people are more easily understandable.

“Did he have any pets?” I asked. If he didn't like other people maybe he had emotional attachments with pets instead.

“Not that I am aware of,” said Charles, glancing at Roger who shook his head as well.

“Was he emotional in any way or was he a cold fish?”

“He got angry very easily, as I remember,” said Charles, “but I don't recall him ever expressing any of the virtuous emotions. Except possibly for an engineering design. I do distinctly remember him once noticing a hinge on a suitcase I had brought into my office and remarking that it was a 'very sexy hinge' which struck me as an odd thing to say.”

“Actually I can understand that,” I said. “Just a sec.”

I went into the lounge and brought back my new briefcase and plonked it on the dining table. It was probably a breach of etiquette but what the hell. I'm a colonial and therefore uncouth by definition.

“Have a look at these hinges then compare them with the hinges on your own briefcases.”

Roger went and got his own briefcase and the two of them studied the hinges carefully.

“Umm, they're hinges,” said Charles.

“Well if you look closely,” said Roger, “the one on Sheila's case has a different style to it and the central pin appears to be a tad thicker. Certainly the general appearance of the hinge looks to be styled a little differently. Perhaps from an engineer's perspective one may be considered to be sexier than the other.”

All I'd meant was that the hinge on my briefcase looked more feminine than the one on his but I kept that to myself. I just had a feeling that I ought to stand up for my uncle a little. No one else ever

seemed to.

“What did he do with himself after he give up designing toys?” I asked.

“He worked on various projects but never brought any to fruition,” said Charles. “He designed a purification system for converting sea water into fresh water, for example. His intention was to try to help people in third world countries but his patent application for that was rejected.”

“Why? Didn't it work?”

“As I recall it was too similar to another system already patented,” said Charles. “That's the ever present danger with development. There's always the risk that someone else gets in ahead of you.”

“Did it bother him?”

“Yes, immensely. He couldn't understand why someone would develop a cheap and easy to use water purifier like his own invention and never take it to market.”

I raised an eyebrow and Charles grasped that I was silently asking him what that meant.

“Someone else had developed the system but never put it into production.”

“Why wouldn't they?”

“Oh any number of reasons,” said Charles. “Lack of capital perhaps. That's fairly common. As it patenting something and repressing its production in order to protect the market for another, more profitable product.”

“Does that happen much?” I asked.

“You would be astonished at the lengths people will go to to protect their own interests,” said Roger. “I don't think Richard ever came to

terms with that. He lived in a fairly small ideological world of his own with no real comprehension of the rest of the world around him. He had no real concept of money for instance.”

“But didn’t he become quite rich?” I asked.

“Yes but it had no meaning for him. He would never, for example, invest his money in order to make more money. For him it was something like wood or soldering wire, he just kept it lying around for when he needed it.”

“But wasn’t his farm an investment?” I asked.

“That’s what he said. It struck me as odd at the time as I handled his investments on his behalf. As far as I know he never invested in anything himself either before or after.”

“How strange,” I thought to myself.

“Why did he buy such a big house?” I asked. “If he lived alone, why did he want a five bedroomed house?”

“That one is quite easy,” said Charles. “He liked lots of space. He hated to be confined.”

Chapter Seven

In the morning, after a wine and lingering jet lag induced extended sleep, I asked Nigel about car hire in Bromley. To my astonishment he didn't know, which was a shame as I had come to look upon him as a veritable encyclopedia and my 'go to' man for what's what, where and how to get there.

"Not to worry," he said. "I'll look it up online."

He put down his vacuum cleaner and lead me to his lair which turned out to be the other basement room although his had an extension which was probably his bedroom.

"Shhh," he whispered as he opened the door and we tiptoed in. "My wife'll be asleep."

Their main room was crammed with books, literally hundreds of them, forced into every crevice of floor to ceiling shelving covering just about every inch of wall space. As far as I could tell from a quick scan they were mostly history books. He noticed me noticing his books.

"I'm a lecturer at London University," he whispered and went over to his computer which was already on. He Googled 'car hire bromley' and wrote down the phone numbers and addresses of a couple then led me back upstairs.

"My wife works nights," he said in a normal voice. "She's a producer for one of the breakfast TV shows."

"How do you manage to run a B&B if you're at university and your wife works nights?" I asked.

"It's all part of our master plan," he said cheerfully. "I'm only part time and I handle the breakfasts and the cleaning and Philly handles the guests in the evenings before she goes to work."

"When do you see each other?"

"We usually have a couple of hours at lunchtime and three or four hours in the evenings," he said. "It's not too bad and there's only another four years to go."

"What happens then?"

"That was our deal," he told me. "When I'm forty we stop everything and sell up and take whatever money we have and go to Italy. The way house prices are going in London we'll make a tidy sum on this place. We've already bought a little place in northern Italy."

"Oh, how lovely," I said. "What will you do there?"

"My field is Medieval Italian History and Philly got her Masters in European Romantic Literature. That's why we want to live in Italy and still be young enough to enjoy it."

I wished him and Philly good fortune for their Master Plan and rang one of the car hire places and booked a car for a few days. They told me to ring them when I got to Bromley South Station and they'd pick me up which seemed very kind of them.

Once again Nigel obligingly gave me directions and I settled my bill with him and set off, all on my own, to find my house. To my surprise Bayswater underground station isn't underground. Much of the roof is a skylight and the rest of it is open air. The train quickly disappears underground and seems to arrive at Victoria several miles below the surface and I needed to ascend an inordinate number of escalators to get to the surface again.

Being a stranger in a strange land I asked the lady sitting next to me in the train to tell me when it was about to arrive at Victoria. As we pulled out of Sloan Square she leaned forward and quietly mentioned that Victoria was the next stop. No one seems to talk on the trains here. Despite being hemmed in, people seem to take great care not to acknowledge the existence of anyone else. Anyway, I gathered my bags and made my way to the door and hung on to the rail and my bags as the train lurched and rumbled through dark tunnels with bricks flashing past only a few inches from my face.

It's impossible not to touch people when you're all jammed in like that but after a couple of moments I realised that whatever it was that was pushing against my bum wasn't going away. In fact, now that I was aware of it, it seemed to be slowly moving in circles and there was a curve to it that suggested it wasn't a bag or briefcase. I reflexively pulled my hips forward and tried to whirl round to find out what was happening and who was doing it and managed to clout the man standing next to me on his thigh with my onboard bag. It clearly hadn't been him as one of his hands was holding on to the rail and the other had been thumbing his phone but he apologised, as the English do, for hitting my bag with his leg. It seems to be an instinctive reaction. When anything happens, the English always say 'sorry'. They even say it when nothing happens.

"Does this train go to Victoria?" "Sorry, yes it does." That sort of thing.

Anyway, by the time I managed to turn around the hand had gone. There were two or three people directly behind me but none of them showed any reaction so I just glared at all of them on principle and I didn't feel anything else, apart from surprise and indignation, for the remaining seconds of the trip but I was glad to get off. By the time I got to the above ground part of Victoria Station I was beginning to think I had imagined it but even so I felt a little violated. Still, I had the entire carriage from Victoria to Bromley all to myself.

Impressively the car hire people sent someone round to get me from the station in Bromley and drove me all of half a mile to their office. More importantly, if I hired a car for two weeks it was a lot cheaper and I let them talk me into upgrading to a Ford Ka with GPS for only a little bit extra as well.

I turned into Priory Mews and there it was. My house. Left to me by someone I had never met and who I hadn't even known existed barely three weeks before. It felt very strange and I certainly didn't feel that it was mine.

It was a funny looking place. It sat there, all alone in the mews at the end of what was effectively a wide, cobblestoned alley between the walls of two neighbouring houses. A bit like a granny flat back in Aus

although it was really quite large and two stories high. It also looked slightly lopsided as the roof seemed to tilt a little and it was quite characterless. The entire front, apart from the windows and door, of course, was a uniform muddy brown. Actually, it looked like a very large mud brick that someone had plonked down and then painted on some featureless windows and a door. There was no ivy or even a front yard. The cobblestone alley ended at the front wall of the house and the brick walls of the neighbours' backyards joined the house at its two front corners. There wasn't even a 'welcome' mat outside.

Still, parking wasn't a problem as there was a sign that said "No Parking Residents Only" and there were no other vehicles. Presumably, since I was now the resident, however temporary, I was allowed to park there.

I dug the keys out of my briefcase and went up to the door. For some reason my heart was beating quite fast and I felt like a trespasser. As I opened the front door I more than half expected someone to come running, demanding to know what I was doing there. Still, the key turned easily and the door opened with barely a creak. It was very dark inside. I fumbled around the inside of the door frame for a light switch and found a panel with three switches. I turned them all on and the hallway lit up. The place smelt a little musty, which was understandable as it had been empty for a while. It also smelt a little of old people which was also understandable. As far as I knew from Roger and Charles, no one other than Richard had been inside the place for forty or so years, other than the cleaner Roger had sent in.

The hallway was quite wide and drab. The carpet was old and going threadbare in front of the various doors and there was a staircase going up to the next floor. Other than a tall, thin pot with some walking sticks and an old fashioned coat rack with a couple of coats hanging from it, it was quite featureless. There weren't even shades on the lights, just bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

I wandered from room to room then went upstairs. Basically, downstairs there was a kitchen, bathroom, a laundry/storeroom, a dining room and a lounge and upstairs were five bedrooms, two large ones at the back overlooking the large back garden and three small ones at the front. Overwhelmingly the general impression was of age.

There was nothing that looked even remotely new. If someone had told me the fridge was fifty years old I would have believed them and the place looked not to have been redecorated for a long time. There weren't even any curtains, just simple brown blinds over every window. It was also cold inside.

It wasn't until I went into one of the large bedrooms that I realised why the place looked so empty. There were no books or pictures anywhere, except in that one room. Richard had clearly made it his office since it had one of those large easel things that designers and engineers use to produce their drawings. There was a shelf with some technical engineering books and a few drawings of designs for things on the walls but that was it. No other books or pictures anywhere else except a picture of a bowl of tomatoes on a wall in the kitchen.

It also dawned on me after a while that Richard really had been a recluse. There was only one bed in the entire house. It made me feel a little uncomfortable because that would mean I had to sleep in his bed, the bed he died in. I guess I'd just assumed that he'd have had a room with another bed in case he had guests but being reclusive he probably never had guests. I hadn't thought of that.

Back in the kitchen I found that the kettle worked, even though it was a bit grimy, and the water from the tap seemed to be clean. Rummaging through the cupboards I found a nearly empty jar of coffee granules which I dumped in the bin and, much more importantly, a new, sealed jar so I made myself a cup of black coffee and wandered into the lounge and opened the blinds. The sunlight streamed in and emphasised the drabness of the room. I figured out how to open the window and, after a couple of whacks, fresh air flooded in and the atmosphere improved dramatically so I went round every room opening the windows to give the place a thorough airing.

Back in the lounge, I sat on the couch, which was reasonably clean despite its age. First impressions? If I was going to live here it would need to be more or less gutted, redecorated and have all new furniture and furnishings. Apart from a couple of items which looked like they might have some antique value everything else was old and tatty. Pretty much what you'd expect from an elderly reclusive man. Still, on the positive side he hadn't been a hoarder, more of a minimalist, apart

from his record collection. At a rough guess he seemed to have a thousand or more albums, mostly classical but there was some jazz, and an expensive looking, but still old, record player with separate amplifier and four large speakers. One in each corner of the room.

Having said that, I wasn't going to live here, was I. I was really only there to decide whether to sell the house or rent it out. It was too early to make that decision but one thing was obvious, it couldn't be rented out furnished. Whatever I decided to do with the place the contents had to go.

A more immediate problem was eating and sleeping. A cursory look in the kitchen had shown me that Richard was a 'one' man. One plate, one bowl, one knife, one fork, one spoon, one teaspoon and one mug. Oh, and one frying pan and one saucepan. That was it. No microwave, no toaster, no freezer. He did have two cooking knives though, one long for carving meat and one short for chopping vegetables. Definitely a minimalist.

So, if I was going to stay here for a couple of weeks should I get some more crockery and cutlery or should I use his? I confess the latter didn't particularly appeal to me. The same applied to sleeping. OK I was going to have to sleep in his bed but I really didn't fancy using his linen or pillows. A bit of a quandary.

I went back up to the bedroom and inspected the mattress. Now I had a closer look it didn't seem that old after all and, joy of joys, there were no stains on either side. Not something that can be said of most hotel mattresses. I remembered seeing some linen in a cupboard somewhere and after thinking for a couple of moments I went to the bedroom that had all his clothes in and, yes, all his linen. There was nothing particularly wrong with the linen but it smelt fusty and musty and didn't feel right so I put it all back and went for a drive, to find some shops. I bought some new bed linen, a couple of pillows and a Home Maker set of crockery and basic cutlery for four people, a couple of towels and a packet of five dish clothes as well as an ample supply of cleaning materials, rubber gloves and several rolls of large plastic rubbish bags. After loading up the car I went back in to the supermarket and bought a new frying pan, a set of three saucepans, a cheap toaster and, which I nearly forgot, some food and milk.

The cleaner had done a good job getting rid of any dirt but I wanted to get rid of associations as well. The furniture I could live with, for the time being anyway, but I just couldn't cook in those pans, eat off that plate or sleep between those sheets. It just felt wrong.

It was early evening when I got back and I was astonished when I turned into the mews. Now that there were lights on and someone was in residence the place was transformed. The blinds were up and gave the facade some depth and the house looked friendly and in some way welcoming. It didn't look sad and depressed anymore. It even smelt better inside now that it had been aired. All that remained was to figure out how to put on the heating. It took me a while as, for some reason, I expected to find a remote control but of course that was absurd. There wasn't even central heating, let alone a split cycle system. Each room had a large electric heater with its own wall switch. Easy and quite efficient as it meant you only needed to heat the room you were in although it would mean having to remember to turn off the heater when vacating a room.

I dumped all the linen into a single rubbish bag and made the bed with all my new linen and pillows. In the kitchen I chucked all the old crockery, cutlery and so on and unpacked my new stuff. The fridge light came on when I plugged it in to the wall socket so I figured it was working and I cooked myself a simple meal, which meant the cooker worked as well.

Browsing through Richard's record collection I found a few classical pieces I knew and I put on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to fill the silence while I had some after dinner coffee and a few ciggies. It was my house, I reminded myself, so I didn't have to smoke outside. That's when I spotted the phone.

"No time like the present," I thought to myself and got my briefcase and dug out Josh Ackland's phone number. I hesitated before ringing him.

"Do I introduce myself as Richard's beneficiary, or as the new owner of the farm?" I thought. "What if he has never even heard of me? Surely he knows Richard died though." Hmm. I decided to play it by ear.

“Josh Ackland,” said a deep tenor voice after the third ring, although it could have been a high bass voice. I’m no musical expert. Either way it was a clear, manly voice.

“Mr Ackland,” I said, in my sweetest estate agent receptionist voice, “I’m Sheila Hutchins.”

I paused to see what effect this would bring to guide me on how to proceed.

“Ahh, Mrs Hutchins, I’ve been expecting your call,” Josh said.

“Excellent,” I thought to myself. “At least he knows the situation.”

“That solicitor chappie phoned yesterday to let me know that the farm had been formally transferred to you and that you’d be in touch.”

“Oh that’s great,” I said. “I was wondering how to broach it to you.”

He laughed.

“I was hoping I could come round and visit the farm and have a chat with you,” I said.

“Of course,” he replied. “Drop round anytime, only ...”

I remembered what Charles and Roger had said about ‘drop round anytime’ so I guessed he didn’t really want me to come round at all.

“... it’s due to rain tomorrow so the next day would be better. You don’t want to walk round twenty acres in the rain.”

OK, so maybe ‘drop round anytime’ can also mean ‘drop round anytime’, or maybe Josh didn’t speak English properly.

“Friday is fine for me,” I said.

“Great,” replied Josh. “How about in the morning? Then you can both stay for lunch.”

“Both?” I asked.

“You and Mr Hutchins,” he said.

“There is no Mr Hutchins,” I told him. “Just me.”

“My apologies,” he said. “Bad assumption on my part.”

“That’s OK. I should have gone back to my maiden name after the divorce,” I said, “only I couldn’t be bothered. There’s a lot of legal crap to go through when you change your name.”

I wasn’t sure why I was telling him this but he seemed a nice enough sort of man. Not that you should ever go by someone’s voice over a telephone.

“There’s a lot of legal crap to go through for everything these days,” he said. “If you’re running a farm you can’t even sneeze without DEFRA approval.”

“DEFRA?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,” he said, “not that I’ve ever had an affair, rural or otherwise.”

OK, he was a funny man too.

“Friday morning, then,” I said. “Is the farm easy to find?”

“Do you have GPS?”

I admitted I did.

“Then yes, just follow the directions and come to the house when you arrive. Do you prefer tea or coffee?”

“Coffee,” I said. “I’m not English, I don’t really like tea.”

He laughed again.

“Aussie by the sound of it. Should I get some stubbies? I was in Australia for a holiday a few years ago. I know about you guys and stubbies.”

“I’m one of the few who doesn’t like beer,” I said. “I prefer wine but I don’t drink much. Coffee will be nice.”

He was an easy man to talk to.

“Coffee it is then. Right, I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Oh, before you go, I’m staying at Richard’s house at the moment. I’m using his phone but I don’t know what the number is.”

He reeled off the phone number from memory and I wrote it down and we ended the call.

I wondered for a moment if he would treat me like a fool or try to dominate me when I went to the farm, even though he sounded fine on the phone, then I made some more coffee.

I was sitting on the couch, sipping my coffee, wondering what changes I would make in the lounge if I were to live here myself when I noticed a small, flat wooden box on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. I’d noticed it when I’d been working out how to use the electric heater but hadn’t given it another thought at the time. I put down my coffee and wandered over to look at it more closely. It was a very nice box, mahogany by the look of it, and well made with cute dovetailed joints that fitted perfectly. It had a hinged lid and a small lock so I couldn’t open it unless I found the key or broke it. I didn’t want to break it. I wasn’t that curious as to what was inside and it was such a nice box it seemed a shame to damage it needlessly. I picked it up and gave it a little shake, the way you do with Christmas presents before you open them and found the key behind it so I opened it.

There was a book inside. A small, slim book with a simple green cover.

Toska of Toy Town Tunnel by Miranda M. Moor illustrated by Michael Hammond.

My eye caught the Toska since that was the name of the farm.

“Maybe Richard named the farm after this book,” I thought. “After all, it's the only book in the house apart from those engineering ones.”

I took it out and looked at the back cover. It was a children's story about a teddy bear called Toska who rescues a beautiful doll called Zoe from the T I P. I flipped through the pages, impressed by the simple but effective hand drawn illustrations. Then my heart stopped. On the inside of the front cover was a handwritten inscription, from the author.

“To Richard with all my love Miranda”

Chapter Eight

If my uncle Richard was a recluse who didn't like people, how come a woman had sent all her love to him?

"Maybe he bought the book at a book signing," I thought. "She might have just written that in every book she signed."

That didn't make a lot of sense either. Richard had difficulty reading and didn't have any books apart from essential technical engineering books. Why would he go to a book signing? For a children's book?

I looked at the frontispiece and saw that the book had been published in Australia, in 2007. On the back it said \$14.95. Dollars not pounds. There was nothing to indicate that the book had been published in England. Something didn't make sense here.

I'd never heard of Miranda M Moor but that didn't mean much since I wasn't a great reader, even though she was, according to the book, published in my home state of Victoria. A thought occurred to me and I scrambled through the farm papers in my briefcase. Richard had bought the farm in 2003 and renamed it Toska's Farm. Four years before the book was published. It seemed unlikely that there was any connection between the farm and the book unless maybe Richard had got the book simply because of the name Toska. Maybe he'd got the book second hand and the inscription was to a completely different Richard.

I went to put the book back in the box and saw an envelope inside. It had been lying under the book. It was addressed to Richard and the handwriting looked familiar so, being nosy, I took it out and opened it. Of course the handwriting was familiar. It was from Granny.

My darling Richard

It's so strange to call you Richard since all your life I've called you Tommy in my heart and in my mind. Little Tommy, my baby Thomas and someone else, some stranger, went and named you Richard. I've thought about you every day, little Tommy, but I suppose I must start calling you Richard even

though I'll never see you again.

There were lots of good reasons why I gave you up for adoption. I heard every one but none of them matter. The simple truth is that I was weak. I was barely seventeen and not strong enough to stand up to my parents and my teachers and everyone else who thought they had an opinion. The two days I held you were the only happy days of my life and I've hated myself, my weakness, ever since. If only I had been stronger, hey, strong enough to stand alone and fight for my little Tommy but I wasn't. I gave in and gave you away and died that day.

As you know I got married a couple of years later. I didn't love him but he was good to me and wanted children. I thought, in my stupidity, my naivety, that if I had another baby that I would be able to forget you, my darling little Tommy. Oh how foolish I was. All that happened was that I lost another baby. Every time I looked at my daughter Susan I saw you and I couldn't love her and I couldn't face having another child again and I let my husband down too. He wanted several children but I couldn't face having any more.

Susan has grown up now and has her own daughter Sheila and you know what? Whenever I look at Sheila I see you, my little Tommy, all over again. I don't have a granddaughter, I have a living reminder of what might have been.

I can't call you Richard. You are and always have been Thomas. My little Tommy.

The letter was unsigned and undated but the postmark on the envelope was July 1985. I read it through several times, standing by the mantelpiece then collapsed on the couch with the letter in my hand.

Oh my god. Now I could understand why granny was so distant from mummy, why mummy ran away to Australia to marry an Australian she'd met in London, maybe even why mummy had never really loved me. She said she did but somehow I had never quite believed her,

there was always a distance between us. She'd grown up without her own mother's love and probably she didn't know how to love me, her own daughter. And for granny to give away her baby? She said she was weak but I knew I would never have had the strength to give away my own baby, my Claire, who was taken from me after only three years. God only knows what pressures were put on her and what torments she went through. All on her own with no one to support her. I knew it was bad enough living every day after my baby was taken from me but the anguish of giving her away? I don't know how granny coped.

I broke down and sobbed on the couch. I wept for my grandmother, I wept for Richard, I wept for my mother, I wept for myself and I wept for my baby Claire. I don't know how long I wept, but I wept for four generations. Too many.

It was very late when I went to bed, all cried out. As I lay there in Richard's bed listening to the rain beating against the windows thinking about my grandmother and how my childhood must have caused her pain I realised two things. I now had a pretty good idea why Richard had left everything to his mother's descendants. He didn't like people enough and didn't have the social skills to get in touch with my mother and me but he still felt some sort of obligation or responsibility or at least concern for us, especially as he had no family of his own. Maybe he even thought that by the time he died his mother would be dead as well and there would be no scandal left. How many times had he taken that letter out of the box and laboured over reading and rereading it, alone in his big, empty house, thinking of what might have been? It didn't bear thinking about.

It also seemed to me that Miranda was somehow important. The Toska book wasn't just some curio he picked up somewhere that amused him. The book had been deliberately put in a locked box with the letter from his mother and kept on his mantelpiece where he could see it, not shut away in a room he rarely went into. It had meaning for him. Great meaning. And somehow the farm was involved. Who on earth was she?

I felt better in the morning. Over coffee and toast from my new toaster I reached a decision. Not one of great significance I have to admit,

more of a purpose I suppose. I had been halfheartedly thinking I ought to go through all of Richard's possessions and pretty much get rid of them before deciding what to do about the house. Now, even though I still had no idea what to do with the house, I had progressed to wholeheartedly wanting to go through his possessions. Partly because it was a job that had to be done but also to see if there were any other clues to his life, maybe even something about this Miranda.

It was too late to phone Carol in Australia, it was after midnight there and she wouldn't thank me so I decided to phone her over the weekend. I ought to anyway since she's my best friend and I hadn't been in touch since she dropped me at the airport.

"I wanted to thank you and your father for a lovely dinner," I said to Roger, the lawyer, a few minutes after finishing my toast.

"Delighted to have you," he said. "Are you at the house?"

"Yes, it all seems fine and I'm going to the farm tomorrow."

"Jolly good," he said. I had the feeling his mind was elsewhere.

"I did want to ask you something though," I said. "Have you ever heard of a writer called Miranda Moor?"

"Doesn't she write those books on self-empowerment?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "The one I'm thinking of writes children's books."

"Come to think of it, that might be Miranda Carr or Kerr or something," he said. "Not that I've read any of them. Lawyers are pretty self empowered already."

"Miranda Moor wrote a book about a teddy bear called Toska," I said.

"Jolly good," he replied.

"Richard Wilson bought the pig farm and renamed it Toska's Farm," I reminded him. "And I found a book in the house by Miranda Moor

about Toska.”

“Ahh, you think there's some connection?”

I could tell he was already thinking it wouldn't stand up in court.

“That's what I wanted to ask you,” I said. “I wondered if you might have any idea why he named the farm after a teddy bear in a book.”

“No ideas whatsoever,” he said cheerfully, having given the matter at least two seconds consideration.

“There's also an inscription in the book that says 'To Richard with all my love Miranda',” I told him.

“Well, that doesn't sound like the Richard I knew,” said Roger. “Sorry, I've never heard of Miranda Moor.”

“Did Richard ever go to Australia?” I asked, “or have anything to do with Australia?”

“You know, I think he did,” said Roger, thoughtfully. “Now you mention it, it rings a vague bell. I'll have to check the files. Can I call you back?”

It was frustrating. I was half hoping that Roger would know all about this Miranda Moor but I was going to have to wait until he phoned back to find out what, if anything, Richard had to do with Australia.

I made a start on going through things in the lounge and had filled two plastic garbage bags when there was a knock on the door. It's astonishing how even an apparently empty room can be full of things when you start to have a serious clean out.

“Hello” said the little old lady when I answered the door. She held a steaming mug of something in her hand and a neatly wrapped brown paper bag.

“Hello,” I replied. Well, what else do you say?

“Sorry, but I live next door.” She waved her hand at the house to the right, looking up the driveway. “I saw your car yesterday and noticed it is still here so I thought you might be my new neighbour. I brought you some tea and sandwiches in case you haven’t got your kitchen sorted out yet and to welcome you to the neighbourhood. Sorry to intrude.”

I thanked her and invited her in. Her name was Cecily. I made some coffee and let her have the tea and shared the sandwiches with her.

“Richard was my uncle,” I told her in the kitchen. “He left the house to me.”

“How strange,” said Cecily, “I didn’t think Richard had any relatives. But then, you’re Australian.”

I got the impression she didn’t think colonial relatives were real relatives. Her sharp eyes had already scanned the kitchen for changes.

“Did you know Richard for long?” I asked.

“Almost forty years,” she said. “Since he moved in.”

“I’ve been next door since I got married,” she added as an afterthought. “Sixty three years ago. I was eighteen.”

We moved through to the lounge and talked about life in Bromley and how it had changed over the last sixty three years. Quite considerably, by the sound of it.

“What was Richard like?” I asked after a while. “I never met him.”

“Didn’t you meet him when he went to Australia?” asked Cecily.

“I didn’t know he’d ever been to Australia,” I said. This was interesting. “When was it?”

“Oh back in the eighties, I think,” said Cecily. “Maybe you weren’t born then.”

"Do you know why he went?" I asked.

"Not really, he wasn't a great talker about himself," said Cecily. "Most probably it was to do with his business interests. I think he went to Melbourne."

That figured. Toska was published in Melbourne.

"Did he ever talk about anyone he met there?" I asked.

"There was someone," said Cecily. "I don't know who it was but I'm pretty sure she was a woman. He only went for two weeks but phoned me when he was due to come back asking me to look after his house as he was staying for a while."

"Why do you think it was a woman?" I asked.

"He stayed for six months," said Cecily. "Until his visa ran out. When he came back he was rather sad for a while. He did mention he'd met someone but he didn't say who. As I said, he didn't talk about himself."

I wondered if this person was Miranda.

"He busied himself with his inventions after that. Always working on something or another. He even tried to learn to play a saxophone but fortunately that didn't last long. Dreadful noise, although one can't complain, of course. You know what they say about saxophones, don't you?"

"No," I said. "What do they say about saxophones?"

"An ill wind that nobody blows good," said Cecily with a gleeful twitter. "Fortunately he preferred classical music to jazz and there isn't much classical music for the saxophone."

"Do you like classical music?" I asked. I had an idea.

"Oh yes," said Cecily.

“Would you like Richard's record collection?” I asked.

“Oh how lovely,” she said, “and so kind of you to offer but I don't have a record player any more. Mine died and my son got me a CD player. Are you getting rid of all his things?”

“Yes,” I said. “I haven't decided what to do with the house but whatever I decide the place has to be emptied and redecorated. Why don't you have his record player as well?”

“Oh I couldn't,” she said. “That would be far too much.”

“You were his friend for forty years,” I said. “I'm sure he would have been only too happy for you to enjoy his records. Why don't we take the player round to your house now and we can come back for the records later.”

I figured a little pressure might help her decision making. She dithered for a while and only agreed when I pointed out that the records would only get thrown out if she didn't take them.

“But don't you bother yourself carrying over the record player and all those records,” she said. “I'll get my son to collect them over the weekend. He knows how to put these things together and it'll give me a chance to clear some space.”

“What do you suggest I do with all the other things?” I asked. “In Australia I'd just give them all to an Op shop.”

“What's an Op shop?” she asked.

“They're charity run shops,” I told her. “People donate things they don't want anymore and they sell them and the proceeds go to the charity.”

“What a good idea,” she said. “We don't have things like that here, although the local church does run a second hand bazaar every now and then.”

We talked for a while about what to do with Richard's belongings. She

suggested the clothes and linen be given to a local homeless charity and that I try to sell the furniture.

"I'd suggest you put some advertisements in the Shopper," said Cecily. "Put in advertisements for the better pieces individually and have an open day for the rest. You'll be astonished what people will buy if the price is right. Whatever is left over can go to the tip. You can hire someone with a van for a very little and they'll do all the lifting."

It seemed a good idea so she said she'd bring her copy of the Shopper, the local free newspaper, round so I could get the details of how to place advertisements. Being a helpful person she'd told the people who delivered the various leaflets and free papers that Richard's house was unoccupied so things hadn't piled up in the letter box.

"I really ought to try to start thinking of this house as my house, not Richard's," I thought to myself. "After all, it's my name on the title deed."

"I want to redecorate my house," I said, putting the emphasis on 'my house' to try to establish it in my head. "Do you know any decent decorators?"

Unsurprisingly Cecily did. After all, with sixty three years of living here she probably knew everyone in the area. She dropped round later that afternoon with the local paper and a couple of business cards for decorators. She also pointed out an advertisement she'd found in the paper which she had circled for "a man with a van" who charged quite reasonable rates for collecting and transporting things.

Roger phoned late in the afternoon. I was feeling tired and there were now a number of black garbage bags in the driveway, some to go to the tip and a couple to be offered to the homeless charity. Needless to say no new clues or explanations had turned up.

"Richard went to Australia in 1989," he told me. "According to our records he went for meetings with a couple of Australian manufacturers about licensing some of his toy designs and for some reason stayed for some considerable time. I don't know why. All our records show is that we had to handle some of his affairs as he was

out of the country.”

“Thank you,” I said. “At least it confirms he was in Australia and gives me a date.”

I wasn't quite sure what having a date signified but at least it was a solid fact in the otherwise nebulous life of my uncle. Or my half uncle I should say, since he had a different father to my mother. Presumably, at least. I suppose it was possible she'd married the man who got her pregnant originally and it was probably too late by then to get Richard back. It was even faintly possible that he'd got her pregnant without ever knowing about it and gone away for some reason then came back to marry her without ever knowing he'd already got a son.

I was wondering whether to go to the shops to get something for dinner or just get a takeaway and sample what culinary delights the English had to offer when I remembered my debit card so I phoned the bank just before they closed and asked if it would be possible to have the card sent to the Bromley branch for me to collect there. I didn't want to risk driving in London yet and I didn't fancy being groped on the train again. They were happy to oblige and promised it should be in Bromley by Tuesday afternoon. I like English banks.

I decided to try fish and chips and was pleasantly surprised that the English do individual portions of chips. Back in Australia the fish and chip shops do 'minimum chips' which is usually enough for two or three people and it's just a waste when you live on your own as I really can't eat that many chips. Which is one reason I don't get fish and chips back home. And another reason for liking England. Cheap ciggies, helpful banks and small portions of chips. Almost worth the occasional groping.

I sat on the couch in the living room eating my fish and chips, which were very nice I might add, with my mind alternating between thoughts about the contents of the little box on the mantelpiece and what colours I should get the room re-done in.

“I don't blame granny. After all, the whole point of having men and women is to reproduce. I blame society for saying that some pregnancies are good and worth having and others are bad just

because of stupid things like whether someone is married in the eyes of some religion. Endless suffering for what purpose?"

"This room definitely needs light, airy colours, something pastel rather than bold."

"If I have a sell off the weekend after next, what am I going to sit on or sleep in until I go back to Australia?"

That last was a bit of a conundrum. I had to get rid of everything, more or less, but that would leave me with nothing but a big empty house, even if it was newly decorated. On the other hand, if I bought nice new furniture what would I do with it when I left? I hadn't actually solved the problem, just changed the nature of it. Irritating.

Chapter Nine

I phoned the 'man with a van' that Cecily had circled in the morning and he promised faithfully he would come round on Monday morning to 'look at the job'. I hoped that was an English euphemism for taking the stuff to the tip. I also phoned both the decorators Cecily had suggested and one said he could come round on Saturday and the other never answered or called back despite my leaving a message. Back in Australia I wouldn't have been able to reach either of them and would have had to go through most of the entries in the Yellow Pages to find one who'd even talk to me so this was another plus for good old England. Personally I hate phoning tradies since they invariably answer, on the rare occasion that they do answer, with an indecipherable and unfriendly grunt and make you explain the ins and out of the entire job before calmly explaining that they're retired or whatever and don't do that work anymore or if they still do then it'll be at least three weeks before they can start.

Since a lot of tradespeople end up working for themselves I don't know why the people who run their training courses don't have a session or two on how to deal with customers, answer the phone and so on. Maybe that would be a little business niche for me to fill. Courses on basic customer relations for sole traders. Maybe I could even do the phone answering myself as a sort of central liaison person where I deal with the customers for them. It's a thought, though. After all, I don't actually have a job or much in the way of an income and while 'company director' sounds pretty good it doesn't pay well at all. Less than I was getting as a low paid receptionist and I still had the mortgage on the house back in Aus to pay.

Still, it was a nice day and the drive to the farm was quite pleasant. England is a much greener and lusher place than Australia, probably because it gets a lot more rain and a lot less heat. Apparently here thirty degrees is a heatwave whereas in Aus it's considered mild. What's quite nice too is that nowhere is really that far from anywhere else. According to the GPS it was only ten miles from my house in suburban Bromley to my farm in rural Sevenoaks. I said that out loud to help get myself used to phrases like 'my house in Bromley' and 'my farm'. They still felt very strange.

“Mrs Hutchins, do come in. I’m Josh Ackland,” said the large, shaved headed man with a light brown goatee who answered the door. He looked quite young, well younger than me at any rate.

The farm house was more of a cottage, being small and squat although it had two floors. The front door opened directly into the living room which was quite neat and comfortable looking although it was clearly a man’s domain.

I’d wondered if he was going to try to bully me in some way since a lot of men aren’t comfortable with answering to a woman but he seemed quite affable as we went through the official English greeting process of asking how each other was and exchanging thoughts on the weather.

“Shall I make some coffee while I fill you in on the farm or would you prefer the tour first, Mrs Hutchins?” he asked.

“Call me Sheila,” I said. “Coffee would be nice and some background. What should I call you?”

“Call me whatever you want,” he said with a smile, “you’re the boss.”

“I’m Australian and we don’t stand on formality,” I said. “How about Josh?”

“Easy for me to remember,” he said, “let’s go into the kitchen.”

The kitchen was through a doorless doorway, next to a short flight of stairs. He busied himself with a kettle and a stove while I eyed a pile of files and ledgers on the kitchen table nervously.

He deposited a large mug of coffee on the table and gestured for me to have a seat then fetched his own mug of tea and put a carton of milk and a bag of sugar in front of me. I helped myself. He clearly didn’t stand on formality either.

“Now, umm, Sheila, what do you know about pigs and farming?” he said.

“Well I know the pork in the supermarket comes from somewhere,” I said, “but that’s about it.”

“You’re ahead of most people then,” he replied. “Your average shopper thinks meat is grown shrink wrapped in the back of the store. Now with pigs there are two types of farms and two types of farming. There’s what we call pasture farms and intensive farms. This here farm is a pasture farm where the pigs roam fairly freely and eat the grass and so on. The intensive farms crowd them all in together in little cages so they can get more pigs into less space.”

“Roger the lawyer said that this farm could handle up to five hundred pigs,” I said.

Josh grimaced. “I suppose theoretically we could but this isn’t that type of farm,” he said. “Let me explain the two types of farming first then I’ll explain what I mean by that. The type of farming we do works with the pigs through their entire life cycle. We breed the sows and grow the piglets to adulthood so we have pigs of all ages. The other type of farming is to specialise only in one stage of the pig’s life. Some farms are just breeding farms and sell the piglets at a month or so old. Others buy the piglets and take them to six months and still others go to nine months.”

“What happens at six and nine months?” I asked.

“Six month pigs are for pork and nine month pigs are for ham and bacon,” he said.

I hadn’t realised they were slaughtered so young.

“Then there’s the abattoirs and pork processing plants,” he added. “So a typical intensive pork farm will buy in piglets, feed them up for five months then send them to an abattoir. This means they can be very precise in their planning, feeding and accommodating. Which is why they can pack the pigs in and supply the supermarkets with cheap pork.”

“But we don’t do that?”

“No,” said Josh. “Which is why the lawyer wasn't quite right. We could handle five hundred pigs on this farm, and considerably more if we moved over to intensive farming, but he was assuming they were all small pork producing pigs. Pigs under a hundred pounds we can get as many as thirty an acre even on pasture which means since we've got twenty acres, we could have six hundred pigs maximum.”

“But ...?” I said.

“Hundred pound pigs are too small to be viable,” said Josh. “Bigger pigs need more pasture to graze so we'd be lucky to get twenty per acre. When they're full grown, which is what we need for breeding, we can get at most ten, maybe twelve sows per acre and when they've got a litter it drops to half that. So, you see, depending on the stage of the pig's life cycle we can have anywhere from five per acre to thirty per acre. We had a litter born yesterday so as of this morning we have two hundred and seven pigs. Maximum would be around two fifty, maybe two seventy.”

He paused to let that sink in.

“We could go to five or six hundred,” he said after a couple of moments, “if we changed to just pork pigs and if you were totally ruthless we could go to ten thousand by moving over to intensive farming.”

“What do you mean 'ruthless'?” I asked.

“Pigs are very intelligent, very sensitive creatures,” said Josh. “Apparently they're the third most intelligent creatures on the planet, after humans and dolphins. If you don't care about the welfare of the animals you can just pack them in but it causes them all sorts of mental and physical suffering. A lot of pigs become schizophrenic or suffer stress and anxiety and depression and you get a lot of fighting and cannibalism. The overcrowding also screws up their immune systems so they are prone to infections and contagions so the intensive farms have to feed them a lot of medications to keep them healthy which of course filters through to the consumer. Not to mention the smell.”

"Now that you mention the smell," I said, "I don't smell anything much."

"That's right," said Josh. "Pigs are actually very clean animals and if they're allowed to graze on pasture their waste is absorbed back in to the ground and fertilises it and there is no particular smell. If you pack them in so they're standing in their own waste all the time inevitably it's going to stink. Just as you would if you had to live your entire life in a toilet with twenty other people."

I got the point.

"I'm guessing you don't want to move to intensive farming?" I said.

"It's your farm," said Josh carefully. "You can do what you want with it. But if you want to move to intensive farming you'll have to find another manager. I care about the pigs too much. That's why Richard hired me."

"So Richard cared about the pigs?"

Josh looked puzzled.

"He was an animal lover," he said. "Didn't you know that?"

"I never met him," I told Josh. "I never even knew I had an uncle until the lawyers contacted me less than a month ago."

"Good lord," said Josh. He thought about that for a few moments then grinned. "Must have been a hell of a shock for you, then."

"Really, all I know is his name, that he was a bit reclusive, that he designed toys and owned a pig farm. That's pretty much it."

"Don't you even know what he looked like?" asked Josh. He seemed quite taken aback.

"Nope," I said. "I've talked to a couple of people who knew him but neither of them said anything about what he looked like."

“Back in a minute,” said Josh and disappeared upstairs. I took the opportunity to pop out the front door for a cigarette.

“Awesome,” he said when he came back down three or four minutes later. “You can smoke in the house, I do.”

I took my nearly finished cigarette into the kitchen and he plonked a glass coffee jar half full of dog ends on the table between us and pulled out a tin of boiled sweets. He used it as a tobacco tin and it had tobacco, papers, filters and a lighter inside. He efficiently rolled a cigarette and lit it and inhaled gratefully. So I lit another to keep him company.

“Since I’ve been manager here,” he said, quite proudly, “we’ve had three prize winning pigs. Now this one was Shotgun,” and he opened a file he’d brought down and showed me the photograph.

The picture was obviously of the pig which was standing front and centre with a large red rosette tied around its neck. The two people were incidental and one was a much younger Josh, with hair.

“Is that Richard?” I asked, pointing to the tall, well built, balding and bespectacled man with a serious expression. He looked to be in his sixties.

“Yes,” said Josh. “That was in 2010 so he would have been 63 or so then.”

He opened two other files with similar photographs. “This was Pretzel, in 2013, and this is Black Magic two years ago.”

In the seven years between the first and last photographs Richard had aged visibly and by the third he was stooping and his remaining hair was going white. It was probably my imagination but he seemed to be wearing the same suit in all three photographs. It was unlikely since by the third he had visibly lost weight but his suit still fitted him so he undoubtedly just stuck to the same style and colour of suit.

I studied the pictures with interest and thought I saw a family resemblance in the shape of his hands. I looked at my own for

confirmation. Yes, his were broad across the palm with long, blunt fingers, like mine and my mum's.

"Thank you for that," I said, still gazing at the pictures.

"Would you like me to get copies?" he asked. "There's a place in Sevenoaks."

"That would be very kind of you," I said. I don't know why but seeing my uncle made a lot of difference to me. He was quite real all of a sudden, not just a vague abstraction. It slowly dawned on me that there was something very wrong on the pictures.

"Just a moment," I said. "These pigs are black. I thought pigs were pink?"

"Oh god, you're not racist are you?"

I looked up at him in irritation and saw he was grinning again.

"I've never heard of black pigs," I said, squashing my irritation at being called a racist.

"A lot of pigs are pink," he said. "The Yorkshire in particular which is what you get in the supermarkets. Here we breed Large Blacks. They're called that because, well, they're large and black really. No one ever said pig farmers were imaginative."

I laughed.

"A full grown Large Black boar is around eight hundred pounds," he continued, "which is two hundred more than say a Berkshire which is another large pig. Large Blacks are the biggest of all pigs and they're the only ones that are completely black. They're perfect for pasture farming since their black skin protects them from sunburn and they're very gentle, social animals. I'll take you to meet them in a bit."

"I'm looking forward to that," I said, "especially the new piglets. I'm sure the big ones will scare me."

"I need to warn you about something first, though," he said.

"Oh god" I thought, "they're killing machines, I bet."

"The Large Blacks have huge ears and they hang over their eyes so most of the time they can't see where they're going. You need to be very careful not to startle them as they might run away and then they run into things and hurt themselves."

"So what should I do then?"

"Just make a noise so they can hear you coming," he said. "I whistle a lot. Oh and by the way, don't smoke around the pigs, they've got a better sense of smell than dogs and they hate cigarette smoke. Smoke in the house, not in the paddocks."

"Actually I've heard about that," I said. "Isn't that why the French use pigs to search for truffles?"

"Absolutely," said Josh, "although the problem is that pigs love truffles and the French haven't yet found an easy way to stop a five or six hundred pound pig eating the truffles they find. Also, never have pigs near a graveyard."

"What?"

"They can smell tasty things as deep as twenty five feet below ground and bodies are only six feet down. They'll dig up the graves."

"Yuk." I pulled a face.

Josh laughed. "Pigs are fairly omnivorous and they'll also pick up the flavour of what they eat in their meat which is why we have to be careful with what we feed them. Dead bodies aren't part of healthy diet."

"What do you feed yours?" I asked. "I mean, ours?"

"Mostly they graze the pasture," he said, "but grass isn't enough so we're growing various beans in the grass as well. We also keep some of

the land as woodland so they can have the acorns and leaves and we supplement their diet with fruit and fish meal and vitamins. Well fed pigs are happy pigs and happy pigs taste better.”

“You said Richard hired you because you cared about the pigs?” I asked.

“As I said, Richard was an animal lover and he wasn't too worried about the farm making a profit. When the previous manager left he offered me the job because I didn't want to change anything.”

“So this farm was run the way you ran previous farms?”

He laughed again. He was clearly happy in his life and work.

“Lord, no. I was an accountant. I knew nothing about pigs or farming.”

“How on earth did you end up here, then?” I asked.

“Back in '09 I was halfway through getting divorced when I was made redundant. It was a bad time for accountants and I couldn't find another job in accountancy and, what with one thing and another, I was getting depressed so when I happened to see the job advertised I thought 'well why not?'. Fortunately the ad said 'no experience needed' so I applied and Richard offered me the job. I've been here since 2010.”

“Did you have any children when you got divorced?” I asked.

“No, thank god. It made things a lot easier.”

I nodded and decided to get off that subject. It lead down a dangerous path and I didn't want to start crying in front of Josh.

“Did Richard know about pig farming then?”

“He knew a little bit as he'd owned the place for a few years by then but I'm pretty sure he wanted someone who cared about the pigs first and foremost. After all, it's easy enough to learn about pig

management but if you don't care about their welfare to begin with it's going to be hard to learn to care."

"Do you know why he bought the farm?"

"I think it was simply because he liked animals and wanted to do something to help them. Certainly both he and I hated intensive farming practices, so I think when the farm went up for sale he was in a position to buy it so he did. Something you probably don't know is that although the official address of the farm is Sevenoaks, it's actually right next to Toy's Hill and Richard made toys. That's probably why he bought this one rather than somewhere else."

"Do you know why he called it Toska's Farm?"

"Something to do with a book a friend of his wrote I think, but I'm not certain."

That was interesting.

"I thought Richard was a recluse and didn't have any friends?" I said, stabbing in the dark.

"Yes and no," said Josh. "I like to think he and I were friends and he was certainly a bit of a ladies' man."

I opened my eyes wide in surprise. This was something new.

"A ladies' man?"

"Oh I don't mean he had a string of women or a different one every night, no he certainly wasn't that sociable but he did have a long running affair with a married woman and I got the impression there were one or two others in his life as well at different times."

"Do you know who the married woman was?" I wondered if it was Miranda.

"One of his neighbours," said Josh. "Cicily, Cecily, Cissy, Chrissy, something like that."

Oh my word! Cecily and my Uncle Richard. Well, well, well.

“Do you know how long it went for?”

“Oh lord, let me think. Would you like some more coffee?”

He made some more tea and coffee.

“Would you like a rollup?” he asked, offering me his sweetie tin.

“I never learnt the knack,” I said.

“I’ll roll one for you, if you like,” he said and proceeded to do so. It was a nice, friendly gesture. It was a little stronger than I’m used to and I coughed with the first drag.

“That’ll put hair on your chest,” he said with a lecherous grin, looking pointedly at the chest in question.

“I really do hope not,” I said. I grinned back because his good humour was infectious. Obviously he’d got over his divorce and depression quite well. Unlike some of us.

“I seem to remember getting the idea that he got involved with this lady not long after he moved into his house. He did tell me once her husband was away a lot on business and she got lonely. You’re living in that house now aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“Have you met the neighbours?”

“Only one,” I said dryly. “Her name’s Cecily. She’s eighty one.”

“Yes well, she wasn’t forty years ago though was she.”

There was that grin again. It seemed to match his wide-eyed innocent look. Even though he clearly wasn’t innocent, even if he was wide eyed.

“Did he ever mention a woman called Miranda?” I asked.

“Miranda? Miranda,” he said thoughtfully. “That rings a bell. Dum de dum de dum, no, it's not coming back. Tell you what, let's go and meet the pigs. I'm sure Miranda will come back to me sooner or later.”

Chapter Ten

It was gone two in the afternoon before we started off on the tour of the farm and Josh still hadn't mentioned anything about the promised lunch. My stomach was feeling decidedly empty but, despite that, I thought it was really quite sweet of him to prefer to talk about the farm than eat. He was clearly proud of the place.

He was ushering me out of the back door of the cottage when he noticed my feet.

"Oh lord," he said. "You can't go round in those, you'll ruin them. Did you bring any others?"

I felt myself go faintly red. I'm from a country town in Australia which means I should know what farms are like. Admittedly your average Victorian farm isn't as muddy as an English farm but that was no excuse. I think at heart I had never taken the idea of being the owner of a farm seriously and so it had never occurred to me that my usual shoes would be inappropriate. I mean, who gets left a working farm by a stranger, after all. And, no, I hadn't brought any other shoes.

"Not to worry," he said. "Improvisation and lateral thinking are my speciality!"

We went back inside and he rummaged in a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out two supermarket type plastic bags and some string. He knelt on the floor in front of me, which felt very strange, and wrapped my feet, shoes and all, inside the plastic bags and tied them round my calves with string.

"That'll keep them dry for today," he said. "Just be careful not to slip, it's very muddy out there and the bags will have no grip."

I rustled my way to the door and watched as he pulled on his boots then followed him out.

"I'll take you to meet Black Magic first," he said as we walked across the yard. "He's the prize winner in the photo I showed you. He's also our biggest pig at pushing nine hundred pounds but whatever you do

don't be rough with him. Pigs are very gentle creatures and don't like being manhandled.”

“Why would I be rough with him?” I asked.

“People like to slap farm animals,” he said, “thinking they're being friendly. Cattle and horses don't mind, pigs do. Especially since he can't see you. The thing to do is let the pig smell you first, like a dog, then stroke him gently. You really don't want a frightened, nine hundred pound pig trying to get away from you.”

Josh opened the gate of a small, seemingly empty paddock and shut it behind me. There was a simple corrugated tin shelter in one corner, much like an oil drum cut in half length ways, only a lot bigger.

“He's probably having a nap” said Josh. “He's getting on a bit.” He raised his voice a little. “Hey Magic, come on boy, wake up and say hello, come on, I've got an apple for you.”

There was a lot of rustling from the shelter and some deep grunts and a huge black head appeared, followed by a body the size of a flatbed truck. Black Magic peered around to see who was disturbing him and clearly couldn't see a thing. Two long wide ears hung from a ridge over his brow and completely covered his eyes.

“Here boy, here,” called Josh and started slowly walking towards him. I followed, nervously, a couple of paces behind.

Magic caught the scent of the apple and trotted over. The top of his shoulder was roughly level with my belly button.

“I've brought a friend to visit,” said Josh, giving the huge head a friendly scratch. “Let him smell your hand,” he said quietly to me.

I slowly, and a little reluctantly it has to be admitted, pushed my hand in front of the pointy end of a back big enough to host a dinner party. The nose twitched and quivered for an eternity then Magic shook his head excitedly and his ears flew around like a stripper's tassels. Not that I've ever seen a stripper's tassels. It's called a metaphor.

“He likes you,” said Josh happily. I had the strangest feeling at that moment that Josh liked me too. The legalities and technicalities of ownership were irrelevant. Black Magic had accepted me so Josh did. What would have happened if Magic hadn't liked me I have no idea.

“Here,” he said, giving me an apple, “wipe your hands on this then give it to him. That way he'll associate you with happiness.”

I conscientiously wiped my hands all over the apple and fed it to Black Magic and watched him savour every tiny morsel of it, nearly in tears from a sudden upswelling of emotion of being associated with happiness. It had been a long time since I or anyone associated with me had been happy and nine hundred pounds of piggy happiness is quite overwhelming. It was a lovely moment, one I'll treasure.

Under Josh's watchful eye I scratched Magic's head and he nearly fainted (Magic not Josh) with ecstasy when I rubbed his ear ridges then he flopped to the ground and allowed me to give him a back massage, all the while looking lovingly at me from the one eye that was uncovered when an ear flopped over. I confess I liked Black Magic too.

“Come and see the latest batch of piglets,” said Josh and led me off to another paddock with five of the shelters in.

“We put the sows in this paddock when they get pregnant,” he said. “Sows like to have their own space for farrowing so they get to choose which apartment they want.”

“What's farrowing?” I asked, “and what are apartments?”

“Farrowing is when they give birth,” said Josh, “and Large Blacks usually produce eight to twelve piglets in a litter. Apartments are what I call the tin shelters. It sounds more homely. We're got three pregnant sows at the moment, in different stages and Blossom gave birth yesterday.”

There were three, obviously pregnant, pigs nosing around in the paddock.

"Pigs are pregnant for about sixteen weeks," said Josh, leading me over to one of the apartments. "It's Blossom's first pregnancy so she only produced eight. She'll produce more as she gets older."

"Hello Blossom, old girl, I've brought someone to see you," he crooned and gently tapped the top of the apartment. There was some grunting but no apparent movement.

"All the shelters are hinged so we can get inside if there's a problem," said Josh with a laugh. "The vets prefer it to having to crawl inside."

"Do you need the vet very often?" I asked.

"Rarely," he said, "very rarely. Pastured pigs are very healthy. There we go."

He lifted the top of the tin shelter and propped it open with a stout wooden pole. Inside there was a huge black pig lying on her side with an uncountable mass of black piglets, each the size of a small dog, lying at all angles, some on top of others, feeding happily. Blossom lifted her head towards Josh and grunted contentedly. He bent down and scratched her head then gently re-aligned some of the piglets so they lay neatly instead of higgledy-piggledy. I had another upsurge of emotion, it was such a beautiful scene. We watched for a couple of minutes until Blossom told Josh she'd had enough daylight and wanted to be left in peace so he closed the apartment again.

"They're much thinner than I expected," I said as he led me off to another paddock with quite a few smallish but definitely not piglet pigs in.

"Pigs used to be bred for their fat," he said. "Lard was widely used for cooking and so on up until the 1950s when vegetable oils started becoming popular so these days we breed pigs for the meat not the fat."

Josh showed me all around the farm and explained the system of paddock rotation and which pigs went in which paddock and when depending on where they were in their life cycle.

“Ahh there's Alwyn,” said Josh, “come on I'll introduce you.”

I'd seen Alwyn but I'd thought he was a scarecrow, which was silly since we had no crops to protect. He was standing in the middle of a paddock with his back towards us, dressed in rags and as thin as a beanpole.

“Alwyn, come and meet Sheila,” called Josh, striding across the paddock.

I squelched after him as this paddock was muddier than the others since it was at the bottom on a gentle decline. The scarecrow slowly turned around and all I could see was a mass of hair with two eyes peering out.

“This is Sheila, Richard's niece,” said Josh. “She's the new owner I told you about.”

“Oh aye” emerged from somewhere near the middle of the hair.

“This is Alwyn,” said Josh, unnecessarily. “He's my assistant.”

I realised that he wasn't dressed in rags. Well, actually he was, but they had all been stitched together to make some sort of overalls. He was quite ... decorative.

“Tell Sheila what you're doing,” said Josh encouragingly.

“Drainage,” emerged.

“He's working out how to improve the drainage of the paddock,” translated Josh. “Richard bought it last year and we haven't got around to deciding what to do with it yet. It's a bit too wet for pigs at the moment so if we can't improve the drainage we'll use it for fruit trees probably.”

“Why did Richard buy it if you don't have any need for it?” I asked.

“Land round here doesn't come up for sale very often,” Josh explained, “and when it does it goes quickly so people tend to buy

and think of a use for it rather than the other way around. Any thoughts?" he said to Alwyn.

"Channel," said Alwyn. "There there," and he pointed with his stick.

"Reckon?" said Josh with a frown. "Deep?"

"Eight fifteen," said Alwyn.

"OK" said Josh.

That, apparently, was the end of the planning meeting.

"We'll be off then," said Josh and started to lead me away.

"Pleased to meet you," said Alwyn and held out his hand. It was surprisingly pink and uncalledoused and we shook hands and he turned back to contemplating the landscape.

"What was that ... conversation ... about?" I asked Josh.

"Alwyn thinks we need to dig a channel fifteen inches wide and eight inches deep across the top of the paddock and going down the west side to the pond behind the outhouse," he explained. "Doesn't say much but he's a good lad is Alwyn. I want to talk to you about him later. He liked you by the way. I've never seen him shake hands with anyone before. He's got a thing about bacteria."

"How old is he?"

"28," said Josh. "All we've got left to look at is the barn which is where we store the animal feeds and equipment and the outhouse which you may not want to look inside."

"Why not?" I asked.

"We do everything on this farm," said Josh. "And the outhouse is where we slaughter the pigs and prepare them for market. I don't like going inside myself although I do every week to inspect the place and to keep an eye on Steve. You may find it disturbing."

"I suppose I should see inside," I said, "although I'd rather not. Are the pigs slaughtered humanely?"

"Definitely," said Josh. He stopped walking and turned to look at me with a very serious expression on his face. "We work very closely with the RSPCA and Steve takes his job very seriously. I know every pig on this farm personally and I will not permit any suffering at all. Steve does the actual slaughtering but no pig is killed unless I am there myself. Most of his work is the butchering of the carcasses and curing of ham and bacon which he doesn't need me for. Also we video record the slaughtering and RSPCA inspectors review random selections."

"I'll be honest," I said. "I don't like the idea of that side of farming so I'd rather not go inside. I know it has to be done but I don't really want to know the details. I'm pretty sure I can trust you to do it properly. Let's skip the barn as well."

"I'll just introduce you to Steve," said Josh "then we'll go back to the house."

We went over to the barn anyway and I peeped in and sure enough there were piles of foodstuffs and a tractor and various other odds and ends. Then I had a quick peep inside the smoke house where the ham and bacon was cured and smoked then Josh banged on the door of the outhouse and after a few moments Steve appeared.

He was a short, taciturn man with extremely broad shoulders and was midway between Josh and Alwyn in hairiness. Josh introduced him and he smiled and we shook hands and that was pretty much that. I was relieved to find he wasn't covered in blood. His overalls were clean and he wore a hairnet and rubber gloves.

Back at the cottage I stripped off my filthy plastic bags and found my shoes were still pristine. We went into the kitchen and Josh put on the kettle then glanced at the clock.

"Oh my god," he exclaimed. "It's quarter to five. I hadn't realised, I'm so sorry."

"That's OK," I said, lighting a ciggie.

"I don't often get the chance to show off the farm," he said with a shy smile. "I got carried away and forgot the time. You must be exhausted and starving. Here, please stay for dinner. You really must find out why we're still in business despite being such a small farm."

To be honest, I was quite tired and very hungry and I had nothing to rush back to so I accepted.

Over the finest pork chop I had ever tasted Josh continued my education.

"We're pretty much immune from market price fluctuations," he said. "Virtually all our pork goes to restaurants who demand the highest quality and pay for it and would never go to a cheaper source. We have a tremendous reputation and five or six years ago I got the farm certified as Organic as well."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that buyers are guaranteed that no chemicals are used at any stage, not even for clearing weeds, and that the animals are bred, fed and housed according to strict, humane, guidelines. We're also regularly inspected to ensure we continue to be organic. Most of the top restaurants insist their suppliers be certified."

"Well I've never tasted pork as good as this before," I said. "And I'm not a great lover of pork usually."

"What you are eating you'd normally only get in a top London restaurant," he said. "You'd never get this in a supermarket or even a good butchers."

We finished the meal in companionable silence.

"Well, that's it. You've seen the whole farm and how it works." He picked up the plates and unceremoniously dumped them in the sink.

"Can I ask you what your plans are? Me and the lads, well, we'd be happier to know what's going to happen rather than just waiting and wondering."

"I don't know," I said. "I know nothing of farming and I guess I was thinking it would be better to sell the farm to someone who does."

"I feel a 'but' coming along," said Josh, hiding his intense interest behind an offhand grin.

I laughed.

"Yes, you're right," I said. "But ..."

I sat hunched over the table staring at it for a few moments then leaned back and looked out of the window at the night. My mind was blank but my subconscious was working overtime.

I looked over at Josh and saw his tension, despite his nonchalant pose.

"If I keep the place will you stay on as manager?" I asked, more or less making a decision.

"That depends," he said seriously, "on what you plan to do with the place."

"I don't plan to do anything with it," I said. "I'd like it to stay the same."

He visibly relaxed.

"Then I'd love to stay," he said. "I couldn't bear it if you wanted to turn it into an intensive farm. If you want to expand into other areas, like sheep or cattle, I'm sure we can handle it but I hate intensive farming so if you went down that path or sold it to someone for that I'd be out the door like a shot."

"Well maybe expanding is something we can think about in the future but at the moment I'm still coming to terms with owning a pig farm. And I've had a lovely day and I never knew pigs could be so nice. I love the place just as it is."

"What about Alwyn and Steve?" he asked.

“What about them?” I asked in return.

“They’re both casual workers,” he said. “I know Alwyn for one would love to be permanent as he wants to get married ...”

I found the idea that Alwyn could talk to a woman enough to ask her to marry him rather surprising.

“... but it's difficult to find permanent work in farming these days. He's been with me for two and a half years now and I was going to ask Richard about him but he up and died before I got around to it.”

“What are the downsides to making him and Steve, if he wants, permanent?” I asked.

“Adds to the cost,” he said instantly. “Holiday pay, sick pay that sort of thing. I've got some figures if you're interested.”

Well, he had been an accountant so I expected nothing less. He dug out some spreadsheets and talked me through farm economics for a while. The upshot was that if we made both Alwyn and Steve permanent the profits would drop by around thirty percent a year. The only real benefit would be loyalty, which seemed to me to be worth it. When you have good workers you want to keep them so I made my first decision as a business executive.

“Awesome,” said Josh. “I’ll tell them the good news in the morning. Are you going to go back to Australia?”

“Well, I ...” I started to say.

“Australia!” he said, slapping his forehead. “Now I remember. Miranda was a woman Richard met in Australia, ohhh, a long time ago. She was a writer, I think he said, and she wrote a book called *Toska* and that's why he renamed the farm.”

“Was she that important to him?” I asked. “Why didn't he stay in Australia if she was?”

“Buggered if I know,” said Josh, “although I think the book was about

Richard in some way.”

“Have you read it?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I have to admit I was more interested in reading books about pigs back then since I didn't know a damned thing about them.”

“I found a copy in the house,” I said. “It's about a teddy bear who rescues a doll from the rubbish tip.”

“Ohh,” said Josh. “Maybe it wasn't about Richard after all. Anyway, that's all I remember. Oh I think she was married. Richard preferred married women, he thought they were safer.”

“Yeah, I think a lot of men think that,” I said drily, and then for some inexplicable reason, “do you?”

He thought about this for a few moments.

“I don't think it has anything to do with whether the woman is married,” he said slowly. “If you fall in love you fall in love and that's all there is to it. I think some men use the woman being married as a way of getting their leg over without having to admit they don't love the woman. But if he loves her and she loves him then the married side of it can be dealt with.”

This was starting to get a bit heavy so I changed the subject back to me and Australia.

“I have two houses now,” I said. “One in Australia and one here.”

“Three actually,” interjected Josh. “This one is yours too, it's owned by the company that owns the farm.”

“Wow,” I said. “I just assumed it was yours. It didn't occur to me that it was part of the farm.”

“So you have total control over my life,” said Josh. “I'm a kept man.”

“Yeah, I don't think I could keep you for long if you didn't want to

be,” I said jokingly.

It was very low key but it was kind of nice to be flirting with a man again.

“Sorry,” he said, “you were telling me about Australia.”

“Yeah,” I said, a little sadly. “I have a house in Australia and I suppose I ought to go back.”

“You don't sound very enthusiastic about going back,” he said. “What about your family and friends?”

Josh was a nice man, one I felt comfortable with and so I started to tell him about my life in Australia. Slowly at first then more openly as time went by. When I told him about my baby Claire and my parents he fetched a box of tissues for my tears and gently held my hand while I used them.

“It's just a thought,” he said when I was done and was cuddling a mug of sweet cocoa, “but since you haven't really got anything to go back to Australia for, why not stay here, in England, with your pigs?”

Chapter Eleven

“Well, hello stranger!” said Carol on Sunday morning.

It was Sunday evening for her since, because of Daylight Saving, the clocks had gone back here in England and forward there in Australia so the time difference was now eleven hours. My nine am was her eight pm. These time differences do my head in as I struggle to remember which way the eleven hours go. Fortunately Carol doesn't go to bed particularly early.

“I have had the most incredible week!” I said and we spent the next hour or so talking about London and the B&B and the house and the farm and everything that had happened. She laughed her head off when I told her about being groped on the train.

“I got groped almost every week when I was at uni,” she told me. “Trams are the worst. I used to ram my elbow back and hope I got the right person.”

We talked a little bit about what made men grope women in public places but didn't come to any real conclusions.

“Anyway,” I said, “I wanted to ask you a favour.”

“Fire away,” she said cheerfully. “Although I've got to go to bed soon. Some of us have jobs to go to.”

“Well, my uncle Richard is supposed to be a recluse,” I said, “but I found a book in his house written by someone called Miranda Moor and published in Victoria. But, get this, she wrote 'To Richard with all my love Miranda' inside it.”

“Authors write all sorts of things inside books,” said Carol. “They do it to sell books, that's why they have book signings.”

“Yeah, but Richard was dyslexic,” I said, “he couldn't read and didn't have any other books in the house. Aaaaannnd he went to Melbourne once and his farm manager thinks he had an affair with a married woman there.”

“So you think he had an affair with this Miranda person?” asked Carol.

“Yup,” I said.

I could visualise her screwing up her nose at this.

“OK,” she said. “So what's the favour?”

“Could you try to find her for me?”

“I've never heard of her,” Carol said. “When was he in Melbourne?”

“1989.”

“Are you serious? You want me to try to find a woman who may have had an affair with an Englishman in 1989 and all you can tell me is a name that was probably a pen name? Come off it.”

“I know the name of the publisher as well,” I said, “and you love puzzles.”

“No I don't,” she said. “I hate puzzles. I love databases which are simple and straightforward. You just type in a search query and out pops the answer.”

“She's bound to be in a database somewhere,” I said, encouragingly.

Carol gave a deep sigh of resignation.

“OK, give me all the information you have and I'll see what I can come up with.”

She noted the very few details I had, including the name of the illustrator, Michael Hammond.

“Are the illustrations any good?” she asked.

“Yes, they are,” I said.

“OK, I might be able to find him if he had any exhibitions as an artist or maybe done commercial graphics, Michael Hammond doesn't sound like a pseudonym. OK, I'll get back to you in a few days. Can I go to bed now?”

“One more thing,” I said. “It'll only take a minute.”

She groaned.

“Someone suggested I give up living in Australia and stay here in England. What do you think?”

“You've only been there a week, who would suggest something like that?”

“Richard's farm manager,” I said. “I mean my farm manager, Josh.”

“Ohhhhhhhh,” replied Carol, perking up. “A man you've never met before says you should move to England and you're thinking about it? How did that come up in a business meeting?”

“Oh Carol,” I said, laughing, “it's not what you think it is.”

“Honey, it never is,” she replied. “How did he say it?”

I told her about how Josh had got divorced and had been made redundant and turned his life around by applying for a job on a pig farm even though he knew nothing about pigs.

“So how did that turn into you moving to England?” she asked.

“He wanted to know my plans for the farm, like whether I was going to sell it.”

“So how did that turn into moving to England?” she repeated.

I could see I wasn't going to be able to get out of it now so I told her about me telling Josh about my life and how I'd cried when I'd told him about Claire and my parents and how he'd held my hand and so on.

“So let me get this straight,” said Carol. “You opened up to a strange man who you'd only met that day when you normally don't even tell me things and then he goes and suggests you throw everything up and come to live with him in England?”

“Not with him,” I said. “Although I'd probably see a lot of him since he is my farm manager after all.”

“Right,” said Carol. “And you're thinking about it?”

“Yes,” I said. “It seemed quite a sensible idea.”

“Right. So Miss 'I'm going to bury my head in the sand and never talk to anyone again' is seriously thinking of throwing up everything she's ever known to go and play with some pig farmer she's only just met, in another country?”

“I was just asking what you thought,” I said defensively. After all, when she put it that way it seemed quite a stupid idea after all.

“Honey,” said Carol, “it'll be the best thing you ever did. Can I come visit for holidays?”

“What on earth do you mean?” I asked.

“You're in a dead end rut here,” she said. “Stay there and get a life for god's sake. You obviously like him so go have some fun for once.”

“But it isn't like that,” I protested.

“So you said already,” said Carol. “What is it like then?”

“Well, umm, it's errr, like erm” When she put it that way I didn't have a ready answer.

Carol let me stammer pointlessly for a while then laughed.

“I'm going to bed, hon. Stay there and find some happiness. I haven't heard you sound so alive for years.”

I sat there with the phone in my hand after she'd hung up thinking about how I'd reacted when I gave Black Magic the apple. Then, for some reason, Josh saying the rollup would put hair on my chest popped into my mind, and I started to go red, the way I should have done at the time.

"Don't be silly," I said to myself, hanging up. "It's just a cultural difference. It doesn't mean anything."

OK, maybe she was right about me sounding more alive though. I was feeling more alive. I was finding the whole trip quite enervating. The places, the experiences, even the people. When I started to wonder what running my hand over a shaved head would feel like, I thought it was time I got on with clearing out the house. After all, Denzil, the 'man with a van', would be round in the morning to look at the job so it would be useful if he had something to look at other than a small pile of garbage bags in the driveway.

One productive thing I did was decide to go through the house itemising everything that would be worth trying to sell individually, such as the drawing board and Richard's saxophone which I came across in one of the bedrooms and some of the better furniture. I thought maybe I could hang on to some of the crappier furniture to use while I was still there and simply get Denzil to take it to the tip when I left. I had thought to accumulate it all in the lounge downstairs so anyone interested could see the items easily but there turned out to be quite a few things that could be sellable and some were too large and heavy for me to bring downstairs on my own.

The hi fi and records had already gone to Cecily's. Her son, Malcolm, had come round the day before and I'd helped him move them to her house since he was in his fifties and not robust looking. Angelo had also come round and taken measurements and made enthusiastic comments about the redecorating and then announced that it would take at least two weeks if both he and his nameless gopher worked together and they probably couldn't start for a couple of weeks either. Still, despite the measurements, he pulled a number out of the air and I agreed to it. He had a capable air about him.

Even though I would still be able to live in the house while the work

was going on, it was clear I was going to be here for another month at least. So, after Denzil came round and looked at the garbage bags then loaded them into his van and disappeared, I decided I needed to do some shopping. After all, I only had the clothes I'd flown over with and the few new items I'd bought in Notting Hill and, frankly, three outfits is barely adequate even for my lack of social life. Richard's washing machine was also very elderly and I didn't really trust it.

The trouble with buying new clothes is that they really show up shortcomings in other areas and I was already conscious that my hair really wasn't up to scratch for my Notting Hill coat. So when I passed Slay It With Lauren in the High Street I dropped in and made an appointment for a restyle and manicure for the next afternoon. Jasmine, who would be my 'personal consultant and coordinator' also persuaded me to let them 'do something' about the grey that was beginning to appear. Apparently 'slay it' is the new euphemism for, well, I'm not quite sure. Something like 'knock 'em dead' I suppose. Anyway, Lauren's seemed a nice enough place and the two ladies getting their hair done in there seemed quite happy.

I got home just in time to phone the Shopper to place some ads. I'd decided to run an open house type sale the following weekend and also advertise the twenty or so items I was going to try to sell individually. Louise, my account manager at the Shopper, seemed quite impressed with the number of ads I was placing and gave me quite a decent discount and told me that any items that didn't sell would be listed for a second week for free.

"It would help them to sell if you have colour photographs," Louise brightly informed me. "Well worth the small extra charge."

"I don't have a camera," I said.

"You can take them with your phone and MMS them to us," she said helpfully.

I had no idea what MMS was.

"My phone can't take pictures, I'm afraid," I said. "It's quite old."

“Stone age,” I thought I heard her mutter then, “Perhaps one of your friends?”

“I’m from Australia,” I told her. “I’m only here for a few weeks and I don’t know anyone.”

“I suppose we could send around a staff photographer,” she said thoughtfully.

She clearly didn’t want to let me go with just lineage classifieds and I could imagine how impressed a photojournalist would be taking pictures of old furniture.

“Oh I really don’t think so,” I said. “That would mean cutting back on news coverage.”

She reluctantly agreed although she did manage to inform me that advertising was their main purpose, not news. Still, I got my ads in before the deadline, by a couple of minutes.

Just for the fun of it, that evening I made a list of the things I would need to get if I stayed in the house. Top of the list was a new mobile phone, one that took pictures and could do MMS and maybe even had internet access as it would be useful to look things up on the net. I didn’t need to do that back in Australia as I knew where everything was that I was likely to want to go to but I was a stranger here. I added a cooker, and a washing machine, and a microwave and a few other items. Then, as an afterthought, I put ‘new car’ at the bottom of the list. After all, I wasn’t going to be able to rent the Ka indefinitely. It was too expensive. In fact, when I thought about it, I wondered if Josh had a spare farm car I could borrow. I made a note to ask him since I didn’t want to phone him in the evening as I knew now that he put in a long day with the pigs.

I learnt a new word at Lauren’s, ‘crispy’. Jasmine explained it to me as that special, sleek, just done look for your hair when you are leaving the salon. I don’t know if I felt crispy when I left with my new hair and nails but I certainly felt special and sleek, although it was a bit of a shock to see that my familiar light muddy brown with hints of grey hair was now a couple of shades blonder. Sadly, in the same way that

my new clothes pointed out that I needed to get my hair done, my new hair pointed out that maybe I could use losing a tiny bit of weight to tighten up my face, and maybe one or two other places. Back home, I added gym membership to my staying here list and made a smaller than usual dinner. And I only put half a spoon of sugar in my coffee, barely enough to taste. I put sweeteners and low fat milk on my groceries list.

I was just thinking that I'd only been in the house for a week and it was already feeling comfortably familiar and quite possibly 'home' when Josh phoned.

"Just rang to say I've got those photos of Richard copied," he said.

"Great," I said. It was nice to hear a familiar voice. I'd talked to a lot of strangers in the last few days. "Shall I come and get them or would you mind posting them?"

"I rather thought I could drop them round," he said. "You're not much further than the post office anyway and it'll save you the trouble."

"Oh that's too much trouble," I said, wondering which of my two new dresses to wear.

"It's no trouble," he said. "I don't get out much and it would be nice to, well, yes, I don't get out much. How about tomorrow evening?"

"It would be nice to what?" I wondered.

"Tomorrow evening would be great," I said. "Why not come for dinner? That way you can tell me what's happening about the drainage in the bottom paddock."

The drainage??? I grimaced at the phone, disgusted with myself.

"That would be lovely," he said, "if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," I said. "It'll be nice to have some company, this place is rather big and lonely."

Lonely??? Why did I say that?

“Oh I can imagine,” he said. “My little place gets quite lonely and it's a fraction of yours. What time shall I come over?”

“Whenever's convenient,” I said.

“I hate it when people say that,” he said. “I never know what the correct protocol is and I worry that I'll be too early or too late.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” I said. “It's just that I don't know what time you finish with the pigs or what time you have to get up in the morning.”

I realised as I was saying it that it could be interpreted as a possible invitation to stay overnight, but it was too late to stop saying it.

“How about six thirty then?” he said.

“Great, I'll see you then. Do you know the address?”

“Yes, I've been there several times.”

“With Richard?”

“Yes, two or three times a year.”

“Great, well I'll see you tomorrow at six thirty,” I said.

“Right,” he said. “Six thirty it is.”

We both stayed on the line for some reason. The logical moment to end the call had passed and this was starting to get uncomfortable. I was about to ask how Blossom was getting on when he acted decisively.

“OK, I'll see you tomorrow, have a nice evening,” and with that he hung up. Oh well.

Now I had a new problem to think about, what to cook for dinner. I

wasn't the world's greatest cook and what cook books I had were back in Australia. Obviously I couldn't serve up supermarket pork and my usual mince was a bit downmarket. I tried to remember what I had seen in his kitchen to try to get some idea of what he liked but, foolishly, I hadn't inspected his fridge. I could do fish since all I had to do was wrap it in tin foil and whack it in the oven for a while but what if he didn't like fish? Going by what he'd said about the chemicals and hormones given to intensively farmed pigs I didn't think he'd much like anything pre-made like a supermarket lasagne and I had no idea how to make a lasagne from scratch. I hadn't reached any decision when I went to bed.

The morning light gave me a fresh perspective. He was a solidly built man who worked hard at a physically demanding job on a farm. He needed his calories and probably ate anything that was put in front of him. Quantity was probably more of an issue than anything else so I decided on a roast, since roasts are very easy, and several different vegetables, so he could skip the ones he didn't like. I went to the supermarket and decided that the lamb looked nicer than the beef so I got a decent sized leg and a selection of veggies and plenty of potatoes. Around fourish I put the oven on to pre-heat and started preparing the veggies. It was then that I realised I didn't have enough saucepans. I needed one for the gravy and I had four veggies and only two other saucepans.

A ciggie helped with the panic attack. I could roast the carrots with the potatoes and cook the beans with the peas and use the other saucepan for the cauliflower. Too easy. I went back in the kitchen and slid the roasting tray with the lamb, with some basil and rosemary sprinkled on top, into the oven; which was as cold as a stubby at a barbeque. I checked the controls and the little oven light wasn't on. I turned on the four hotplates with a beating heart and kept touching them with my fingers until I was certain they weren't working either. The whole damned cooker had packed up.

It's at times like this that smoking is a real boon. I don't know what a non smoker would do in that situation but I, fairly calmly, went into the lounge and sat down and had a smoke.

"Maybe it's the fuses," I thought. I knew what to do about those since

I'd had to deal with blown fuses a couple of times in my house in Aus. I butted the ciggie and went outside where, fortunately, I found the fuse box. It was, like most things in the house, pretty old and had those old fashioned white porcelain fuses. Someone had, in the not too distant past, put little handwritten labels above each saying what area the fuse covered. I pulled out the one labelled 'cooker' and the wire was beautifully intact.

“Bugger,” I said to the world. “Now what?”

My trouble shooting skills did not extend any further and I had no intention of dismantling the cooker to try to figure out what the problem was. There was only one thing to do.

“Hi Josh, it's Sheila.”

“Oh hi, is tonight off?” he asked, sounding a little worried.

“Maybe,” I said. “The cooker's packed up so it's either a takeaway or nothing.”

“Takeaway's fine,” he said with a laugh.

“Fish and chips, pizza or Chinese?”

“Anything,” he said, “except sweet and sour pork.”

“Pizza it is then.” I said. “I'm guessing not ham though.”

He thought that was funny.

Chapter Twelve

“Hi,” said Josh when I opened the door. He looked quizzically at me for a moment.

“Have you changed your hair?”

“Yes,” I said, a little self consciously, touching my hair with my hand, wondering if he'd notice my nails. He didn't.

“Nice,” he said. “Very nice.”

I thanked him and invited him in. For some reason he was carrying a mug.

“You're having a clear out then,” said Josh as he came into the lounge.

“Yes, I still haven't decided what to do with this house but whatever happens it needs clearing out and redecorating. Would you like some tea?”

“Love some,” he said. “Umm, do you need this?” He proffered the mug.

“What for?” I said, genuinely puzzled.

“Well, Richard never had any spare mugs or plates or anything so whenever I came round for a cup of tea or anything I had to bring my own mug and stuff. I didn't know if you were the same.”

I stared at him wondering if he was joking then I remembered that there had only been one of everything in the kitchen when I arrived so I took Josh into the kitchen and showed him the Home Maker set I had bought. He seemed somewhat relieved.

“Is that the guilty cooker?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I checked the fuses and they're OK so I think it's the cooker itself.”

He opened the oven door and peered inside, the way men do when faced with a technical problem. I don't know why since the electrical components are round the back, not inside the oven.

"Looks pretty knackered to me," he said. "Probably can't get the parts for it now. Must be twenty years old at least."

"Yes," I agreed. "I'll probably have to get another cooker."

He closed the oven door as though it were the lid on a coffin.

"Here are the photos," he said, pulling one of those fold-over envelopes film processing shops use out of his pocket.

I looked at them, trying to work out what went on in the mind of someone who was supposedly reclusive but who had people over for coffee and yet expected them to bring their own mugs. Frankly it baffled me. Did he tell people to bring a mug when he invited them? If they forgot did he make them go out and buy one before they came inside the house? How did people react when he said "come for a coffee and bring your own mug, bring a teaspoon while you're at it"? Did they have to bring their own coffee and milk too?

I thanked Josh and left the photos on the kitchen table and we went into the lounge.

"How much were the photos?" I asked, reaching for my purse.

"My treat," he said, so I thanked him again.

I didn't press the matter because, in my experience, men seem to like buying things for women and insisting would probably insult him. Maybe it's a power thing or a gender role stereotype or something.

"I ordered you a chicken and mushroom pizza, hope that's OK," I said as we sat on the couch.

"Lovely," he said. "Umm, do you really want to know about the drainage of the bottom paddock?"

“Not really,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “I was being polite more than anything.” I was more relaxed now than when I was on the phone. “Is it going to cost much?”

“Not a thing,” he said. “Alwyn will dig it as part of his day to day job.”

“Really? But his hands are so soft and smooth, I wouldn't think he'd ever done anything like handle a spade.”

“We've got a mini digger and his girlfriend makes him use a lot of hand cream when he has to do manual work because she hates callused hands. He plasters his hands with the stuff then puts gloves on top.”

Josh said this very matter of factly but there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. His own hands were moderately calloused although his nails were clean and neat. He had long strong fingers as well. Not that I noticed, of course.

“She makes his overalls too. We're supposed to supply him with work clothes but she doesn't like them, says they make him look like a farm labourer. She's, ummm, a bit of a character but at least she agreed to him using non perfumed hand cream since the perfumed stuff he used to wear upset the pigs.”

“I don't know what to say,” I said, because I really didn't know what to say. I had a feeling that a farm labourer who wore hand cream and whose girlfriend made multi coloured overalls wouldn't get out of the pub alive in Australia.

“Yeah,” said Josh. “I, er know what you mean. Damned good man though. Very nice when you get to know him and he loves pigs, even though he's a vegan. They both are. She's a model.”

“A model?” I tried to conjure up Alwyn with Elle McPherson and my brain simply couldn't handle it.

“Feet,” said Josh. “Apparently she has perfect feet and does quite well modelling socks and things. She's never been photographed above the ankles, which is just as well really. Umm, yes, well that's about it.”

This trip to England was certainly an experience.

“What about Steve?”

“Steve's about as typical a farm labourer as you'd expect. He's the archetypal farm labourer, even down to the wife who gives him hell. I don't like him much, I'll admit, but he doesn't scare the pigs which is saying something for a slaughterman. That's why I keep him on.”

“Talking about the farm,” I said, “I'm hiring a car at the moment and it looks like I won't be going back to Australia for a while and it's rather expensive. I was wondering if there was a spare car on the farm I could borrow for a while?”

“Take mine,” he said immediately.

“Oh I couldn't do that,” I said, impressed by the speed of the offer.

“It comes with the farm so it isn't really mine, it's yours,” he said. “And I've got a scooter I can use when I need to go into town, although I might need to borrow the car back if I have to go to see a customer. When do you need it?”

“The hire car is due back next Wednesday,” I said, “but I really can't take yours.”

“Of course you can,” he replied seriously. “I'm seeing a possible new customer next Tuesday so Wednesday is perfect. I'll bring it over and get the bus back.”

“Don't be silly,” I said, “at the very least I'll drive you back. I'd like to see the farm again anyway.”

He smiled. “Why not come over to meet the new customer? Help give you a better overview of the business.”

“OK,” I said. “Who is it?”

“I don't know much about him,” said Josh. “His name's Henry Curshaw and he's a chef. He set up a restaurant a few months back

and from what I hear he's making quite a name for himself. Anyway, he wants to see how we operate before committing himself. He's not going to be a big customer since he's small and exclusive but he'll help spread the word."

"What is an exclusive restaurant?" I asked.

The pizzas arrived at that point, and we sat side by side on the couch eating pizza out of boxes like a couple of teenagers. It was quite fun actually, more fun than a roast at the table would have been. I'd ordered a Family sized pizza for Josh, just in case. It turned out to be a wise decision as he ate the whole thing before I'd finished my Small one.

"An exclusive restaurant is one based on the name and reputation of the chef. They always very expensive and generally have a fairly small customer base, which is why he's coming to check us out. At his level you can't get away with cheap, inferior quality food. It has to be the best and where pork is concerned we're one of the very best."

"What makes us the best?" I asked. I knew we were pretty good since the chops I'd had were superb.

"Two things really," said Josh. "One is the bloodline. Black Magic is the direct descendent of Long Tam, one of the first crosses between the black pigs of Devon and those of Cornwall in the early nineteenth century. His line has stayed pure. The other reason is the way we treat them. Our pigs are about as unstressed as it's possible to get without valium. We only breed the sows once a year for example, not three times a year like they do in most places. So how long are you thinking you'll be here?"

He eyed the pieces of congealed cheese sticking to the cardboard lid so I went and got the packet of chocolate biscuits I'd bought at the supermarket. His face reminded me of Black Magic's when I gave him the apple and I resisted the temptation to scratch Josh behind his ears.

"At least a month," I said. "It'll take that long to redecorate my house, probably longer."

“Are you thinking of selling your house then?”

“I guess so,” I said. “It’s far too big for me and if I did stay in England I’m going to need more income than the farm gives me.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Josh. “It was just a hobby for Richard, he didn’t care if it lost money. Try to hold on to the house for as long as you can though. It’s a big, solid house in an expensive suburb, it can only appreciate in value.”

“I suppose I could rent it out but then I’d have to rent somewhere to live in myself. I couldn’t afford to buy anywhere and there’s the mortgage on the house in Australia.”

“You could always take in lodgers,” said Josh. “Or maybe open it up as a B&B.”

I thought about that for a few moments.

“Actually that’s not a bad idea,” I said and told him about the B&B I’d stayed in when I arrived in London.

“I don’t know if you’d get rich doing that,” he said, “but you’d have an income and since there’s no mortgage on the house it would be mostly profit and you’d be able to live in part of it as well. Plus you’d have your breakfast bacon and sausages free from the farm.”

We talked about the idea for a while and I started to get a little enthusiastic.

“OK,” said Josh after a bit, “I’m talking now as an accountant. Don’t rush into doing this as there could be pitfalls we’re not aware of. Why not have a chat with that chap who runs the B&B you stayed at? He sounded a helpful chap. Maybe he can give you some advice.”

“Yes, that’s sensible,” I said. “I’ll talk to my lawyer as well as I have no idea if I can even stay here for long as I’m a foreigner.”

“Seriously though, hold off on the decorating,” said Josh. “If you decorate after officially setting up as a B&B you can claim the cost

against tax and I'm guessing it won't be cheap to redecorate a big place like this."

"So at what point can I redecorate?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Josh "but you'll probably have to register with the Council to run a B&B but your lawyer will know more about that. Once you're registered, any outlay you should be able to claim although it would be safest to redecorate after your first booking. That way the Inland Revenue will accept it is a business expense since it's already generating an income."

"But how do I get bookings when the place is a tip like this?"

"Easy," said Josh. "Make one up and pay for it yourself, or get a friend to stay a night in one of your rooms, it doesn't really matter so long as you have some documented income to show you're in business. I'll stay here for a night if you like, and you can do it in stages as well. Decorate one room and rent it out while you're decorating the next. That goes for furniture like beds and things and a new cooker, although with things like beds you'll get a better deal if you buy half a dozen at once. Anyway, whatever you spend, if it's for the business you can claim it against tax which makes everything cheaper. Even if you don't make much income from the B&B you can offset the costs against your income from the farm."

What was really cool was that Josh did a few calculations and even on a third of what the London B&B charged, I'd be able to afford to have someone come in and clean the rooms every day. I didn't mind cooking breakfasts, as bacon, sausage, eggs and toast are within my capabilities, but cleaning a house this size was not my idea of fun.

I sent Angelo a text message telling him to hold off on the redecorating. I told him I was rethinking the colours since I didn't want him to think I was bailing out and Josh suggested I didn't tell him I was thinking of setting up a B&B since he might put the price up. Sensible man is Josh.

"What do you think I should do with the house in Australia?" I asked him later.

“Sell it,” he said.

“Why” Wouldn't it be worth keeping and renting out?”

“Maybe, but your heart's not in it.”

That confused me.

“What do you mean?”

“We've been talking about houses most of the evening,” he said, with a gentle smile. “Whenever you mention this house you say 'my house' and whenever you mention the one in Australia you say 'the house'. I could be wrong but I think you've moved already.”

“Umm, that's only to distinguish this house from your house,” I said, “whereas the one in Australia isn't ambiguous.”

“OK,” he said, “if you want to be disingenuous but there no real likelihood of confusing my house with anything in all this. After all, it's part of the farm.”

Was I being disingenuous? Since I didn't quite know what it meant I couldn't really argue and I didn't want to ask him what it meant. So I changed the subject back to pigs. I had already learnt that pigs were pretty safe ground. He liked to talk about them and they didn't lead me into any potentially dangerous areas, like already moving to England in my heart. I'd been in emotional denial for years and old habits die hard. Still, I was slightly disappointed when he didn't try to kiss me goodnight when he left. It was almost like I was half expecting it. Very strange.

I woke in the morning with good feelings about the idea of setting up a B&B so I phoned Roger to make an appointment to ask his advice and we agreed on the following Monday afternoon. I also phoned Nigel, a little nervously since I had no idea how he would react, but he claimed to remember me and said he'd be happy to give me some tips, so long as I wasn't planning to set up in Bayswater, ha ha. I assured him I wasn't and suggested Monday as I was going to be in London, seeing Roger. Monday afternoon wasn't a problem as very

little happens in a B&B in the afternoons apparently.

Either way I was going to need a new cooker. It struck me that there were no gas appliances in the house and I prefer gas cookers so I knocked on Cecily's door to see if she knew if gas was connected to the house.

"Oh yes, dear, definitely. It's just that Richard hated gas so he took out the gas hot water tank and gas cooker and replaced them with electric ones. Naked flames bothered him for some reason. I've got a card for a gas fitter somewhere and you'll need an electrician to take out the old cooker. Now where did I put them?"

She couldn't find one for the gas fitter but she did find a card for an electrician. I phoned him and he promised he'd be round first thing in the morning and, for a small additional fee, would take away the old cooker, which was fine by me. A tenner here or there was no big deal but I had no idea how to dispose of a cooker. He might even be able to fix it and sell it secondhand, good luck to him if he could.

One advantage of living in a small country town in Australia is that when you need something like a new cooker the local store has maybe ten to choose from. The store in Bromley seemed to have several thousand. I stood there and gazed at acres of home appliances in disbelief. Apparently there was more to it than size. You could have electric cookers with gas ovens, gas cookers with electric ovens, gas cookers with gas ovens but electric grills, gas ovens with halogen hobs and electric grills, single ovens, double ovens, triple ovens, split level cookers, about ten different levels of automation including several that were internet ready allowing you to control it from anywhere in the world and one with a built in microwave. And most of them offered the choice of white or brushed metal finish and some had a range of custom colours. You could even choose different styles of knobs. Oh and there were some oil fired ones that looked like they were from the 1930s, in cast iron. They'd probably be perfect if I had a retro country cottage styled apartment. Why would anyone want an internet capable cooker?

"Do you have a gas cooker with built in fridge" I asked the salesman a little sarcastically.

“Not in stock,” he said seriously, “but I can order a custom designed one for you from Ferrantos Home Appliances. It should only take a month or so. What capacity fridge were you thinking of?”

I abandoned him after a while and went and stood in the street having a smoke while I figured out what to do. I eventually decided on a simple all gas cooker with five rings, a single oven and single grill since it looked pretty stylish, in case I should decide to sell the house, and if I set up a B&B I'd need plenty of hobs but I wouldn't have much use for an oven. No way was I going to do a roast for breakfast. Since there were three like that I went for the one with the longest warranty. I bought a new fridge while I was there, although it wasn't internet ready and didn't have an ice cube maker. My new washing machine was bottom of the range too, with only seven cycles. There was one which had over twenty and I got a headache just thinking about it.

The salesman was delighted, no doubt he would be getting a hefty commission next pay day, and promised me faithfully that they would all be delivered on Monday morning and that he would book a gas fitter to install the cooker on Monday afternoon. It wasn't until I got home that I remembered I would be out on Monday as I was going to London but my head was spinning with home appliances and I really couldn't face going back.

“I'll sort it out tomorrow,” I said to myself. “I need a nap.”

I'd just settled myself on the couch with a cup of coffee balanced on my tummy and a ciggie in my hand and my eyes shut when someone knocked on the door.

“Great,” I thought. “If I lie quietly they might think no one is in.”

Whoever it was knocked again. Groaning I put my coffee on the floor and slowly got up.

“Hello dear,” said Cecily. “I saw you come back.”

She half stepped forward expectantly so I invited her in.

"I just came round to invite you to dinner," she said happily, in the hallway, "since you don't have a cooker."

"That's very kind of you," I said. "Would you like some tea?"

"Just a minute," I thought. "Cecily doesn't go out much. I wonder if she'd mind being here while the man does the cooker?"

I explained about the cooker man coming to fit it on Monday and Cecily was delighted to help. I took her tea to the kitchen table and retrieved my coffee from the lounge. When I got back to the kitchen I saw she was looking at the photographs of Richard.

"Such a handsome man, wasn't he," she said with a half smile and a nostalgic look on her face.

OK, I didn't see it myself but each to their own. "Yes," I said. "Very handsome."

"I remember how happy he was when Shotgun won the prize," she said. "He was so proud, he didn't stop talking about it for days."

"Did you visit the farm?" I asked.

"Yes he took me there a couple of times," she said. "But I'm not fond of pigs or muddy fields."

She sighed and turned away from the pictures and gave her attention to her tea.

"Umm, what sort of relationship did you have with Richard?" I asked, surprising myself. I'm normally more discreet.

Her sharp eyes gazed piercingly at me over the rim of her tea mug.

"There was such a palaver at the croquet club today," she said. "Emily ran the ball three times in a row but Mabel disputed it saying she'd cheated. They were still arguing about it when I left."

I got the message and dropped the subject of Richard and we chatted

about croquet for a while. I knew of its existence but that was about all.

“Oh you'd love it, dear,” said Cecily. “You should join our club. Anyway, I must go, come round about six. There's something I want to show you.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Come on in, dear,” said Cecily when I got there just after six. “I’ll make some tea.”

What is this English obsession with tea? Personally I can’t stand the stuff. I’m a coffee person.

“Great,” I said.

Her house was very different to mine. It was a little smaller, I guessed four bedrooms instead of five, but every inch was crammed with knickknacks, mementos, photographs in frames, cute little chintzy ornaments and god knows what else. There were even some books, mostly detective thrillers although, incongruously, I spotted a copy of *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

“Go on in to the lounge,” called Cecily from the kitchen.

I guessed which was the lounge and discovered a large dining table in there so I tried the room next to it. It had a couch and a couple of easy chairs and looked more like a lounge. Cecily bustled in with a tray with two teacups and saucers with flowers on them and a matching teapot, jug and bowl. She wasn’t a tea bag sort of person.

She put the tray on a little table beside the couch and patted one end of it.

“Come and sit here, dear, it’s easier to talk than shouting across the room.”

I sat as directed and watched her go to a large wall unit. The top half was glass fronted shelving and the bottom half was wooden doored cupboards and it looked to be made of solid oak. Cecily pulled a chair over and used the back of it to support herself as she went down on her knees. I immediately jumped up and offered to help but she shooed me away.

“I may be old but I’m not incapable,” she said. “Just takes a little longer than it used to.”

She opened one of the cupboards and started pulling out photo albums.

“How old are you?” I asked, hoping it wasn't a rude question.

“81,” she said.

“Really? You look a lot younger.”

She laughed a little sourly.

“Don't try to humour me. Take this one, please, and this.”

She passed over a couple of the photo albums and replaced the others back on the cupboard shelves and used the chair back to lever herself upright again. Once standing she checked the colour of the tea. Apparently it was the right shade so she poured the tea into the two cups using a little strainer with an ornate handle and passed one over to me. I put mine on another little table at my end of the couch and she passed over the jug. It had milk in it so I drowned the tea as best as I could and passed it back.

“Sugar?”

“Please.”

The sugar bowl came my way and I ladled three spoons of sugar in. I'd started on a gentle diet of a kind but it wasn't going too well, what with the pizza the night before and now the sugar but this was an emergency. The sweetness would hopefully cover the taste of the tea. It worked, fortunately. When I had a sip all I could taste was sweet milk and I can live with sweet milk. Cecily had hers without milk or sugar, which was probably how she'd managed to get to 81 and still be pretty spry.

I'd put the photo albums on the couch between us and she picked one up and opened it then put it back down and picked up the other one.

“Sit a little closer,” she instructed so I edged across and she showed me the photograph on the first page. It was a black and white

photograph of a young woman on a stage wearing a one piece bathing suit, high heels, a tiara and a sash that read "Miss Home Cou". The rest of the words were hidden behind a bouquet of flowers.

"That was me in 1954," said Cecily. "I'd just turned sixteen when I won the Miss Home Counties beauty contest." She gazed at the picture fondly.

She had changed a lot in the subsequent sixty five years. I studied the picture and thought I could see a similarity in the shape of her face but her peroxide blonde hair, jutting bosom, wasp waist and smooth, creamy skin were long gone. The years can be very cruel.

"You were so beautiful," I said. "And only sixteen! How did you manage to stay so thin?"

"I didn't eat," said Cecily. "But those were real ...", she pointed towards her boobs in the picture, "... implants hadn't been invented then."

"Impressive," I didn't know what else to say.

"After winning I became a model," she said, turning the pages slowly. There were a succession of fifties pin-up photos. Skin tight trousers, blouses tied at the waist, pouting lips, suggestive hand poses and those strange cone shaped boobs that for some weird reason were fashionable then. I wasn't an expert on fifties pin-ups but she had definitely been beautiful, even though the poses were so artificial as to be utterly sexless and unappealing.

She turned another page. In this one she was in an evening dress, smiling at the camera with her fur coat artfully slipped off one shoulder, standing next to a middle aged man who was holding his arm up between his face and the camera. Clearly he didn't want to be photographed.

"That was Percy," she said. "We got married in 1956 when I was eighteen."

I looked more closely at the man. He was the same height as Cecily,

slim and in a suit with high waisted trousers. He had thin hair, heavily greased and combed back and one of those silly little pencil moustaches. I couldn't see his eyes since they were obscured by his hand but I could see the arm of some spectacles going to his ear.

"How old was Percy when you married him?" I asked.

"41," she said.

"What did he do?" I asked, wondering if it was a love match or if he was a rich older man.

"Oh, something in accounting," she said vaguely. "He swept me off my feet. He was very exciting and took me to all the best places. We were out every night at parties and shows and things with all sorts of celebrities. I even met Diana Dors a few times."

"Did you love him?" I asked. I had no idea who Diana Dors was.

"I thought so," she said. "Until we got married."

"Oh dear," I said, "What happened?"

"He never even consummated our marriage," said Cecily. "It took me a couple of years to realise it but he only married me for my looks and my age. I was just something he could show off to his friends, what you would call nowadays a 'trophy wife'. He changed after we got married. Before, he was very attentive, always complimenting me and talking to me and so on but afterwards he more or less ignored me. Whenever I said anything he either ignored me or told me to shut up because my opinions were worthless or just slapped me. He still took me everywhere but I was basically just a stuffed toy. He'd prop me up somewhere where I could be seen and then ignore me while he talked to his friends. He didn't even say much at home."

"Didn't you ever talk to him about it?" I asked, "about how you felt?"

"This was the fifties, dear," she said, turning some more pages. "Women weren't supposed to complain about their husbands, just be grateful that they had one. On the odd occasion that I did say

anything he'd just give me a handful of cash and tell me to go buy myself something pretty."

"Was he rich?" I asked.

"I imagine so," she said. "He bought this house without a mortgage and when he died he had no real debts although it all changed after Ronnie and Reggie were convicted."

"Who were Ronnie and Reggie?" I asked.

"Oh just a couple of friends," she said. "they were twins, Ronnie and Reggie Kray, and Percy knew them quite well."

I'd never heard of them either.

"What were they convicted of?" I asked.

"They were supposed to have tried to murder someone," said Cecily, "but Percy told me the police had fabricated the evidence. I'm sure they didn't really try to kill anyone. They just ran a couple of nightclubs and they seemed quite nice even though they were both a bit mouthy. But we didn't seem to have as much money after they went, although we never went short."

"Hold on a second," I said. Something had just occurred to me.

"Your marriage wasn't consummated?"

Cecily nodded, continuing to look at the old photographs.

"Umm, Malcolm ... ?" I had a nasty feeling I wasn't going to like the answer.

"I started out being faithful to Percy, even though I knew he wasn't being faithful to me," she said. "I was twenty when I had my first affair, and Malcolm wasn't Percy's, of course."

"Was he Richard's?" I had to ask.

“Oh dear me no,” said Cecily. “No, I didn't meet Richard for another twenty years or so. I don't even remember who the father was now.”

For some reason I was a little relieved. I don't think I particularly wanted Malcolm as a cousin.

“What did Percy do when he found out?” I asked.

“He didn't care,” said Cecily. “I think that upset me even more than the way he treated me. He just didn't care that I was having someone else's child. All he did was make me promise to tell people that Malcolm was his son and nothing else changed.”

I sat and watched her for a while as she turned the pages of the album, reliving her life some sixty years ago. There's something about old people that makes you forget that they used to be young and have been through all sorts of experiences, good and bad. Cecily was a little old lady of 81 who drank tea and played croquet with other little old ladies and seemed to be the ultimate in respectableness. It was incredible to think that she'd once been a teenaged trophy wife and had affairs and produced illegitimate babies. And maybe even been involved with some sort of gangster. I made a mental note to find out who the Kray twins were.

“Did you have an affair with Richard?” I asked. I was dying of curiosity and Josh had thought that my reclusive uncle had been having an affair with Cecily.

“Not really,” she said.

“Not really,” I thought. “How can it be 'not really', you either were or you weren't.” I didn't say anything, though, just waited.

“I didn't sleep with him”, she said, with a slight twinkle in her eye. “Well, not very often. Percy had a heart attack in 1977 and died, you see. He was only 62 but he left me everything and Richard bought his house, your house, in 1980. That's when I first met him. I was a widow and quite well off and Richard was the perfect gentleman. He was everything Percy wasn't. He treated me with respect and talked to me and asked my opinions on things and gave me back my confidence

and self respect. He never took me out and never tried to show me off but we talked for hours and he listened to me.”

She paused for a moment.

“Did they have the Candy Makeup Screen in Australia?” she said suddenly.

“Yes,” I said. “I didn't have one but my friend did and we used to play with it for hours until it fell apart.”

“It was my idea,” said Cecily. “He named it after me. That was my modelling name, you see, Candy Aspell. He didn't think the Cecily Makeup Screen was a good name although he thought about the Lady Cecily Makeup Screen for a while.”

“And Candy Aspell was a good name?” I said, thoughtlessly.

“I was sixteen and quite naive,” she said, a little apologetically. “My agent suggested it and I thought it sounded sophisticated as there was a famous comedian at the time called Andy Aspell who had his own show on the television. I stupidly thought I might get my own show too. It was three or four years before I realised my name was really Candy Ass Pal. I never forgave my agent for that but I'd stopped modelling when I got married so by then it didn't really matter.”

I couldn't imagine what life had been like for a trophy wife in the highly sexist fifties whose name was Candy Ass Pal. She must have suffered through a lot of crude comments, and more.

“This is the only picture I have of Richard,” she said, tapping on one in the the second album. “Malcolm took it when he got interested in photography for a while.”

It was a photograph of the two of them in the back garden of Richard's house. They were both sitting in garden chairs and were toasting each other with glasses of wine and smiling and looking very happy. He was in his mid thirties then and looked quite fit.

“That was taken when Richard finally worked out how to scan

photographs into his Makeup Screen,” said Cecily. “The screen part was easy but the scanning was difficult. He modified a design by Xerox for small scale use but Xerox came up with their own small version two or three years later which was better so he never got it into commercial production, except as a toy. Just think, he might have had royalties on every photocopier if he had.”

“Were you proud of him?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she said, “I was so proud of him. He was a very clever man and it did me the world of good to be treated like an equal. It wasn't until I met Richard that I realised that Percy wasn't a clever sophisticated man after all.”

“Did you love him?”

Cecily burst out laughing.

“Of course I did,” she said. “He was a very lovable man. There was something about his manner, he was very non threatening and always slightly ruffled, I don't know, you just wanted to mother him I suppose, look after him. He had lots of women friends and I'm sure we all loved him. But, of course, he never loved any of us. Certainly not me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it's true, dear. Despite being very lovable, Richard simply didn't have the emotional capacity to love. He didn't even like most people but he liked a few, almost all women. I know he liked me. He told me once that he couldn't stand men. He thought they were all arrogant buffoons and that all they ever talked about was sex, money and sport, all three of which bored him. That's why he bought the pig farm.”

“I don't understand?”

“He said that if he had to be around pigs he wanted to be with real pigs since they were a lot more fun than the human kind,” said Cecily and we both burst out laughing. I'd known a few pigs in my life as

well.

We stopped around that point for a light dinner and went back to the photo albums afterwards. Percy had tried to make her a singing star in 1959 and she'd recorded a version of Jackie DeShannon's Lonely Girl.

"It never made the charts," she said, "although I did perform it in a few clubs in the West End."

She still had a copy in the cupboard, neatly wrapped in its paper sleeve, along with her photo albums. She played it for me.

*I'm just a lonely girl
Living in my little lonely world
Can't understand my love has passed me by
Oh, Venus, I think I'm gonna die*

Given what she'd told me about her life in the late fifties, after recording a song like that it's no wonder she had an affair and got pregnant. And ended her singing career in the process.

Still, judging by the number of photos of Malcolm, she'd been a good mother and Percy had done his part with good schooling and no shortage of the material aspects of life. Malcolm had become an accountant himself and married although he divorced after a few years and never married again.

"Did you ever think of marrying again," I asked, "after Percy died?"

The photos she had of herself in her forties showed that she hadn't lost too many of her looks although her hair was no longer peroxide blonde. The weird conic boobs were gone too, thankfully. The things women have to do for fashion.

"No," she said. "Once was enough. I had Malcolm and I didn't want to end up in another bad marriage. I had money and independence so I didn't need a man around. Well, not all the time anyway. I flatter myself that even into my sixties I wasn't never short of male company when I wanted it. And I had Richard next door and I could always go round whenever I wanted a chat with someone intelligent."

“Would you have married Richard if he'd asked?” I asked.

That made her stop and think.

“I don't know,” she said after a while. “Richard was so obviously not the marrying type that it's not something I've ever thought about. You know, I think I might have, but then, maybe the fact that he would obviously never marry anyone was what made him so easy to talk to. I've certainly had my share of offers but someone who's obviously out for a wife or just a bed mate isn't that easy to chat with. There's always an undercurrent, an edge. With Richard there wasn't. His conversation was always what it seemed, even when it got technical or over my head.”

Cecily usually went to bed around nine so we broke off and I thanked her for a lovely evening. It actually had been very interesting and I could have stayed a lot longer. My own life had been very dull and conventional in comparison.

“Someone really ought to write her biography,” I thought, walking down the driveway to my house. “It would be fascinating.”

When I got home I noticed the pictures of Richard on the kitchen table. On impulse I gathered them up and took them back round to Cecily. She was very grateful and gave me a gentle hug before going off to find some frames to put them in before she went to bed.

The next morning I went round to the library since they had computers I could use to access the internet and I googled the 'Cray Twins'. Google suggested 'Kray Twins' and the first result was the Wikipedia entry for Ronald and Reginald Kray. It seems they were the most notorious gangsters in England in the 1950s and 60s and were convicted for multiple murders in 1969 and sentenced to life in prison. Percy wasn't mentioned but it seemed pretty obvious what form his 'some sort of accounting' took.

“Sooo,” I thought to myself. “Cecily was basically a gangster's moll.”

I found that slightly thrilling, to be honest, even though it all happened a long time before I was born. I knew a real gangster's moll!

Cool!

I spotted 'Diana Dors' in the Wikipedia article and remembered Cecily mentioning meeting her. Apparently she was one of the celebrities the Kray Twins liked to be seen with. Diana had the same bosomy peroxide blonde style that Cecily had had but, frankly, she wasn't in Cecily's league when it came to beauty. I could appreciate, I think, how Percy must have felt, being able to flaunt Cecily in front of the likes of the Krays. He must have felt quite powerful.

Then I had another thought and googled for pictures of the Krays. I'm very probably wrong but there was a certain superficial resemblance between Ronnie Kray and Malcolm, Cecily's son. Particularly with the nose and ears. And Malcolm was born around 1960.

"Don't be absurd," I said to myself, "Cecily and Ronnie Kray? Nooo."

Although it was strange that Percy didn't seem to mind Malcolm. Or that Cecily claimed not to remember who the father of her only child was. That seemed unlikely.

Chapter Fourteen

I was woken by someone pounding on the front door. Mildly panicked, I leapt slowly out of bed and pulled on my dressing gown and peered through the blind out the window. It was grey outside and I couldn't see anyone since the front door was the other side of the house. The banging went again so I grabbed my phone and went downstairs. The phone said ten to seven.

“Mmm?” I said when I opened the front door.

“Is this where the house clearance sale is?” said a man belligerently, waving a newspaper at me.

“What?” I said. There was a large four wheel drive in my alley, with a trailer.

He must have taken that as a yes since he stepped up to the door, probably expecting to be let in. He was wearing one of those padded sleeveless jackets and a thin woolly hat. He probably had trousers on as well but I didn't look that far down. I was fascinated and repelled by his lower lip which was quite fat and had a permanent pout in it that could hold a straw. Maybe he hadn't shaved as he was apparently growing a beard to try to hide it.

“Come on then, open up, I haven't got all day.” His lip quivered petulantly for a couple of seconds after his jaw stopped moving.

“Go away, you revolting man,” I said in my head very loudly.

“Starts at nine,” I said out loud. “Come back later.”

Louise, my account manager at the Shopper, had been most insistent that I put a starting time in the ad so people didn't come round too early.

“Oh for fuck's sake,” said the man. “I don't have time for all that. Let me in.”

So much for the famed English politeness. I stared at him then just

shut the door. I couldn't handle this so early in the morning. He started banging on the door again but I ignored him and went into the lounge to get my cigarettes then to the kitchen for some coffee. As the kettle heated I watched through the window as he angrily went back to his oversized inadequacy compensator and tried to reverse his trailer down the drive. It took several attempts and I could see him glaring at the house a couple of times.

The dawn sun touched lightly on my copy of the Shopper as I flicked through the pages looking for my ad. "9am-4pm Sat/Sun". Clear as day.

"Oh god, I hope he doesn't come back," I thought, and shivered.

I slowly drank my coffee and made another and stared out of the window into the garden. The grass needed cutting and the flower beds were getting overrun with weeds but the birds seemed quite happy. Other than a very brief tour of inspection the day after I'd arrived I hadn't been in the garden. It was very green, unlike my back yard in Aus which would be turning brown and crunchy fairly soon and at best was only ever light green. England was much lusher.

I glanced at my phone and discovered it was now almost eight thirty so I took my mug into the kitchen to give it a rinse and noticed there were a couple of cars in my drive, neatly lined up behind mine. The driver of one was sitting in the car, reading a newspaper, and the other was leaning against the side of his car having a cigarette, watching some sparrows fighting over a piece of litter and quietly chatting with his passenger through the car window.

"That's more like it," I said to myself and went back upstairs to get dressed.

It wasn't that I had forgotten about the house clearance sale. It was more that I had so much on my mind what with ideas about staying in England and setting up a B&B and the farm and even Cecily and Josh that the sale had gone to the back of my mind. I knew it was happening and had even remembered to get to the bank just before it closed the day before to get a selection of small bank notes and coins for change if anyone actually bought anything but I hadn't organised

myself.

I hadn't given any thought to how much I wanted for things, let alone put any price tags on anything so I had to think quickly and engage in spirited negotiations pretty much as soon as I opened the door. It was maybe an hour before I developed any sort of systematic approach.

“How much do you want for ...” someone would say.

“Make me an offer” I'd reply.

They'd then screw up their faces in pained thought then come up with some figure which I either accepted or said “try again” and generally accepted the second offer. One very dishy young man offered me £15 for a four drawer metal filing cabinet and I said 'try again’ and he gave me such a sexy smile when he came back at me with £10 that I laughed and let him have the cabinet for £10 which pleased him no end and made me feel virtuous. I was sorely tempted to brush his hair out of his eyes as he manhandled it down the stairs but I managed to restrain myself. He looked barely old enough to drive.

Being unprepared I hadn't given any thought to my own stuff or the stuff I wanted to keep and most people seemed to take the idea of a 'house clearance sale' literally. After someone tried to buy my nice new coat that was all of two weeks old I quickly bundled my belongings up in a sheet and locked them in my car then cleared one of the kitchen cupboards out onto the table and put all my new crockery, cutlery and pans in the cupboard and stuck a piece of paper on the door saying 'contents sold'. It was easier than arguing over why they weren't for sale. Stupidly I let the lawn mower go before I remembered the lawn needed mowing but mistakes happen.

Mid morning a woman rang about the saxophone and wanted some details which I couldn't give as I know nothing about saxophones so she asked if she could drop round to look at it. When she turned up she had her son with her, all of ten years old.

“I'm looking for a sax for Timmy,” she told me. “He's been learning with one rented from school but it's not much good.”

We introduced ourselves and I took them into the lounge where I'd put the sax case on the table and the boy's eyes lit up when he opened the case.

"It's a Yanagisawa tenor," he breathed and gingerly reached out to touch it.

"Oh god," said Laura, his mum.

"Is that bad?" I asked.

"Very," she said. "No way can I afford a Yanagisawa."

"Can I try it, mum?" said Timmy in hushed tones, stroking the thing gently.

Laura looked at me and I nodded. Timmy carefully took it out of the case and assembled it and hung a strap around his neck. He rummaged through a box of reeds and selected one then stuck it in his mouth.

"The reed has to be wet," said Laura, answering my puzzled look. She didn't explain why it had to be wet though.

I nodded and turned away to deal with someone wanting to make an offer on an old wooden desk upstairs. Someone else wanted to talk about some other odds and ends and while we were talking I heard music coming from downstairs. It was, frankly, beautiful and haunting.

I concluded the deal and went back down. Timmy was standing by one of the windows with his eyes shut, caressing the sax while it poured out Solveig's Song from Edward Grieg's Peer Gynt, a piece I knew well and loved.

"Is he really only ten?" I whispered to Laura and she nodded.

"He's been playing for three years now, it's all he wants to do," she whispered back.

He finished the piece and launched into another piece, a breathy jazzy

piece but almost as haunting. I didn't recognise it.

"What's that?" I whispered to Laura. Three or four other people had gathered in the lounge to listen.

"Stan Getz' solo from The Girl From Ipanema," she whispered. "He prefers jazz to the classics."

Timmy was about to launch into another piece when his mum told him to stop.

"No way can I afford that," she said to him. "We'll find another somewhere else. Pack it away now."

She turned to me, "Thank you for letting him play a decent sax, but it's way out of our league."

Timmy was cleaning the sax with an oversized bottle brush that was in the case.

"Is it a good one then?" I asked.

"It's a Yanagisawa," said Timmy, "just about the best there is."

"Are they expensive?" I'd just put 'offers' in the ad since I was clueless.

"Five grand upwards new for one of those," said Laura. "Come on, Timmy, let's go."

Timmy reverently put the sax back in the case and wiped his fingerprints off it with a cloth before smoothing the cloth over the sax and reluctantly closing the lid.

"How much can you afford?" I asked.

"I was hoping to get something halfway decent for under £500," she said. "But they aren't very good at that price although anything will be better than the school one."

I walked them to the front door and Laura unlocked the door of a

rather tatty old car.

“OK,” I said, the memory of Timmy’s playing still in my ears. “You can have it for £500.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Laura. “You’ll easily get two or three grand for that one.”

“Timmy’s got talent,” I said, smiling. “Pay me the rest when he turns professional.”

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Yes.”

For some reason the boy’s overwhelming aura of happiness when he’d been playing it had made an impression on me and it was obviously going somewhere where it would be appreciated. She looked at me for a few seconds then pulled her purse out of her bag and pulled out a wad of bank notes. She counted out £500 and slipped a solitary note back into her purse and handed me the money.

“Do you want to get the sax, Timmy?” I said.

He looked at his mother and she nodded and he ran back inside and emerged a moment later hugging the sax case to his chest and beaming like a Cheshire cat.

“Thank you,” she said as he got in the car. She turned to get in herself then turned back and gave me a huge hug. “Thank you so much” she whispered in my ear.

Incredibly someone offered me £10 for the defunct cooker and took it away in the boot of his car. I had to help him get it in and he produced a piece of rope to hold the boot lid down. The fridge went too although the buyer didn’t want my half empty carton of milk or the lamb, veggies and cheese that were inside.

I finally closed the door a little before five and collapsed on the couch, one of the items not for sale although I’d had a couple of

offers. It had been quite a good day and I had a decent bundle of cash in a cash box I'd found in one of the upstairs rooms. There was still a fair amount of stuff left though and I had hopes that Sunday would go well. After all, quite a few people do their household shopping on Saturdays, and go to their kids sports events and so on so there might be a few who'd come to the clearance who couldn't make it on Saturday. The house was beginning to look empty.

Carol phoned about nine that evening. It was around ten on Sunday morning in Australia. She proudly informed me that Saturday had been about thirty degrees and teasingly asked me what the weather was like in London.

"That's one of the few downsides I've found here," I told her. "It's cold and pretty wet although the grass is very green."

"So you're still thinking about staying there?" she asked.

"I haven't decided yet but I'm thinking of turning this big house into a B&B," I said, "to get some income as the farm doesn't make much money. I'm seeing some people for advice on Monday."

We talked about B&Bs for a while. Carol didn't know what the British market was like but she thought the Australian B&B market was doing well.

"A lot of people are moving away from the hotels," she said. "The bank's seeing it in their lendings and market surveys. It looks like people are looking to stay with someone for their holidays rather than an anonymous hotel or motel. Probably because of AirBNB."

I knew of AirBNB because some of the owners of rental houses I had managed when I was working for Morgan & Tilly had moved over to them. AirBNB was quite good for very short term lets although most property investors wanted long term tenants. Virtually all the properties I had managed were for a minimum of one year although a few owners would consider six month tenancies. On the other hand, a lot of Australians go to Bali or just camp. I didn't know much about the British tourist market.

“Anyway,” she said, “a B&B is a good idea. You can keep the house so it appreciates in value and it’ll give you an income and something positive to think about. All the more reason for staying. How’s Josh?”

I hadn’t expected that for some reason.

“Oh, he’s fine,” I said. “Actually the B&B was his idea.”

That was a silly thing to say since Carol wasn’t stupid.

“Ohhh,” she said. “So you’ve seen him again then.”

“He brought round some photographs of Richard that he had,” I told her.

“Right, and that naturally leads into talking about B&Bs,” she said.

“Well, he stayed for dinner,” I admitted and to sidetrack her I told her about the cooker dying and not being able to do the lamb roast and ending up with pizza instead since I thought it was quite a funny story. That turned out to be an error on my part as well.

“Whenever someone brings me photos to look at I usually just give them some coffee and biscuits,” she said. “But yeah I can see that pics of your dead uncle would be worth a roast dinner.”

I told her not to read anything into it and she laughed.

“Of course not hon, what could I possibly read into it? A guy brings you some pics to look at and you do him a roast. Perfectly normal. How long did he stay? Ten minutes?”

“A couple of hours,” I said. Actually it had been nearer four but Carol didn’t need to know that.

“Must have been a lot of photos then.”

“Yes there were,” I said. Well, three is a lot more than one, isn’t it.

“Oh well,” she said, “so long as you’re enjoying yourself.”

"Today was good fun," I said, "although it was tiring."

I told her about my clearance sale and all about Timmy and the sax. She thought I was stupid for letting the sax go so cheaply when I could have got a lot more for it but she works for a bank and has no soul where money is concerned.

"Anyway, I phoned to let you know what I've found out about Miranda Moor," she said.

To be honest I'd almost forgotten about Miranda and I glanced at the box on the mantelpiece to remind myself that it was still there and that I hadn't sold it by accident. I made a mental note to put the box in the car to be safe.

"I started out with Michael Hammond," she told me, "but got nowhere, unless he's moved to America. There are several artists called Michael Hammond there and I'll try them if I reach a dead end in Australia. Then I tried investigating Catstail Publishing."

"Did you get anywhere with that?"

"Well, it seems that Catstail was a writer's cooperative that Miranda set up with someone else. The idea was to publish pretty much anything that writers wrote with the writers doing the selling of their own and the other writers' books at markets and so on. They were trying to bypass the publishers so that good books could get published rather than just the ones publishers thought were profitable and since publishers have high overheads as well that means that a fair few books never get published even though they could have a market of sorts."

"That seems a good idea," I said.

"Well maybe, but the model depended on writers to do the actual selling as well and it seems that writers like to write but not sell things, which is probably why publishers got invented in the first place. Anyway, the idea never took off and Catstail gave up after putting out only a handful of books. Miranda Moor put out two of them herself."

“So she just wrote the two books then?”

“No, she was quite a prolific writer but under several different names. Miranda Moor was the name she used for the writers' cooperative. Several others of her books were under the names Mandy Matthews and Maureen Mathers.”

“I think I've read some of Mandy Matthews,” I said. “Aren't they detective stories?”

“No, Mandy Matthews wrote science fiction and fantasy,” said Carol. “Anyway, that's more or less as far as I've got. I've been on to her publishers under her other names trying to find out what her real name is and once I have that I might be able to find out how to contact her but they're not giving out that sort of information.”

“How are you going to do that?” I asked.

“I don't know yet,” said Carol, “although there are ways. The most important thing is that she seems to still be alive. I think she's in her late sixties though.”

“How on earth did you find that out if you don't know her real name?”

“I found a reprint of her first novel at the library,” said Carol. “As Natasha Hardacre. The reprint says she wrote it when she was in her early thirties and it was originally published in 1983. So if she was, say, thirty two that means she'd be sixty eight or so now.”

“That would make her three years younger than Richard,” I said thoughtfully. “So some sort of affair would be quite possible. It's not like she was only fifteen when she put out *Toska* or something ridiculous like that. Is she in Melbourne?”

“I don't know if she still is but *Catstail* was based in one of the eastern suburbs so she almost certainly was in Melbourne around 2006 or 7.”

“Richard was in Melbourne in 1989,” I said. “Could she have been there then as well? Even if she isn't now?”

"I wouldn't know," said Carol. "Her earlier books were with a variety of publishers, including some American and British ones so who knows where she was then. Still, I think I'll be able to get her real name and once I do it'll be a lot easier to find her. Unless she's deliberately trying to stay hidden."

"Why would she do that?"

"I have no idea. Who knows why anyone disappears? There are millions of reasons but if someone really doesn't want to be found it's pretty difficult even for the police let alone me. But if she's not in hiding then I've a good chance of finding her once I get her real name."

"What if she got married or changed her name for some reason?" I asked.

"Not a problem, all that's computerised now and banks have access to a lot more information over and above what's on the internet and there's a ton on the net. I'm more confident now than I was last week."

"So you're going to keep trying?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm getting interested now that I know she wasn't just a one book writer. Just one thing though."

"Yes?"

"Have you thought about what you're going to do if and when I do track her down?"

"Nope," I said. "I guess I'd just like to talk to her somehow."

"Well have a think about it," said Carol. "Even if she isn't in hiding it doesn't mean she wants to talk about the past. Like what if she had an affair with Richard but is still married to her husband? She may not want him to know about it."

That was a good point.

“Oh god, I don't know,” I said. “Do you think we should give up then?”

“Let's find out more first, after all they may not have had an affair and she may never have got married or she did but got divorced or she's a lesbian or anything really. We don't know enough yet. In fact we know bugger all. But do give it some thought. So when are you seeing Josh again?”

“Tuesday,” I said, caught off guard. Carol can be a pain sometimes.

She found that quite funny.

Chapter Fifteen

“So nice to see you again, Mrs Hutchins, umm, Sheila,” said Roger. “Come this way.”

He waved me into his office.

“Such a delightful evening, we must do it again sometime.”

I was beginning to learn that when the English made generalised invitations like this it was just politeness. If they actually meant it then they give some specifics, such as 'how about tomorrow?' or whatever. So I just smiled and murmured, “yes delightful”. He sat down and beamed at me. It occurred to me that it must be quite difficult dealing with people who spoke the same language but didn't understand the code.

“So how may I be of assistance today?” he asked.

“Two things actually,” I said.

I'd organised my thoughts on the train to London Bridge and wanted to keep things fairly concise as I would be paying for this meeting, not Richard's estate.

“Firstly, I'm thinking about the possibility of staying permanently in England,” I said.

“How delightful,” he replied. “And England will be the better for your presence.”

He certainly was a charmer, shame he played for the other team. That was another English expression that had been explained to me.

“Now,” he said, steepling his fingers, “you are an Australian so you automatically get a six month visa so as a minimum you could simply take a day trip to France every six months indefinitely. Alternatively you could apply for permanent residency which shouldn't be a problem. As I recall, however, your mother was a British citizen? How about your father?”

“Yes, she was although she married an Australian. He was originally Irish.”

“Did your mother renounce her British citizenship?” he asked.

“Not that I know of,” I said. “Certainly she kept her British passport up to date.”

“Then that is the easiest avenue,” said Roger. “Apply for British citizenship.”

“Would I have to give up my Australian citizenship?” I asked.

“Oh lord, no,” he said. “Dual citizenship is commonplace. This is why Britain will never go to war against Australia. Too difficult to find out who is on which side.”

He found that rather funny. I didn't but I smiled anyway.

“Now you look too young for this to apply but I have to ask, were you born before 1983?”

“Yes,” I said. “1979”

“Oh surely not,” he said, then continued too quickly for the remark to be anything other than a politeness. “That is a very slight complication but nothing to worry about. Under English law, if you were born before 1983 and your father was British you would automatically hold British citizenship yourself. Alas, the same is not true if your mother was British. You will need to apply for citizenship.”

“That's rather sexist,” I remarked.

“Indeed,” said Roger, “and that is why there will not be any difficulty. The Immigration Department does not want a Discrimination case brought against them which would undoubtedly have to go before Parliament and possibly the European Court of Human Rights so therefore your application will effectively be approved automatically. Assuming you are of good character. Have you been convicted of any criminal offences?”

“I was convicted for speeding a few years ago,” I said. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Traffic offences are civil not criminal, unless you stole the car in which you were caught speeding?”

“No” I said. “It was mine, bought and paid for.”

“Then that is by far the easiest avenue,” he said. “We simply fill out a form, supply the necessary documentation and pay the fee and you are British. Would you like me to handle the application for you?”

“I haven't decided yet,” I said. “It depends to a large extent on the other thing I want to talk to you about. What documentation is needed?”

“I'll have to check to make sure but certainly your mother's British passport and birth certificate as well as your own.”

“You already have certified copies of those.”

“Sadly the Immigration Department will require to see the originals.”

“They're in Australia,” I told him. “Still, I have to go back at some point anyway to sort out my house there so I can get them then.”

“In the meantime I shall ascertain exactly what other documentation is needed so that your return is fully prepared,” said Roger. “And the other matter?”

“If I do stay in Britain,” I said, “I will need an income. I was wondering about turning my house in Bromley into a Bed and Breakfast.”

He scratched behind his ear for a moment.

“Five bedrooms, as I recall,” he said. “In Bromley. Yes, that should be a worthwhile venture. How can I be of service?”

“Well, umm, how do I go about it?” I asked. “Legally, I mean. I know

about beds and things.”

“Quite,” he said. “That too is a very simple matter. You simply apply for planning permission to the Bromley Borough Council. Assuming you comply with their fire and safety regulations, there shouldn't be a problem because they are desperate for more accommodation, as with all London Boroughs.”

“Why are they desperate?” I asked.

“Two principle reasons,” said Roger. “Partly to generate more tourism and partly to accommodate the rising numbers of homeless and others needing shelter.”

“You mean the Council will expect me to house the homeless?” I wasn't too keen on that idea. Not that I have anything against the homeless as such but I was rather anticipating holiday makers for short periods.

“Not unless you volunteer your premises for that,” said Roger, “but the more accommodation there is for one category of guest, the more accommodation is freed up elsewhere in the Borough for those in need. And the higher rates you will be obliged to pay will help the Borough finance appropriate accommodation for those in need. Frankly you will have to work hard to have your planning application turned down.”

“Have you any idea how long it will take to get approval?” I asked.

“Assuming there are no issues the Council requires you to remedy before granting the application, I would imagine two months at the outside.”

He paused for a moment then added, “perhaps ten or eleven weeks as the Christmas and New Year period is almost upon us, which always slows things down.”

“Do I need to set up a company, or anything?” I asked.

“You can if you wish but there is no particular benefit in doing so for

a Bed and Breakfast establishment. By far the simplest approach is to operate as a sole trader and simply declare your profits as personal income. You would, of course, then be able to offset any losses of the Bed and Breakfast against your income from the pig farm although not the profits of the farm itself since that is a company and, by law, a separate entity.”

“Great,” I said. “I’ve some people I want to talk to about running a B&B. Could you handle the planning application for me if I decide to go ahead? I’m a foreigner and I’ll probably say the wrong thing because I think like an Australian.”

“Of course,” he said. “And just between you and me, local Councils are paranoid about possible lawsuits so having a solicitor act on your behalf may well swing a ruling in your favour if it is borderline.”

“One more quick question,” I said. “What’s the difference between a lawyer and a solicitor?”

“Ahh, a lawyer is anyone qualified to give legal advice,” said Roger. “A solicitor is a lawyer who can also represent a client in court.”

“And an attorney?”

“Attorneys are American,” said Roger with some distaste.

I was feeling quite optimistic when I left Roger, until I remembered I needed to take the underground train to get to Nigel. I find the entire process of going underground with the echoing, gloomy platforms and the howling gales and strange noises as the trains blast out of dark tunnels scary enough as it is but the prospect of being groped again added a new dimension of unpleasantness.

“Just jab backwards hard with your elbow,” Carol had said.

She had made it sound easy but I don’t like conflict, and certainly not where there might be physical retaliation. What if someone groped me and I jabbed them and they pushed me under an oncoming train?

Still, I made myself go down the elevators to the Jubilee Line keeping

my bag firmly against my backside and kept close to the wall while waiting for the train. If anyone was going to grope me they'd have to do it to my face. Fortunately it was early afternoon and I was able to get a seat all the way to Bond Street and did my wall hugging, bag protecting routine while changing to the Central Line. I emerged at Queensway with my person and my dignity unviolated. I wondered if women who used the underground every day wore steel underwear.

"The thing you have to remember ...," said Nigel, over the inevitable cup of tea. It was Earl Grey which is one of the more unpalatable teas in my opinion. It doesn't even smell like tea. Thank god for milk and sugar to disguise the taste.

"... is that B&Bs are competing with the cheaper hotels so you have to give the guest everything the hotels give them and more."

"Like what?" I asked.

"WiFi internet access," said Nigel. "The faster the better, and internet TV so they can watch Netflix. If you don't give them that for free then you'll be out of business within days."

I wrote that down on my notepad.

"And clean linen and towels every day. Give them the option to keep using them by all means but if you don't at least offer clean linen and towels every day you won't get returning guests."

I wrote that down too, and added a point about seeing if a laundry would do the washing as I wasn't certain my new washing machine would be up to five sets of sheets and towels every day.

"For some reason people who use B&Bs don't seem to mind sharing bathrooms. How many have you got?"

"Two," I said. "One upstairs and one downstairs."

"Should be OK," said Nigel, "so long as they are spotless and you never run out of hot water. Something that is really important, though, is a communal room. I have no idea why since no one ever uses the

communal room, they just sit in their rooms on the net but if you don't have one people will go to a hotel instead.”

“So it could actually be one of my private rooms?” I asked.

“Yes, although you might get someone every now and then, so be prepared for the occasional visitor. Also the communal room is a good place for when a guest wants to talk to you about something. Like us now. It gets them out of the corridor where they feel exposed. You might even get someone wanting a heart to heart with you. Which reminds me ...”

I quickly noted the communal room while he remembered the other point.

“... you need to be available most of the time. That's something the hotels can't offer, the personal contact. Guests don't really like staff constantly changing and lots of new faces all the time. They like to think they know you personally. And, of course, they like to know who to talk to about problems or for information or whatever rather than always going to a stranger.”

“So you're saying I can't have any help?”

“Oh, dear me, no, have whatever help you want. Just make sure your help is around a lot and not on ever changing rosters. And you don't have to be there yourself, you could have a manager there. What I'm saying is that the staff need to be familiar to the guests. They like that feeling of being part of a family of some sort, makes it different to a hotel.”

“OK.”

“And another thing, with hotels and motels the rooms are all the same. If you want your B&B to be successful it's best to have each room with some sort of theme so it's different to the room next door. It doesn't really matter what the theme is, so long as it's not offensive. Some guests will come back just to see what the other rooms are like, others will come back for that specific room. Make the rooms quirky in some way.”

I noted 'quirky rooms' in my notepad.

“Do you have a garden?”

“Yes.”

“Then make it lovely and have chairs for the guests. They love gardens and the prettier it is the better. And make sure there some pictures of it on your website.

“I need a website? I was thinking of AirBNB or the other sites.”

“Don't touch online booking sites,” said Nigel. “They get the wrong kind of guests these days and you don't want your place used for drug parties or trashed or anything like that. Say, for example, some prostitutes take a room for a few days. They have lots of clients then move on, but it gives your place a bad name It can even lead to you being charged with running an illegal brothel. Also the online sites take a chunk in commission as well and sometimes force you into price parity. Best thing is your own website and lots of internet presence and your own online booking system. Do you have an IT person?”

“No” I said. “Who do you use? And what's price parity?”

He got up and rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a business card.

“This is Clark,” he said. “He set up our system here, high speed internet access, web TVs, booking system, web site, the lot. Great guy. Price parity is when the agent site requires you to use their pricing structure. They grade your facilities and put you into a particular band. Don't worry too much about price, if the guests like you and your place they don't worry too much about price and the higher the price the better the quality of guest.”

“OK,” I said, scribbling furiously. “Although obviously I can't charge £1000 a night though.”

“Actually you can,” said Nigel. “You just need to be offering accommodation of the appropriate standard. It's like Claridges Hotel,

they're just another hotel at the end of the day but they still charge £15,000 a night for some of their rooms. There's a couple of benefits of starting high regardless. One is you can drop your prices anytime you want with 'specials' and people think they're getting a bargain which everyone likes."

"Hey, yeah, I can see the sense in that. What's the other?"

"It's easy to go down market if you need to but almost impossible to go upmarket if you are already known as a downmarket place. Like Rolls Royce can easily sell cheap compact cars if they want to but Kia will have a huge problem trying to sell an expensive luxury car."

That was a very interesting point and I would never have thought of it.

"I'll give you a warning though. Whatever you do it's going to take a while to get established so don't go dropping your prices when you don't get any bookings at the beginning. Stay strong and hold on for at least six months before thinking about changing prices. At the same time stay flexible. If someone rings up or emails asking for a cheaper price, it's up to you whether or not to accept it but don't change your pricing structure. If you do accept it treat it as a special. Bromley is a good area and it's got easy access to London and the Kent countryside so you should get guests. It just may take a while."

"Great, thanks for all that." My head was beginning to spin and I thought my pen was beginning to overheat. "Anything else?"

"Yes," said Nigel. "Never forget the most important thing in business, which most businesses forget after a while."

"What's that?"

"Bad news travels faster and further than good news. What I mean is that if someone has a bad experience they'll tell everybody, they'll tweet it and put it on Facebook and god knows what else. If they have a great experience they'll usually only tell their friends. So getting more guests through word of mouth is a long slow process but losing them is very very quick. A handful of really bad reviews can kill you in a matter of days. Never let a guest leave with a bad opinion."

“How do I know if they have a bad opinion?”

“How does any one know? Talk to them! That's the big advantage B&Bs have over hotels, the personal contact. Even if they're only there for one night, if you greet them and look after them and say goodbye they'll trust you and will tell you if there's a problem. Treat them like cattle and they won't, they'll just bitch about you on Facebook. Keep it personal.”

“My head is spinning,” I said. “I'm not sure I'm up to all this.”

Nigel laughed uproariously and poured some more tea for me. I managed to hide a shudder.

“It's really easy,” he said. “Do you want to be treated like a fool and a criminal?”

“No, of course not,” I said.

“So treat your guests the way you want to be treated. They're human beings, not income streams so treat them like human beings. Set whatever rules and boundaries you want then go outside them every time you have to and they'll love you for it.”

I could see what he was getting at but ... ,

“Maybe an example?” I asked.

He thought for a moment.

“OK, suppose you set your breakfast times as seven to nine in the morning.”

I nodded.

“When someone needs to leave early and wants breakfast at five, make the effort and give it to them. They'll appreciate it and tell their friends how you bent over backwards and their friends will stay with you when they're in Bromley. Insist that they can't have breakfast before seven and even people who want it after seven will be

annoyed.”

“Right,” I said. “I get it. Customer service.”

“Yup,” said Nigel. “Just don’t say it, do it.”

Going home on the train in the rush hour didn’t add to my self confidence. I didn’t get groped but I did spend fifteen minutes pressed up against a giant of a man with personal hygiene issues. Even in the chill of November he was sweating profusely.

Still, I had a shiny new cooker and fridge in my kitchen when I got home and Cecily had figured out the timer controls so that my roast lamb was nearly done by the time I arrived. I was a little dubious about it since I’d bought the lamb to feed Josh the previous Wednesday and I’d sold the fridge on Saturday so it hadn’t even been refrigerated for a couple of days.

“Thank you for letting the guys in,” I said to Cecily while I was waiting for the roast to finish. “And thank you for putting the roast on. Did it seem all right when you put it in?”

“I wasn’t going to let you eat that,” said Cecily. “It looked as though it was going off and smelt a little funny so I took it round to Emily’s for her dogs and bought you a new one since you didn’t seem to have anything else.”

I was quite touched by that and offered to pay her back for the joint. She dismissed the offer out of hand.

“That’s what neighbours are for,” she said. “I’m sure you’d do the same for me.”

“Well at least come and help me eat it,” I said. “A whole roast is far too much for me on my own.”

She let me talk her into it and put on a cardigan for the walk to my house. It was a chilly evening.

“I’m thinking of staying here permanently,” I said during dinner. “I’m

toying with the idea of turning this house into a B&B so I can have some sort of income. Would that bother you?"

"Oh, thank the Lord," said Cecily, putting down her knife and fork and beaming at me. "I was talking to Mrs Ramasingh about you yesterday and we're so afraid you might sell to some of those coloured musicians who'd have drug parties and loud music all night. Have you met the Ramasinghs yet? They're such lovely people, they're your neighbours, the other side. He's a surgeon. Do you think there's enough parking?"

Chapter Sixteen

After Cecily left I spent a while sitting in the lounge going through my notes from Nigel and trying to get a handle on the things he'd said. I wondered if I was really up to it? I gave that some serious thought and decided that I was. My years on reception at the Estate Agent had taught me a few things about dealing with people and my cooking skills were certainly up to handling breakfast, although there was no way I could handle a restaurant. If I got someone in to do the cleaning, or at least the major part of it, the day shouldn't be too onerous.

Undoubtedly sheer ignorance on my part hid many possible future problems but, so far at least, the biggest I could see was the rooms themselves. Nigel had said to make the rooms 'quirky'. How on earth do I make them 'quirky'? Five times? Six if I had a quirky communal room too.

It would mean living in England though. Mind you I didn't dislike the idea of that and even if I took British citizenship I could still stay an Aussie and go back whenever I wanted. And Carol could visit here too which would be fun.

The IT side was easy and I decided to ring Nigel's guru on Wednesday and find out how much it would cost. Although, after thinking about it for a while, I realised that this was probably the most important area and trying to economise on that would be a mistake. I'd need the internet to get bookings and I'd need the internet available to guests to get them to come back again.

The garden shouldn't be too much of a problem either. Back in Aus, gardeners are mostly people with lawnmowers who cut the grass but here in England people seemed to take more care of their gardens, probably because they didn't get fried every summer, so I should be able to find someone who could do more than cut the grass. I could maybe economise here by planting perennials rather than annuals. Maybe even a couple of fruit trees so I didn't need to buy fruit. Perhaps Cecily would know someone?

I was staring at my notes and letting my mind wander when I had an

epiphany, if that's the right word. An idea, at any rate. Over the weekend I'd sold two of Richard's metal filing cabinets and what looked like his main desk and had had to empty the contents onto the floor as the buyers weren't interested. The thing is, Richard was a toy designer and a lot of what was in the filing cabinets were old toy designs. Drawings, blueprints, sketches and so on. Maybe some of the more impressive ones could be put up on display and I could fashion a room around the idea of toys. I could call it The Toy Room. It had a certain ring to it and could turn out quite nice. I might even be able to find some of the actual toys on eBay and in junk shops to put out as well. Was it quirky enough? Or too quirky?

I went to bed thinking that a B&B was definitely a serious possibility. It didn't seem too bad an idea in the morning either which was unusual for me. Over the last few years I'd woken up every morning with a decidedly negative perspective on life so this was actually a positive. In fact I was almost enthusiastic about getting out of bed. Perhaps it was because I planned to go shopping for shoes.

Well, not shoes, boots. I was going over to the farm mid morning to meet that man Josh was showing round and I didn't want to wear plastic bags again so I needed something appropriate. I learnt another new term in the process. In England they're not called 'work boots' or 'gumboots' they're called 'wellington boots' or 'wellies'. Why? God knows.

Surprisingly there was a shop in the middle of the High Street which specialised in wellington boots which goes to show how highly regarded gardening is here. In Australia these kinds of shops are tucked away in back streets and on industrial estates and usually sell parts for chainsaws as well. Anyway, to get to the point, I was torn between a gorgeous pair of boots with pink orchids on a black background and another, less gorgeous, pair with black pigs on a green background. Obviously I had to get the pigs as a show of loyalty but I preferred the orchids so I did what any woman would have done under the circumstances. I got both pairs.

They had some nice gardening gloves as well, woolly and warm with reinforced fingertips so I got two pairs of those as well. After all, I can't have gloves that clash with the boots. And just to be safe I

bought, in another shop, a below the knee skirt that more or less went with both pairs of boots and something called a 'duffle coat' in a third. I went for black as the red one didn't go with either pair of boots and I'd probably only wear it on the farm or in the garden but it had rather fancy fake fur cuffs and collar. At least I hoped they were fake and, given the price, they almost certainly were. And some warm leggings since there was a chilly wind. Then I noticed the time and had to rush home to change even though there were some other clothes shops I wanted to look in. They would have to wait as I was now a busy person and had commitments. Which felt pretty cool.

There was some mud just outside the farm house which made me skid and over rev the engine and the tyres screeched a little bit as they regained contact with solid ground again, but I managed to stop before hitting the fence and parked where I ended up so it looked deliberate. I was only a few minutes late but Josh was standing out the front, chatting with a couple and I distinctly heard "Ahh, here's Sheila now," from Josh as I got out of the car.

"Sheila, this is Henry Curshaw and Carol Delaney, Henry, Carol, Sheila," said Josh making the introductions.

Which was just as well as I'd been racking my brain trying to remember the man's name on the drive over. Carol was noticeably, but not excessively, pregnant.

"Henry runs La Maison d'Art restaurant and Carol is an artist."

"Awesome," I said. "Did you have a reasonable drive over? The weather isn't too bad, is it."

I'd only been in the country for two weeks but I already knew that the weather was the safest and most common topic of conversation.

Carol did most of the talking for them while Henry just looked nervous. Josh gave his little talk about how to behave around pigs then led the way on a tour with the practised spiel of a professional tour guide. Inevitably, as Josh was an expert pig breeder and Henry an expert pig cooker, they led the way while I, knowing little of cooking pork and less about breeding pigs, followed in their wake with Carol

who, it turned out, was vegetarian and knew nothing of breeding or cooking pigs. So we talked about babies.

“How far along are you?” I asked.

“Just under five months,” she said happily. “As far as I can tell I got pregnant around the time we opened the restaurant so the baby is symbolic, you see.”

I didn't see, and said so.

“Ohhh,” she said. “Henry went through some bad times and we made a mess of things when we first met and we nearly didn't end up together at all. But we sorted it out and Henry found an old cafe he could upgrade into a restaurant so I'm certain the baby is symbolic of our stability and unity. I'm always forgetting to take precautions but I've never got pregnant before so it was clearly meant to be. Do you have any children?”

“I did have one,” I said, a little sadly. “Her name was Claire but she died when she was three. My parents had taken her to the zoo to see the giraffes because Claire was fascinated by giraffes and there was a nasty crash on the way back and all three were killed.”

“Oh, that's terrible,” said Carol seriously. “At least she had a nice time at the zoo and saw the giraffes first.”

I stopped in my tracks at that then hurried a little to catch up. No one had ever put a positive perspective on it before.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” I asked.

“We don't know,” said Claire. “Henry has trouble coping sometimes, so we're just letting things happen naturally until he gets used to it.”

“He ought to be used to the idea by now,” I thought. “Five months!”

“I'm sure he'll be a wonderful father,” I said. I doubted it but I wasn't going to say so.

“He’ll be a dreadful father,” said Carol, pragmatically. “He didn’t have a good time as a child himself so he’s going to spoil him or her something chronic. I hope it’s a girl since Henry knows nothing about being a boy. He was worrying last night about how he’s going to learn about football in case the baby’s a boy and he has to play soccer with him when he’s grown up a bit.”

I was so busy looking at Carol as she was saying this that I walked into Josh who had stopped and was looking anxiously at Henry.

“Is he all right?” Josh said to Carol. “He doesn’t look well at all.”

“He’s fine,” said Carol dismissively.

Henry was standing motionless, apart from his lips which were moving slightly, and staring at Black Magic who was giving him a quivering nose body search in case he had any apples or other tasty delicacies.

“Henry does like a little calming chant in his head when he gets stressed,” said Carol. “He’ll be done in a few seconds.”

Sure enough, a few seconds later Henry came to life again and slapped his chest for some reason, which startled Black Magic who flapped his head around to try to find out where the nasty noise had come from.

“Give him an apple,” said Josh and tossed one towards Henry. It bounced off his arm and Black Magic caught it neatly just before it hit the ground. I hoped the baby was going to be a girl as well since ball games didn’t seem to be Henry’s forte. We resumed the tour, with Black Magic trotting happily alongside Henry and Henry giving him sidelong looks. Fortunately the paddock wasn’t particularly big.

“So you’re an artist,” I said to Carol, “like, as in paintings?”

“Yes,” she said.

“What sort of painting do you do?” I didn’t know much about art but I quite liked landscapes.

"I paint feelings and emotions," said Carol.

Right, not landscapes then.

"How do you paint an emotion?" I asked.

"Badly," she said, quite seriously.

I didn't quite know what to say to that so I searched my mind for something else to talk about.

"How do you feel when you're here?" she said quite suddenly and stopped walking. 'Right here, right now. What does this paddock do to you? How does it smell, how does it taste, how does it feel?' She'd become very intense.

"Umm," I said. "Umm, I guess it makes me feel quite happy and I quite like the smell, it's fresh and natural."

"You see?" she said. "You can't really express how you feel in words since the words don't exist. And since you can't fully describe how you feel how can you possibly ever get me to understand how you feel? Now, you've had a baby so you have some common ground with me but even then I can't begin to tell you how I feel about my baby and being pregnant."

"OK," I said carefully. I wasn't sure of my ground here.

Carol suddenly smiled and relaxed.

"That's what I paint, or try to at least. I try to paint how I feel things, what emotions I have about something and try to convey some sense of those feelings and emotions to the viewer. I never try to explain my paintings, I just let the viewer experience them in their own way."

I let that simmer in my mind for a bit.

"What sort of things?" I asked. "I mean, what sort of things are you experiencing when you paint your feelings?"

“Oh anything really. Like the first one I sold was a painting of my feelings and emotions when I had my first orgasm with Henry.”

“Ahh, a little too much information there,” I said, astonished at her openness.

“Oh sorry,” she said. “I’m not used to being with normal people. Ummm, another painting I sold was what it was like when I first had one of Henry’s shrimp soufflés.”

“What was it like?” I asked. I was curious about what it was like for the other painting as well but was too embarrassed to ask. Knowing Carol she’d probably tell me as well, in graphic detail, which would be even more embarrassing.

“You’d have to look at the painting,” she said, “That’s the whole point. I can never express it in words. Even in paint it’s only the vaguest approximation.”

We started talking about pigs. It was safer.

At the end of the tour, Josh took Henry and Carol inside the outhouse where the pigs ended their lives. I didn’t go in because I was still too squeamish so I went back to the farmhouse to make drinks and ham sandwiches for us all. Slicing some untidy bits off a ham I had another epiphany. I still don’t know if it is the right word but I’d never had any epiphanies before and I liked the idea of having them. One last night and one today. I felt empowered.

“Awesome ham,” said Henry, “shame about the bread. By the way, I read something in the papers about an Australian being arrested for importing pig semen. Do you know anything about that.”

“Yes, I heard about that too,” said Josh. He noticed me looking quizzically at him so he explained.

“A couple of pig farmers in Western Australia were caught smuggling pig semen inside bottles of shampoo from Denmark,” he said. “They got three years in prison for breaking the biosecurity laws and their

company folded.”¹

“Why on earth were they importing semen” I asked.

“To increase the number of piglets their sows were having,” he said.

“Would you do something like that?” asked Henry.

“No,” said Josh. “That's the sort of thing intensive farmers do. They were trying to increase their average number of piglets from twenty six a year to thirty two.”

“I thought sows only had eight to ten piglets,” I said.

“That's per litter,” said Josh, looking sad. “The intensive farmers keep them permanently pregnant with three litters a year. It exhausts the sows but they don't care. Here the sows have one litter a year and I keep the blood line pure so I'd never use semen from any other line.”

Henry nodded approvingly and he and Josh moved on to discussing the technicalities of delivery and pricing and so on while Josh devoured most of the sandwiches.

“So would it be fair to say your paintings are abstract?” I asked Carol.

“I prefer to call them abstract surrealism,” she said.

I wasn't going to argue the point since I had no idea what abstract surrealism was.

“How big are they?”

“You mean the canvas dimensions?” she asked, “or conceptually?”

“The, ah, canvas dimensions,” I said. I wondered if all artists talked like this.

“All sorts of sizes,” she answered.

1 “Illegal pig semen racket busted, with WA pig farmers jailed”, ABC News, 14 August 2019

“OK,” I said. “How big was your orgasm?” I meant to say the soufflé but the other one came out by mistake. Perhaps it was all that talk about semen.

She grinned and I hurriedly rephrased it.

“I mean the size of the painting?”

“Ohh, six foot by four foot,” she said.

“How much did you sell it for? If you don't mind me asking.”

“Five grand.”

“Wow,” I thought, “she must be a good artist.”

A few years ago, when I was still married, I'd bought a painting I'd liked for \$185, say £80, and I'd thought that was rather expensive. It was a landscape of some bush country in Queensland. Now that I thought about it I couldn't remember where it was.

“I'm thinking of setting up a B&B,” I said hesitantly. It might have been an epiphany for me but that doesn't necessarily mean it's a good idea or that other people will go along with it.

She nodded.

“And I want to have each of the rooms with a different theme,” I said.

“Good idea,” said Carol. “Hotels are so boringly anonymous.”

“Umm, would you consider maybe doing a room for me?” There, I'd blurted it out. Let the cosmos deal with it.

“You mean, like, decorate it?” she said dubiously.

“No I mean do some paintings for it. I could maybe call it The Art Room,” I said.

“Like a commission?”

“Yes.”

“Cool, I’ve never had a commission before.” She thought for a few moments.

“I’m no good at doing things to order,” she said. “What sort of subject did you have in mind?”

“Your feelings and emotions,” I said. “Whatever you want, although nothing pornographic, obviously.”

A painting of what an orgasm felt like was one thing but what it looked like was probably not suitable for a family holiday bedroom.

“And not too big,” I added. “I’d rather have several smaller ones than one huge one.”

She sat there quietly, looking at Henry who was oblivious to her as he was engrossed in some technical aspect of ham production.

“Umm, and they’d be for sale if any of the guests wanted to buy them,” I said, thinking I needed to add an incentive.

“This is your farm,” she said, “isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Would you consider a deal where we get free pork for pictures?”

“Sure,” I said.

“OK,” she said, then “Guys,” to the guys.

They stopped talking and looked at her.

“Sheila wants to do a deal where we get free pork for some of my paintings. Sort something out for us, would you?”

Josh looked over at me and asked if he could have a word in private. We went outside for ciggies.

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“I’m thinking of a theme for one of the B&B rooms,” I said. “I thought it would be nice to have some of her pictures but she sells them for like £5000 each. So I’m trying to get them cheaper. Is it a problem?”

“Nah,” he said. “They don’t want much pork. In fact it’s hardly worth bothering with but I’ve a feeling that Henry’s going places and that’ll be good for us long term and generate new business. Giving them pork for free won’t even show up in the books since it’s less than the natural wastage anyway. The problem is, at her prices you won’t get much for the pork quantities they want so you’ll have to give her some cash as well. What’s your limit?”

I thought about it for a few moments. I had five rooms to do but I could economise in other areas.

“I said some guests might want to buy some of the pictures,” I said. “So maybe if I waive a commission she’ll go cheaper still. Say £5000 for ten reasonable sized paintings.”

“OK,” He grinned and rubbed his hands together. “This is turning out more fun than I expected.”

We went back in and it looked as though Henry and Carol had had their own discussion while Josh and I were out of the room, since Henry went to make more sandwiches and Carol did the negotiating.

“You don’t really want to buy any of my pictures, do you,” said Carol. “You just want something to go on the walls. So why don’t I just hire some pictures to you for pork? If any of your guests want to buy one, that’s cool, and I’ll give you a sales commission.”

I liked the sound of that. Henry got his pork, I got some pictures for a quirky themed room and Carol got a private exhibition gallery that might generate some sales. No money would change hands, unless there was a sale, but that was independent of this, and we didn’t need any paperwork. Too easy. So I agreed in principle and handed over to Josh for the fine details, like insurance and pork quantities and so on. Henry gave me some tips on how to cook pork in exotic ways.

It didn't take long for Carol and Josh to agree the nitty gritty and they wrote out the agreement on a couple of sheets of paper which Henry, Carol and I signed. I don't know how Henry and Carol felt but I was very nervous and had a lump in my throat. I prayed I was doing the right thing as I was making a commitment, of sorts, to running a B&B and staying in England on the spur of the moment. A small step for a pig farmer, but a giant step for me.

"Come over some time and see if you like any of the ones I've already done," said Carol. "And I'll stay at your B&B sometime to do one about what it feels like to be there."

I liked the idea of that.

They left soon afterwards, having made a tentative arrangement for me to visit, to be confirmed later.

"You made an impressive arrival," said Josh. "You made it look like you were hurrying to meet them which probably made them feel good."

"I skidded in some mud," I said.

"Looked good anyway," said Josh. "By the way, love the boots! I must get some too, maybe for Alwyn and Steve as well. Like a uniform."

"Do you know why they're called 'wellington boots'" I asked as we went back inside.

"I think it was after one of the Dukes of Wellington," he said. "Not sure. Do you want me to look it up?"

"No, I was just curious," I said.

"Fancy going to a Guy Fawkes party tonight?" he asked.

"A what?" I said.

"Guy Fawkes, it's November the fifth."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, although I kind of liked the idea of going to a party with Josh.

"Ahh, of course, you're a foreigner," he said, slapping his head. "Back in sixteen hundred and something Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the House of Lords. Us Brits celebrate the attempt every year."

"Did he succeed?" I asked.

"No, sadly," said Josh. "Although his attempt has been celebrated ever since. Some History Professor once said that Guy Fawkes was the last man to enter Parliament with honest intentions."

"What happened to him?"

"He was tortured to death," said Josh. "Still, every year there are parties all over the country and people have bonfires where they burn a guy and have fun."

"What? You mean a human sacrifice?"

"God no, just some old clothes filled with dead leaves. It's supposed to represent the Pope but these days most people dress up the guy to look like their least favourite politician."

I still didn't really know what he was talking about but it sounded like fun. You've got to love the English for celebrating someone trying to blow up their government.

"Who else will be there?" I asked.

"It's my club," said Josh. "They have one every year."

"What club?"

I wondered if he was a member of a cricket club or something. The English apparently love their cricket almost as much as the Australians. Other Australians at any rate. I'm not a fan of cricket and the idea of a party at a cricket club didn't really appeal after all.

“I'm a member of a Mod Revival Club,” he said. “Would you like to see my scooter?”

Chapter Seventeen

It was surprisingly erotic. I had a man in my arms, my legs wide apart and a chill breeze up my dress. Then we went round the first bend and I felt like I was going to fall off and I got quite scared so I held on to Josh more tightly and shut my eyes even tighter. Thirty seconds later my bits started to go numb from the jet stream whistling at thirty five miles an hour through my leggings and it stopped being erotic and became a matter of survival.

“Please god let this end,” I muttered to myself. “I promise I’ll be good forever.”

Perhaps I prayed to the wrong god as a couple of minutes later we came to a halt not far from a raging fire. I could feel its heat and the flames were reflected in a kaleidoscope of chrome and bolt on mirrors and shadowy figures moved and mingled in its glow.

Josh's scooter was, he informed me proudly as he pulled the tarpaulin off it in the barn, “a Lambretta Li Series 2 from 1961, heavily customised of course.” As far as my inexperienced eye could see it had been customised by bolting large numbers of rear view mirrors and small lamps on the front. I wasn't a total stranger to motorcycles as I'd been on the back of a Harley a few times, well once really, in my teenage rebellion years but this was nothing like a Harley.

“I’ll be going over on the scooter,” Josh had said. “If you'd like to come you can follow in your car or, if you're up to it, on the back behind me.”

I had to admit the thing did look quite cute and comfy as it had a back rest sticking up behind the seat so I said “OK, I'll go on the bike.” It was worth it just for the look of happiness on his face.

“Should I wear anything in particular?” I'd asked.

“Do you have a pencil skirt?”

I'd shaken my head so he told me to just dress warmly and he had a spare helmet so we agreed I'd come back around six that evening and

we'd go on to the "do" after that.

I knocked on Cecily's door when I got back.

"Sorry to disturb you," I said.

"Come in, dear, would you like some tea?"

"No thanks," I said. "Just wanted to ask you something. I've been invited to a 'Mods Revival' party tonight. Have you any idea what a 'Mods Revival' is?"

"Ooooh, that takes me back," said Cecily. "Come in and sit down, are you sure you don't want any tea?"

I think I've already mentioned the English obsession with tea and I got the feeling that to say 'no' was tantamount to slapping someone in the face with a wet fish. So I asked if she had any coffee and got a disapproving look. Fortunately I also got a cup of, weak, coffee.

"The Mods and Rockers came along not long after I got married to Percy," she said. "Not that he approved of them. Tearaways, he called them. The Rockers had big motorbikes and leather jackets and smelt of engine oil but the Mods were sweet. They had those little scooters and wore suits and nice fashionable clothes. If I hadn't been married I'd probably have been a Mod myself, not that I had much to do with them."

"Why were they called Mods?" I asked.

"It was short for 'Modernists'," she said with a smile of reminiscence. "The Rockers listened to the Rock and Roll that came along in the 1950s and the Mods liked the more modern jazz although they changed in the early sixties to soul and music like that. I remember Percy took me and Malcolm to Brighton for the Whitsun weekend. Malcolm must have been three or four at the time. We ended up going back to London. Percy was so angry!"

"Why? What happened?"

“Ohh, my dear,” she said, putting her hand on my knee. “There were thousands of them all along the seafront and through the town.”

“Mods?” I asked.

“Mods and Rockers,” she said. “Rampaging everywhere. They were fighting you see. Pitched battle for the whole weekend and when the police finally quietened them down they moved on to Hastings and started all over again.”

I began to have doubts about going to a Mods Revival party and hoped there wasn't a Rockers Revival party going on nearby.

* * *

“Oh nothing like that happens anymore,” said Josh with a laugh when I turned up that evening. “We're more about the style and the music. Bit of nostalgia, you see.

I decided to go anyway since Josh was all dressed up and looking, well, a little strange. He was wearing a narrow lapel jacket with a narrow tie and narrow trousers and, of all things, highly polished two tone shoes. Maybe the key aspect of Mods was 'narrow' since he'd wanted me to wear a pencil skirt. I didn't have one so I was in a warm woollen dress with my leggings underneath and my cute grey boots. I should have bought the red duffle coat as it would have matched the main colour of his scooter but I hadn't so I wore my red woolly hat and my warm grey coat. None of which turned out to be warm on a moving motorcycle. Still, the party was only a couple of miles away.

When we arrived Josh left me near the fire to warm up while he got some drinks and came back with a couple of glasses of wine. Around us were quite a few people, mostly dressed like Josh and a lot of the women wore pencil skirts and tight sweaters.

“We can stay out here by the fire,” said Josh, “or we can go inside the club house where there's music.”

I could hear some sixties type music coming from the barn nearby. I guessed the barn was their clubhouse.

“Can we stay by the fire for a bit, till I warm up?” I said.

“Oh god,” said Josh, immediately concerned. “Did you get very cold? Here, wear this.”

He pulled off his baggy Parker and wrapped it around me. It was warm from his body and felt snugly.

“I’m not dressed for biking in England,” I said, “I’m going to have to get something more appropriate.”

“Where did that come from?” I said to myself, masking my surprise by taking a sip of not very good wine from the plastic cup. “Like I’m going to go on the back of the scooter a lot? Hmm”

He didn’t seem to notice anything.

“There’s a lot of people here,” I said. “Are they all members of your club?”

“Mostly,” he replied. “Although they come from all over Kent and London. Some from up north too. There aren’t many Mod groups around these days.”

“Why are you into this?” I asked.

“Oh I don’t know really. I saw that film Quadrophenia and it just appealed to me. There’s a line in the film where Jimmy, who’s a mod, is talking with his friend who’s a rocker. The friend says something about not caring about mods and rockers as we’re all the same underneath and Jimmy says something like ‘No I don’t want to be like everyone else, that’s why I’m a mod, you see. You’ve got to be somebody or you might as well drown in the sea.’ That resonated with me. I was just another faceless nobody, an accountant for god’s sake. So when that ended I decided I didn’t want to be just another nobody, I wanted to be somebody.”

“So you became a pig farmer?”

Josh burst out laughing.

“Well, partly. There are thousands of accountants and very few pastured pig farmers. But no, that's why I became a mod, to be different. Well, a mod revivalist anyway. I was born about forty years too late to be a real mod.”

He paused and cocked an ear.

“You hear that? The music?”

“Yes, I don't recognise it though.”

“It's The Who. My Generation. It's a classic mod song from 1965.”

He started to sing.

“I'm not trying to cause a big sensation, I'm just talking 'bout my generation.”

“But it isn't your generation,” I said.

“I know, and that's the problem. I don't really like my generation. It's all got too greedy and selfish. I know the sixties had problems but they were the usual problems that people have always faced, you know, crime and so on. There was still an innocence about it, a joy. But my generation, we've created new problems we've never had to face before like climate change and the global economic collapse. Global problems which can't be solved because we seem to only be able to think locally, nationally. How are we going to solve global problems when we can't even be part of Europe?”

He paused and gave me that grin of his.

“Hey, I'm sorry, this is a party and I'm putting a dampener on it. Come on, let's go and dance.”

He took my wine off me, which I wasn't too upset about, and dumped it on the ground and grabbed my hand and led me off the the barn. He showed me where to leave our coats, both of which I was still wearing. There didn't seem to be any particular style of dancing going on so we just gyrated to the music much like everyone else was doing.

It was quite fun, actually. I hadn't been dancing since, well, forever pretty much. We danced to two or three songs then went to find some better wine.

"Hey, Brendon," called Josh, waving at a group of men standing by a scooter that seemed to be entirely chrome.

"Come on, I want you to meet someone," he said to me and we went over.

"This is my friend Brendon, and these are Ken, Bert and Al. Brendon, this is Sheila."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Wow," said Brendon. "So the sod had to go all the way to Australia to get a girl to go out with him!"

The four of them laughed uproariously and Josh grimaced.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's never brought a girl to one of our dos before," said Brendon. "Well not since that woman, what's her name?"

"Tina," said Josh.

"S'right, Tina" said Brendon. "How long ago was that?"

"Tina was a girl I went out with for a while after I got divorced," said Josh to me. "Seven years now," he said to Brendon.

"Beginning to think he'd started fancying his pigs," laughed Brendon. "What's your name again, love?"

"Sheila," I said.

"Lovely to meet you, I'm Brendon," and he stuck out his hand. I think he was a little drunk.

“Is this your scooter?” I asked.

“Nah, it's Bert's, mine's over there.”

He dragged me and Josh over to look at his scooter. I admired it, although it looked much like the others, and he revelled in it.

“She's a keeper, mate,” he said to Josh, “hang on to her.”

Josh looked a little embarrassed at that and we left him to resume our search for some wine. We didn't find anything better and ended up with more of the rather ordinary cheap wine we'd abandoned earlier.

“So who was Tina?” I asked.

“Oh, just a woman I got involved with for a while, it didn't last,” said Josh. “We weren't really compatible.”

“Why's that?”

“Umm, she wanted more than a pig farmer,” he said.

“And what did you want?”

“Someone real,” he said.

I digested this for a moment or two.

“Did you find anyone real after Tina?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said. “I went out with a few girls a few times but I didn't meet anyone special, until ...”

He seemed to be about to say more but stopped and looked around.

“Until?”

“Oh nothing, I just haven't been involved with anyone since Tina, that's all.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry.”

He smiled. “You're not prying,” he said. “I just got involved with Tina after my divorce, probably a rebound thing, but she wasn't the one for me and I certainly wasn't the one for her and that's how it goes, doesn't it.”

“Yes, I suppose you're right.”

It was interesting, though, that Josh hadn't been involved with anyone for several years. I wondered why he had invited me to this party and I was about to ask him when I realised he might find that too embarrassing a question. Actually it was probably too embarrassing a question for me too. I could sense something was happening between us but I didn't know what it was or where it was heading.

“Can I have one of your rollups?” I asked. “I think I left mine in my coat.”

Actually mine were in my bag but I thought it would be a way to change the subject and ease the tension that seemed to have appeared. He got his tin out and rolled us both cigarettes.

“Would you like something to eat?” he asked. “There's a buffet of sorts.”

I didn't really but said “Sure” so we wandered over to a trestle table near the bonfire where they were cooking sausages and putting them in rolls.

“You've been on a bike before,” he said. “I could tell by the way you leaned into the corners with the bike instead of against it.”

“Yes,” I said. “A long time ago I dated a guy with a Harley. I'd forgotten how exhilarating it is.”

I was going to say 'scary' but changed it at the last moment.

“Did you date him long?” asked Josh.

“No, just a couple of times,” I said. “Then I met Paul. He’s the man I married.”

“Oh yes, I remember you telling me.”

Josh dropped that line of enquiry, probably because I’d cried when I’d told him about it, seeing as how it involved Claire. We both smoked our rollups in relative silence, since loud music was coming from the barn.

“Oh look,” said Josh, “they’re getting ready to burn the guy.”

We wandered over to the bonfire just as a vaguely human shape in a leather jacket was tossed on to the flames. A loud cheer went up.

“Was that a rocker?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Purely symbolic of course. We are mods.”

After the guy was pretty much incinerated we went back to the barn to do some more dancing. The music had got slow and couples were dancing together. We joined them and Josh put his arms around me and I put mine around him, and we slowly moved to Moon River.

*Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker
Wherever you’re goin’, I’m goin’ your way*

It’s a beautiful song and it was so nice to be held in someone’s arms again. A man’s arms. Josh’s arms. I let myself drift.

*We’re after the same rainbow’s end, waitin’ ’round the bend
My huckleberry friend, moon river, and me²*

Moon River flowed its course and whoever was doing the music expertly moved into another slow song without any break so the mood continued

*Oh, my love, my darling
I’ve hungered for your touch*

2 Moon River by Andy Williams, 1962

A long, lonely time

I'd been away too long. I needed to come back to the land of the living and get on with my life and this was the way to do it.

Lonely rivers sigh

"Wait for me, wait for me"

I'll be coming home, wait for me

Yes, I'd been waiting too long. I felt like I was coming home.

I need your love

I need your love³

The song came to its slow, gentle end and I lifted my head off Josh's chest. He looked down at me and we looked into each other's eyes. As the violins faded away he slowly lowered his head to kiss me and I knew I wanted to be kissed. By Josh.

Then he suddenly jerked his head away and looked at his watch.

"We ought to be going," he said, brusquely. "I don't know about you but I have to be up early."

"What the hell?" I said to myself. "What just happened?"

OK I appreciate not everyone might want to kiss me but I was sure he was just about to then suddenly changed his mind. Why? I felt ... rejected.

I was going to ask but he disappeared to get our coats and I followed in his wake, all the way back to the scooter where we put our helmets on in silence. We drove back to the farm in silence as well, except for the sound of the scooter which, for some reason, reminded me of my mother's sewing machine.

Outside his farm house I took off my helmet and handed it back to him.

3 Unchained Melody by the Righteous Brothers, 1965

“I had a lovely evening,” I said, “thank you.”

I wanted to ask him why he hadn't kissed me but I was too shy. He seemed a little distant.

“Yes,” he said, looking at the helmets hanging from their straps in his hand. “We must do it again sometime.”

I waited for some suggestion of some details, so it wouldn't just be a polite English brush-off but none were forthcoming. So I said goodbye and wondered if maybe I should kiss him rather than wait for him to kiss me but he said goodbye too and we awkwardly stood there for a few heartbeats and then I left. I didn't know what else to do. Maybe I was sending the wrong signals.

I didn't know what I wanted so that was probably it. My confusion was confusing him. Or maybe he'd just realised that he didn't really like me after all. Maybe I was just not real enough for him, whatever that means. It had been a long time since a man had kissed me, a very long time. But I didn't want a man to kiss me, I wanted Josh to. And he didn't want to. I drove home in a whirl of emotions and cried myself to sleep. Not the sobbing anguish you cry for something lost but the quiet weeping for the sadness of something that is not going to be.

Chapter Eighteen

I woke up in the morning in a better frame of mind. Sad admittedly, but still better.

“Best to find out about these things sooner rather than later,” I told myself. “Just imagine how you’d feel if things had gone further and you’d fallen in love with the sod only to have it fall apart.”

Still, I didn’t understand and it niggled at me and caught me unawares every now and then, even though I tried to dismiss him from my mind.

Since I’d more or less made the decision by making an agreement with Carol over the paintings, I spent a little while drawing up a rough plan of action. First off I had to set Roger the lawyer loose on the planning application and my citizenship issues, then I had to sort out the decorator, start thinking about furnishings, gardening and so on. And not to forget arranging for Denzil, the man with the van, to come round and take away whatever was left after the next weekend sale. And at some point I had to go back to Australia and finalise my house there.

Roger was easy.

“Delighted to,” he drawled when I rang to give him the go ahead. “I’ll have someone pop round to measure up for a floor plan for the planning application. Would this Friday be convenient?”

He also told me the documents of my mother’s that I needed to bring back and I ticked him off my list.

“No problemo,” said Angelo, the decorator. “Cept we got ’nother job next week. ‘Ow ’bout week arfter, like?”

“OK,” I said. “And it’ll have to be just the ground floor for now. I’m rethinking the first floor.”

“Sweet,” said Angelo. “Make it a week arfter dat then, gives yous more time ta fink and we ain’t got nothing booked arfter, like.”

“So that's the twenty fifth?”

“Could be,” he said. “Dunno, like.”

I wrote down the twenty fifth anyway and ticked him off my list too. Next, a gardener.

“Come in, dear,” said Cecily, “would you like some tea?”

I'm sure if my house went up in flames and I pounded on Cecily's door at three in the morning she'd still open the door and ask if I wanted tea.

“I just popped round to ask if you knew anyone who could design a nice garden for me,” I said. “I'm busy getting things organised so I won't stay.”

“Oh, how nice,” she said, “go for lots of colour, particularly winter flowering so you get something to look at all year round and perhaps a nice gazebo.”

She knew several gardeners and recommended Lance as he refused to cut grass as it was beneath him, which I thought was quite funny but Cecily didn't. I rang him and he didn't answer so I left a message. He rang me back an hour or so later and after hearing out my vague plans said he could come round on Friday, “hopefully in the morning”, to see how he “could implement my horticultural vision”. I ticked that item on the list as well and on a fresh sheet of paper started to draw up a calendar to keep track of who was coming round when to do what. Then I phoned Carol, that's Carol the artist, not Carol my Aussie friend.

“Can I change my visit to next Tuesday,” I asked. “Only I've got someone coming round to take away some junk.”

“Sure,” she said. “I think I'm looking forward to it.”

“You think you are?” I said, a little taken aback. Was she rethinking our deal?

“Yeah,” she said. “I don't like people looking at my paintings. It bothers me but I guess I've got to get used to it.”

“Umm,” I said, “probably since not many people buy paintings to not look at. Maybe you should do a painting on how it feels to have people look at your paintings.”

I meant that as a bit of a joke.

“Hmmm,” she said, “interesting idea,” and went silent.

I said goodbye but she didn't reply so after holding onto a silent phone for a bit I hung up. Rather than think about it, I ticked her off and added her to my little calendar.

Since most things were going to take a while to accomplish and little could actually start straight away, my calendar was telling me that it would be a good idea to go to Aus in the next week or so and be back in time for the decorators. That way I could get the documents for Roger and get my citizenship application started as well. Every now and then you get days when everything seems to coalesce and come together and today was one of them. I was on a roll so I phoned British Airways and booked myself a flight back to Aus, returning the weekend before Angelo started on the ground floor.

Then I phoned Carol, my friend in Australia, to tell her I was coming back and ask if she could pick me up and realised on the second ring that it was around one in the morning there so I hung up and went to make a sandwich for lunch. Then the phone rang and I answered it.

“Who's died?” said a sleepy voice.

“Oh sorry, Carol, I didn't mean to wake you,” I said, very apologetically. “I forgot what the time was.”

“So there's no emergency?” she asked.

“No,” I said and she hung up without another word. I'd call her again at a better time.

Half an hour later there was a knock on the door.

“Oh hello,” I said, surprised. “This is unexpected.”

Josh looked puzzled.

“You're taking the rental car back today,” he said.

I had completely forgotten about that.

“Ah, yes,” I said. “Give me a couple of minutes.”

In a bit of a flap I grabbed the Ka's keys and my coat and bag and had to faff around for a bit taking out all the things that I'd left in it during the house contents sale at the weekend. Then I stopped faffing around and sat down.

“No,” I said. “This doesn't make any sense.”

“OK,” said Josh, leaning against the door frame. “What doesn't?”

“I've already booked my flight back to Australia,” I said, “the weekend after next. It would make more sense to just keep the hire car until then.”

“Oh,” he said, looking crestfallen. “Was it something I said?”

“What?” I was a little confused as my head was buzzing from all the organising and arranging I'd done that day.

“You're going back to Australia,” he said.

“Yes,” Hadn't I already said that? “So I think I'll keep the hire car until then.” It didn't seem a difficult concept to me, to be honest. “Then I'll buy a second hand one when I come back.”

“Ohh, so you're coming back then.” He looked relieved.

“Of course,” I said. I was pretty sure I'd said that too. “I've got to sort out my house in Aus and get some paperwork for the lawyers.”

“Right,” said Josh. “Umm, you seem pretty busy at the moment. I’ll bugger off and leave you in peace.”

Actually he wasn’t far wrong as my paper notes were strewn all over the couch. I followed him out to his car in order to thank him for remembering about taking the hire car back.

“So what do you think of the Ford Ka?” he asked, pausing to look it over.

“It’s a great little car,” I said. “Very easy to drive and it seems economical.”

“Do you like the colour?” he asked.

“Not really,” It was a rather garish yellow. “They had a lovely dark grey one but it didn’t have GPS so I took this one instead. It’s too bright for me but what the hell, it’s only a rental.”

He got in his car and I remembered to thank him before he drove off.

“What was all that about?” I wondered. “Why just turn up without ringing first and why did he look like that when I said I was going back to Aus?” I shook my head and went back inside to my papers.

“Just a sec,” I said out loud. “Did he think I was going back to Aus permanently? Why would he think that after everything I’ve said about staying here and doing that deal with Carol and Henry?”

I thought about it for a couple of moments then gave up. Josh was confusing me and I had a nasty little job to do. I had to phone Nigel’s IT person. I don’t like talking to IT people since their brains seem to be wired differently to ordinary people. I took a deep breath and picked up the phone then put it down again and went and made another coffee. And had a ciggie. And got another ready to light during the phone call. Just in case.

“Hello, can I speak to Clarke, please,” I said when someone answered the phone.

“Sure,” he said.

We waited in silence. There were none of the usual clicks or crap 'on hold' music or other signs that the call was being transferred.

“Hello?” I said after a while.

“Hello,” said the voice, conversationally.

“Could you put me through to Clarke, please,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“I want to talk to him about a computer system,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “Why do you want to be put through though?”

“Umm,” I nearly picked up my ready cigarette at that point. “So I can talk to him?”

“Oh,” he said. “But I'm here.”

“You're Clarke?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why didn't you say that in the first place?” I didn't scream down the phone at him. Instead I picked up my cigarette.

“Ahh, I didn't know,” I said. “Umm, you've been recommended to me.”

“How nice,” said Clarke.

“I need a computer system,” I said.

“Everyone needs computer systems,” said Clarke. “Although one day we'll all be directly integrated with them.”

I clenched the ciggie between my lips and lit it.

“Yeah,” I said. I'd ring another IT guy if it wasn't for the fact that they are all pretty much like this. “Umm Nigel said you could help me.”

“Ahh, Nigel,” said Clarke, as though he was nodding his head in recognition. “Super.”

He paused.

“Who's Nigel?” he asked.

For the life of me I couldn't remember Nigel's surname.

“Umm, he runs a B&B in Bayswater,” I said.

“Awesome,” said Clarke. “Umm, there are hundreds of B&Bs in Baywater.”

“He's in Hereford Road,” I said.

“I thought you said Bayswater,” said Clark. “I don't remember setting up a computer system in Hereford. Not for a few years anyway.”

“No,” I said. “Nigel's B&B is in Hereford Road in Bayswater.”

“Oh, my bad,” he said and fell silent again.

This time though I could hear the rapid clicking of a keyboard.

“Oh Nigel!” he said after a few moments. “Why didn't you say so?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep drag on my cigarette.

“Yes, sorry,” I said, calmly. I hoped there weren't two Nigels with B&Bs in Hereford Road.

“So what's wrong with his system?” asked Clarke.

“Nothing, as far as I know,” I said.

“Awesome,” said Clarke. “So why does he want a new one?”

“He doesn't,”

“Ahh,” said Clarke. He was clearly puzzled. “So why are you ringing me?”

“Because I want a computer system,” I said, fumbling for my cigarette packet. “Like Nigel's”

“Cosmic,” said Clarke. “You can't though.”

“Oh,” I said. “Why not?”

“His server is nearly two years old. You can't get that chipset any more.”

“OK,” I lit another cigarette and went to flick the ash off the end and discovered the other one was still burning in the ash tray.

“I can do you one with a better chipset though, more radical,” he said after thinking about it. “Sweeter graphics and audio too. What do you want it for?”

“I'm setting up a B&B so I want to manage bookings and websites and things like that,” I said.

“Ahh,” he said. “Nigel runs a B&B. What a coincidence.”

“Not really,” I said. “I asked Nigel what IT he uses for his B&B so I could have the same system, you see.”

“I see,” he said. “So that's why you're ringing?”

“Yes,” I said.

“How many rooms do you have?” he asked.

“Five,” I said.

“You can't have a system like Nigel's then,” said Clark. “He's only got four rooms. You'll need one for five rooms.”

“Yes,” I said. “How difficult is that?”

He thought about it.

“If I copied Nigel's system,” he said thoughtfully, “I'd need to adapt it to five rooms.”

“Is that hard?” I asked.

“Take me, ohh, I don't know, maybe five minutes,” he said.

“Great,” I said. “How much would it cost?”

“No idea,” he said. “Depends what you want.”

I dumped the two burning cigarettes into my half empty coffee mug and lit a fresh one.

“I want high speed internet access in each of the five rooms,” I said, consulting the notes I'd made when talking with Nigel. “And Internet TVs and a website and a bookings system and a guest management system.”

“What infrastructure do you have?” he asked.

“What?” I asked.

“What existing system do you have?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“What?” said Clarke. I don't think he could comprehend someone existing without any form of computer system whatsoever.

“I just have a house,” I said.

“Right,” said Clarke. “Do you have a phone line or do you want WiFi or cable? ADSL or T1”

“I do have a phone line but I don't know what I want,” I said. “I'm

setting it up from scratch.”

“Wow,” said Clarke. “A newbie.”

I was about to ask if I needed one of those too when I realised he meant I was a newcomer.

“OK,” he said, “here's what you need,” and he reeled off a list of things.

What seemed like two hours later he paused for breath then added,

“And a full, integrated logging system, of course.”

“Why do I want a logging system?” Apart from 'router' and 'web server' it was the only thing I'd heard of before and I was too scared to ask about any of the things I hadn't heard of.

“In case the cops catch someone downloading kiddie porn or some terrorist plot,” he said. “That way it can be traced to the occupant so you won't get charged.”

“OK, I'll have a logging system too then,” I said. It hadn't occurred to me that any of my guests might have other objectives than a nice holiday.

“Too easy” he said. “Take a week or so.”

“Umm,” I said. “I don't want the system yet. The house has to be decorated first and I'm still waiting for planning permission.”

“Cool,” said Clarke. “I can get plenty done in advance and set up the system when you're ready.”

“How much will it cost?” I asked.

“Do you want me to supply all the hardware too? Like the TVs and stuff?”

“Yes,”

He hummed a little tune and gave me a figure. I checked my notes and it was slightly less than what Nigel had paid so I agreed.

“Sweet as,” said Clarke. “If you, umm, want to give me a deposit I’ll get started on the website for you to review before it goes live.”

“I’m going to have a different theme for each room,” I said. “Can we show that on the website?”

“Sure,” he said. “Do you want virtual visualisations?”

“What are they?”

“Umm, a video of each room,” he said. “I can do it in 3D VR as well if you like, although jpegs will download faster than mpegs.”

I knew jpegs were ordinary photographs.

“Jpegs,” I said. My limited experience of the internet had already convinced me that if a site was slow to load people gave up and went somewhere else. I did it myself on the odd occasion I used the net.

“Super,” he said. “I’ll do a mock up then we can get down to the details when you’ve approved the concept.”

I kind of liked having a concept so I agreed.

“Will you, umm, be doing the actual wording of the website?” I asked, with my fingers crossed.

“No,” he said. “I just do the techie stuff. I have someone who does the marketing verbiage on websites.”

I uncrossed my fingers in relief.

“Is that person included in the price you gave me?” I asked.

“She’s my girlfriend,” he said, proudly.

I wondered if it was her he was proud of or himself for actually

knowing a girl but I didn't ask. I also hoped that she being his girlfriend meant she was included in the price. It was kind of implicit, but you never know. Not that it mattered, I needed the system and Nigel had faith in him and I had faith in Nigel.

"Timeframe?" asked Clarke.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I wondered if that was a kind of computer, like a mainframe.

"When do you want to go live?" he said.

Roger had said it would take maybe two months to get planning permission and since this was early November that meant the middle of January.

"Not sure," I said. "Let's aim for the beginning of next year."

"Sweet, do you have a domain name?"

"A what?"

"A web address," he said, "you know, www dot something. So people can visit your website."

"No," I said. "Can you do that for me?"

"Sure," he said. "You'll need to give me some names though. Have a think about it and let me know."

He seemed to know what he was talking about and Nigel had said he was very prompt whenever there were problems so I gave Clarke my debit card number for the deposit and more or less left it at that, although I did have a new problem. What domain name should I have? I added it to my 'To Do' list then decided to have a nap.

I woke up half an hour later and phoned Clarke as I had an idea.

"How about www.toskashideaway.co.uk?" I asked.

“Just a sec,” he said, then “it's available. Do you want it?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Done,” he said thirty seconds later. “Thunderbirds Are Go!”

“Great,” I said. Thunderbirds? Best not to worry about it. At least he hadn't mentioned Star Trek, which set him apart from most IT people. The IT administrator at the insurance company I worked for a few years previously had named all the company servers NCC1701, NCC1701A, NCC1701B and so on after the Starship Enterprise and his login was 'captainkirk'. His password was 'BeammeuP' but no one was supposed to know that, even though it had only taken fifteen seconds for me to hack.

I wrote TOSKA'S HIDEAWAY in large letters on the top of every single one of my pieces of paper. It looked kind of cute and I doodled for a while to see if I could create a cute logo then I added “buy a large teddy bear for the Toy Room,” to my “To Do' list. Then I crossed out Toy Room and wrote Hallway. I could probably embroider TOSKA on a small vest for the teddy to wear and he would be sweet, sitting on a stool by the front door, welcoming everyone.

Carol phoned from Australia when she got up in the morning, which was while I was having some dinner in England.

“Why did you phone me in the middle of the night?” she wanted to know

“Sorry,” I said, “I'd forgotten the time difference. I was just ringing to tell you I had booked a flight back to Aus and to ask if you could pick me up at the airport.”

“Are you coming back or just visiting?” she asked.

“Just visiting,” I said. “I need to sort the house out,” and I told her about applying for citizenship and planning permission for the B&B and Toska's Hideaway.

“Sound's great,” she said, “but I've got to go to work. I was going to

call you tonight anyway so we can talk more about it then. By the way, I've found Miranda."

Chapter Nineteen

“You don't really need to know how,” said Carol when she phoned the following morning, it being after work in Aus. “But she's with a couple of publishers and let's just say that some publishers have better security than others, OK.”

“So what can you tell me?” I asked.

“Miranda Moor's real name is Mona Finkelmann,” said Carol. “She lives on the Mornington Peninsular, outside Melbourne, with her husband, Egbert, or Ed for short. He's a truck driver and she hasn't published a book for four years and the last three didn't sell well at all so she's probably retired or not far off.”

I wrote down her address and phone number although I had no idea what I was going to do about it. To be honest, the message in the book had seemed astonishing when I'd discovered it but with all the major transformations going on in my life over the last couple of weeks I'd pretty much forgotten about it. A dead relative that I'd never met may have had an affair with someone else I'd never met forty odd years ago. At the end of the day, so what?

I thanked Carol profusely for her efforts and we moved on. After all, current and future events are always more interesting than the past. Unless you're a historian, which I'm not even though I have a degree in history.

“So you're really doing this,” said Carol. “Awesome. I'm so happy you're finally getting your life back. When are you planning on opening the B&B?”

“Probably January,” I said. “Maybe February if there are problems.”

“Have you had any bookings yet?”

“Of course not,” I laughed. “We haven't even got the planning application in yet let alone a web site or anything. Haven't even got any beds yet.”

“Cool,” said Carol. “Then I’ll be your first booking. Put me down for a single room for two weeks next Easter.”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “If you come over you’ll stay with me as my friend, not as a paying guest.”

“No,” she said. “It’s symbolic of my total support for you. You now have a formal booking so you can’t get out of it! The week before and the week after Easter. I’ll book my leave off work tomorrow and organise the flights and let you know the exact dates when you’re here. And give you a deposit.”

I was quite touched and made a note on a piece of paper to tell Clarke so his booking system didn’t double book her room by mistake, although it would be very impressive to get a double booking that quickly. Of course I was going to put Carol in my best room, I just didn’t know which room it would be yet.

“Nigel, that man who ran the B&B I stayed in when I got here, told me to make the rooms individual and quirky,” I told Carol. “I’ve already got two themes in mind but I haven’t thought of any others yet.”

I told her about my idea to base one room around Carol the Artist’s ‘feelings’ and another around Richard’s toy designs.

“They sound pretty quirky to me,” said Carol. “I think I’d rather be in the Toy Room than the Art Room though. That one sounds too quirky to me.”

“Oh god, do you really think so?” I said, having a mild panic attack.

Carol started to laugh.

“That’s the problem with quirky,” she said. “It polarises. People either love it or hate it. If you want everyone to like it then don’t be quirky, be bland and anonymous like most hotels. The moment you give a place any sort of character or personality, someone somewhere is going to hate it and someone else is going to love it.”

“But do you think I’m going too far?” I asked.

“No,” said Carol. “You should see some of the really weird shit that some people stay in. Like rooms made entirely of ice or covered in horror scenes or whatever. Don't worry about it. Just make sure you have good quality photos on your website so people have a good idea of what they are letting themselves in for. If someone doesn't like the room, they can book a different room, no problem. And if someone really likes that art then they'll probably come back to see what new art she's produced. Could be very good for both of you.”

New art? I hadn't thought of that either and made a note to talk to Carol the Artist about periodically changing the pictures. Yes, maybe some of my guests would come back to see what was new but at the same time, it would get more of her paintings on display so it worked both ways.

“So what's happening with lover boy?” she asked.

“Lover boy?”

“Josh, your fancy man.”

“Oh him.” I was a little disdainful. “Nothing. He doesn't particularly like me.”

“Why? What happened?”

I wasn't going to but I ended up telling Carol about the Mod Revival party. She'd never heard of Mods either so I had to explain about them and about Guy Fawkes.

“OK, so he's some sort of neo-punk fetishist, so what. That doesn't mean he doesn't like you.”

Patently I explained that Mods pre-dated punks by at least a decade and it wasn't a fetish, just a particular type of music and dress style. And that there was nothing wrong with scooters.

“Oh girl, have you got it bad!” she laughed.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

"You're defending him," she said. "He's inside your head."

"I'm not defending him," I retorted irritably, "and he's not inside my head. I just want you to get your facts right."

"Oh right, sure" she said and kept on giggling. I was not going to tell her about the non-kissing now. Not for any reason.

"Hey, I've just had an idea," she said suddenly. "For one of your rooms."

"A fetish room?" I asked sarcastically. "Whips and handcuffs?"

"Noooo," she said. "A music room. I've just remembered a restaurant I went to in New South Wales a couple of years ago. The walls were lined with album covers. You know, from records, old ones before CDs. You could do something like that too. I don't know, maybe classic albums or something, like the Beatles."

"Ummm," I said, "where am I going to get old album covers?"

"Op Shops,"

"They don't have Op Shops here," I told her.

"Oh. Well there's bound to be places that sell off second hand stuff, recycle yards and so on. Maybe get some off eBay or second hand records shops. You could even go to some Op Shops here when you're over and take some back with you. Chuck out the records to save weight for the plane. Or sheet music. I've just remembered a cafe I went to a while back. I think it was on the Gold Coast, or maybe Coffs Harbour, I don't remember. Anyway they'd wallpapered the cafe with sheet music."

"Sheet music?"

"Have you ever seen any? Some of it's quite beautiful actually, particularly those orchestral ones with all those lines and squiggles for all the different instruments. I bet if you went to a music store you could find a complete score for someone famous like Beethoven or

Handel and it would cover the whole room.”

“Hmmm,” I said. I couldn't visualise it.

“Thinking about it,” said Carol, “You could buy a score off the internet and download it. That way we could work out what size to print it so that it exactly fitted the room. That would be pretty cool. You could even put in one of those old gramophones, you know with the big cone thing on it and have a record of the piece that's on the walls. Then when someone is bored they can play the record and follow it around the walls.”

“It's an idea,” I said, not bothering to note it down. Sheet music? “By the way, I'm calling the B&B Toska's Hideaway.”

“It's got a ring to it, I guess,” she said. “What are you going to tell people when they ask who Toska is?”

“Ummm,” I said. “Do you think they will?”

“Bound to,” she said. “It's an old house and tourists will expect everything about it to be historical.”

“I was just thinking I might have a teddy bear with Toska embroidered on his tee shirt sitting on a stool in the hallway. I thought it would be cute.”

“Mmmm,” said Carol thoughtfully. “No, it would be cuter if he was sitting in a little rocking chair, like he was in his hideaway. And you could have some leaflets about Toska. Maybe even some of those books, if you can find any in print. I don't think Miranda sold many so there may be a stock of them sitting around somewhere.”

“I like the idea of a rocking chair,” I said “but the books sound like a lot of hassle. And what would be on the leaflets?”

“Oh, make something up,” said Carol. “It's just a gimmick, not like Toska was anyone real. Make up a cute little story. You could even sell little Toska teddy bears, or use them as freebies for your guests, little souvenir things with your website on his bottom.”

"I'm not going to embroider web addresses on hundreds of teddy bears bottoms," I said, starting to laugh.

"Nooo," she said. "You can get one of those marketing product businesses to do them, like pens and badges."

"Actually that isn't a bad idea," I said, thinking about it. "Maybe those little teddies with the springy arms that cling on to things. Be a change to those endless fridge magnets everyone else does."

We talked for a while about other marketing tools and got increasingly silly about them. Like toilet paper with the Toska logo on every sheet and those little individual bars of soap, moulded like teddy bears. It was fun and too soon she had to go to bed.

It occurred to me after talking to Carol that it had been just over four weeks since we'd been told that the Real Estate Agency where I used to work was closing. Four weeks! Is that all? It had been the busiest four weeks of my life. Simply unbelievable. Still, as I was going back to Aus in only a week's time to sort out the house, it would be a good idea to check I'd actually had my termination pay and that there was enough in my Australian account to pay the mortgage, which had been due three days ago and which I had completely forgotten about.

"I'll look a right dingo's donger if I go back to sell the place and find the bank's foreclosed because I'm in arrears," I told the lounge.

So, I tidied up all my pieces of paper into a neat pile and went through my purse looking for the number of the bank's Customer Service Line and rang them. Not a minute too soon either as they shut down at midnight and it was half past eleven in Australia when I rang. After a lot of checking that I was really who I claimed to be they conceded that yes, the mortgage had been paid, no my termination pay had not been received and yes my account was in credit, to the tune of \$17.45. My mobile rang while I was contemplating whether or not to transfer some money from the UK and how to go about asking what had happened to my pay when there was no one left to ask but I ignored it.

I decided to transfer enough to cover any direct debits, like gas and

electricity, that might crop up in the next week or so. I'd be back in Aus by then and if my pay still hadn't arrived I could probably find Vera, my old boss, or even dump it onto a lawyer. The mobile rang again so I answered it.

"Mrs Hutchins?" asked the voice at the other end.

"Yes," I said.

"Have you stolen our car?" The man laughed.

"Who is this?"

"Bromley Car Hire," he said. "The Ka was due back yesterday."

"Oh shit," I said. "I'm sorry, I forgot. I haven't stolen it."

"I know," he said. "If you had you wouldn't have answered your phone."

"Oh I don't know," I said. "I'm probably stupid enough to do that."

He laughed again. I think he was just happy to find I hadn't stolen the car. There was probably a lot of paperwork to do if I had.

"Anyway," I said. "Can I keep it until next Thursday? I'm going back to Australia then."

"Certainly," he said. "It says here that we picked you up from the station when you hired the car. Do you want us to drop you back at the station?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead, at least not about going back to Aus, but it seemed a good idea so I thanked him and said yes. He did a quick calculation and told me what the balance owing would be and it turned out that a three week hire gave a bigger discount than a two week hire so there wouldn't be much extra to pay at all. I settled the balance over the phone so there wouldn't be any delays that might mean me missing my flight. I'd got a much cheaper flight from British Airways by losing my 'right' to change or cancel the flight and I didn't

want to miss it.

I then phoned my bank in England, feeling quite the international financier, to transfer some money to Australia and was told I couldn't do it over the phone as I hadn't got phone banking set up. I wondered if other international financiers had the same problem. Apparently I had to set up phone banking in person at a branch so I went into town and transferred some money the old fashioned way, talking to a real human being. Since I was in town and had no other business to do that day I went clothes shopping. Apparently it was going to get a lot colder in December and January, you see, so I needed some more clothes. A lot more clothes. And shoes. And another coat, as the one I'd bought in Notting Hill smelt of wood smoke and needed dry cleaning. And a new hat to go with the new coat.

I was in High Chic, a clothes boutique in the High Street, when my phone rang again. I happened to be in the little changing cubicle in my underwear at that precise moment so it's just as well technology hadn't progressed to instant video chat, although quite why I answered the phone while in nothing but my underwear I don't know. This time it was someone enquiring about Richard's drawing board so I figured that this week's Shopper was out and my repeat advertisements were in it. We arranged for him to come round that evening.

When I got home mid afternoon there was a small black and tan dog of indeterminate breed peeing on the frame of my front door. He, obviously, since female dogs don't cock their legs, ran away when I pulled up but came back when I opened the front door and followed me inside. I dumped my bags in the lounge and checked his collar. There was a little blue metal tag which had "Tyson" on one side and a phone number on the other.

I sent a text message saying "I have your dog" and gave Tyson a dish of water which he lapped up thirstily. A minute or so later I got a text saying "If this is a kidnapping keep the little sod, otherwise text me your address and I'll be round forthwith."

I didn't know if whoever it was was being funny or callous but I was intrigued that they had sent a text message with punctuation, capitals in the right place and 'forthwith' so I texted back with my address and

shouted at Tyson as he was about to pee on the leg of the table.

Two minutes later I saw a Rolls Royce pull up silently in the alley and probably the most gorgeous man I had ever seen got out. He looked to be in his late forties and his hair was getting that distinguished grey at the sides that on some men is, umm, interesting. He was dressed in a beautifully tailored pin striped suit and carried a dog leash. I quickly checked my hair was presentable and smoothed down my non-tailored skirt and answered the door with my most welcoming smile.

“Hello,” he said in a creamy rich, deep voice. He smiled a most welcoming smile too. “You have my? Ah yes.”

Tyson trotted out to meet him, wagging his tail and looking very pleased with himself. The man bent to attach the leash to Tyson's collar and I searched for something intelligent to say. The Rolls gleamed in the pale, partially overcast, afternoon sun.

“Thank you,” he said to me. “My wife was going frantic.”

Bugger.

Oh well. The clothes I'd bought that afternoon still fitted when I tried them on and the man who'd phoned while I was in my undies came round and looked at me as though I was still in my undies, although he couldn't have known. He bought the drawing board and also Richard's electrical work bench.

“I was going to ring about that,” he said, “when I saw it was the same number, so I didn't, like.”

There isn't a lot you can say to that so I didn't say anything.

“These your husband's?” he asked.

“My uncle's,” I said.

“Ohh,” then “so your husband didn't want 'em then?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“Who, my uncle?”

“No, your husband.”

“He's out at the moment.”

“Ohh,” then “Back soon is he?”

“Any minute now.” I wished he'd go away, with or without the board or bench.

“Right,” he said. “Cash good enough for ya?”

I nodded and he pulled out a wad of notes and counted out a few of them.

“So, erm, you fancy coming out for a drink or something sometime, then?”

“Sorry no, my husband wouldn't like it.”

“Wasn't inviting him,” he laughed. “Not to worry, see ya.”

He loaded the stuff into his van and disappeared into the night, hopefully to never return. For some strange reason I dreamt that night about Josh drawing a small black and tan dog with long ears that fell over its eyes. When he'd finished drawing its tail the dog ran off the paper, trailing its leash behind it and ran through a field of chrome plated flowers. Every time Josh tried to grab the leash he missed.

I was just saying goodbye to a very spotty young boy who had spent two hours wandering around my house when a filthy, battered and ancient looking Land Rover pulled up at the far end of the driveway. Its engine backfired with a cloud of black exhaust then died. The spotty boy, whose name I never discovered, had been putting a gadget against various walls which emitted a little red beam and then writing things in a small notebook. I think he was there to measure up for the floor plan for the planning application but since he jumped like a

panicked wallaby every time I said anything I wasn't entirely sure. Anyway, at the sight of the Land Rover he half ran up the alley and disappeared.

A large man in a pair of thongs, jeans, camouflage jacket and a Trilby got out and stared at the house. Even from a distance I could see his disbelief. He scratched the back of his head and tipped the Trilby forward and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. He slowly walked halfway down the alley, completely ignoring me. Then he rotated through three hundred and sixty degrees a couple of times and knelt down and put his head on the ground and peered up at the house. His Trilby fell off and he ignored it. I was quite intrigued so I just stood in the doorway watching. I hadn't yet met any of England's famed eccentrics but I was pretty sure I was about to.

He got up again and picked up the hat. He went over to one side of the alley and walked down to the house, brushing his shoulder against the neighbour's garden wall all the way. When he reached the house, he bent down and prodded the cobblestones, sighed and stood up again and put his Trilby back on his head so the brim pointed almost straight up. He dusted off his hands and stalked back to the entrance of the alley and walked down the other side and peered closely at the cobblestones there.

Fascinated, I lit a ciggie and watched him. He hadn't yet shown any sign that he was aware I existed. He returned to the approximate centre of the alley and jumped up and down a few times and gazed at the sky and scratched his nose. Then he marched back to his Land Rover and opened the door through the window and got in and started to rummage about on the back seat. He re-emerged with a large pad of what looked like paper and slammed the door of the Land Rover quite hard. He seemed to notice me for the first time and stalked purposefully towards me. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties and his thongs made slapping sounds as he walked.

"Jesus," he said, when he got closer. "What a depressing dump. Bloody glad you called me."

Chapter Twenty

"You must be Lance Fenson," I said.

"The one and only," he replied. "My fame precedes me and I need no introduction." He gave a flowery bow and laughed.

"I'm Sheila Hutchins," I said, not bowing back.

"Of course you are," he said, flicking through his A3 sketch pad to find a blank page. "No one else would have rung me about this, this."

Whatever he lacked it wasn't self confidence.

He dug a piece of charcoal out of one of his pockets and sketched rapidly then gestured for me to follow him up the alley so I followed. Near the entrance he stopped and turned to look back at the house.

"Look," he said, showing me his sketch. In about ten strokes he'd captured the essence of the house and driveway and, yes, it did look a little depressing.

"B&B you said?" he asked. "How many rooms?"

"Yes, five."

"Right, five cars then, park them here," and he quickly sketched car like shapes along the left side.

"Now, to alleviate the gloom of the house, we'll take up four or five feet of the cobblestones at the front and plant a variety of flowers that bloom in different seasons," he said, sketching rapidly. "Trellises here, here, here and here, some red creepers and green ivies, make the facade more tolerable. If we cut the parking off here there'll be enough room for turning space so we'll take out some more cobblestones, just about there, a little off centre to balance the aspect and put in a water feature. Like this."

He showed me the updated sketch and the place had come alive, even

in a simple charcoal drawing.

“What's that room there?” He pointed to the ground floor room in the left corner.

“The kitchen,” I said.

“Excellent, we can run the piping for the water feature from there. Good. Now let's see the back.” He marched off, with me trailing in his wake.

“We'll need about fifteen cubic yards of decent top soil,” he said. “Plus a lot of fertilisers.”

“Why?” I asked.

“These stones are old,” he said. “Very old, probably a hundred years or more. The soil underneath will be quite dead. Need to bring it back to life so we dig in the fertilisers, plenty of phosphates and nitrates and stuff, then put fresh soil on top and dig that in as well. Trouble is the stones'll be a foot thick so we've got to raise the beds up or they'll be lost. Seventy five foot frontage, five foot beds, foot deep, call it fifteen cubic yards. Beautiful stones though, probably be able to use them in the back. Shame to waste them.”

He walked in through the front door and down the hallway.

“Which will be your private rooms?” he said, looking around.

“All the ones on the right,” I said. “With the guest breakfast room down there on the left.”

He marched off to the breakfast room, thongs clapping, and stood in the bay window and sketched an outline of the view on a fresh page.

“Back door?”

I showed him and he wandered around the back garden in much the way he had with the front.

“Right,” he said. “This is easier.” Sketch, sketch, sketch. “Decking here, beds there, there and there, curving pathway along here, arches here and here. You didn't want a swimming pool did you? Dreadful things. Perhaps a small pond here, the trick, you see, is to have hidden little areas that aren't visible until you come across them. Makes the whole place much more interesting. Like butterflies, do you? Coneflowers, flox, yes. I like it.”

He studied his sketch intently.

“Children?”

“The guests might have kids, yes.”

“OK, swing here. Out of sight from most of the garden but visible from the breakfast room so the doting parents can watch over their little darlings and we can use the cobblestones to make a nice little wall so they don't pull up the plants.”

“How long will it take?”

“Three or four years.”

“Wow,” I said. “That's a long time.”

“Plants don't grow overnight.”

“Ahh, I meant how long would it take you to get the work done, excluding growing time.”

“Oh, gotcha, couple of months. This is the best time to do it. Get the digging and planting finished before the spring.”

“How much are we talking about here?”

He gave me a figure roughly double what I'd guesstimated and I swallowed hard.

“Any way we can reduce that cost?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said huffily. “Get someone else.”

“Oh don't be like that,” I said in my best 'we're in this together' voice. “I really want your expertise but I've also got to get beds and things for the guests. They can't sleep in the garden.”

“I suppose you're right,” he said, looking as though a couple of tents should be adequate for them.

He ripped the sketch off his pad and crumpled it up and started another one. This was less grandiose, with no decking, arches or swing and had a decent sized area given over to a zen-like meditation area which was fairly minimalist and secluded by a cobblestone wall. More to the point it knocked thirty percent off his figure and still looked good. And it would attract butterflies. Apparently people staying in B&Bs like butterflies in the garden.

“How about if we had a flower bed in the centre of the alley rather than a water feature?” I asked.

“You'd lose impact,” he said. “A fountain creates a cascading effect that helps centre the eye and leads it flowing out to the sides.”

“Wouldn't a weeping tree do the same?” I asked, “or maybe a big bunch of pampas grass?”

Lance closed his eyes as though offering up an internal prayer to Demeter, the goddess of horticulture.

“Pampas grass I can live with,” he said, even though there was no question of him living here, “since that will take the eye up and around, but never, ever plant any trees out the front. Their roots will destroy the stones.”

We settled on a figure that was only twenty percent or so more than my guestimate and he pointed out that it was a small cost bearing in mind that the house would substantially increase in value once the work was done. I pointed out that I wasn't planning on selling the house so it was irrelevant and he subsided.

“When can you start?”

“I’ll get someone round on Monday,” he said, “to start on the cobblestones. The sooner we can get air and rain to the soil underneath the better. Every day helps. Planting we can leave until late February after the frosts.”

After he left I was having a quiet, calming ciggie and a coffee when it occurred to me that I had a booking so technically I was in business. Which meant I could start claiming my business costs against tax. This cheered me up immensely so I went into town and bought myself an account book and found a 'copy and print' shop who would make me a letterhead from one of my doodles. When I came out of Lara's Fashions, which was a little downmarket from High Chic, I decided to go into the Tin Pan alley cafe for a hot chocolate. I'd been on a diet for a few days and felt it was time for a treat and the cafe was part way down an alley and had cute old fashioned tables and chairs in the alley itself. It had a quiet, secluded feel to it, away from the bustle and glitz of the High Street.

I went in and ordered and sat down inside then got up and went outside since I didn't like the ambience inside. There were too many tables crammed in and it felt oppressive even though there weren't that many people as the lunch time crowd had been and gone. It was much nicer outside, in the alley. In fact, I was the only one out there so I sat and quietly gazed around. A little further down was a sign for a tattoo parlour which I wasn't much interested in as I'm not a fan of tattoos. Yes, I admit many of them look very good but I didn't want one for myself. My hot chocolate arrived and, with great strength of character, I ignored the little marshmallow that came with it.

A youngish man in a suit walked past and I noticed he went in to the tattoo parlour, which surprised me since he didn't look the type for a tattoo either. I had nearly finished my chocolate when he walked past again, going in the other direction, carrying a shopping bag. All I could see down the alley was the tattoo parlour and my curiosity was piqued since, although I'm not an expert in these things, people don't usually come out of tattoo parlours with shopping bags. I finished the chocolate and ate the marshmallow and went to investigate.

“Aha,” I said to myself, standing outside the tattoo parlour. The door opened into a tiny hallway with a staircase leading down to the basement. The tattooist was through another door the other side of the hall and a small, hand painted sign saying “Down & Out pre-loved records” pointed down the stairs. I turned to go back to the car just as a short but extremely wide gentleman clad in well worn leathers covered in patches and chains and with tattoos up his neck and the sides of his head blocked my way.

“‘Allo darlin’” he growled, “waitin’ for me, are ya?” and he leered at me so I turned again and went down the stairs without bothering to reply. Frankly, I found him very scary.

I imagine he went into the tattoo parlour since he didn't follow me down the stairs but I kept going just in case and found myself in a dimly lit room surrounded by racks of old LP records. There was a dusty, almost museum-like smell to the place and some slow, mellow jazz was playing quietly in the background. Out of curiosity I looked in the rack closest to me and started flicking through the records. One with a glossy black sleeve with a simple triangle on it and a white line going in one side and a rainbow of lines coming out the other side caught my eye and I lifted it out. Turning it over I saw the album was Pink Floyd, Dark Side Of The Moon. I'd heard of Pink Floyd although I couldn't remember any of their songs. Still, it was an impressive album sleeve.

I abandoned that rack and moved to a different one. In it I found another album whose cover appealed to me. It was a simple picture of a young black man holding a saxophone and was called Newk's Time by Sonny Rollins. I'd never heard of Sonny Rollins but it did make me wonder if Richard had been trying to generate an image like that when he decided to take up the sax. I kept browsing and in a third rack I froze in astonishment.

This sleeve was a graphic picture of the Vietnamese Monk Thích Quảng Đức burning himself alive. I'd bought that album myself when I was fourteen or fifteen and had been a big fan of Rage Against The Machine. I'd forgotten all about the album and its horrific but fascinating cover. Even now, in this dim, basement record shop twenty five years later, it still horrified and fascinated me.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” a pleasant tenor voice said behind me.

I jumped and nearly dropped Rage Against The Machine.

“Sorry,” I said, “you startled me.”

“That’s what I do best,” he said. “Angus McDermott, welcome to my little shop of horrors,” and he touched a finger on the Rage Against The Machine sleeve. He seemed a little eerie, not that far away from being creepy.

“I bought this album when I was fourteen,” I said. “It’s brought back so many memories.”

“Yes,” said Angus. “Music is so fundamental, especially to the young. A lot of very strong memories are formed by music, from very strong emotions.”

“I’ve got a half formed idea in my head,” I said, after a couple of moments. He raised an eyebrow.

“It probably sounds crazy,” I said, “but I’m thinking of decorating a room at home with album sleeves.”

“Not crazy at all,” he said. “Come into the back with me.”

I was about to say “not a hope in hell, mate” but he was already disappearing behind a curtain at the back of the shop.

“You really are a fool,” I said to myself and took a firm grip on my shopping bags and followed him. Fortunately Angus was alone and still had all his clothes on. More importantly, the back room was covered, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, with album sleeves. It was ... intense, I suppose was the word. I found myself gazing round, recognising two or three I’d had myself and getting caught up in the memories.

“Wow,” I said.

He smiled and didn't look so eerie any more. Just lonely.

"I buy used records," he said. "Complete collections, and a fair number are in poor condition so I chuck them out since I can only sell the decent ones. If you want album sleeves I've got hundreds in the shed that I haven't gotten round to chucking yet. Most are fairly common obviously. You can have the lot for fifty quid."

"OK," I said on impulse. "Can I see them?"

He took me through the back door and up some steps into the tiny garden behind the tattoo shop and unlocked the padlock on the shed. He'd lied to me. There were probably three thousand, maybe more. No way would they fit into the Ka so I phoned Denzil, my 'man with a van'.

"Oh, not you again," he said. I fancied I could hear a smile in his voice. "Are you cancelling Monday?"

"No," I said. "I still need you on Monday. I've just bought a job lot of old records. Could you pick them up and take them to my house for me?"

"OK," he said. "I'm just finishing a delivery now. Give me fifteen minutes."

I handed Angus two twenty pound notes and a ten and he disappeared back into his shop in case another customer had turned up. I browsed through some of the records and there were quite a few that still looked good so I went out to have a ciggie and Denzil turned up after a while. He loaded the records into his van and drove off. I walked back to my car and found Denzil had already arrived when I got home. He was busily browsing through the records himself.

"Tell you what," he said. "I won't charge you anything for this if you'll let me have this record."

He pointed to Sign of the Star by Congo Ashantie Roy.

"Been looking for that for years," he said.

“No problem,” I said. “Take it.” He did, with a smile on his face and, no doubt, a reggae beat in his heart. Three rooms sorted, art, toys and music. Things were looking good.

* * *

Very little happened over the weekend. A fair number of people turned up for the second house clearance sale although most of the good stuff had gone the previous weekend so I didn't sell that much. Denzil was going to have to make a couple of tip runs on Monday. Amusingly Angus turned up to see if the person having the house clearance had a record collection to get rid of and as a joke I tried to sell him his records back but he turned them down. He didn't seem to have much of a sense of humour either, particularly when I told him Denzil had taken an album instead of charging me for his time and van.

By the time Denzil had finished getting rid of everything that hadn't sold over the weekend the house was very empty and very echoey. I'd even got him to take the blinds away so it felt quite exposed. It would probably feel worse at night with the lights on. It probably hadn't been one of my better idea but I wanted to empty the house as much as possible so that I had as blank a canvas as possible to work with. New curtains and carpets could wait until after the rooms were decorated. Since I had no idea what the colours were going to be like in three of the guest rooms and so far only a vague idea for the other two, the Toy Room and the Music Room, I didn't want to rush into buying the wrong curtains and carpets.

Lance also turned up on Monday, as promised, with an old man, and started taking photographs.

“What are the photos for?” I asked.

“Before and after,” he said. “This place will probably be in Better Homes And Gardens by the time I've finished with it.”

“Cool,” I said. I didn't know what Better Homes and Gardens was but figured it might be some sort of magazine which would be good for business. The old man was Gerard and he wasn't as old as he looked,

being a mere sixty one. He was, however, apparently an expert at renovating cobblestones and knew exactly how to remove them without damaging them. He was also going to build the feature wall from them when things had reached that point. For the time being he stacked them neatly in the alley, and drank copious quantities of tea. He seemed to need a cup of tea after every cobblestone and, as far as I could tell, never needed to go to the toilet. Maybe he was helping to fertilise the soil.

Between making cups of tea I did a quick calculation and worked out that I would need somewhere around six hundred album sleeves if I was going to cover the walls of one of the smaller bedrooms which quite surprised me. After I spent the afternoon going through the lot and chucking out all the duplicates and badly mangled ones, I found I was left with barely enough. Still, enough is enough and it occurred to me that if every single one was eye catching it would be an assault on the senses so a fair proportion of bland ones was actually a good thing. How to attach them to the walls was going to be Angelo the decorator's problem.

"So you found the place, then," said Henry when I turned up at the bungalow next door to La Maison d'Art. "Weather's not too bad, is it."

It was drizzling and had been for hours. That kind of cold, persistent drizzle that gives England its reputation for being cold and wet. Before I'd come to England I'd googled the annual rainfall during one of my frequent periods with little to do after we'd been told the Agency was shutting down and discovered that London gets one inch less rain a year on average than Melbourne does and has thirty three fewer wet days a year but for some reason Melbourne isn't considered cold and wet. Well, it is by other Australians, but it isn't by the British.

"No," I said. "Not for ducks anyway."

Henry smiled and called for Carol, his social obligations fulfilled. I was still standing on the doorstep though, in the drizzle, with my new umbrella up, feeling chilly after the warmth of the car.

Carol, the artist, wasn't overly pleased to see me.

“Hello,” she said. “You’d better come in.” She tried to smile welcomingly but it looked more like a grimace.

“Is everything OK?” I asked, stepping inside and remembering to collapse my umbrella. “I can look at the pictures another day if you’d rather.”

“Everything is fine,” she said. “Would you like to see the restaurant first?”

“If you like,” I said. I didn’t particularly want to as a restaurant is a restaurant. Tables and chairs and knives and forks, basically. Unless she wanted to show me round the kitchens in which case one cooker is much like another.

She grabbed a coat and we walked quickly over to the restaurant and she unlocked the door.

“We’re only open in the evenings,” she said. “Well, there you go.”

She turned on the lights so we could see better and I caught my breath. There were a number of paintings on the walls, mostly quite large but there was a montage of small ones as well.

“Are these yours?” I asked, looking round.

“Yes,” she said sadly. I gave her a sharp look then remembered she’d said she didn’t like people looking at her paintings.

I stood in front of one and it most certainly wasn’t a landscape. I didn’t quite know what to make of it but it was ... interesting. I looked at it for a while then stepped back and tripped over a chair.

“What is it?” I asked, picking myself up.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” she said, helpfully. “No, that’s not true. It’s whatever you feel it to be. What does it do to you?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But I feel a little invigorated. Like the sun has come out unexpectedly through all that drizzle.”

“Great,” she said. “What about this one?”

“Oh, that's just plain happy,” I said, “but not exciting if you know what I mean.”

I turned around and glanced at another and shuddered and turned away instantly and went to look at some of the smaller ones.

“Are these smaller because they represent smaller emotions?” I asked.

“No,” said Carol. “I did those when I didn't have enough money for paint to make them bigger.”

It hadn't occurred to me that artists have to be realists as well as creative. I spent a while looking at most of them although I avoided the one that had made me shudder. There was no doubt about it, Carol was a talented artist, even if I didn't always understand what each one was trying to say to me.

“So are these your best pictures?” I asked. “Since they're up in the restaurant.”

“How do you judge what's best?” she answered. “I paint my emotions so who can say if one emotion is better than another. Really the only way to judge is to question how closely the end result is to what I felt when I experienced the emotion and no one can do that except me.”

“So do these most closely represent what you felt?” I asked

“Not really,” she said. “Paint can't capture every dimension of emotion. It's just a superficial representation. A vague approximation. These are no closer than any of the others.”

“OK,” I said. “Let me put it another way. You have more or is this all there is?”

She gave a little laugh and admitted there were more.

“I suppose you want to see them?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “That was what we agreed.”

“Mmm. OK, let's go back to the house.”

We trooped back to the house. The drizzle hadn't stopped and no little rays of sunshine shone through to light the world. Not this part of the world anyway.

“My studio is in the garage,” she said, leading me through the little kitchen into the garage. She flicked on the light and I could see the double garage was jam packed with canvases, piled against each other and in some places two levels high. Near the door was a small space with a table covered in tubes of paint, rags, bottles of oil and god knows what else. And an easel. With a large canvas on it. I went over to have a look at it.

“It's not finished yet,” said Carol nervously.

The painting made me feel very anxious. There was a shivery quality to it, depressive but not depressing. Bright, sharp, jagged streaks shot through it, making it tense, nervous. No matter where I looked on the canvas I felt worried.

“Jesus,” I said, stepping back. This time I crashed into the garage door but didn't fall on my bum. “What's this all about?”

“You tell me,” said Carol.

“It makes me worried and anxious,” I said. “I feel I'm lacking something but at the same time I get a funny feeling of, I don't know, power maybe, pride, strength, something like that.”

“Cool” said Carol. She started to fiddle with some of her brushes on the table.

“What were you feeling when you painted this?” I asked.

“Umm,” said Carol. “I don't like talking about my pictures.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“No, I mean, that's what I was painting,” she said. “How I feel when someone looks at one of my pictures. It was your idea.”

“What?” I said.

“You remember, when you rang to change your visit to today?”

I vaguely remembered saying something about that as a joke.

“So why don't you like people looking at your paintings?” I asked.

She sighed and squeezed a tube of paint then picked up a bottle of something and shook it.

“Do you want a stranger to know how you feel?” she asked. “Because that's what these pictures are, my feelings, my emotions. I feel naked, exposed when someone looks at them. In fact it's worse than that, since people seem to think they have to comment on them, even criticise them. Do you want people talking about your deepest emotions? Being critical of them?”

“Right,” I said. “Now I understand this picture.”

I turned away to look at some others.

“So, er, how do you feel about some of them going up on display at my B&B?” I asked.

“I'm not there,” she said. “It's like someone talking about you behind your back. It doesn't matter until you know about it, then it hurts. Somewhere else I don't give a rat's arse about. I just don't like being around at the time.”

“Yeah, I can understand that. Do you have any which aren't your emotions?”

“Sure,” she said. “Over against that wall. They're my older pictures, when I was still exploring styles.”

I went over to have a look. There were several portraits and still lifes,

lives?, and one of a steam train coming out of a tunnel in the countryside somewhere. They were all very good but somehow they lacked an intensity, a vibrancy.

“I know what you're thinking,” said Carol. “They're just superficial garbage.”

“What do you mean?” I said, startled. It seemed a funny thing to say, particularly about her own work.

“They're just pretty pictures,” she said. “They look nice but there's no solid emotion behind them, no experiences, no ... substance. They're of life but they aren't life, if that makes sense. They have no reality behind them. They're not real.”

Not real? Didn't Josh say something like that?

Chapter Twenty One

I ended up selecting four paintings and left the other four for Carol to choose since I couldn't make up my mind. In some ways it would be easier for Carol because she could judge the paintings on their intrinsic merit whereas I always had the colour scheme of the guest room niggling at the back of my mind. In the end it didn't matter since it was going to be impossible to get the colours right as there was so many colours across whatever pictures I took that pretty much anything other than beige for the room and furnishings would clash with something. Henry said he would drop them round after I got back from Australia. Apparently they needed to be wrapped properly in acid free packaging and padding.

For some reason choosing Carol's paintings for the Art Room felt very significant to me. Emptying the house of Richard's old stuff and buying a few odds and ends for myself hadn't meant much but the paintings were somehow symbolic of setting up my new life. I felt as though the B&B was coming together even though the paintings were really just the beginning. Even the taking up of the cobblestones hadn't made me feel this positive. They were outside the house and could just have been some Council road repairs but the paintings were the first real forward change inside. I woke up on Wednesday morning feeling very invigorated and ended up spending much of the day wandering around furniture stores.

That's when I started to get the feel for power. The effect on salespeople when you casually mention you're looking to buy half a dozen queen sized beds or a dozen arm chairs is an eyeopener. They become very obsequious and several places even offered me coffee and a quiet chat in a comfortable back room. More importantly sizeable discounts were mentioned, which was probably a mistake on their part since it made me realise just how big their profit margins were and got me thinking about approaching the manufacturers directly. Still, I felt a little like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and I have to say that is a nice feeling. I mean that scene where Richard Gere tells the store manager he's going to spend an obscene amount of money and the manager makes all the staff fawn over Julia Roberts. Furniture stores in country towns in Australia tend to make you feel they're doing you a favour rather than the other way around. Even at

my very low power level I could feel the power corrupting me. Bring it on!

* * *

"Hello dear, would you like some tea?"

"Yes please," I'd resigned myself to having to drink the foul stuff whenever I visited Cecily.

"Are you having the driveway done?" she asked when she brought the tea into her lounge. She didn't like company in the kitchen. She said it made her flustered.

"Lance, that gardener you recommended, is taking up a few stones in front of the house to make some flower beds," I said. "That's actually why I'm here."

"Oh, you don't need a reason to drop in, dear," she said, checking the colour of the tea. I don't know why since I always put in so much milk to drown the taste that mine was invariably almost pure white.

"I'm going back to Australia tomorrow for a week," I said. "I was wondering if I could leave a set of keys with you so Lance can get into the house if he needs to."

"Certainly, dear," said Cecily. "But why would he need to?"

"He might need electricity or water or something," I said. "And it's even possible he might be able to start working on the back garden while I'm away."

We talked about Lance's plans for the back garden for a while and Cecily was of the opinion that it would be lovely.

"Especially in a few years when things have got established. I just hope I'm still around to see how lovely it will be," she said.

"Oh, I'm sure you will," I said and we talked for a while about her various aches and pains and which of her wide circle of friends were

thinking of or in the process of moving into retirement homes.

“Which reminds me, dear,” she said, pouring herself a second cup of tea. “Have you got themes for all your rooms yet?”

I explained about the Art Room, the Toy Room and the Music Room but admitted I hadn't yet thought of anything for the other two rooms.

“I only asked because Dolores is moving to a retirement home and she's having to downsize, poor dear,” said Cecily. “Hubert, her husband, died a couple of years ago and she has to get rid of his train set.”

“Oh yes.” I couldn't quite see the relevance.

“He was an enthusiast,” she said. “He converted an entire room into a fully functioning model railway system with passenger trains and freight trains and lots of stations and countryside and so on. He spent hours every day playing with it, shunting things all over the place. Dolores says there's over a hundred feet of track. He even developed a timetable for the trains to run to. When she told me I thought of you.”

“You mean as a train theme for one of the rooms?”

“Yes, perhaps some of your guests would like to play with trains.”

“Well, it's an idea,” I said. Not a very good one, I didn't add. Somehow I didn't like the idea of guests locking themselves in one of my rooms playing with toy trains all night and blowing whistles and things. And would there be room for a bed? They'd probably collect the dust a well.

“Oh, and Elsie had decided it's time she got rid of her collection of porcelain miniatures and decorated thimbles,” continued Cecily. “They might make a good theme too.”

“Wouldn't they be easy to steal?” I said, thinking rapidly. My gut reaction was that porcelain and thimbles were a bit, old?, for a theme. Like lace doilies. Although not all my guests would be into modern art or classic rock. Maybe I ought to think about it. Still, a train theme

wasn't that bad an idea, without the train set of course. Maybe a couple of old station signs and things like that. Or maybe an old railway carriage converted into a breakfast room or a summer house in the back garden?

"Oh, don't be absurd, Sheila!" I told myself, as Cecily reminisced about a friend many years ago who had collected Russian dolls. "Where on earth are you going to get an old railway carriage and how will you get it in the back garden?"

A new day dawned and I was going home. I should have been excited, I suppose, but the truth was I was far more excited about being in England and setting up the B&B and taking positive charge of my life. Going back to Aus to finish things off there was a chore, an interruption, an irritation.

I threw a few clothes into my carryon bag, wondered whether to leave the fridge on or not and decided to leave it on and jumped into the car. When I got to the end of the alley I stopped and reversed all the way back and went inside and got the Toska book from the box. I was vaguely thinking that I might give Miranda a ring while I was there and that having the book with me might, I don't know, give me credibility perhaps. I probably wouldn't get in contact with her but I felt having the book with me was a good idea in some way. If only to show Carol in Australia the cause of all her hard work.

I dropped off the car at the car hire place. Rob, according to his name tag, was the one who had phoned me about stealing the car and he politely enquired if I was coming back from Australia.

"Yes," I told him. "I'm only going for a week."

"Will you be wanting to hire another car when you come back?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm going to buy one."

"Sensible idea," he replied. "How will you get around until you've bought one?"

“Good point,” I said. “Could you book me one for a few days for when I get back?”

“Certainly,” he said. “You can have the same Ka if you like, it's not reserved.”

Rob was the kind of salesman I liked. Polite and attentive but not pushy. So I reserved my bright yellow Ka. Even though I didn't like the colour it gave me a sense of belonging that lasted until I got on the train to Victoria Station, not that there was anything wrong with the train. The problem was me. I was letting a single unpleasant incident colour my opinion of all train journeys. Needless to say I got all the way to Heathrow Airport without being groped again.

And Singapore Airport hadn't got rid of its cactus garden! I toyed with ringing Lance to ask for a cactus garden but decided, regretfully, not to. I don't think England has the right climate for those huge cacti.

How many millions of non smokers have travelled through Singapore Airport and never experienced the joys of a couple of ciggies in a cactus garden in the middle of a long haul flight? You have to feel sorry for people sometimes.

And Carol, bless her little heart, was there at Melbourne Airport to meet me, at six o'clock on Saturday morning, forgoing her usual sleep-in to get up and drive for two hours just for me. I'd slept well on the plane so after the initial excitement of our meeting she slept in the car while I drove.

I woke her when we got to my house and she wanted to come inside with me but I wouldn't let her. I needed to face the place alone so she drove away and probably went back to bed.

My house was as cold and cheerless as I remembered. My car was still there on the drive and there was a stack of junk in the mail box and a couple of letters so I dumped the junk in the rubbish bin without looking at it and made myself walk up to the front door. The grass needed cutting, I noted. I found my keys in my bag and went to unlock the front door but my hand dropped away. Legally this was my house but it felt wrong. This wasn't where I lived anymore. I'd only

been gone for three weeks but it felt like a lifetime.

I took a deep breath and pushed the key into the lock and turned it and pushed the door open. The odour of a thousand stale memories rushed out at me and my stomach churned. It was all as I had left it. Perhaps a little dusty but otherwise unchanged. I put my bag down in the hall and left the letters on top of it.

Yes, there were some good memories from this house. My early years of marriage, the joy of my pregnancy and of Clair's early years. Memories of visits from my parents. Memories of love and laughter. But not many and deeply buried.

I wandered from room to room, touching things. Everything was cold and dead. Like my little darling Claire and my loving parents. Cold and dead. I straightened some photos on the wall and ran my fingers along the back of the couch. The kitchen bench tops gleamed dully, no sign of the many, many tasteless dinners for one that had passed over them. It had been forever since they'd seen a happy, family meal. The red digits of the clock on the cooker flashed 0:00 at me, winking balefully. In the bedroom the slightly dishevelled covers reminded me of the haste with which I'd left this mausoleum with barely a shred of the memory of joyous lovemaking that, aeons ago, had filled the house with energy and passion.

And there it was. A door. Just a door. An ordinary door. One of those simple wood veneer internal doors that opened into a museum of despair. When Claire had died I didn't have the heart to tidy up or clear it out. I just spent hours every day sitting on the floor beside her bed, grieving. Her new bed. Only a few months old when she left it for the last time. Her cot, dismantled, inside the wardrobe, waiting for our second baby. Which never came along. Her toys still scattered, crayons, drawings. The bed unmade, some rumpled clothes still lying on the floor where she had left them.

I sat again in my old spot beside the bed. Remembering her excitement when she woke, desperate for her gran and grandpa to arrive for the much anticipated outing to Melbourne Zoo. Remembering her screams when they finally turned up and her casual kiss and hug before they drove away. Before I went to work. Before my

life ended. Before Paul's sorrow turned to worry over me and then to despair and then to anger and finally to divorce. I sat here beside her bed through it all. And cried too many tears to be counted.

I suppose as you grow up you somehow have an awareness that your parents will die. It's dreadful when it happens but it's easier to accept. It's part of the natural order of things. But not your child, your baby. Clair was supposed to outlive me, not die, two desperately short days after her third birthday. So I sat there again, on the floor beside her bed. My hand on her coverlet. I could not cry, I had no tears left.

"Goodbye," I said quietly. "Goodbye my gorgeous girl. It's time to go now."

I got up, as I had done so many times before, and bent to kiss her pillow. I slowly made her bed and picked up her clothes from the floor. I buried my face in them but her smell was long gone. Long gone. I folded them and put them away in the drawer. I tidied away her toys and crayons and drawings and picked up her stuffed giraffe. I put it on the bed, beside her pillow. The way she always had it when she went to sleep.

"Goodbye," I said softly and turned towards the door. Then I turned back and picked up the giraffe and walked out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind me. I got my bag and ignored the letters and drove to Carol's. Where I discovered I still had a few more tears left inside me.

* * *

"I have to get rid of the place," I told Carol later. "Now I've been back I know I can't keep it and rent it out. It has to go."

"OK," she said. "Whatever you think best. How do you want to handle this?"

"I don't want anything from the house," I said forcefully. "Nothing, except that." I pointed to the giraffe. "My old life is over, I've got to cut it off and leave no traces."

“Are you sure? You could probably get some money for some of it.”

“Sod the money,” I said. “It’s over, it’s all got to go.”

She made me some coffee and we sat silently over ciggies.

“I’ll phone the Salvation Army on Monday,” I said. “They can send one of their trucks over and take what they want and the rest can go into a skip. I’ll ask Norman to handle the sale of the house. Can I stay here?”

Norman was the only half decent estate agent at the firm I used to work for. Stanley probably couldn’t give the house away and there was no way I was going to ask Vera to handle it.

“Of course,” she said then paused. “What about your car?”

“I’ll take it to a dealer, ask them to let me keep it until my plane leaves.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said. “How about we start now?”

“What do you mean?” I said. “It’s Saturday.”

“The car dealers are still open,” she said. “If you’re decided we might as well make a start.”

So we finished our coffees and went round the local used car dealers. They weren’t overly impressed by my old car but then it wouldn’t be in their interests to be impressed anyway. But I found one who was willing to give me cash the following Friday for it, provided it was still in the same condition so I agreed and he tried to sell me another car. Which made me smile.

Carol and I spent some time on Sunday going through the paperwork in the house. There wasn’t much that needed keeping beyond documents about the house, including recent bills which the conveyancer would need for prospective buyers. I also found all the papers Roger the lawyer in London needed about my parents and myself in order to apply for British citizenship. The rest I put in

garbage sacks ready for the skip.

On Monday, while Carol was at work, I phoned the Salvation Army and they told me they couldn't get a truck out that week so I phoned St Vincent De Paul, another charity, and they could get one there the next day so they got the benefits instead. Norman was delighted to hear from me, as he is a professional people person. He was delighted that I was moving to England, delighted to sell the house for me and delighted to recommend a conveyancer. The skip people had a skip round that afternoon. Everything was going like clockwork.

It was incredibly boring watching the St Vincent De Paul people go through the house and load things into their truck so on impulse and for want of anything better to do, I phoned Miranda.

"Is that Mona Finkelmann?" I asked.

"Yes, who is this?" she answered.

"Umm, my name is Sheila Hutchins," I said. "I'm Richard Wilson's niece."

There was a long silence.

"I think you have the wrong number," she said and hung up.

"Oh well, it was worth a try" I thought to myself.

I made a round of coffee for the SVDP guys and myself. None of them smoked though.

"So what's happening here?" asked one of them. "Why are you getting rid of all this stuff?"

"I'm moving to England," I said.

That pretty much killed the conversation for them and they went back to talking about the cricket so I went to the bottom of the garden and phoned the gas, electricity and phone companies to close my accounts. It didn't take that long so I went for a walk.

Maybe two hours after our very brief chat, Mona Finkelmann phoned back.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“I just wanted to have a chat with you about Richard,” I said. “He died a few months ago and left me everything but I never met him. I didn't even know he existed until the lawyers contacted me.”

“Hmmm,” she said and fell silent.

I waited for more of a reaction but none was forthcoming.

“So, erm, would it be possible to meet you sometime?” I asked. “Just for a chat. I'm in Australia until Friday.”

She didn't answer.

I was just about to say “Oh well, thank you for calling back, bye bye,” when she said

“How about Thursday afternoon?”

“Great,” I said. “Where and when?”

She named a cafe in Mount Martha which is a small town on the Mornington Peninsular and we agreed to meet there at two in the afternoon. Then she hung up. She seemed quite a decisive woman.

When the guys from SVDP had gone I surveyed what was left and decided another skip was needed so I phoned the skip people and they promised to get one to me “at sparrow's fart” which is Aussie slang for dawn. Despite the jet lag I had no intention of being there if they did. I got started on filling the skip and gave up when it was two thirds full and went back to Carol's for food and sleep. I didn't tell her I'd rung Miranda since there was nothing really to tell and she'd only give me endless advice on what and what not to say and, frankly, I didn't feel up to it.

There was an empty skip there when I went round to the house again

on Wednesday. By the look of it they'd dropped off the new one and taken the old one away so I got stuck in. Pretty boring really, especially as I'd switched my mind off to any memories that might get revived. This was just cleaning and tidying. Just business, nothing personal.

Mona was waiting in the cafe when I arrived. I knew it was her because there was no one else in the cafe, apart from a young girl behind the coffee machine.

"Are you Mona Finkelmann," I asked.

"With three Ns," she said.

"OK," I said. "I'm Sheila Hutchins. I suppose that's one in the middle and two at the end?"

She nodded so I asked if she wanted some coffee and I ordered two cappuccinos.

"It's surprising how many people think I mean there are three Ns at the end," she said as I sat down opposite her. "It's a little test I give people to see if I can be bothered to talk to them."

"OK," I thought. "How weird can you get?"

"So did I pass?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

We sat and looked at each other, neither quite knowing what to say. She was a small but strong looking woman with short, grey hair and black framed glasses.

"So, err, how did you meet Richard?" I asked.

She looked thoughtfully at me with a steady gaze.

"I was having a lunch meeting with a publisher in a cafe in Melbourne," she said. "When the publisher left I stayed for another

coffee and Richard leaned over from the next table and asked me if the song Mornington Ride was written about the Mornington Peninsular. He must have heard me give my new address to the publisher.”

“Was it?” I asked.

Everyone knows the Seekers song Mornington Ride ... *Train whistle blowing, makes a sleepy noise, underneath the blankets for all the girls and boys*⁴ and the Seekers were from Melbourne so it made sense.

“No,” she said. “It’s a common mistake but the song was written in the fifties by an American. The Seekers were just one of many bands who recorded it.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“That’s what Richard said, too,” said Mona. “How did you find me?”

“I came across the name Miranda Moor,” I said, “and a friend of mine here tracked you down.”

“Where on earth did you come across that name?” said Mona. “I only used it once, on a book that never sold.”

I rummaged in my bag and pulled out Richard’s copy of *Toska* and put it on the table.

“Did you really love him?” I asked.

4 Mornington Ride by The Seekers, 1966

Chapter Twenty Two

Mona didn't react. She just stared at the book then slowly reached out and picked it up and read the inscription. A softness came over her face and she quietly closed the book and stroked the cover gently.

"He came to Australia on business," she said. "Back in 1989. I'd only been married three years but I had an affair with him."

She looked me in the eye.

"I'd prefer my husband didn't find out," she said. "Although it probably doesn't matter now. It was thirty years ago."

"I won't say anything," I said. "I just want to find out more about Richard, I'm not here to cause any trouble."

She searched my face then relaxed perceptibly.

"Did I love him? Yes. Maybe if he had loved me I would have left Ed and gone back to England with him but he didn't. He once told me he couldn't, there was something missing in his personality, his mind. He simply lacked the capacity to love anyone. He liked people, yes, but love? No."

She stared at the book then put it on the table.

"He was a charming man," she said. "Very polite, respectful, kind. Very easy to love. I'm sure I wasn't the first woman to fall in love with him and I doubt very much I was the last either."

She had some of her coffee and gazed out of the window.

"He stayed here until his visa ran out then he went back to England. He promised he'd come back again but he never did."

She sighed.

"We wrote to each other, you know. Or at least I did. He wrote back a few times but he wasn't much of a writer. You know he was dyslexic?"

I nodded.

“And we talked on the phone a few times as well. I don't know, I think I thought that one day he might love me back but ...”

She petered out, lost in her memories.

“Ed was a long distance truck driver in those days. Now he stays fairly local but back then he'd be gone for a week or more at a time so it wasn't hard to be with Richard. Ed would go off to WA or Queensland or somewhere and I'd go off to Richard.”

She laughed. “Yes, I suppose it was wrong but it was fun too, even though Lisa ...”

She went quiet again then touched the book.

“This book is about Richard, you know.”

“I thought it was a children's book,” I said.

“It is, but it's allegorical.”

“Lisa?” I asked quietly, not wanting to break her mood.

“Yes,” she said. “Lisa.”

She switched her gaze to look me in the eye. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind.

“Another coffee?” she asked suddenly. “I'm going to have a muffin, do you want one?”

I went for a pee while she ordered coffees and muffins. Although I was rapidly becoming an anglophile, I had to admit the Aussies were much better at making muffins.

“Lisa was my sister,” she said. “Still is. I'm a writer, I should get my tenses right. Anyway, she's eight years younger than me and she got involved with a total loser but we all do silly things when our

emotions are involved. He was forever getting into fights and couldn't hold a job but she was in love so what can you do?"

I hadn't got a sister but I'd had a girlfriend in my late teens who'd gone the same way so I empathised.

"One day when Richard was with me, Shane, Lisa's man, turned up on my doorstep. He was distraught because he'd beaten up Lisa and she was in hospital. We rushed over and Lisa wasn't too badly hurt. Some cuts and bruises, a broken nose, an amazing black eye but no internal injuries or anything really serious. While I was going frantic in the waiting room, Richard talked with Shane and when he and I went back to his apartment he phoned his psychiatrist in London."

"Richard was seeing a psychiatrist?" I asked. I was surprised since no one had mentioned this to me before.

"He suffered bouts of depression," said Mona. "He was never full-on bipolar but hovered on the edge and he was seeing a psychiatrist about it. I don't know if he continued after he got back to England but, well, anyway, he talked to his psychiatrist about Shane and his psychiatrist got in touch with a Melbourne psychiatrist and arranged for Shane to go to see him. It turned out that Shane was suffering from something called Intermittent Explosive Disorder and that was the cause of his problems. Most of the time he was just an ordinary guy but sometimes he'd explode with uncontrollable anger. Sometimes for a reason, sometimes for no reason, or none that anyone could fathom out. And a lot of the time the anger would just be verbal, shouting, abuse and so on but occasionally it would turn nasty and he'd start hitting people. Understandably he couldn't hold a job, he'd work somewhere for a while then have an uncontrollable rage and abuse his boss or beat up another worker."

"Is that why he hospitalised your sister?" I asked.

"Yes. He undeniably loved her and would never hurt her, when he was himself. But that day he'd had a bout and without knowing what he was doing just laid into her. He hated himself for it."

"So what happened?"

“There was no treatment for it in Australia,” said Mona. “This was 1989, don't forget. The American Psychiatric Association had only a year or two before put it on their list of recognised psychiatric disorders. Richard's London psychiatrist knew about it but here in Australia it was unknown. It was just seen as bad tempered aggression, not a psychiatric disorder. The Melbourne psychiatrist Shane went to was pretty radical and he found a clinic in Arkansas in America that was doing some experimental therapeutic work with IED and managed to get Shane referred there. It was years before Medicare here acknowledged its existence so there was no way they'd cover it.”

“It must have been expensive,” I said.

“I wanted Lisa to leave him,” said Mona, ignoring me. “Before she got seriously hurt or got pregnant. Can you imagine a man like that with kids? Anyway, she wouldn't. She refused point blank to abandon him. She was convinced that with some love and help he'd come good.”

She finished the last of her muffin and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“It was incredibly expensive,” she said. “Shane had to go to Arkansas for treatment. There was some drug they were working on and there was also behavioural therapy but it meant he had to keep going to the clinic every two months for over two years and he had to stay for week each time and, of course, Lisa had to go with him and they worked on coping strategies for her as well. Aside from the treatment itself there was all those flights and accommodation and neither of them had any money coming in since how do you hold a job when you need that much time off?”

“So how did they manage?” I asked.

“Richard paid for everything,” she said. “Have you heard of the Candy Makeup Screen?”

“Yes, it was one of Richard's,” I said.

“As well as paying for everything, he arranged for all his royalties in Australia on the Makeup Screen to go to Lisa,” said Mona. “It only

lasted a few years but it was enough to get them sorted.”

“Jesus,” I said. “That was incredibly generous of him.”

“He was like that,” said Mona. “He had no real concept of money either. It was just something that sat around until you needed it then you used it. Like string. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if he valued string more highly than money.”

“So what happened to Shane?” I said after a while.

“The treatments worked,” said Mona. “They’re still together and now he just has fits of bad temper and when they happen he goes and sits in a corner for a while and writes nasty letters to people which he burns and he doesn’t take it out on anyone which means he has been able to stay in the same job for over twenty years now. And, more importantly, he never hit Lisa again, or any of the kids they had.”

She finished her second cup of coffee.

“I loved him anyway,” she said. “But I’ll always love him for helping Lisa too and I always felt he should have got some recognition for what he did but he would never let me write about it. He said it was just a lot of fuss about nothing. He said they needed some money and he had some money so what was the problem?”

“So Toska was about Richard helping Lisa and Shane?” I felt the glimmering of understanding.

“Yes,” said Mona. “I let it ride for years but then I had this idea to write about Richard, Lisa and Shane as a children’s story. It wasn’t much but I talked about it on the phone with Richard and he let me do it after a while. Unfortunately no publishers were interested. They might have been if I’d been able to write about it properly, as a biography, but as a children’s book it wasn’t the current vogue. Which is one of the reasons why I tried to set up a writers’ cooperative but that didn’t really work either. Have you read the book?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m guessing Richard is Toska the teddy bear.”

"That's right," said Mona. "I'm Zoe and Lisa is Zara. The flying carpet is the plane trips to America and the rats that save the carpet when it's stolen is Richard's money. Of course you'd never be able to fit the story to real life if you didn't already know, which is why Richard agreed to me writing it."

We talked some more about Richard and had more coffee and muffins. My diet, never particularly strong to begin with, more or less forgotten. Then we moved on to what I was doing with my inheritance from him so I told her about changing his house into a B&B.

"He'd have loved the name," she laughed. "but he'd have hated the idea. He didn't like strangers in his house. Even that woman next door, he always went to her place when they did it."

* * *

"How is it possible that a depressive reclusive who didn't like people managed to have such an impact on people's lives?" I asked Carol that evening. "After all, he even made people bring their own mugs when they came for coffee!"

"Well, he did like women," she said. "Maybe he just did these things to get a shag?"

"No, I can't believe that," I said. "If that's all it was he'd have had a string of hookers. There's something else here, maybe it was because of all his problems growing up as a dyslexic illegitimate adoptee."

"Or maybe he just didn't understand the positive impact he was having," said Carol. "As Mona said, he had money and no desire to hang on to it. If someone needed it he just gave it to them and didn't think about the consequences."

She may have been right, I don't know, but I liked to think there was something saint-like about my uncle. After all, he could have just walked the streets handing money out to people.

"It wasn't just women, though," I said after a while. "He helped Josh too, when he was made redundant. He could so easily have hired an

experienced farm manager but instead he gave a complete unknown the opportunity. It changed his life.”

“I guess,” said Carol. She wasn't really that interested as there was someone in her department at work causing problems and she didn't know how to handle him, so we talked about her staffing issues then went to bed.

I managed to get the rest of my house emptied into the skip the next day and arranged for its collection and left the house keys with Norman. He promised he'd get the place photographed and up for sale in the next few days and, after a tearful goodbye with Carol, I got on the plane to go to England, ending my life in Australia. Regrets? Maybe a few but there was nothing I could do to change the past and I had no future there. Memories? Yes, I carried them to England with me, part of that huge excess baggage that I carried in my head. They just didn't weigh me down as much as they used to.

I managed to sleep for a lot of the trip, although I didn't miss out on my time in the cactus garden in Singapore. I also spent some time thinking about Richard.

“How many other people did he help?” I wondered. I had no way of knowing unless chance happened to shed some light. It was frustrating but I did have an idea and phoned Miranda about it from Heathrow airport when I arrived.

“You remember I said I was thinking of having a teddy bear in the hallway with Toska on his chest?” I asked. “Would you mind if I had some leaflets giving the story of how he helped your sister and how Toska came about?”

She ummed and erred about it for a while.

“I suppose as he's dead now it doesn't matter from his point of view, but I'm not happy with the idea of our names being made public.”

“How about if I just refer to Miranda and her sister?” I asked, “without giving any actual names. And if you still have any of the actual books left I could sell them too. That way people will know what a kind,

generous man he was.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” she said. “I’ll get back to you.”

We left it at that and I made my way home. To my new home and my new life. Richard could have left everything to the RSPCA but instead he chose to leave it to me. Yet another woman whose life he turned turned around.

Josh phoned soon after I got home. He wanted to come round as he had something for me. I just wanted to go to bed but what the hell.

I opened the door when he knocked and saw his new car, parked behind my rental.

“New car?” I asked and he smiled sheepishly but didn’t comment.

“Come on in,” I said. “Tea, coffee?”

He settled for tea and asked how the trip had gone so I told him I’d decided to burn my boats and sell the house in Aus. He seemed pleased for some reason.

“So what have you got for me?” I asked.

“Umm,” he said. “You remember before you left you said you liked the Ka and you wanted a dark grey one with GPS?”

“Vaguely,” I said.

“Come and have a look,” he said and went to the front door.

“OK,” I said. “So you’ve bought yourself a grey Ka. Is that what you wanted to show me?”

“Umm,” he said. “I didn’t buy myself one, I bought you one. It’s yours. It’s not new though, it’s four years old but its got low mileage.”

“What?”

I can only blame jet lag for my reaction. Before condemning me, try taking a long haul flight to the other side of the world and then come back before you get used to the lag and see how you react to things. As far as my body was concerned I was somewhere in the middle east, or perhaps the Ukraine and ... irritable.

“Oh shit,” said Josh, looking worried and ashamed. “I’ve buggered it up, haven’t I.”

“What do you mean you’ve bought me a car?” I wanted to know.

“Ummm, it’s a present,” he said, looking at his feet, the keys for the Ka in his hand, forgotten.

“But a car? Jesus! What on earth possessed you?”

He didn’t answer.

“Well?”

“Umm, I like you and wanted to get you something,” he said quietly, not looking at me. “Err, I can always sell it if you don’t like it.”

“What’s going on here?” I said. “You don’t go round buying cars for people you like!”

Then it dawned on me. He liked me and had bought me a car. Not just any car but a car I’d told him I liked. I started to calm down.

“OK,” I said. “I apologise for shouting at you. I was just very surprised. Come in to the lounge, You’ve got some explaining to do.”

He walked to the lounge like a school boy sent to the headmaster for being naughty.

“Right,” I said when we’d sat down. “What’s going on here?”

His leg started to jitter.

“Umm,” he said. “Maybe I’d better just go and we’ll forget this ever

happened.”

“No,” I said. “I completely confused and I'm not a schoolgirl anymore. I'm forty and I want to know what's going on here.”

“Oh god,” he said. “This isn't happening.”

I just looked at him, which seemed to make him more uncomfortable, if that was possible.

“When we went to the Mods Revival party you were about to kiss me,” I said. “Then you backed away and wouldn't talk to me. Now you buy me a car. You're not leaving here without an explanation.”

“You're my boss,” he blurted out.

“No, I'm not,” I said.

“Yes, you are,” he said, looking surprised, “you own the farm.”

“Oh,” I said. “I suppose I do. So?”

I still hadn't made any real connection with the farm. As far as I was concerned Josh ran the farm and I hadn't even had any income from it yet to make me feel that I actually did own it. It was just a place I visited occasionally with Josh and a few pigs.

“So you're my boss,” he said. “Which means you can sack me any time you want.”

“Why would I sack you?” I asked. I was genuinely puzzled. Now that it had been said I suppose I could sack him but I had no idea how. Besides, I knew nothing about pig farming so why would I sack someone who did?

“Oh god,” he said. He was visibly shaking. He took a deep breath and pulled himself together and jumped up to stand in front of me. Probably getting ready to run.

“I like you,” he said. “I really like you, you're completely real and, well,

umm, I just like you.”

I stared at him.

“Umm, you're going to sack me now, I guess,” he said.

Have you ever had one of those moments when a light suddenly goes on in your head and then smacks you between the eyes? It happened to me at that moment. Josh liked me! But he was scared in case I sacked him. And gave him a bad reference.

“Oh, you silly man,” I said, standing up to kiss him. “You silly, silly man. We're both mature adults, we'll work it out. Don't worry.”

He kissed me back and I kissed him again. Just to show him who's the boss.

“So does this mean I can ask you on a date?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And since you're putting your career on the line by dating your employer, the least I can do is get a crash helmet that fits properly. Come on, let's go shopping. I need some warm jeans too. Where are the car keys?”