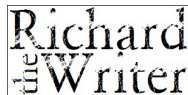


Sylvia

Richard Jefferis



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Prologue

It was a bad day for a hanging.

An icy wind gusted across the marshy ground, bringing with it occasional squalls of rain. The dawn, if the dim grey light that hid behind the scudding clouds could truly be called a dawn, had passed an hour before and early seekers of entertainment had started to gather long before. Even now, with the condemned due to arrive soon, more people were joining the crowd. They came mostly on foot, wrapped in such clothes or rags as they possessed, although them as could afford it came in their carts and carriages, staying on the London Road to avoid the sodden marshes.

“Where are we?” asked Letitia Metcalfe, her heart aching with grief although she tried to hide it with false jollity. “As yet I know little of the surrounds of my new home.”

“This is Knavesmire,” said John Metcalfe. “Known by many in these parts as the York Tyburn. ’Tis a foul place on the south side of our fair City of York. Aye, a foul place for foul people.”

“You mean them as are to be hanged?” asked Letitia.

“Aye,” said John. “You see that there?” and he pointed with the end of his whip. “That be the Three Legged Mare and that be where the hanging takes place.”

Letitia forced herself to look over at the triangular wooden structure on three posts some way into the marsh and tried to suppress a shudder.

“Why is it called the York Tyburn?” she asked, trying to show an interested curiosity she was far from feeling.

“Know you not of Tyburn Hill, my dearest?” asked John with some surprise. “’Tis where all the hangings in London take place.”

“Ahh forgive my foolishness, husband,” said Letitia, shaking her head slightly to pull her wits together. “And this is the London Road, is it

not?”

“Indeed,” said John. “If we were to follow this road we would arrive in London after several days of much discomfort and travail.”

“Then I pray we have no need to visit that place,” said Letitia.

“As do I,” said John. “Ahh, yonder is Jack. He will direct us to our seats.”

“We have seats?” asked Letitia, her heart missing a beat.

“Aye,” said John happily as he steered the cart towards Jack. “I paid two shillings each for us to have a seat with a close and goodly view of the proceedings. ’Tis but a small price to pay for my beloved wife’s edification and entertainment.”

“I thank you, husband,” said Letitia, feeling sick at the prospect. She had hoped to be able to hide behind others in the crowd but it was not to be. Doubtless at two shillings a seat they would be very close indeed.

A distant rumbling from the crowds some way behind them caused John to stop the cart and stand up to see what was happening.

“Pon my soul, he is almost upon us!” he exclaimed, sitting back down and urging the horse on. “We must make haste for the condemned is drawing near. We have not a moment to lose! You there! Take my horse and keep it safe and there will be a penny in it for you!”

“Aye, thank ’ee kindly, sir,” said the lad, knuckling his forehead in pleasure at the prospect of an easy penny.

John threw the lad the reins then hurried around the back of the cart to help Letitia down. The low heels of her ankle boots sank into the muddy ground but he paid that no heed as he hurried over to ask Jack about their seats. She followed more slowly, leaning forward so that her heels did not become bogged.

“Those be our seats,” said John, hurrying back. He pointed to a low

platform with several rows of hard wooden chairs. Most were already occupied. "We have the two at the end of the first row. Jack promised me a goodly view and I do believe we will have one of the very best. Make haste, my dear, make haste!"

He snatched up Letitia's hand and half dragged her to their seats as the noise from the crowd grew. No sooner had Letitia taken her seat than there was a sudden flurry from those standing nearby as they surged forward to get a glimpse of the notorious Midnight Dutch. Several started to throw clods of earth and rotten vegetables and boos and jeers rang out.

"There he is!" exclaimed John jumping to his feet in excitement. The four soldiers on horses rode past to reveal the high sided cart that carried the condemned man.

"Have a care, my good sir. There be others wishing to view," growled a man's voice from behind and John quickly sat down with a muttered apology.

"Is he not an evil looking cur!" exclaimed John as the cart went past to reveal the solitary figure standing at the back where the end had been removed. "Tis a shame he be already hooded for I am most curious to look upon the face of such a devil."

"Aye, a most ill favoured ruffian indeed," said Letitia, refusing to look and fighting back her tears. "I must be strong, I must be strong," she repeated to herself inside her head.

Midnight Dutch staggered as a large clod of mud hit him square in his chest and he fell against the side of the cart as though seeking protection. Insults and jeers came from those gathered and he twitched with every single one. The cart drew up under the Three Legged Mare and the hangman stepped forward. He jumped onto the back of the cart and snatched up the rope that was already in place around Midnight Dutch's neck. He said something quietly to Dutch and Dutch jerked pitifully at the rope binding his hands.

"Where is the trapdoor?" asked Letitia in alarm, suddenly noticing. "Should there not be a trapdoor?" She still refused to look directly at

Midnight Dutch though. That would be too much to bear.

“Oh bless you, my dear,” said John with a laugh. “This be the Three Legged Mare. It be a short drop gallows.”

“What do you mean?” asked Letitia urgently, clutching at his arm as the hangman tossed the end of the rope over the beam of the triangle closest to the seats. A minion with a stout step ladder hurried forward so the hangman could climb up and tie the rope tight. Midnight Dutch stood with his head hanging as though afraid to look even though he was hooded. Several in the crowd jeered.

“There is no trap door,” said John. “The rope is tied to the beam and the cart pulled away. That cur will not enjoy the breaking of his neck. His end will be slow and painful and I pray that God draws it out as long as possible as a warning to those who wish to follow in his footsteps.”

Letitia gasped and felt the tears of anguish start to form in her eyes.

“Be of good cheer, my dear,” said John happily. “Yorkshire will be the better place once this villain is removed from the land.”

“How long will he take to die?” she asked leadenly.

“Oh I daresay as long as five minutes, mayhap longer,” said John gleefully. He took out his pocket watch. “What say you we time it, eh?”

“A guinea on the Dutchman expiring in under four minutes, sir,” growled the man behind, leaning forward. “From drop to last kick. Will you take the wager, sir?”

“Would that not be inappropriate for someone with your position in life, husband?” asked Letitia, filled with horror at the thought. “Or would you have it said by some that you take overmuch pleasure in death?”

“Perhaps you are right, my dear,” said John sadly.

“Damn, sir!” exclaimed the man behind and drew back in disgust.

“What manner of sport is this if there be no wager to make it interesting? Pah!”

John put his pocket watch away and stared at Midnight Dutch.

“I wonder how much the hangman will get for his clothes?” he mused out loud. “He be right poorly dressed seeing as how it be said he has a fortune hidden away. 'Tis a wonder he did not dress for the occasion.”

Letitia kept her eyes on the mud-stained hem of her gown and stayed silent.

“Ahh, the time is almost upon us,” said John a few moments later. “The Recorder comes. I wager he is about to proclaim the sentence.”

Letitia squeezed her eyes tighter shut but she could not block the sound of the Recorder's bell.

“Hear ye, hear ye,” shouted the Recorder as the peal of the hand bell died and the crowd quietened. “Let it be known to all that we are gathered here on this fifth day of October in the year of our Lord 1860 to witness the lawful execution by hanging of Hans Hoedemaker, alias Midnight Dutch, alias Cap'n Dutch, alias The Midnight Hand, native of Holland, for smuggling and highway robbery. Such order is signed by His Lordship, the Duke of York and Master of the York Assizes.”

Cheers, jeers and boos arose from the crowd. A well aimed stone caught Dutch on the thigh and he staggered, tightening the noose about his neck.

The Recorder stepped back and a local Minister of the Church stepped forward and faced Midnight Dutch.

“You that are condemned to die, repent with lamentable tears and ask mercy of the Lord for the salvation of your soul,” he bellowed at the top of his voice. “Do you so repent?”

Midnight Dutch must have spoken for the Minister leaned close to hear but none in the crowd could discern a word.

“Forgiveness is between God and you,” sneered the Minister loudly. “Tis my task but to arrange that meeting.”

Against her will, Letitia looked up. Her heart caught in her throat at the sight of him standing forlorn on the cart, hooded and with a rope around his neck. Her hand unconsciously sought the hard outline of the ring Hans had given her that hung inside her corset on a ribbon, hidden from John.

The Minister stared pityingly at Midnight Dutch for a few moments then turned to face the crowd.

“All good people, pray heartily unto God for this poor sinner who is now going to his death,” he shouted then walked backwards, clasping his bible to his scrawny chest, to stand beside the Recorder.

On cue, the hangman climbed back on the cart and jerked hard on the rope, testing it with his full weight. Midnight Dutch whimpered and tried jerking his head away but the hangman ignored him. Then he stepped down from the cart and, with studied slowness, fully aware the eyes of all present were upon him, he walked round to stand beside the horse.

“All is ready, Master Reckoner,” he called in a loud voice. “I await only your final authority.”

“Very well, very well,” remarked the Reckoner tetchily. He took a sip of warming brandy from a small flask then waved his hand. “Let it be so.”

The hangman struck the flank of the horse with a short length of rope and the horse leapt forward.

Letitia clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle her emotions as she watched Hans Hoedemaker begin to die. She had to be strong, very strong, for the babe she carried was barely two months old and her husband of one month did not yet know of it. Nor, indeed, did the child's father and he would never know for it was he who danced the jig of death at the end of the swinging rope.

Despite the thickness of her dress she could feel the solid outline of the ring between her breasts with her fingers. She gripped it tightly, her knuckles white.

“I swear, on this token of our love and on the life of your unborn babe,” she muttered, closing her mind to the hooded effigy and seeing only Hans' face, “my love for you will never die. Farewell, my love.”

“What was that, my dear,” remarked John, not taking his eager eyes off the weakening spasmodic jerks of the hanging man. He surreptitiously glanced at his pocket watch.

“’Twas only a prayer to God the most merciful,” said Letitia, releasing the ring and suppressing her growing hatred for her husband. “Thank you for bringing me to this hanging. I shall never forget this day.”

Chapter One

“Oh mum!” I exclaimed sadly as Jean's coffin was lowered into the ground. Tears sprang up and I buried my head in mum's shoulder. We hugged, seeking consolation in each other's touch.

We didn't hug for long. Most of our tears had already been shed but it was the finality of the cheap little coffin being lowered into the hole in the ground that had sparked another round. I suppose in a way it was a form of closure but when all's said and done is closure really that great?

I pulled a hankie out of my jacket pocket and mum found some tissues in her handbag. We both stood there for a few moments drying our eyes then the undertaker discreetly moved over carefully holding a ladle with a small pile of soil on it. A little fell off and dribbled over the toe of his immaculately polished shoe.

“Perhaps you would care to ...,” he quietly whispered to mum and she started in surprise like a deer.

“Oh yes, of course,” she said, staring fixedly at the ladle.

It looked like an ordinary kitchen soup ladle but it was a nice coppery colour and heaps better than a dirty trowel or a muddy shovel. She lifted her hand to take the ladle, hesitated then jerked her hand forward again to grasp it. Another dribble fell onto the undertaker's shoe. He ignored the dirt and lifted his left arm to discreetly usher mum to the head of the grave. I went with her as it seemed the right thing to do. She stood there looking down at the coffin with a blank expression.

“Goodbye, mum,” she said quietly and my heart gave a little surge as though it was my mum in that coffin, not hers. “Thanks for everything.”

Clumsily she lifted the ladle and upended it. The dirt pattered onto the coffin and she turned away. Dexterously the undertaker relieved her of the ladle and scooped up some more dirt from a bucket beside him and proffered the ladle to me. I took it and looked down at the

coffin.

"Bye bye, gran," I said with a choke in my voice. "Stay warm."

I don't know why I said that. Maybe because it was a chilly day and the damp hole in which the coffin lay looked very cold. I glanced at the vicar and saw he was trying to look reassuring.

"Jean is in the warmth of God's love," he said quietly, reaching out to squeeze my sleeve gently.

"Bloody hope so," I thought but didn't say. Instead I just smiled and nodded then tipped the ladle so another cupful of earth landed on the coffin. The undertaker relieved me of the ladle as I was about to pass it to Auntie Sarah. Some of the other mourners who'd attended the funeral were forming a queue behind her and others were hanging back. Two I noticed, who I didn't recognise, were already walking back to their car.

"Umm, would you mind awfully if I didn't go the the club?" I asked, going to stand beside mum. "I don't think I can face all those blue rinsed cronies of gran's. They're just, like, happy that it wasn't any of them. I just want to be alone for a while."

"She was only 76," said mum, sadly. "I thought she'd be around for a long time yet. If only she hadn't fallen then caught pneumonia." She shook her head sadly then looked at the mourners. "I know what you mean. It's like they're gleeful."

"A beautiful service," said Auntie Sarah, coming over with Uncle Toby dutifully in tow. "You did mum proud." She put her hand on mum's arm and I sensed mum wanting to step back out of reach but restraining herself.

"More of a celebration than a funeral," said Uncle Toby in his dour way. He looked at the sky. "Gonna rain soon."

"Thank you," said mum. "Umm, you know we're having a memorial do at the club at 4?"

“We’ll be there,” said Auntie Sarah. “How are you, Sylvia? Still single are you?”

“Yes I am,” I said. “Sorry.”

“We’re counting on you, you know,” she said, releasing mum and putting her hand on my arm instead.

“Oh yes?” I asked, knowing full well what she was about to say. “What for?”

“Babies,” said Auntie Sarah. “All down to you now to keep three generations of the family going now gran’s gone. My Rachel being only thirteen.”

“Well, I’m doing my best,” I said, a trifle sarcastically “but all the boys I shag insist on wearing condoms for some stupid reason.”

Uncle Toby cackled half heartedly and Auntie Sarah looked affronted.

“You need to find yourself a husband,” she said, gripping my arm tightly, “before you get yourself a reputation. How old are you now?”

“Twenty six,” I said.

“Twenty six,” repeated Auntie Sarah sadly. “You’re running out of time.”

“No she isn’t,” interjected mum testily. “Sylvia’s got her own life to lead. She doesn’t need you telling her what to do. This is the 21st century now, after all, and women have careers and things and don’t have to be beholden to men and babies anymore.”

“Well, we can talk more about that later,” said Auntie Sarah, dropping her hand. “This isn’t the time or place, mum’s grave still being warm and all.”

“You did ask,” I said. “I was just being honest.”

“See you at the club,” said Auntie Sarah. “Come on, Toby.”

She stalked off with Toby in tow.

"I wonder why Rachel isn't here," I said, watching them go. "I always thought she and gran got on well together."

"To be honest I'm glad she isn't here," said mum tiredly. "You know what the kid is like. Something always goes missing when she visits. Spiteful, too. Just like her mother. No, can't say I blame you not wanting to go to the club. Sarah'll be going on about kids all night now. I can't see as how it matters one way or another if there are three generations of us or not but she's got a small mind and very little to rattle around in it. Are you going back to London tonight or staying over?"

"I think I'll go back to London," I said as we started to walk back to the cemetery car park. "I've got work tomorrow and it's been a sad day."

"Yes," said mum. "Come back to the house for a cuppa then I'll run you to the station. Jean left something for you."

"For me?" I said in surprise. "I didn't think she had anything?"

"She didn't," said Mum, unlocking the car. "That care home took all her savings and most of her pension but she had a few things. Knick knacks mostly but she left a couple of things for you in her Will. You might as well have them now rather than wait for probate to come through."

* * *

"It's strange," said mum, standing in the kitchen beside the kettle.

"What's strange?" I asked, getting a couple of mugs from the cupboard.

"There's only ever been you and me in this house since your dad buggered off," she said, looking around the shabby kitchen. "You went to London five years ago and I've been on me own ever since but now mum's gone it seems empty here. Not like she ever lived here. She just

visited once a month but ... I don't know. The house seems emptier even though she was hardly ever here."

"I don't know why you don't move in with Anton," I said, plonking a tea bag in each mug. "You've been seeing him since before I went to London."

"Oh I'm too old for another husband," said mum with a laugh.

"Rubbish," I said, adding a sugar to each. "You're only fifty and he's, what, fifty two?"

"Fifty three," she said. "Anyway, he doesn't like this place. Says it's too small and pokey but I don't like his place either. It's sterile. Can't put your feet up and relax."

"So why not get rid of them both and find somewhere else you both like?" I said, twisting to get the milk out of the fridge.

"I'm used to being on my own," said mum, pouring water from the kettle into the mugs. "I'm not saying I don't like a bit of company every now and then but a man in the house full time? No, not my cuppa tea, dear. 'Sides, I'm still married. I don't want to be done for bigamy, do I?"

"I'm sure dad would give you a divorce if you asked him to," I said, adding milk to our mugs.

"I doubt it," said mum. "I'm his security. Let's go in the lounge."

"What do you mean, his security?" I asked, following her.

"As long as we're still married no one else can trap him," said mum. "That way he can play the field in safety."

"But if you went to court," I said, sitting down. "They'd force him to get divorced."

"Maybe," said mum, "but he wouldn't be happy."

“Well, is that your problem?” I asked. “Isn't staying married to him making you unhappy?”

“Oh God, no!” exclaimed mum. “Works both ways, you see. As long as I'm married to him I can't be trapped again neither.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little deflated. “But what about Anton?”

“What about Anton?” asked mum. “He likes his freedom as well. Not everyone wants to get married and have kids despite what Sarah thinks. Anyway, I've got you and I'm too old for more kids, not that I ever wanted any more.”

“No, I'm not surprised,” I said. “You got it right first time and any more would have been a disappointment to you. Does dad still come round?”

“Of course he does,” she said with a complacent grin. “I'm the only one he trusts with his paperwork. In fact he'll probably be round in the next few days as his quarterly VAT return is coming due. Why don't you come down and say hello? He'd love to see you again. He always asks after you.”

“No, I don't think so,” I said.

“Still not forgiven him?” she asked.

“No, and I never will,” I said, heatedly. “After the way he treated you then just bugged off? I hope the shit rots in hell!”

“There's a steel edge inside you,” said mum, gazing at me. “God knows where that came from. I'm just a big softie and your dad's even worse.”

“Maybe it came from gran,” I said. “She could be a tough old bugger when she wanted to be.”

“Maybe,” said mum. “What time's your train?”

“Twenty past the hour,” I said. “No great rush.”

“Not for you,” she said, “but I’ve got to be at the club before four to greet everyone.” She half sat up then dropped back. “Strange how there haven’t really been any men in our lives.”

“How do you mean?” I asked, squeezing my teabag against the side of the mug with the spoon.

“Well, you’re 26 and you don’t even have a boyfriend,” she said, “and your ...”

“I’m just between guys at the moment,” I said hurriedly.

“It’s all right, sweetie,” she said with a smile. “I’m not criticising you. Just saying you don’t have a man. Mine bugged off years ago and much as I like Anton I don’t want him around all the time. My own dad was killed soon after I was born and mum never got involved with another one. Oh, I’m not saying she didn’t have men friends, it’s just she never brought any home. I didn’t even know I had a dad until I started school and the other kids talked about theirs.”

“So that’s three generations of us who’ve done without men, more or less,” I said, “since there must have been some men otherwise we wouldn’t be here.”

“Actually four,” said mum. “Your great grandmother Betty got herself pregnant to a Yank soldier a couple of years after the end of the second world war. She never had another man again neither.”

“You mean gran’s mum?” I asked in surprise. “I never knew that. Was he killed?”

“No,” said mum. “The war had ended. He was just one of the ones who stayed for a while to tie up loose ends then he got shipped back to the States. She was only eighteen at the time.”

“But if Betty was eighteen she could easily have found someone else,” I said.

“Oh, I’m not saying she didn’t find someone else,” said mum with a knowing smile. “It’s just that it wasn’t a man, that’s all I’m saying.”

“You mean she was a lessie?” I asked in surprise. “Why’s no one told me this before?”

“Because it isn’t really any of your business,” she said. “Betty’s friend died when I was, ohh, ten or eleven. I barely even remember her. Anyway, we didn’t talk about those sorts of things in those days. Oh, lord, look at the time! It’s half past three already. I’ll just get those things mum wanted you to have. Won’t be a tick.”

She jumped up and hurried out of the room. I heard her run up the stairs so I collected the tea mugs and took them into the kitchen and rinsed them under the tap after chucking the tea bags in the bin.

“Where are you dear?” she called, coming back down the stairs.

“In the kitchen,” I called back, putting the mugs upside-down on the drainer. “I’ll be in in a minute.”

I wiped my hands on a dishcloth then went back into the lounge.

“Ahh there you are,” said mum. “Here’s a copy of Jean’s Will if you want to check.”

“No, I trust you mum,” I said. “So what did she leave me?”

“Not much, to be honest,” said mum. “Just some money, an old ring and this prayer book.” She waved a small book at me then put it down on the occasional table.

“A prayer book?” I said, staring at it in surprise. “Why would she leave me a prayer book? Didn’t she know I’m an atheist?”

“I think she did but we never really talked about you and religion,” said mum. “Anyway, it’s something to remember her by and if you really don’t want to keep it you can chuck it out or give it to a jumble sale. It’s up to you.”

“I’ll keep it,” I said. “I was just surprised, that’s all. So, um, how much money?”

“Only a thousand, I’m afraid,” said mum. “If you give me your bank details I’ll transfer the money on Monday.”

“Wow, £1000?” I said, surprised again. “I didn’t think she had any money?”

“That surprised me as well,” said mum. “I didn’t think she had either but when she made her Will six years ago she left £5000 in cash with the solicitor. Two thousand each for me and Sarah, a thousand for you and what interest there was on it to go to Rachel.”

“Well, that was very nice of her,” I said. “I bet you could use the money yourself.”

“Oh, I’ll think of something to spend it on,” she said, “although I don’t really need it. Unless you need more money? A thousand isn’t much and I know you struggle what with living in London and that job of yours.”

“Oh no,” I said. “Gran left that money to you for yourself not to give to me. I manage and this money will be very useful.”

“If you say so,” she said, giving me a searching look. “But if you ever need some money ...”

“Seriously, mum,” I said. “Spend it on yourself and don’t you go buying something for Anton either. It’s not like he’s short of a bob or two.”

“Well, true enough,” she said. “And there’s this ring. I know it’s a bit old fashioned but it’s still quite nice.” She passed me an old ring box that had once been covered with red velvet but was now faded to almost brown and had worn bald in places, particularly at the corners. “I’m no expert on jewellery but I think it’s a moonstone.”

I took the box and opened it.

“Actually that’s nice,” I said, looking at the ring. “Do you suppose those are real diamonds around the moonstone?”

"I very much doubt it," she said. "If they were then it would probably be valuable and mum would have sold it years ago or the home would have taken it. I think the metal is gold though, although it might just be gold plating. There's some writing inside which might be a hall mark."

"Oh yeah," I said, taking the ring out and peering closely at the writing. "It's too tiny for me to read although it looks more like an inscription rather than a hall mark. Have you got a magnifying glass?"

"No," said mum. "Just my reading glasses."

"Still, it's very nice," I said, trying the ring on the third finger of my left hand. It fitted very nicely. "Not sure what outfits I've got that would go with it but it fits and it's not like I've got heaps of decent jewellery anyway. How old do you think it is?"

"Certainly pre-war," said mum. "It might even be Victorian. It looks pretty old, doesn't it."

"Did gran wear it a lot?" I asked, admiring the ring on my finger. "I don't remember seeing her wear it."

"I've never seen it before either," said mum. "She left it with the solicitor with the cash. All the rest of her jewellery has been sold to pay for her funeral expenses but she specifically wanted you to have this. It says so in her Will, that and her wedding and engagement rings which she's left to me and Sarah."

"I wonder why she wanted me to have this specifically?" I said. "There was another of her rings that she knew I liked."

"Who knows?" said mum. "Old people can get a little strange sometimes. Oh God, I'm going to be late. Come on, let's get you to the station. When will I see you again?"

"Oh, how about next weekend?" I said, putting the ring back in the box and stuffing the box and the prayer book in my bag. "Did you keep gran's old photo albums? We could look through those."

“Or the weekend after?” asked mum, going off to find her keys.
“Anton's taking me to Brighton next weekend.”

Chapter Two

“Morning,” I said stumbling bleary eyed through the café door the next morning even though there was no one in sight.

I always stumbled bleary eyed through the café door since I start work there at 6.30 in the morning and live just seven minutes walk away, six if it's raining. On the face of it it was good since my alarm went off at 6 and I could still have a ten minute lie-in but it had its disadvantages as well.

“Morning, Sylv,” called Winston from the cold store. “Clean the coffee machine, would you? Cassie's not here yet.”

That was one of the disadvantages. I could have all the tea and coffee I wanted for free but only after the place had been cleaned and set up ready for the first customers. Strictly speaking Jason should clean the coffee machine as he was the second shift barista. However, Winston would keep the café open as long as there were customers and Council regulations required the place to be fully vacated and locked by 10pm which sometimes meant Jason didn't have time. This meant Cassie, the first shift barista, would have to clean the blasted thing in the morning when all the crud had dried as only she and Jason were certified to clean and operate the machine. However, Cassie had quickly learnt that if she was a little late for work some mornings the machine would still be cleaned by someone else since our early morning customers needed coffee. The fact that Cassie's late arrivals coincided suspiciously neatly with Jason's late shut downs hadn't yet percolated through to Winston even though it had to the rest of us. None of us plebs were certified to operate the machine but we still had to when the barista was taking a break. The customers' needs came first.

“OK,” I shouted back blearily and pulled a face in the general direction of the cold store. There was a crash and a yelp as something fell off a shelf and I mentally cheered my hitherto unknown telekinesis superpower then flicked the coffee machine on to heat the water.

“Everything OK?” I asked, sticking my head innocently around the cold store door.

“Dropped a box of frozen croissants on my foot,” complained Winston. “Chuck them in the garbage for me, hon.” He nodded at the pieces of broken croissant on the floor while shoving the box back on the shelf.

Fresh croissants are fairly fragile but frozen ones tend to shatter when dropped and by the look of it at least three had been damaged too much to serve to customers. I grabbed the long handled dustpan and brush and swept the pieces up then went back behind the counter to dump the pieces in the bin.

“Good morning,” called Sunita happily as she waltzed in.

She never looked bleary. She was always disgustingly bright and cheerful even when she'd pulled a double shift and I hated her. No, 'hate' is the wrong word. 'Resent' is much better. I resented her always being happy and cheerful no matter what went wrong and things always went wrong in the café. We were surrounded by machines for cooking and washing and it was a rare day when everything worked properly. Of course, it could simply be that she didn't know any English swear words although she should have picked up enough from me by now.

“No Cassie today?” she asked, noticing the dried foam on the coffee machine nozzles.

“She'll be in in a bit,” I said.

I must have looked disgruntled as she smiled happily, secure in the knowledge that I'd arrived before her so she wouldn't have to clean it. I stuck my tongue out at her and she laughed.

“Cleaned it yet?” asked Winston, emerging from the cold store with his clipboard in his hand.

“Almost finished,” I said, hurriedly pulling a couple of cleaning cloths from the pile under the counter.

He looked at me suspiciously then went to sit at the end table to do his calculations on what needed to be ordered. He didn't trust any of

us to do it even though it was really simple. Just add what was due to be delivered today to what we had in the cold store for each item then subtract the quantity we normally stocked, allowing for which day of the week it was since Fridays, for example, tend to be busier than Mondays, and order whatever was needed to make it up to a number above zero. Only rarely would it ever be zero as virtually everything came in packets of various quantities so it was a question of ordering enough packets. It wasn't rocket science and he liked to have a coffee while doing his calculations. Why he didn't do it on a spreadsheet I've no idea. Maybe he didn't trust them either. I'd offered to set one up for him but he'd dismissed the idea out of hand.

I quickly wiped the outside of the machine then unscrewed the nozzles and squirted in a little descaler fluid and left them to stew while I squirted some more fluid up inside the tubes. I counted to ten then pushed the button to run hot water through the tubes then taught Sunita a new swear word because I'd forgotten to put a bowl under the tubes to catch the dirty water. The water cascaded over the drip tray and onto the floor. Fortunately the machine only heated the water to 65 degrees, so customers drank their coffee faster and made way for more customers. If it had been boiling water I'd have scalded my ankles.

As it was I jumped back a little then threw some more cleaning cloths on the floor as the machine continued to spew out water for a few more seconds. Looking even more delighted, Sunita fetched the floor mop and handed it to me before returning to wiping down the counters.

"Thanks," I said and tossed the soaking cloths into the bin.

I mopped the floor and returned the mop to its rightful place then scrubbed and reattached the nozzles. I was just about to run another load of hot water through when I remembered the bowl so I grabbed one from the shelf and put it on the drip tray. There was still a hint of descaler when I smelt the water so I ran through another batch of hot water. Customers don't like their coffee tasting of cleaning fluid for some strange reason.

"Morning!" said Cassie bouncing in through the door.

She spotted me at the coffee machine and grinned.

“Morning,” I said. “Machine's cleaned.”

“Thank you, Sylvie,” she said. “That's very kind of you. I'd have done it only my train was late. I owe you one.”

“More like fifty,” I muttered under my breath as I smiled back. “You want me to make Winston's coffee or will you do it?”

“Oh I'll do it now I'm here,” she said, shoving her bag under the counter. “Did you use descaler on the nozzles?”

“Of course I did,” I said.

“Sweet,” she said and ran another batch of hot water through to sniff. It must have passed as she filled both coffee holders with coffee and slotted them into the dispensers. “You want a coffee too or tea? Suni?”

“I'll have a flat white,” I said.

“Tea, please,” said Sunita, looking up from scrubbing the inside of a sandwich toaster.

“Coming up,” said Cassie, opening the dishwasher. “Ugh.”

“What's up?” I asked.

“Someone forgot to run the dishwasher last night,” she said, holding up a plate with congealed tomato sauce.

“What?” exclaimed Winston, hurrying over. “Who did that?”

“Wasn't us,” I said holding up my hands. “We're day shift.”

Winston glowered at me anyway.

“It's not a biggie,” I said. “Only takes ten minutes to run.”

Cassie put the plate back inside and shut the door. Sunita put a tablet

in the dishwasher and I pushed the start button. It's called teamwork. The dishwasher started to whoosh.

Winston grunted and glowered at me again.

"Where's my coffee?" he demanded.

"Almost done," said Cassie, opening the fridge and getting out a fresh four pint container of milk.

"This is taking too long," said Winston irritably. He checked his watch. "We open in thirteen minutes."

"I'd better clean the microwave," I said, more to show willing than because it needed it.

He nodded and went back to his table.

"I've already cleaned it," whispered Sunita conspiratorially.

"Great, thanks," I said. "I'll put out the trays then."

I went into the store room to get eight stainless steel trays and took them into the cold room. Each had to be loaded with rolls, croissants, wraps and assorted sweet sticky things prepared the night before and put in the chiller display unit beside the counter.

I was just slotting one of the trays into the chiller cabinet when the door made a noise. I glanced up to see a man looking in irritably.

"We've got a customer," said Sunita unnecessarily, looking up from topping up the paper napkins, knives, forks and spoons.

The man looked at his phone then at the opening hours displayed on the door and clearly swore even though I didn't hear what he said. He looked pointedly at me so I held up one hand with my fingers splayed and said "Five minutes".

He screwed up his nose but nodded and started doing things with his phone.

"You doing anything this evening, Sylv?" asked Winston, coming up behind me and pulling out his keys.

"Why? You asking me out?" I said, even though I knew exactly what was coming. It's just that we had this silly little ritual.

He smiled and unlocked the cash register.

"I'd love to," he said, "but Bernie can't make it today. Can you do the evening shift?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," I said, picking up the coffee Cassie had put on the counter for me. I tasted it and there was no hint of cleaning fluid although if there had been Winston would have thrown his at her. He'd done that once, not long after she'd started and the once had been enough.

"Great," he said, moving over to the door. "Do you want a morning off or pay in lieu?"

"I'd rather have the cash," I said. "The rent's due this weekend."

"No problem," he said, unlocking the door.

The waiting man looked up from his phone and smiled. Winston opened the door for him.

"Thanks," he muttered and hurried towards me.

"Good morning!" I said brightly. "How can I help you?"

"Large cappuccino, skinny milk and a bacon and cheese croissant, please Sylvia," he said as he did every morning.

"Can I tempt you with anything else?" I asked as I also did every morning. I tapped the relevant things on the register.

"You do constantly," he said, again as he did every morning, "but my wife wouldn't like it."

“That'll be £11.90, please,” I said. “Cash or card?”

He pulled a card out from his phone case and waved it at the machine.

“Ooops,” I said, as I did most mornings. “Isn't switched on yet, sorry.”

I flicked the little switch at the back of the card reader and it beeped once to show it was alive. The card option appeared on the display of the register and I tapped it. The man, who I'd served breakfast to almost every day for at least six months but whose name was still unknown to me, waved the card again. This time it went through.

“Would you like the receipt?” I asked, knowing he always had the receipt.

“Yes, please, Sylvia,” he said and beamed at me.

I handed him the receipt and he went to sit at the table nearest the door. He always sat with his back to the window so he could watch us serving people.

“I still reckon he fancies you,” muttered Cassie as I gave her the coffee order.

“Bit old for me though,” I muttered back. “He's got to be at least 40.”

Sunita dealt with the next customer while I ran my fancier's croissant through the griller.

“Thank you, Sylvia,” he said with a broad smile when I took his croissant and coffee over.

“You're welcome,” I said.

“You make the best bacon and cheese croissants in London,” he said.

“That's very kind of you to say so,” I replied. “If you'd like to review Angeleta's Café there's a Q-code at the bottom of the menu.” I picked up the menu that sat on each of the tables and pointed to the code.

"I will," he promised. "Just as soon as I get a Q-code reader app."

"Great," I said and went off to deal with another customer.

About 11 my phone vibrated to say I had a message. I finished dealing with the customer I had then turned to Jhansi, who started at 10:30 to cover the lunchtime crowd.

"Could you take over for a few minutes, Jhansi?" I asked. "I need the lavvy."

"Sure," she said. "Half a mo."

I took the order from the next customer while Jhansi finished rolling a wrap and put it in the sandwich press then she took over at the register and I hurried out the back. The toilets themselves were about a hundred yards further up and were shared by all the businesses in the block. I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and groaned. It was from my friend Zoe.

"What time shall I pick you up?" her message read.

"Shit!" I exclaimed. "Shit shit shit!"

I had completely forgotten we were supposed to be going to Wendy's gender reveal party and that Zoe and I were going on to another, more alcohol based, party afterwards. It's not that I go to many parties but my gran's funeral had put it out of my mind.

"What times the do?" I texted back.

"530" came back the reply after a minute or so.

OK. That pretty much killed any chance of the extra pay from the extra shift, not that many gender reveal parties start at 10 in the evening but you never know. I heard a door open and looked up to see Winston emerge from the back of the café so I quickly ducked into the toilets.

"5 I guess," I texted back and decided to have a pee while waiting for

Zoe to confirm or otherwise. It also gave me a chance to think up an excuse I could give to Winston since he owned the café and worked at least 16 hours a day at it. Sometimes I thought he expected us to have the same level of commitment but a little above minimum wage isn't the greatest incentive.

"See you at 5 hugs," came back the reply while I was still peeing. I hadn't thought of an excuse though.

"Bugger," I thought.

I pushed my phone back in my hip pocket then washed my hands. Cautiously I opened the door. Winston was still there although he was staring up at the sky with his back to me.

"Oh God, I hope so!" I muttered.

Crossing the fingers of both hands, I slipped out of the toilets and walked over.

"Yo Winston!" I said loudly and he turned round and beamed at me genially. He had a large home made roll-up cigarette between his lips which was how he managed to survive his punishing 16 hour work days. The ciggies made him very mellow for twenty minutes or so after he had one.

"Hey, Sylvia," he said and giggled slightly. "Like, how you doing babe?"

"Just great," I said. "Umm, I'm afraid I can't do the second shift today. I've, um, got to go to the dentist. I forgot."

"That's all cool, babes," he said, waving his ciggie at me. "Gotta look after your teeth."

"Great," I said. "Thanks."

He continued to beam at me so I nodded respectfully and hurried back inside.

“Hey Jhansi,” I said, taking over at the till. “You free for the evening shift today?”

“Sure,” she said, “are you ill?”

“I said I’d cover for Bernie,” I said, “just a sec. How can I help you today?”

“Umm, I’m not sure,” said the old lady, leaning on her stick. “What are you having, Edith?”

“Those cakes look rather yummy,” said Edith. She pointed to one. “What is that?”

“It’s pecan cheesecake,” I said.

“Ohh, does it have nuts in?” she said, looking disappointed. “I can’t have nuts, not with my dentures.”

“I’m afraid so,” I said. “How about the cherry caramel cheesecake? There’s nothing hard in that.”

“Sounds too sweet,” said Edith. “What are you having Doris?”

“I think I’ll have one of those scones,” said Doris.

“Then I shall have the same,” said Edith.

“So that’s two scones with jam and cream,” I said. “Strawberry or blackberry jam?”

“Strawberry,” said Doris.

“Blackberry,” said Edith.

“And anything to drink with those?” I asked, ringing them up.

“A pot of tea, I think,” said Doris.

“Earl Grey, English Breakfast or Lapsang Souchong?” I asked.

“Do you have any Russian?” asked Edith.

“I’m afraid not,” I said.

“Then I’ll have Chai,” said Edith, “or don’t you have any of that either?”

“We have Chai tea,” I said. “Is that for both of you?”

“I’ll have Earl Grey,” said Doris. “I don’t really care for those foreign things.”

“So that’s two scones, one strawberry, one blackberry,” I summarised, “and one Chai and one Earl Grey.”

“Or perhaps I’ll try that cheesecake after all,” said Edith. “It does look delicious.”

“You can always leave the nuts on the plate,” I said encouragingly. “There aren’t many in it.”

“Well, if you’re having that then I’ll have one of those muffins,” said Doris.

I cancelled the scones and rang up the cheesecake and muffin instead.

“I think I’ll have a latte instead of the Earl Grey,” said Doris. “The Earl Grey won’t taste right with a muffin.”

I made the change and waited with my finger poised while Edith dithered over the Chai tea.

“The Chai will soothe your stomach if you find the cheesecake a bit rich,” I said, foolishly but trying to be helpful.

“Oh, you think it’ll upset my stomach?” asked Edith, looking worried.

“Everything upsets your stomach,” said Doris sourly.

“Then I shall have a Viennese Whirl,” said Edith decisively. “And

English Breakfast tea.”

“Excellent choice,” I said, ringing it up. “And a latte and a muffin. Would you like the muffin warm?”

“How else would you have it?” demanded Doris.

“Some people like their muffins cold,” I said. “We have to be flexible.”

“That’s exactly what I said,” said Edith. “You have to be flexible these days, Doris.”

“That’ll be £17.35,” I said. I didn’t bother to ask what table they wanted as it would probably generate a lengthy discussion. I just pushed over a table number at random, my interrupted conversation with Jhansi forgotten.

Chapter Three

I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep but someone was hitting my head repeatedly with a sledgehammer. I tried to push him, her?, away but whoever it was hung on tightly to my throat and I started to choke. Getting irritated and gasping for breath I lashed out with my fist and hit something very hard.

“Owww,” I moaned and flopped back in exhaustion, knowing that my life was almost over and there was nothing more I could do about it.

I must have gone back to sleep then because the next thing I knew sunlight was starting to come in through the window which only happened mid morning. I blinked a couple of times then the pounding in my head started again.

“Ugh,” I muttered then wished I hadn't as saying 'ugh' had moved my tongue and brought my taste buds into contact with something furry and disgustingly sour.

I tried to sit up and nearly choked as there was a rope around my neck tying me to the bed.

“Oh great,” I thought, insofar as the incoherent swirlings in my head could be called thoughts. “I've been drugged and kidnapped. Goody.”

Several hours later, or perhaps only a minute or two, I realised that the ceiling above me looked virtually identical to the ceiling above my bed in my room in my shared house in Islington, although mine didn't go in and out of focus.

“Cool,” I thought and got another taste of the nastiness inside my mouth. It was even more disgusting than before and made me feel sick. I tried to sit up again but the rope was still there so instead I rolled onto my side and tried to swing my legs out of bed. That seemed to work but I still couldn't sit up. I lifted my other hand, which hurt for some reason, and gently explored the rope. It felt more like cloth than rope and seemed to be attached to the bed under my elbow.

I thought about it for a few moments then lifted my legs back onto the bed and gently rolled the other way. The pressure of the cloth rope slackened.

“Yay!” I exclaimed weakly, although my voice was cracked and broken.

I cautiously lifted my pounding head and found it wasn't tied down anymore although everything had gone dark because my hair had fallen in front of my face. I levered myself up onto my elbow and tried to push my hair out of my face with my non-hurting hand but that was a big mistake because my hair hurt as well. I gave up and just stayed put for a while, balanced on one elbow and staring at the small patch of sheet and carpet that I could see. The pounding in my head eased slightly.

“Come on girl,” I muttered, trying not to move my tongue. “Get up.”

I swung my legs over the side of the bed again, although this time it was the other side, and pushed up with my arm at the same time, more or less, and managed to get myself into a kind of seated slouch with my toes on the floor, one elbow still on the bed and my back curved like the letter C. On the plus side, however, my hair had all flopped forward and now hung in front of my face with a decent gap. I slide my sore hand under my hair and pushed it all to the back of my head. It hurt and I swore.

I stayed like that for a little while letting things settle down and wondering why my arms were different colours. One was the fairly normal brownish pink but the other was black. All the way from my shoulder to my wrist although, strangely, my hand was the right colour. It was too confusing so I gave up thinking about it and stood up.

That was my biggest mistake so far. My head resumed pounding and pains stabbed down my neck and through my shoulders. The room itself, hitherto familiar if occasionally out of focus, started to spin and I collapsed back on the bed. I stayed like that, groaning quietly to myself, until the bed stopped undulating then peeked out from under my hair. The room seemed to have stopped moving as well. I rolled over and slowly wormed myself backwards until my knees touched the

floor and I was held upright by the side of the bed. Something kept brushing against my back but I decided to ignore it. One thing at a time.

With a lurch I pushed my upper body off the bed and, very slowly, got to my feet. The room spun a little but I kept one hand on the bed and one on the wall for a few moments until it settled down again.

“Definite progress,” I muttered. “I need a pee.”

With infinite caution and making full use of every piece of furniture in the room I made my way to the door then crawled along the wall to the bathroom. Opening the door I saw myself in the bathroom mirror and wished I hadn't. I still had my little black jacket on although only one arm was in its sleeve. I also still had my dress on even though it was rucked up around my hips and my undies were clearly visible. The remains of my makeup were smeared all over my face and my hair looked like one of those giant rollers in a car wash. I had a pee and felt slightly better then soaked my face in cold water. That was nice so I poured myself a double shot of mouthwash and used it to get rid of most of the fur and sourness in my mouth. I made my way back to my room and stripped everything off and left it in a heap on the floor. Wrapped in a faded and only slightly threadbare dressing gown I ventured down the stairs to the kitchen in search of tea and aspirin.

Half an hour later the hot sweet tea was working although the four aspirin had yet to kick in. My hand was still aching but the warmth from the mug had helped a little. I must have banged it against a wall or something at some point. Still, that was only a minor concern. What was more of a concern was that I was pretty sure I hadn't drunk that much. Yes, I had had two or three beers, or maybe four, before that nice guy whose name escaped me had come over to chat and brought a bottle of wine with him but I was sure he'd drunk most of it himself.

“That bastard had better not have spiked my drink,” I muttered.

The odds were that he hadn't as I'd still been wearing my undies when I made it to the bathroom. Just to be sure I went back up to my bedroom and checked. Yup, no tears or damage. My bag wasn't there

though.

The aspirin was kicking in by the time I got back to the kitchen so I made myself another cup of tea. I spotted my bag on the floor of the hall, just inside the front door, so I picked it up and took it into the lounge. My purse and keys were still there and my credit and debit cards and licence were still inside and the little pouch inside the bag still had my emergency tampon and a condom tucked away just in case either situation arose although neither clearly had. The bad news was that some cash was missing. So was my phone.

“Oh bloody wonderful,” I muttered and let the bag drop onto the floor. A sudden thought struck me and I slowly made my way back up to my room. My rings, including gran's moonstone one, were sitting on the table beside the bed together with the cheap gold chain I'd worn and a couple of bangles. I checked under the bed to make sure but there was no sign of my phone.

Back downstairs I took two more aspirin just to be safe and put a couple of frozen slices of bread on to toast. The two cups of tea had settled my stomach and it was now telling me it was lunchtime. I made another cuppa and took it, along with my marmite toast, back into the lounge.

“OK, think,” I said while chewing. “How did you get home from the party and where did you last see the phone?”

I wasn't sure but I had a vague recollection of being driven home so I picked up my bag to text Zoe to ask if she'd driven me back then remembered I'd lost my phone.

“Bugger,” I said quite loudly and discovered that the aspirin were only partially effective.

When I stopped squinting with pain I forced myself to think and it seemed to me that a guy had driven me home, not Zoe. Hmm. Well, clearly I hadn't invited him in or, if I had, he hadn't come in and it seemed unlikely he'd come inside the house with a drunk girl only to steal her phone. Therefore, and I couldn't fault my logic here, I must have either left my phone in his car or lost it before getting into the

car. Definite progress. All I had to do now was find out who this mystery guy who'd driven me home was and ask him to search his car. If it wasn't there then, by elimination, it must be still at the house where the party had been.

I reached for my phone to ask Zoe about these things and swore again. The bloody thing was still missing!

"Maybe I got an Uber!" I exclaimed. "That could explain the missing cash."

I reached for my phone to check if I'd contacted Uber and put my hand to my head in disgust.

"No phone," I muttered and stuffed the last of the toast into my mouth. I think I was still chewing when I fell asleep again.

* * *

"Holy shit, Syl! What the hell happened to you?"

"Wha?" I mumbled, groggily. "Wassup?" I struggled to sit properly upright. "Oh, you're back then, Gem."

"Of course I'm back," exclaimed Gemma. "We're interviewing that girl at 2 or have you forgotten?"

"What girl?" I said, trying to remember.

"The one about the spare room," said Gemma. "You have forgotten, haven't you."

She stepped back and studied me for a few moments.

"You got pissed, didn't you!" she said, hooting with laughter. "It was only a bloody gender reveal and you got pissed. Oh Syl, what are we going to do with you?"

Gender reveal? Oh yeah. I'd been to a gender reveal before I went to that party with Zoe. Maybe I'd left my phone there. The trouble was I

couldn't remember whose gender reveal it was although come to think of it the baby might have been a boy. He was still some way off being born though so it probably wasn't him who drove me home.

"Yes, no," I said, trying to pull the front of my dressing gown together and push my hair out of my face at the same time. "We went on to another party after. Me and Zoe. Yeah."

"Well, get your sorry backside off that chair and have a shower," said Gemma. "She'll be here in half an hour or so and we don't want her thinking this is a doss house."

"I lost my phone," I said plaintively, holding up my bag so she could look inside.

"Oh it'll be somewhere," said Gemma, pulling out her own phone. "I'll call you."

The familiar warble of my phone began and Gemma looked around the room trying to place it.

"Aha!" she exclaimed and dropped to her knees to look under the couch. "There you go."

She handed me my phone and I crooned over it like a long lost baby for a few seconds before she snatched it back and dropped it in my bag.

"Go and make yourself presentable," she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me upright. "Your hair's a mess, you've got what looks like a marmite moustache and there's a damp stain on your dressing gown."

"I spilt my tea," I said weakly.

"Whatever," said Gemma pushing me out of the room. "There isn't time to shower. Just get changed and wash your face. Go on, move."

"Yes, Gem," I said, too weak to protest.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "You didn't throw up anywhere, did you? I'll

be showing her round the house.”

“I ... don't think so,” I muttered, uncomfortably aware of the fur and foul taste in my mouth when I woke up.

“Well, I'd better check,” she said briskly. “If you did you owe me one, big time.”

“OK,” I said and stumbled off. She was scaring me to be honest. Halfway up the stairs I paused. “How's Duncan? I thought you wouldn't be back 'til Monday. Did you have a fight?”

“I'm back for this damned interview!” exclaimed Gemma, emerging from checking the kitchen for vomit.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “So what's her name?”

“Cheyenne,” said Gemma, coming up the stairs to push me the rest of the way.

“Stupid name,” I said, letting her push me as it was easier than resisting. “Did her mum watch a lot of cowboy and indian movies then?”

“No idea,” said Gemma. “Move.”

It was a struggle but I managed to dress myself and wash my face of marmite. My hair still hurt so I abandoned brushing it and tied it in a messy ponytail which, although I say so myself, looked quite sophisticated against my pale wan face. I couldn't be bothered with any makeup though since this was my home and my day off.

I was just coming back downstairs when someone knocked on the front door and it swung gently open.

“Come on in,” I called and winced.

“Umm, the door just opened,” said a pretty but rather large young woman with long black hair.

“Get in the lounge,” hissed Gemma as she hurried through the hallway. “Cheyenne! You are Cheyenne? Lovely to meet you. I’m Gemma, we spoke on the phone. Come on in.”

I disappeared into the lounge but left the door open.

“Umm, the door wasn’t shut,” said Cheyenne apologetically.

“Oh it’s a temperamental door,” said Gemma with a dismissive wave of her hand. “When the weather’s dry it won’t shut properly and when it’s wet it jams. You’ll get used to it. Would you like some tea or coffee or anything?”

“Oh, umm, a cup of tea would be nice,” said Cheyenne.

“Wonderful,” said Gemma with all the false enthusiasm she’d learnt in her job as a marketing assistant. “Sylvia,” she called, “could you make some tea?”

“Sure,” I said lurching out of the lounge again. “Hello, I’m Sylvia. I’m upstairs at the front.”

“Cheyenne,” said Cheyenne.

“What a beautiful name,” I exclaimed, trying to be as enthusiastic as Gemma even though the aspirin were wearing off. “Are you an American Indian by any chance?”

“No, I’m from Wales,” said Cheyenne with a faintly puzzled look.

“Ahh,” I said, feeling confused. “Wonderful.”

“Let me just show you round,” said Gemma. “No point in interviewing you if you don’t like the place, is there,” and she laughed as though to show she confidently expected Cheyenne to love the dump as much as we did.

“Shall I not bother with the tea until you come back down?” I asked.

Gemma pointedly ignored me as she ushered Cheyenne upstairs to

show her the delights of the, presumably vomit free, bathroom and the back bedroom that was potentially hers. I wandered into the kitchen and put the kettle on then took some more aspirin. Gemma could be a little loud when she was trying to impress.

“So what do you think?” asked Gemma after she'd shown Cheyenne our kitchen and managed to avoid showing her our pathetic excuse of a back garden.

“It's very nice,” said Cheyenne. “Umm, I've seen several places and I've forgotten, how much did you say the rent was again?”

“Yeah, well, assuming all goes well it's £300 a week for the room and shared use of the rest of the place,” said Gemma, ushering her into the lounge where the tea waited. “Although I do need to explain is that the rental for the whole house has to be paid regardless of who's living here and that's a little under four grand a month which is more than I get paid at work. What that means is that whoever is here agrees to an equal share of the house rental. With three of us its £300 a week although at the moment Sylvia and I are paying £450.”

“Which is why we're hoping you'll stay,” I said. “I'm just about totally skint now. I don't suppose you'd consider backdating moving in a couple of weeks?”

“Take no notice of her,” said Gemma. “She's got a strange sense of humour which is why she did a degree in hotel management.

“Ohh, you work in a hotel?” said Cheyenne, sitting down. “You must have a lot of stories to tell. Which hotel are you with?”

“Actually I work at Angeleta's Café in Upper Street,” I said. “Just up from the Angel underground station. I'm a waitress. What do you do?”

“Oh,” said Cheyenne. “Isn't that a bit of a waste of your degree?”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “Blame it on COVID and the collapse of the hospitality industry. Gemma's in marketing.”

“Oh really?” said Cheyenne. “I would have liked to go into marketing

myself. It always seemed a very glamorous job but I ended up becoming a beautician.”

“Awesome,” said Gemma, becoming alert as she spent a small fortune on beauty products. My ears pricked up as well although I couldn't afford as much as Gemma. “Do you have your own salon?”

“Oh gosh no,” said Cheyenne with a little laugh. “I work for Ravenswood Undertakers in Camden but I can get you a discount on products if you want.”

We both stared at her for a few moments then Gemma changed the subject to security bonds and hot water and other practical matters while I fiddled with my phone and thought about my gran. While the idea of a beautician for dead people seemed a little macabre I did have to admit that in death gran had looked quite a lot healthier than she had in her last few years. More than a few of her wrinkles had gone too although her skin had felt quite hard to the touch as I'd discovered when I'd held her hand while giving her a final kiss before the coffin lid was put in place.

I must have let my mind drift after that because I missed the rest of the conversation and only became aware of it when Cheyenne asked if it would be OK if she moved in on Tuesday.

“Umm,” said Gemma, shooting me an enquiring look.

“Fine with me,” I said, delighted that my share of the rent was going to drop by a third. I just hoped Cheyenne wasn't planning on bringing her work home with her.

“Excellent then, that's settled,” said Gemma. “I'll organise keys and your rent book and give them to you on Tuesday. I won't be here until around 6ish but Sylvia finishes at 2:30 so anytime after, say, 3? You'll be here by then, won't you, Syl?”

My phone warbled to say I had an email so I leant over and got my phone out of my bag.

“Oh sure,” I said, thumbing it on.

“Awesome,” said Cheyenne happily. “I’m so looking forward to it. Is it OK if I bring my own sheets and things? I’m a bit fussy like that.”

“Of course it is,” said Gemma. “I did show you the washing machine in the shed outside, didn’t I?”

“Actually we didn’t go outside at all,” said Cheyenne. “Is it OK if I have a quick look?”

“What the frigging hell?” I exclaimed.

Both Gemma and Cheyenne stared at me.

“Umm, not if it’s a problem,” said Cheyenne worriedly.

“What’s the matter Syl?” asked Gemma. “Why can’t Cheyenne see the washing machine? You haven’t broken it again, have you?”

“Hmm?” I said, looking up from my phone. “What?”

“Cheyenne wants to see the washing machine,” said Gemma.

“Oh sure, fine,” I said, frowning at my phone again. “Only eBay’s just sent me an email. Seems I’ve won an auction I never bid on.”

Chapter Four

"I've done that a couple of times," said Cheyenne. "Bid for things then forgotten about them. What have you bought?"

"It's really weird," I said slowly, staring at my phone. "It looks like I bought a company."

"A company?" exclaimed Gemma. "Are you still pissed or something? Companies cost millions and who'd be stupid enough to put one on eBay anyway. Let me see."

"It says here it was £5," I said, ignoring Gemma's outstretched hand. "Mine was the only bid by the look of it."

"£5?" said Cheyenne. "That isn't much. Does it have a lot of liabilities or something?"

"Liabilities?" I exclaimed looking up wildly. My phone dropped onto the floor as my hand went limp. "What do you mean, liabilities?"

"I've heard of things like this," said Cheyenne. "A company gets itself into trouble and runs up millions in debts then gets sold for a pound or something and dumps the debts onto the new owners."

"Yeah, I think I've heard of that as well," said Gemma. "Show me," and she waved her hand impatiently at me.

I picked up the phone and scanned it again looking for the words 'liabilities' and 'debts', my heart in my mouth. My total net worth this week was around £250 and falling.

"I can't see any mention of debts or liabilities," I said, then Gemma leaned forward and snatched the phone out of my hand. "Oi! Give it back!"

"Just a sec," said Gemma scanning my phone. Then she relaxed back into her chair and started to laugh.

"What is it?" I demanded agitatedly. "How many millions am I up for?"

Oh God, it's not billions, is it?"

"You're not up for anything," said Gemma, "other than your five quid. By the look of it all you've done is bought an old share certificate from a failed company. Look, ..." and she held out the phone with her finger pointing to something. "... it says here the company ceased operating in 1933. Even if there were any debts they'd be long gone by now. There were probably thousands of shareholders anyway so you wouldn't have been up for all the debt."

"Oh thank God for that," I said in relief. Sure enough it did say the company had folded in 1933. "So what have I bought, do you think?"

"Looks to me like you just bought an old share certificate," said Gemma. "It'll have no meaning now so it's really just an old picture. Kind of cute though."

"Can I see?" asked Cheyenne.

"Sure," I said, passing her my phone.

"Ohh, that is pretty," she said, looking at the picture of the certificate. "Look at all that scroll work. Must have taken hours to design and isn't the name fantastic? Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway Company. That is just so evocative! There's even a picture of a steam train in the middle. That is so cool! It'll look lovely framed. I wonder how big it is?"

"It looks pretty big," I said, taking my phone back. "The picture's quite small but there are a couple of fold lines in it. Jesus, my heart's still fluttering!"

"Thought you were going to be a big time business tycoon, did you?" said Gemma, standing up. "Come on, Cheyenne. Let's have a look at the washing machine. I'm sure you're anxious to go and get things sorted and packed if you're moving in on Tuesday."

"Most of it's packed already," said Cheyenne, getting up as well, "but yeah, things to do. Do you want cash or shall I set up bank transfers?"

"Whatever's easiest for you," said Gemma as they disappeared through the back door in the kitchen.

I sat back and just chilled for a few moments then looked at the certificate again. It was kinda cool.

"Well, that's probably the closest I'll ever get to having a share portfolio," I said out loud and giggled. "And it is quite pretty."

I closed my email and shut down eBay and went to check my text messages. There were about ten from Zoe, all basically saying the same thing and getting increasingly strident.

I thumbed the ring icon and put the phone on speaker.

"Oh thank God!" screeched Zoe after two rings. "I've been so worried! Where are you?"

"I'm at home," I said.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice calmer.

"I'm fine," I said, "apart from a shitty headache. How much did I have to drink last night?"

"A lot," said Zoe chuckling. "Don't you remember?"

"I remember having three or four beers," I said, trying to remember, "then some guy came over with a bottle of wine but I'm sure I didn't have much."

"And the rest," said Zoe. "It wasn't wine it was vodka and you were drinking it neat from the bottle."

"Oh God, are you serious?" I exclaimed in horror. "Neat vodka?"

"Yup," said Zoe. "Umm, I'm guessing you don't remember Ewan then?"

"Nope," I said. "I've never heard of a Ewan. Was he the guy I was

talking to? With the vodka?"

"Yes," said Zoe. "The two of you were huddled in a corner, sitting on the floor and chatting most of the evening, until you threw up over him."

"I what?" I said in shock. "No way!"

"You sure did," she said. "Well, not much went on him, really. Mostly it went over the side of the armchair beside you. And the floor, of course."

"Oh. My. God." I said, my hand over my mouth and my eyes wide with horror. "You mean, like beer and vodka?"

"And the food we'd had at the reveal," said Zoe drily.

"Oh Jesus," I said and shut my eyes. "Do you know his phone number? I suppose I'd better text and apologise."

I was struggling to come to terms with throwing up over someone at a party as I don't drink much as a rule but it did also explain why I didn't have any missed calls from a strange number. No matter how much we'd connected at the time, being thrown up on probably tends to sour a budding new relationship. Shame really as I must have liked him or I wouldn't have drunk all his vodka.

"Fraid not," said Zoe. "I don't know him. I suppose I could ask Ursula."

"Who's Ursula?" I asked as Cheyenne stuck her head round the lounge door to wave goodbye. "Byeee, see you on Tuesday!" I called as I waved back.

"What's happening Tuesday?" asked Zoe suspiciously.

"Oh sorry, I was just saying goodbye to our new tenant," I said. "She's moving in on Tuesday. So who's Ursula?"

"It was her party," said Zoe. "Don't you remember her either?"

“Umm, was she the blonde in the green dress?” I asked, picking something at random.

Zoe laughed so I figured I'd got that wrong as well.

“So how did I get home?” I asked, changing the subject.

Gemma came back in and started making noises in the kitchen.

“Ursula was pretty pissed off at what you did to her chair and carpet,” said Zoe. “She was going to call the police so I dumped you in an Uber to get rid of you.”

“Oh God, are you serious?” I exclaimed, my self-horror finding new depths to plumb. “What else did I do?”

“Nahhhh, I'm joking,” said Zoe with a snigger, “at least about the police. I did dump you in an Uber though. And don't be surprised if Ursula sends you the cleaning bill. She was saying something about the carpet being forty quid a metre.”

“Oh Jesus,” I muttered.

“So long as you enjoyed yourself,” said Zoe with a touch of sarcasm. “Oh, I took the money for the Uber from your purse. She wanted the money up front seeing as how you could barely stand upright.”

“She?” I asked. “It was a woman Uber driver?”

“Yeah,” said Zoe. “I specifically requested a woman driver as I didn't want you being taken somewhere and killed or worse”

“Oh wow, thank you, Zo,” I said from my heart. “I owe you one. Seriously.”

“All good babe,” she said. “But I was worried when you didn't answer my texts.”

“I lost my phone,” I said. “Gemma found it under the couch.”

“Hello Zoe,” shouted Gemma as she came into the lounge with fresh mugs of tea. “Hope your drunken friend didn't embarrass you too much last night?”

“She's not my friend any more,” called back Gemma. “That's the last party I'm taking her to.”

Gemma laughed and plonked a mug of tea in front of me.

“Oh come on!” I exclaimed. “That's the only time I've ever got drunk at a party!”

“Oh yeah?” said Zoe. “And what about that time at my cousin's wedding?”

“That doesn't count,” I said quickly. “That was a wedding, not a party and anyway, bridesmaids are supposed to get drunk. It's part of the formalities, that and shagging one of the grooms-men and I didn't fancy either of them.”

“Yeah, well there's just one incy wincy little flaw in that,” said Zoe. “You weren't one of the bridesmaids.”

“I was first alternate,” I said hotly. “I would have been a bridesmaid if Sandra hadn't had her baby a week early.”

“Anyway, I'd love to chat but there's someone at the door,” said Zoe. “I'm just happy you got home safely, hon.”

“Yeah, thanks to you, Zo,” I said. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“You'd have done the same for me,” said Zoe. “Bye Gemma!”

“Bye Zoe,” called Gemma.

I hung up and we looked at each other for a while. Me still a little horrified with myself and Gemma with the joy of schadenfreude in her eyes.

“That was Zoe,” I said after a while.

"I figured," said Gemma. "So she told you everything that happened?"

"Probably not," I said with a groan, "but I've found out why I was so hung over this morning. Apparently I was drinking vodka not wine."

Gemma laughed.

"So how did you get home?" she asked, dunking the tea bag a few times to make the tea darker. "Zoe brought you back?"

"No, she put me in an Uber," I said.

"So who put you to bed?" asked Gemma. "The driver?"

"Zoe said it was a woman driver," I said, watching as the little piece of cardboard at the end of the string attached to my teabag slid remorselessly into the tea as I stirred it, "but I'm guessing she just dumped me on the door step. I must have made my own way inside and collapsed on the couch since that was where my phone was. I must have put myself to bed since I woke up fully dressed."

"Oh yes, the share certificate," said Gemma. "You probably had your own little party on the couch first. I wonder what else you bought?"

"Oh shit," I said and picked up my phone. I logged into eBay and checked my history. There were three other auctions I'd bid on but I'd been outbid on all of them which was just as well. One was a used pair of very ugly Prada shoes two sizes too small for me and the current bid was now £201.50.

"Well?" asked Gemma with a mildly malicious grin.

"No, nothing else," I said, closing eBay quickly. "Just that certificate."

"You're lucky it was only a fiver," she said. "So what did you think of Cheyenne?"

"She seemed nice enough," I said. "Mind you I'd put up with a lot to stop having to pay the extra rent. Did you notice she didn't seem bothered by that?"

“Probably because I told her you'd been here nearly three years,” said Gemma. “She probably thinks you're a fixture here and won't move out.”

“Three years?” I said in surprise. “Is it really that long?”

“Well, two years seven months,” said Gemma. “That's almost three years, isn't it.”

“Jesus,” I said in dismay. “That means I've been working at the café two years and eight months. It was only ever supposed to be a temporary thing until I found a job in a hotel.”

“Are you still looking?” she asked, sipping her tea.

“Religiously,” I said, “but I'm finding it so disheartening. I'd just finished my degree in hotel management when COVID hit and the hotels cut back on staff. Now it's all over and hospitality is coming back up they're starting to recruit again but my degree's three years old and they're taking on the newly qualified as trainee managers, not people like me who've still got no experience.”

“That's a bummer,” said Gemma. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don't know,” I said. “For sure I don't want to stay on minimum wage in a café for the rest of my life but another year or two and there'll be no hope of hotel management. Maybe if I went in as a cleaner and tried to work my way up but I don't see that happening. I'm overqualified to be a cleaner anyway.” I sighed. “Maybe I should do another course but when you're skint all the time it's difficult to find the money.”

“Maybe Cheyenne could find you something in the undertaking world,” said Gemma. “Do you want me to ask around and see if there's anything in marketing? Have you got any graphic arts skills?”

“No,” I said. “I was crap at art at school. I can use a computer but I'm not one of those creative types. I'm more of a people person.”

“Undertaking is working with people,” said Gemma, swirling round

the dregs of her tea.

“Ugh, dead people,” I said, screwing up my nose. “I was upset enough when gran died but having to work with dead people all day ... no thanks.”

“I don't really know,” said Gemma, “but I'm guessing most of the work of an undertaker is with their relatives. You know, comforting the bereaved, choosing the music and upselling coffin handles and stuff. You'd be good at that, I'm sure, and it's got to be better than lattes and cream slices.”

“We don't sell cream slices,” I said absently, wondering if she was right and I needed to abandon my ambitions of owning a chain of hotels. I groaned and gently shook my head. “Oh Jesus, I still feel like shit. I think I'll go back to bed. Thanks for the tea.”

I plonked my mug on the little table and got up. The room didn't spin but I still felt a little queasy and achy.

“Actually,” I said when I reached the door, “you may be on to something. Maybe I will have a chat with Cheyenne.”

“Probably an idea to let her settle in for a couple of days first,” said Gemma. “Don't want to scare her away before she's established here.”

* * *

For some reason Monday mornings were always slow at the café. I don't know why as most of our customers were people who worked in the area and presumably they worked on Mondays as well. Maybe people spend a lot over the weekends and tried to recoup by cutting back on the Monday morning breakfasts. Still, my 'large cappuccino, skinny milk and a bacon and cheese croissant' man was there as usual and our repartee still went no further than his fear of his wife not letting him give in to my temptations. I did, however, wonder if he owned a hotel and decided he probably didn't. If he did he'd probably have his coffee and croissant at the hotel.

I was leaning against the corner of the chiller cabinet watching Cassie

force steam through some milk to make it frothy when my phone rang. I pulled it out of my hip pocket and looked at it but the number was displayed as 'unknown'. I let it ring out and waited to see if whoever it was was going to leave a message. I only answer calls from unknown numbers when I'm expecting a call since they're usually scammers. About twenty seconds later the phone pinged to say I had a voicemail.

"Maybe it's Ewan?" I thought, getting just the tiniest bit excited. "Maybe he's forgiven me and is ringing to offer me another bottle of vodka!" A little voice inside me said that if it was Ewan he probably wanted to know where to send his cleaning bill as well but I squashed that thought. He hadn't seemed the vindictive type, not that I could remember anything about him other than he was generous with his alcohol.

Sunita was at the far end of the café collecting the dirty mugs and dishes and wiping tables. I picked up the coffee Cassie had made and took it over to the customer then meandered down to where she was.

"Could you cover the till for a few moments?" I asked quietly. "I've got to make a phone call."

"Ooooh, is it about another job?" she asked.

"No, of course not," I said, wondering why she would assume it would be about a job.

"Oh, OK then," she said and beamed happily. She gave the table one last wipe then sauntered off to the counter.

I could see Winston through the glass frontage talking to Sondra who ran the dry cleaners next door so I decided to chance it and went out the back.

"Ahh, this is Robin Rigsby calling for Sylvia Avery," said the voicemail. "I'd appreciate you calling me back at your earliest convenience." Conveniently he'd given his phone number as well

He sounded middle aged and there was no way Robin could be mistaken for Ewan so I glowered at the phone. My finger hovered over

3 to delete then I hung up without deleting it. It was just possible that this was someone ringing about my last interview. Admittedly they had offered the job to someone else but it was possible that whoever it was had turned the job down and I was the second choice. OK, I'd prefer to be first choice but second choice is good too. Better than last resort anyway.

I ummed and erred for a few moments then called him back.

"Rigsby & Son Solicitors," said the lady's voice. "How can I help you?"

"Bugger," I thought, my stomach turning over. "Ursula has brought in a solicitor. Bugger bugger bugger."

"Oh, umm, I've just had a call from Robin Rigsby," I said nervously.

"Your name?" asked the woman. She sounded surprisingly northern to my London and the Home Counties ear.

"Sylvia Avery," I said.

"Putting you through," she said.

"Ahh, thank you for calling me back so promptly," said the voice from the voicemail, presumably Robin Rigsby.

"If it's about the carpet, I can explain," I said hurriedly.

"What carpet?" he asked, sounding confused.

"Umm, Ursula's carpet," I said. "You know, Saturday night?"

"I don't think I know an Ursula," he said slowly. "Umm, is there an issue with her carpet? Some sort of personal injury claim perhaps?"

"Umm, sorry," I said after a few seconds hesitation as something seemed to be amiss with the conversation. "I think we're talking at cross purposes."

"I do hope so," he said cheerfully. "I very much dislike not knowing

what I'm talking about. You are Sylvia Avery, are you not?"

"Umm, yes," I said. "You rang me a few minutes ago."

"Indeed," said Robin Rigsby. "I rang in connection with your recent purchase of the Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway Company. When would it be convenient for you to attend my office? There are some documents that need signing."

Chapter Five

My whole body went tense and the world around me disappeared.

“Hello?” said Robin. “Hello? Ms Avery? Are you there?”

“Umm, yeah,” I said, an unmistakable quiver of alarm in my voice. What the hell was a solicitor phoning me about a silly little £5 auction on eBay for?

“Ahh, good,” he said. “I thought we'd been cut off. Now, as I was saying, there are some documents you need to sign in order to transfer ownership of the company to you. You wouldn't happen to be anywhere near, would you? It would make things so much easier with identification and so on.”

“Um, no, I'm in London,” I said automatically, my mind a virtual blank. Documents? Ownership? What the frig?

“Ahh, I see,” said Robin. “Well, perhaps tomorrow then or Wednesday?”

“What?” I asked.

“Perhaps another day would be more convenient for you, Ms Avery?” said Robin patiently, “although I would like to get the matter resolved as soon as possible.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, staring sightlessly at a dirty brick wall. “What are you talking about?”

“The Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway Company,” said Robin. “Um, you are the Sylvia Avery who purchased it through eBay yesterday, are you not? I got your phone number from your account profile.”

“But that was just an old share certificate,” I said. “I bought it because it looked pretty.”

“There is only the one share certificate,” said Robin. “In fact there is

only the one share as it is a private limited company. The certificate image used for the auction was merely to demonstrate authenticity and a new certificate will be issued to you in your name once the transfer is complete. I'm afraid, though, that the new certificate won't be as, umm, pretty as the old one as we do not have the original template. It will just be a simple declaration on a sheet of A4."

"So you're saying I didn't buy the certificate?" I asked, confused.

"Well, I have that certificate in my possession," said Robin, "so I am more than happy to give it to you, umm, as a keepsake, shall we say, upon completion of the transfer."

"But I don't want the company," I said with an edge of desperation creeping into my voice. "I don't know anything about steam engines and railways and things."

"Well, that is hardly a factor," said Robin, his voice hardening slightly. "After all, the company ceased operations in 1933. It exists only on paper now, more or less."

"More or less?" I squeaked. "What do you mean 'more or less'? It doesn't owe millions, does it?"

"Oh dear me, no," said Robin with a little laugh. "There is no remaining debt attached to the company except, of course, the notional debt of £1 due to the sole shareholder on the formal winding up of the company. No, I was referring to the assets of the company."

"Assets?" I asked. "What assets?"

"Did you not read the document referred to in the eBay listing?" asked Robin. He was beginning to sound puzzled now.

"What document?" I asked, somewhat unnecessarily since I didn't even remember bidding on the thing so the odds were I'd been too drunk to read any supporting documentation or understand it if I had.

"Ahh," he said and paused. "This does put rather a different complexion on things."

"I'm lost," I said, stepping up to the wall and leaning my forehead against it. "What did you say your name was?"

"Rigsby," he said. "Robin Rigsby."

"Can I call you Robin?" I asked. "I've got a confession to make and Mr Rigsby sounds too unfriendly."

"In my capacity as a solicitor I would advise you against making any confessions," he said quickly, "but by all means call me Robin." He paused again and cleared his throat. "Would you prefer that I called you Sylvia?"

"Yes," I said. "I would prefer that muchly."

"Muchly," he repeated quietly as though to himself. "Hmm."

"OK, Robin," I said, turning round so my back was against the wall. "Here's the thing. I, umm, went to a party on Saturday night and, silly me, I drank a bit too much."

"I trust you were not driving," said Robin.

"What? Oh, no. I got an Uber," I said. "Anyway, I don't really remember any of this but it seems that when I got home I went and bid on some stupid things on eBay and this was one of them."

"Ahh," he said.

"The first I knew about it was when I got an email saying I'd won the auction," I said, feeling stupid. "So, you see, it's all been a dreadful mistake."

"Be that as it may," said Robin, "under the terms and conditions of eBay there is a valid contract here. You bid in a legally valid auction and, as there were no other bidders, you won and, I might add, you have paid the £5. It was taken from your PayPal account at the time the auction was completed. I'm afraid, legally, you are the owner of the Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway Company. The papers I referred to earlier are merely the legal formalities to recognise that

fact.”

“Oh shit!” I exclaimed. “So you're saying that there is no way I can get out of it now?”

“Well, I daresay you could take the matter to court,” said Robin, “but the costs would be high and in all likelihood you'd lose unless you claimed that your drunkenness was forced upon you by someone in an attempt to coerce you into this purchase. I suspect proving that could be somewhat onerous.”

“No, I wasn't forced,” I admitted, my heart sinking. “My friend Zoe said I was swallowing the stuff like there's no tomorrow.”

“Yes, well, it's probably not a good idea to admit that to me if you are planning to go to court,” said Robin, “but I would advise you not to bother. It would be much easier to simply list the company again on eBay and sell it to someone else.”

“You mean I can do that?” I asked, my heart rising up a little.

“Of course,” said Robin. “You are the owner. You can sell it anytime you want to although finding a buyer may be difficult unless you happen upon another party-goer like yourself,” and he chuckled.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What the hell, Sylvie?” shouted Winston's voice. I looked up to see him striding towards me. “You going to be all day? Come on, back to work! We've customers waiting!”

“Oh, sorry!” I exclaimed jerking upright guiltily. “Umm, I'm just on the phone to my solicitor.”

Winston froze mid stride.

“Ahh,” he said. “Solicitor. Right. Umm, well, take your time then. Umm, yeah,” and he turned and hurried away.

“I'm sorry,” I said re-focusing on Robin, although Winston's reaction

had surprised me. "That was just my boss."

"He sounded a trifle upset," said Robin. "I trust I am not keeping you from other important matters?"

"No, it's OK," I said. "He often gets upset. Pressure of work, you see."

"Indeed," said Robin. He cleared his throat again. "Umm, I would be more than happy to represent you should an unfair dismissal arise from our conversation."

"Thanks," I said, "but he won't sack me. At least I bloody hope he won't. Where were we?"

"I was about to explain the unusual circumstances of this company," said Robin, "as detailed in the document that formed part of the auction listing."

"The one I didn't read?" I asked.

"Indeed," said Robin, "although if you had I venture you would be less alarmed about this purchase than you would appear to be."

"OK," I said. "Talk to me."

"The Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway Company was formed in 1841," said Robin, "by Joshua Coverdale for the purposes of carrying freight and passengers from Smocklebeck to Saltburn, a distance of some twelve miles. It was incorporated as a limited liability company as a means of minimising the liability of the owner, Mr Coverdale, in the event of some disaster as steam railways were still in their infancy at the time. The company traded fairly successfully for some seventy years and ownership passed from father to son to grandson. However, the advent of the First World War impacted business negatively and the company ceased trading in 1933. At that time most of the assets, including the rolling stock, were sold to pay off the company's debts."

"I think I follow that," I said. "So are you saying the company still has some assets?"

“Oh yes,” he said, “but they are worthless.”

“Oh,” I said. “How come?”

“If I might continue?” he said pointedly. I had a vision of him looking irritably at me over half moon glasses.

“Sorry,” I said contritely.

“Now,” he continued, “in 1922 the North Yorkshire Preservation Rural Municipality Corporation was created with its boundary enclosing the Smocklebeck facility and some nine miles of the track itself. Under the terms of the agreement negotiated between the Government of the day and the company, the company was granted continuing ownership of that land, amounting to some 125,000 square yards, in perpetuity while the company continued to exist. Subsequently, in 1952, the North York Moors National Park was created which absorbed the land of the NYPRMC. Consequently, although much of the land covered by the National Park remains in private hands, the land owned by the SSSRC is subject to the earlier agreement with the NYPRMC and therefore reverts to Governmental ownership if the company ceases to exist.”

“But didn't it shut down in 1933?” I asked, confused by all these abbreviations.

“Not at all,” said Robin, “and this demonstrates why legal negotiations should not be left in the hands of Government officials. The company merely ceased trading in 1933 but continues to exist as a legal entity to this day.”

“So you're saying the company still owns this land?” I asked, feeling a little lost.

“Indeed,” said Robin. “In fact, you do as you own the company.”

“You what?” I exclaimed, taken aback by this unexpected new development.

“You own the company and the company owns the land,” said Robin. “At least until such time as you decide to liquidate the company and

terminate its existence.”

“Wow,” I said. “You mean I own 100,000 square yards of Yorkshire?”

“125,000,” said Robin. “Together with a railway station, a house and two minor sheds.”

“Well, fuck me,” I said, totally blind-sided.

“Well, quite,” said Robin. I could almost hear him going red over the phone. “I would advise you, if you permit, not to liquidate the company however.”

“Why not?” I asked. It occurred to me that all that land should be worth a few quid.

“If the company is liquidated then the land and buildings revert to the Government,” said Robin. “You would not get one penny in compensation.”

“But what if I keep the company going but sell the land?” I asked.

“You can’t,” said Robin. “Under the terms of the agreement the land must stay under the ownership of the company. If you try to sell it then it reverts to the Government again. This is precisely why the company has never been formally closed.”

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “I own a company that owns a whole bunch of land but I can’t sell the land?”

“That’s right,” said Robin patiently.

“But I can sell the company with the land?” I asked.

“Most definitely,” said Robin, “as I did yesterday.”

“But why only for £5?” I asked. “Surely it’s worth a hell of a lot more?”

“Yes and no,” said Robin. “In principle, yes, but under the terms of the agreement the land can only be used for the purposes of a steam

railway. Any other attempted usage would mean the land reverts to the Government.”

“So it couldn't be used for houses or farming or anything?” I asked.

“No,” said Robin. “In fact the terms are very clear. It has to be a steam railway. Even an attempt to upgrade to a modern diesel or electric railway would render the agreement void and in view of the rolling stock and track being absent it would require a very substantial investment to make the company a going concern. Frankly, the demand for a steam railway in that area would be minimal at best.”

“So I'm screwed whichever way I turn?” I asked. That was pretty much the way my life had gone so far so it looked like my luck was holding steady.

“Oh I wouldn't say that,” said Robin. “You do have some 26 acres of beautiful Yorkshire countryside within easy reach of beaches.”

“How far is this place from London?” I asked.

“Three hundred miles or thereabouts I'd say,” said Robin. “I confess I have never been there.”

“Oh wonderful,” I said sadly. “I own all that and I can't even afford to get there.”

“Ahh,” said Robin and paused for a moment. “I see that that could be a difficulty. Umm, I'm afraid I have an appointment in a few minutes. Perhaps you could consider your situation and make arrangements to visit to complete the transfer documents?”

“What happens if I don't?” I asked.

“Then I shall be obliged to consider suing you for breach,” said Robin, “although I would do so with the greatest reluctance.”

“I'll get back to you,” I said quickly. “Give me a day or two, OK.”

“Of course,” he said. “It's been a pleasure talking with you, Ms Av ...,”

umm, Sylvia. Until our meeting.”

“Bye,” I said abruptly and hung up.

“Jesus effing Christ!” I said and slid down the wall so I was squatting on my heels. “Woah!”

I stayed like that for a minute or two trying to come to terms with the entire conversation. Frankly it was beyond my comprehension but his casual threat of suing me was kind of worrying. I caught a movement in the corner of my eye and looked over to see Winston watching me through one of the kitchen windows.

“S'pose I'd better get back to work,” I muttered, wishing I could go home and lie on the couch to think things through.

I forced myself up and walked back inside the café.

“So, umm, how did it go with your solicitor?” asked Winston when I reappeared.

“Oh fine,” I said, reluctant to tell him anything about it. I turned towards the till then wondered why he was so concerned.

“He said he's happy to represent me in an unfair dismissal,” I said, half jokingly but watching Winston's eyes closely. Did I see a flicker of relief go through them?

“Who's unfairly dismissed you?” he asked. “You have another job as well?”

“Oh no,” I said. “It just came up in the conversation.”

“Oh shit, you're not a whistleblower, are you?” he asked, staring at me open-mouthed.

“Sylv's a whistleblower?” asked Cassie, turning to look and narrowly avoiding steam frothing her hand instead of the milk jug. “Who's whistle is she blowing then?” She cackled with laughter and waited to see what reaction she got.

"I'm not a whistleblower," I said. "Why? What are you up to, Winston?"

"This is a café," he said, holding his arms out sideways. "There's nothing much we can do except short change customers every now and then."

"I wasn't accusing you of anything," I said. "You're the one who brought up whistleblowers, not me."

"Is this going to be on the news?" asked Sunita, bringing back a small pile of dirty dishes.

"Is what going to be on the news?" demanded Winston, a touch of panic in his eyes.

"I dunno," said Sunita. "Whatever Sylvia's blowing the whistle about. Why's it called whistleblowing anyway?"

"I've no idea," I said, "but I'm not a whistleblower and as far as I know there's nothing to blow a whistle about."

"I can see the headline now," said Cassie and Winston whirled in alarm to look at her. "Café Owner Serves Customers While Stoned." She laughed and got back to her coffees.

"Is that what you're worried about, Winston?" I asked. "Don't be. This is Islington after all."

He gave me a long look then walked away.

"Is Winston taking drugs?" asked Sunita quietly, putting down her tray.

"What do you think he smokes out the back?" I asked.

"I thought it was Golden Virginia," she said. "My cousin smokes that."

"It might be Golden Virginia," I said. "I don't know but whatever it is he's adding something. Haven't you noticed how happy he is after having a smoke?"

"I always thought that was just because he likes smoking," she said happily.

"Maybe we should check our payslips," said Cassie. "Maybe he's diddling us."

"I doubt it," I said. "He's not clever enough. More likely he's using this café as a front for money laundering."

"Don't you need cash for money laundering?" asked Cassie. "Most of our takings are card."

"Maybe he's shagging some of the staff," I said with a giggle.

"Oooh, do you think it's Jason?" said Cassie bursting into giggles herself.

"What's shagging?" asked Sunita, half giggling because Cassie and I were even though she didn't know what we were talking about.

"I'll tell you later," I said, looking up to see someone walk in the door. "We've got customers."

Sunita hurried over to the dishwasher to dump the dirties and I went to the till.

"How can I help you today?" I asked brightly.

"Ummm," he said pondering the goodies laid out on trays in the chiller. "Ummm, what would you suggest?"

"The Ruben Sandwich is quite popular," I said, moving over a little and pointing directly down at some.

"Sounds Jewish," he said, bending over to look at the Ruben Sandwiches. "What's in it?"

"Pastrami, melted Emmental cheese and sauerkraut," I said. "You can have it toasted or as it is."

“Hmm,” he said and straightened up. “OK, I’ll have one toasted.”

“Anything to drink with that?” I asked, ringing it up on the till.

“Do you have any diet Coke?” he asked, his eyes shifting to my chest where my name tag was.

“We’ve got Pepsi Max,” I said.

“Yeah fine,” he said.

“Do you want a glass with it?” I asked ringing the Pepsi up as well.

“Nah, the can’s fine, Sylvia,” he said and pulled out his wallet.

“That’ll be £12.60” I said. “Cash or card?”

“Card,” he said, pulling one out of his wallet. “So what did your mother say?”

Chapter Six

“She said I’m too busy to talk to you and you should leave me alone,” I said, my brain fully on automatic. After all, people had been making some sort of reference to the song ‘Sylvia’s Mother’ to or at me since I was old enough to know the words ‘Sylvia’ and ‘Mother’.¹

“Oh, did she really?” he said sadly as he swiped his card across the card reader.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There was an error. Could you try again?”

“So what did your mother say?” he asked with a wide grin on his face.

Actually he wasn’t bad looking, in a middle-aged sort of way, so I said “the card didn’t read” in a softer tone than I might otherwise have done.

“Oh, right,” he said and looked down at the reader. It confirmed the error so he swiped his card again.

“Ooops, sorry,” I said and touched the ‘cancel card payment’ icon on the till’s screen then ‘process card payment’. “Try now.”

It worked this time so I gave him a little sign with a number on it and told him his order would only be a few minutes. He wandered off to find a table and I turned to the next customer. As the man and his wife were arguing over whether or not she could have almond milk in her latte – her point being that it was healthier and his being that it was just a con to charge more for milk – I noticed the ‘Sylvia’s Mother’ man come up to the counter again and take a napkin. Still, we got the milk order sorted in the end – almond, to his irritation – and I processed that then got a Ruben Sandwich from the tray with a pair of tongs. I put it on a plate and shoved it under the grill for a minute or so to melt the cheese and got out a can of Pepsi for when the sandwich was ready.

I passed the almond milk order to Cassie, along with the man’s own flat white with ‘normal’ milk order and got out a couple of scones.

1 Sylvia’s Mother by Dr Hook and the Medicine Show, 1972

The grill pinged so I took the sandwich out and put the top slice of sourdough back on and put the whole thing in the sandwich press to toast then got out some pre-filled dishes with cream and jam for the scones. I put the scone plates on Cassie's counter for Sunita to take over when their coffees were ready. There were no other customers waiting so I leaned my hip against the counter and thought "Where the hell is Middlesbrough?" I had a vague idea it was somewhere up north but that was all. Robin had said the land was near some beaches but which side of the country?

The sandwich press pinged so I opened it and quickly stuffed a bit of sauerkraut which had fallen out back inside with my fingers. We weren't supposed to handle food directly with our hands but it was too fiddly to use the tongs and my hands were clean enough. I used a spatula to slide the sandwich out of the press and cut it in half before sliding it onto a plate. There was someone at the far end of the chiller studying the cheesecakes so I grabbed the can of Pepsi and put it on the tray beside the sandwich then nearly crashed into Sunita as she grabbed the tray of coffees and scones.

"Sorry," we both muttered and went our separate ways. Near collisions happened all the time but actual collisions with spillages happened only two or three times a week and usually generated a cheer from most of the customers in the café when it happened. It used to be embarrassing when I first started there but nowadays I just did a little pantomime hop, skip and jump before redoing the order.

"Hello," said the Sylvia's Mother man when I delivered his sandwich and Pepsi. "You weren't entirely right."

"Oh yeah?" I said, noticing the napkin was covered in scribbles and crossings out.

"Yes," he said, pushing his sandwich out of the way and pointing to the napkin with his pen. "She also says for him to call back."

"But that's not until the end of the sixth verse," I said with a sigh. After a hundred or two remarks about Sylvia and her mother I'd gone online and downloaded both the song and the lyrics and memorised them. Some people are very good at twisting song lyrics to their own

purpose so it helped to be able to quote the exact words back at them. "It's her last resort since her attempts to get rid of him in the previous verses haven't worked. She doesn't really want him to call back."

"I thought that was in the second verse," he said and studied his napkin with a frown.

"The second verse is where the guy says he has to talk to her and won't be long," I said. "In the third her mother says Sylvia's getting married. Then the guy says he just wants to say goodbye then her mother tells Sylvia to take her umbrella with her. It's only after that, when it's more than likely Sylvia's already left the house, that her mother says the guy should call back."

"Oh," he said and screwed up the napkin contemptuously. "You really do know that song, don't you."

"I imagine everyone called Sylvia knows it backwards," I said, "especially if they work in hospitality. Anyway, do you seriously think Sylvia wants to go off with this guy? She's marrying that fella down Galveston way so clearly the guy on the phone is a loser. Probably a stalker since even her mother can't get rid of him."

"I always thought it was a love song," said the man, pursing his lips. "Especially where it goes, For the next. Three. Minutes. Pleeeeeeeease Mrs Abbey, I've just got to talk to her."

"Actually it's Avery," I said. "Mrs Avery, not Abbey, although the singer pronounces it as Avey."

"You're shattering all my illusions," he said, pushing out his lower lip unattractively. "I'm never going to hear that song in the same way again."

"Never mind," I said cheerfully. "At least you've saved the forty cents you were going to offer me to talk to you for three minutes."

"I was only going to do it as a joke," he said in surprise. "You're only the second Sylvia I've ever met and the other one was nowhere near as pretty as you. How old are you?"

"Fourteen," I said and he looked at me in alarm. "Hah! Only joking! Not all jokes are funny, are they."

"No, I suppose not," he said. "Umm, thanks for the sandwich."

"You're welcome," I said. "Have a nice day!"

"You shouldn't be talking to the customers when there's customers waiting," said Winston who was standing at the till when I got back.

"There aren't any waiting," I said, "apart from that woman standing outside."

"That's not the point," he said. "This is a business and we need to keep the throughput flowing."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, pushing him out of the way so I could stand in my officially designed spot. "It's Monday morning and we've got no throughput. Are you harassing me?"

"Of course I'm not harassing you, Sylv!" he exclaimed angrily then took a deep breath to calm himself down. "I'm just reminding you not to chat with customers."

"OK," I said. "I'll never speak to a customer again."

Winston groaned and rolled his eyes.

"Are we all to stop talking to customers, Winston?" asked Cassie, "or is it only Sylvia?"

"Why can't Sylvia talk to customers?" asked Sunita joining us. "Has she been rude to someone again?"

"What do you mean, 'again'?" I said tartly. "I've never been rude to a customer!"

"Don't you remember that old lady who got upset about the crumbs on her table?" asked Sunita.

"I wasn't rude," I said. "I just suggested she sat at another table until I'd got a cloth. How was I supposed to know that was her favourite table? She'd never been in in the morning before."

"I've a good mind to sack all of you," said Winston grumpily.

"Just as well I've already got a solicitor onto it then," I said, just to wind him up.

"What's his name, Sylv?" asked Cassie with a grin. "Maybe we could share costs."

"Costs for what?" asked Sunita, not knowing what was going on but enjoying it anyway. It made her feel part of the team.

"Our court case against Winston," I said, winking at Cassie.

"For sexual harassment," added Cassie for good measure.

Sunita's eyes went wide in astonishment and she turned to look at Winston in confusion.

"I give up," he said throwing up his hands. "Do what you damned well like, I'm going for a smoke!" and he stalked off. The door slid open as the woman who'd been waiting outside came in with a friend.

"What did he do to you?" whispered Sunita.

I beckoned her closer and put my lips up to her ear.

"Absolutely nothing," I whispered. "We're only winding him up."

She thought about that for a few moments, perhaps even translating it into Gujarati or whatever, then scowled at me.

"Could you take the till?" I asked. "I need to talk to Winston."

"Sure," she said, uncertainly. "Everything is all fine?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

She nodded and looked into my eyes for a couple of seconds then her happy face re-appeared.

“How can I help you?” she asked, turning to the customers.

I wandered outside and found Winston rolling a cigarette.

“Yo, Winston,” I said. “We were only joking with you. Don't get so stressed.”

He looked at me while he slowly wet the cigarette paper with his tongue then finished rolling it.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But you phoning a solicitor got me worried.”

“It's nothing to do with you,” I said. “It's about something I bought on eBay.”

“For real?” he asked, his ciggie drooping unlit from his lip.

“For real,” I said.

“Only I've had an unfair dismissal case before,” he said, pulling out his lighter. “A few months before you started. It was a bugger. I ended up paying out a couple of thousand just to not go to court.”

“Ahh,” I said, taken aback. “I'm sorry, I didn't know.”

He took a deep drag on his ciggie and held his breath for a few seconds.

“It's not easy, you know,” he said, letting out a cloud of smoke. “There are hundreds of cafés around here and the margins are terrible.” He glowered at the back wall of the café for a moment. “Agh, don't worry about it. Just do your job and you'll be fine.”

“Is the café in trouble?” I asked.

“Why, what have you heard?” he asked quickly.

“Nothing,” I said, watching him. “You just seem more stressed than usual.”

“Oh,” he said and took another drag on his ciggie. He looked around then let the smoke out in a whoosh. “You’ve met Angata, haven’t you?”

“Once, I think,” I said. “Nice lady with braids?”

“Yeah that’s her,” he said and took another drag. He held this one for longer then let it trickle out. “Only she went into hospital on Saturday. Some sort of aneurysm.”

“Oh God, Winston!” I said in surprise and instinctively put my hand out to touch his arm. “That’s terrible. How is she? Is it bad?”

“Too early to tell, the doctors don’t know,” he said, looking at the wall again, this time sourly. “Fingers crossed, hey.”

“Yeah, fingers crossed,” I said. “Umm, why don’t you take the rest of the day off and go to the hospital?”

“There’s nothing I can do,” he said, “and I’ve got to keep busy or I’ll go round the twist.”

“Oh Winston,” I said, tightening my grip on his arm. “I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“Nah,” he said, “but thanks anyway, Sylv. Hey, don’t tell any of the others, will you? I don’t need their pity.”

“Sure, no problem,” I said. “Umm, I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing you can say,” he said, dropping the ciggie on the ground and crushing it with his trainer. “It is what it is. Come on, let’s get back to work. The lunchtime crowd will be in in a bit.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, letting go of his arm. “Hey, you will let me know how she’s getting on, won’t you?”

“If you like,” he said. “Back to work.”

I followed him back inside the café and he went to check the chiller cabinet then disappeared into the cold room. I sidled up to Cassie.

“Hey, Cass,” I muttered.

“What's up?” she asked, finishing topping up a cappuccino with froth.

“Keep it to yourself but Angata was rushed into hospital Saturday,” I whispered.

“Who's Angata?” she asked, shaking chocolate power over the mug then her eyes went wide. “Oh, you mean ...?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “Some sort of aneurysm but Winston doesn't want anyone to know.”

“Is she going to be alright?” she whispered.

“I hope so,” I whispered. “He's stressed enough as it is.”

Winston emerged from the cold room and I slipped away to relieve Sunita who went to collect the cappuccino Cassie had made and take it to the right customer. A few moments later she was back and in a huddle with Cassie.

“Everyone needs to know,” I justified to myself. “Otherwise someone might fly off the handle and make things worse. The last thing any of us need is a real court case.”

* * *

I got home about ten past two and immediately went on eBay to check if there was another document with the auction listing. Unsurprisingly there was so I read it through carefully and it made little sense to me although it seemed to tie in with what Robin had said. At the very least the link to the document was through the Rigsby & Son website. Still, I got their address then went into Google maps to find out where Middlesbrough was. I was right. It was way up north, over on the right hand side of England. It wasn't that far from a small place called Saltburn which rang a bell.

I went back to the auction listing and discovered that Saltburn was past of the name of the company so I went back into Google Maps to see if Smocklebeck was a place as well. It was but it was so small I had to zoom Google Maps almost to its limits to find the place. By the look of it Smocklebeck had about a dozen houses right on the coast although there was a small notation a little inland that pointed to a disused but unnamed railway station. I briefly wondered why such a little place had a station then forgot about it as it wasn't important. What was important was how I would get the two hundred and fifty miles to Middlesbrough to avoid being sued.

I pondered for a few moments then Googled 'train fares london middlesbrough' and it turned out that the fare was around fifty to sixty quid each way although the trip was only about three hours so I could get there and back in a day and so only lose a day's pay. Much as I resented losing a day's pay it would be a lot less than the cost of losing a court case so on balance it was probably worth it.

"Hey Zoe," I texted. "How much would it cost in petrol to go 500 miles?"

I tried to read the document again while waiting for her reply but it was full of legal jargon and I realised why no one else had bid for the company. The actual eBay listing was attractive, with the ornate share certificate prominent, but most people who'd seen it had probably not been drunk and had seen the document and gone "no way" before they'd got to the end of the first paragraph.

"depends on the car maybe 50" texted back Zoe a while later.

"Wow, only £50?" I said to myself. "That's half the train fare. Hmmm."

I went back into Google Maps and found that Google estimated the time to get from Islington to Middlesbrough by car at five hours which was a bummer. If I left work at 2 and drove straight to Middlesbrough, Robin Rigby would have gone home.

"Unless I can persuade him to stay late," I thought. "If he does then I can drive straight back which would mean I'd be home at midnight or thereabouts so I could get to work the next day. Worth a try."

“Have I ever told you that you're the bestest friend in the whole world?” I texted Zoe.

“No you can't borrow my car,” she texted back moments later.

“Bitch!” I thought and texted back “:(“

“Who else do I know with a car?” I thought. “Gemma has one but there's no way she'll lend it to me. Ahh, I know.”

“Hey Malcolm, long time hey,” I texted to Malcolm.

“Who is this?” came back after a minute or so.

“Sylvia, remember me?” I texted.

“I have a new gf,” he replied.

“Great :)” I texted and refrained from mentioning that if he treated her better than he'd treated me he might actually hang on to this one. I didn't hold out much hope though and mentally wished her luck. At least I hadn't got pregnant like the one before me.

“Hello, mum,” I said when she answered the phone.

“Hello Sylvia,” she said. “Are you coming down this weekend? You said you might.”

“I don't know, mum,” I said. “Got a lot of things going on up here. Hey, I couldn't borrow your car for a day, could I? Or two, maybe?”

“Oh, I don't know,” said mum worriedly. “I've got to go to the shops tomorrow.”

“I was thinking maybe Friday and bringing it back Sunday,” I said. “Are you seeing Anton this weekend?”

“No, he'll be in Marseilles,” she said. “What do you want my car for?”

“I've got a job interview in Middlesbrough,” I lied. “Hotel Night

Manager.”

“Ohhh, but isn't Middlesbrough in Scotland?” she said. “I'll never see you again!”

“Nooo, it's in Lancashire,” I said. “Only a couple of hours drive away.”

“Lancashire? Isn't that way up north, near Scotland?” she asked.

“I don't think so,” I said. “It didn't look that far on Google Maps.”

“Hmm, well I don't know,” said mum. “I don't like being without a car. Couldn't you borrow one from one of your friends?”

“They all need their cars for work,” I said. “Come on, mum. You aren't working on Friday,”

“I might be,” she said ambiguously. “What about your gran's?”

“Gran's?” I asked in surprise. “I thought you'd sold that.”

“I was going to,” she said, “but it's better than mine so I've been thinking of keeping it and getting rid of the other.”

“Sweet,” I said happily. “So you have gran's and lend me yours over the weekend. You can sell it after I get back.”

“But what if you get the job?” she said. “Won't you be needing a car? Middlesbrough's not like London with all that public transport, you know.”

“If I get the job I'll be able to buy yours off you,” I said.

“Well, I don't know,” said mum worriedly. She wasn't a fan of quick decisions.

“That's awesome, mum,” I said and blew her a kiss down the phone. “I'll be down Thursday afternoon to pick it up. Thanks. Hey, I've got to go. Talk to you on Thursday. Love you. Bye.”

“Oh, bye bye,” said mum disappointedly.

“Cool,” I said to myself and looked up Robin Rigsby's number.

Chapter Seven

"I'm afraid Mr Rigsby is in conference," said the woman when I rang the solicitor. "Can I take a message?"

"Oh, umm, could you just let him know I'm hoping to come up on Friday," I said, caught off balance. For some reason it hadn't occurred to me that he'd have anything else to do except wait for me. "Umm, yeah, if he's free, I suppose."

"If I may have your name and contact number?" she asked smoothly. This clearly wasn't her first day on the job. I gave her the information and she efficiently disconnected.

I stuck my tongue out at the phone even though she hadn't been rude or anything then dumped my phone on the arm of the couch while I went to make some tea. While the kettle boiled I looked in the fridge to see what goodies were on my shelf. Not a lot by the look of things although there was a neat little plastic label on the empty bottom shelf with 'Cheyenne' neatly embossed. I looked inside the freezer and, sure enough, Gemma had been busy with her label maker in there as well. My own dinner choices were limited to half a frozen pizza, something I didn't recognise or remember wrapped in tin foil and a rock solid Chinese take-away box with what looked to be the remains of some chop suey and possibly beef in black bean sauce. I stared at it for a while trying to remember when I'd last had a Chinese take-away. Gemma, being a label addict, put cute little white labels on all her frozen stuff giving the date she'd put it in the freezer but I didn't have that kind of discipline. I relied on my memory and it was letting me down at the moment. I decided to have the pizza for dinner and put the Chinese back for another day just as my phone rang. I slammed the freezer shut and half ran into the lounge.

"Hello?" I said, snatching up the phone.

"Sylvia Avery?" asked Robin. He sounded a little irritated. "Robin Rigsby returning your call."

"Oh, hello Robin," I said, hoping he wasn't irritated with me. "I was, umm, hoping to come up to see you on Friday. Would that be OK?"

“In connection with?” he asked.

“Umm, that railway on eBay,” I said, completely unable to remember the name of the company. Maybe I should get a label maker as well?

“Ahh, Sylvia, of course,” he said, his voice losing all its irritation. “I do apologise. I’ve just finished a meeting with a very difficult client. Yes, Friday morning would be convenient. Shall we say 10 o’clock?”

“Late afternoon would be better for me,” I said. “I work in the mornings and I’ll be driving up.”

“Ahh, I’m playing golf with some colleagues from the Chamber of Commerce on Friday afternoon,” he said. “What time do you finish work?”

“2pm,” I said, “which makes things very awkward. Google says it’ll take four hours to get to Middlesbrough.”

“That would be optimistic to say the least,” he said. “I presume you will be working all the following week as well?”

“Fraid so,” I said, “and I don’t really want to lose a day’s pay for this.”

“Quite, quite,” he said thoughtfully. “No, Friday will be fine. I’ll give you my mobile phone number so when you are on the outskirts of Middlesbrough you can phone me and I’ll come in to the office. I don’t believe my wife has anything planned for Friday evening.”

“Umm, I don’t want to put you to any trouble,” I said, crossing my fingers so he wouldn’t change his mind.

“It’s no trouble at all,” he said briskly, “and I’m keen to get this matter resolved. Do you have a pen?”

He gave me his number and reassured me that it was fine to ring up to about 9pm although he didn’t make any suggestions about what I should do if I was delayed and found myself alone in a strange city in the middle of the night. I just hoped mum’s 14 year old Ford Fiesta would be up to it.

After hanging up I went back and finished making my tea then slumped in the arm chair. The obvious thing to do was to drive back to London after the meeting and be at work at 6:30 on Saturday morning but the prospect was daunting. It also occurred to me that once the legal formalities were done I'd still have to do something – God knows what – with the company and the land and it would make sense to at least have a look at it.

I picked up my phone again and Google mapped Smocklebeck to see how far it was from Middlesbrough.

“Hey, awesome!” I muttered when I discovered it was barely twenty five miles. And, by the look of it, for some of the way the road ran along the coast.

“Sweet,” I said, contemplating my phone as I sipped my tea. “Drive up Friday, do the biz with Robin then head out along the coast and find some deserted cove where I can doss in the car. I can get up at dawn, go find this land and see what it's like then drive back and do the late shift at work. Way cool! Now, who'd be the best person to swap with?”

* * *

Bernie owed me a swap so I had a chat with her on Tuesday when she turned up and she immediately texted her boyfriend to organise going to some club now that she'd have Saturday evening off. As a result I was a little late getting back home and found Cheyenne waiting in her little Mazda outside the house. She saw me walk down the road and got out.

“Hiya,” she said, smiling happily. “Sorry for being early.”

“Hey, hi,” I said, trying surreptitiously to peer into her car to see how much stuff she had. Not a huge amount by the look of it. “Come on in.”

“I'm so looking forward to this,” she gushed. “I just know we're going to be great friends.”

“Well, sure,” I said, trying to hide my irritation as I dislike gushers.

“Come into the kitchen. Gemma's left an envelope for you.”

She followed me into the kitchen and I handed her the envelope with the rent book and keys inside.

“There's two keys,” I said. “One for the front door and one for the back. There's one for the window lock in your room as well but we leave them in the windows.”

“Right, thanks,” she said, taking the envelope. “Ohhh, isn't that a lovely ring!”

“Do you like it?” I said, holding my palm towards me so she could see it better. “It was my gran's.”

“Is that a moonstone?” she asked. “I love moonstones.”

“I think so,” I said and hesitated then took the ring off. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking it and holding it up to the light from the window. “Yeah, that's a moonstone. Are those diamonds around it?”

“I doubt it,” I said. “Gran could never have afforded a diamond ring. Probably just zirconia.”

“Looks a bit old for zirconia,” she said, studying it. “It looks Victorian in style. Probably mid 18th century.”

“Wow, so you know about jewellery?” I said, impressed.

“Yeah, a bit,” she said. “I have to inventory all the jewellery on our clients when they are delivered and make sure the right pieces are in place for the funeral. We take them off after, of course. It would be a crying shame to cremate a £20,000 necklace by mistake.”

“Well, yes,” I said although if I ever had a £20,000 necklace I'd sure as hell want to take it with me.

“And there's an inscription inside,” she said, holding the ring close to her eyes. “It's very small though and looks a bit worn. What does it

say?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's too small for me to read too."

"I've got a magnifying glass in my makeup kit," she said, slipping the ring on her little finger as her fingers were a bit thicker than mine. "I'll get it out when I've brought my stuff in and unpacked. You know, these just might be diamonds. The ring itself is real gold. There's a hallmark inside, opposite the inscription." She held her hand up to admire the ring on her finger.

"Yeah, I saw that," I said, not having noticed the hallmark. "So you think it would be worth much?"

"Probably not," she said, pulling the ring off her finger. "There's a lot of Victorian jewellery around and the other stones are very small. You could always take it to a jeweller for a valuation although it'll cost you."

"I don't think I'll bother," I said, slipping the ring back on my finger. "I like wearing it and if it is worth a lot I'd be too scared. Do you want a cup of tea or coffee or anything?"

"No thanks," said Cheyenne. "I want to get my stuff inside before it starts to rain. Should I give the rent and deposit to you?"

"God, no," I said, holding up my hands. "No, Gemma will be back around 6. Give them to her."

"OK," she said, "and what are the bathroom arrangements?"

"How do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, can I have a bath tonight or is it someone else's night?" she asked. "Only at my last place there was never enough hot water so we each had designated bath nights." She giggled. "Mine were Monday and Thursday which was a pain."

"Oh, we've plenty of hot water here," I said, wondering if it was a pain because she worked with dead bodies. I'd probably want a decent bath

every day as well. "Maybe leave it an hour or so if someone else has just had a bath but we've never had a problem before. Do you want a hand carrying things?"

"No, I'm good," she said, turning to leave the kitchen. "I don't have much. Just a couple of suitcases and some bin liners."

I made myself some tea and wandered up to my room mainly to be nearby in case she had any questions. After an hour or so of carrying and making unpacking noises in her room she appeared in my doorway and said "knock, knock," quite loudly.

"All done?" I asked, looking up from my phone.

"Yes," she said, going over to look out of my window. "The view's nicer from here."

"It's only the street," I said.

"Yeah," she said, "but it's better than the back yard. Maybe I could do some gardening?"

"Talk to Gemma about that," I said. "It's her place."

"I guess," she said. "Oh, I brought my magnifying glass," and she brandished it at me.

"Oh great," I said, pulling the ring off again.

I handed it to her and she stood by the window and manoeuvred the ring and glass to get the best view.

"That's a bit strange," she said after a few moments.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"Letitia forever midnight," she said, "or at least that's what it looks like."

"Letitia forever midnight?" I said in surprise as I'd been expecting

some sort of expression of love or something. "That's a bit creepy. Do you suppose it's a satanic thing or something? Can I have a look?"

"Sure," she said, passing the ring and magnifying glass to me. "Was Letitia your gran?"

I held the glass over the inside of the ring and sure enough it said, in quite ornate writing, 'Letitia forever Midnight' although the midnight had a capital M.

"Hmm," I said trying to see if the ornateness of the lettering could be read in a different way. "No, my gran was Jean. I've never heard of a Letitia. Do you suppose this is saying she was a dark person who should only come out in the middle of the night or something?"

"I've no idea," said Cheyenne, not apparently wanting to take the ring back. "I'm not sure I like it though."

"Well the capital M makes Midnight a noun," I said thoughtfully. "So maybe Letitia was given this ring by someone called Midnight rather than saying she should live in darkness."

"Maybe Letitia was a vampire," said Cheyenne with a laugh. "Didn't the Dracula story get written in the 1800s?"

"I've no idea," I said. "I've watched some horror movies but I can't say I'm much of a fan."

"Oh well," she said. "I was expecting something more romantic. Not to worry. I think I'll go and make a coffee. Want one?"

"Just had one," I said, putting my ring back on. I handed her the magnifying glass and she gave a sort of squeal which alarmed me.

"Ohhh, look at that," she said, looking at the pile of junk on top of my chest of drawers. I periodically tidied it up but the pile always came back.

"Look at what?" I asked. The junk seemed pretty ordinary to me although, fortunately, there was no dirty underwear there today.

"It's a Prayer Book," said Cheyenne picking up the prayer book I'd chucked there when I found it in my bag a few days after mum had given it to me. "It's in good condition even though it's pretty old. The leather cover is still quite soft. Was this your gran's as well?"

"Yes," I said. "I don't know why she left it to me when she died as I'm not religious. Are you?"

"So so," she said, leafing through the pages slowly. "We see a lot of these since it's the Book of Common Prayer and has the standard prayers for funerals. Ohhh, there she is again!"

"Who?" I asked, automatically looking over.

"Letitia," said Cheyenne. "There's an inscription to her on the inside cover. This one's more romantic, though."

"Yeah?" I said. "What's it say?"

"For my dearest Letitia'," read out Cheyenne, "'with fervent hope this serves you better than I' and its signed by someone called Hans something or other. Hoedemaker or something."

"Can I see?" I asked, holding out my hand. My ring seemed heavier than usual but I took no notice. "Hey, he had pretty neat handwriting, didn't he," I said. "It isn't that romantic though, is it. He's just saying he's giving her a prayer book, that's all."

"Nooo," exclaimed Cheyenne. "He's saying he's unworthy of her love which is why he's giving it to her. He's unable to serve her the way she deserves so he's giving her the prayer book to make up for it."

"Well, maybe," I said, doubtfully. "Or maybe he's saying that the prayers didn't do much for him and hopes she'll have better luck with it. But a prayer book? Why would a guy give a prayer book to the woman he loves?"

"Because prayer books meant more back then," said Cheyenne, taking the book back. "It's a bit like ladies giving their suitors a handkerchief. Waste of time with guys nowadays. They'll still pick their noses."

I laughed and tried to imagine giving some of my ex boyfriends a handkerchief as a token of my love without much success. They'd probably use it to wipe grease off their work boots or something.

"Ohh, look," exclaimed Cheyenne, "there's more inside the back cover. It's a list of names and dates and Letitia is the first one. What's your surname?"

"Avery," I said. "Why?"

"Were you born in 1997?" she asked, looking at me.

"Wow, am I on that list?" I asked, craning my head to see.

"The last one," said Cheyenne, showing it to me.

"Oh yeah," I said in surprise. "And the one before is my mum. She is Jennifer Avery and her maiden name was Crossland. That looks like gran's handwriting."

"They look different to me," said Cheyenne, turning the book back to look at it again.

"No, I mean the last two," I said, grabbing the Prayer Book off her. "And the one before that is Jean Crossland nee Bland, although I don't remember her maiden name. So Letitia was Letitia Coverdale and she married someone called Metcalfe. Wow, do you suppose this is a list of all her descendants? It looks like she had a daughter called Anne in 1861."

"I wouldn't think it's all her descendants," said Cheyenne, peering over my shoulder. "Unless they all only had one daughter each."

"Maybe it's just the girls," I said, looking at the list. Letitia, Anne, Violet, Mabel, Mildred, Betty, Jean, Jennifer and Sylvia. "Or the first born."

"Betty was a naughty girl, wasn't she," said Cheyenne. "She's got no married name and her daughter Jean has the same surname."

“She was my great grandmother,” I said. “She got knocked up by some American soldier just after the war and never married. Mum told me a couple of weeks ago she was actually a lesbian.”

“They could all have been,” said Cheyenne. “Being gay’s only been allowed in the last few years. If Letitia had been gay she’d probably never have been able to do anything about it and been forced to marry some man anyway.”

“I guess,” I said. I counted back and Letitia seems to have been my six greats grand mother. That’s a long time. “I wonder why gran wrote my name in here, not mum? Mum didn’t even know this prayer book existed until she was given it by the solicitor to give to me.”

“Why would a solicitor give your mum this to give to you?” asked Cheyenne. “Was it held in trust or something?”

“Hmm? Oh, no,” I said. “It’s just that gran died three weeks ago and she left some things with the solicitor when she made her will. Well, the prayer book and my ring.”

“Your ring!” exclaimed Cheyenne. “That’s probably the same Letitia! The book and the ring have been passed down from generation to generation. Do you suppose this Hans whatsit was her lover?”

“Well he sure as hell wasn’t her husband,” I said. “Hoedemaker and Metcalfe are nothing alike.”

“1861,” mused Cheyenne. “She was probably only seventeen or eighteen when Anne was born. I wonder if Hans gave her the ring before or after she got married? Do you suppose Anne was really Hans’ daughter?”

Chapter Eight

A little red light on the dashboard flickered on for a few seconds then went out. I'd just finished breathing a sigh of relief when it came on again. I stared at it, willing it to go off but it didn't. This time it stayed on. Quite a nice shade of red admittedly but glowing and inherently evil.

“Shit!” I exclaimed and bashed the steering wheel with my hand.

I had absolutely no idea what the light meant, other than the general 'red means warning or danger' burned into our collective psyches by millennia of spurting blood so to be proactive I turned off the radio. It had been playing some dire classic rock from decades before I'd been born and was no great loss. I willed myself to count to ten, slowly, then looked at the dashboard again. The bloody light was still on.

Now I'm no stranger to domestic emergencies or even café ones but although I'd had a driver's licence for almost seven years I'd never owned a car or even driven much. I could fix a puncture on a bicycle or replace the chain when it fell off but that was about the limit of my automotive skills.

“What to do, what to do?” I wondered, a sick little ball of worry building up in my stomach.

I scanned the dash to see if there were any other warning signs and there weren't. There weren't any comforting signs either although the speedo still said I was doing about 70 so that meant the car was still going. The engine sounded much as it had for the last hundred miles or so but since I didn't know what it was supposed to sound like that didn't mean a lot. After all, it could have been making 'I'm getting ready to explode' noises for the last hundred miles.

I eased off the accelerator and let the speed drop a little but the light stayed on and the car behind tooted angrily and overtook me. The driver made some sort of gesture as he went past and probably made a nasty remark about women drivers as well but I didn't hear it. I just wished all the warning lights on his dash would light up so I could make rude gestures at him when he was all stressed and worried.

I tapped the light on the dash a couple of times because that usually worked on the light on the sandwich press at the café but it didn't which probably made sense since the sandwich press wasn't made by Ford.

"I wonder if it's serious," I muttered. After all, it had been on for over a minute and the car still seemed to be running OK.

I was debating if it was worth trying to push on to Middlesbrough, still another hundred and fifty miles or more, or pull over onto the side strip and hope some kindly traveller would stop when I saw a sign saying Peterborough Services was two miles further ahead. If nothing else I could phone mum and ask her what the light meant and what to do about it.

I eased back some more on the accelerator and crawled at 60mph to the services, getting overtaken by quite a few other cars in the process. I swung off and pulled into the car park.

"Aha!" I said when I spotted a big tow truck on the edge of the car park, its big diesel engine spewing thin clouds of black smoke. More to the point, the driver was just getting out. He looked to be in his thirties with a few days stubble and the filthiest overalls I've ever seen. I pulled up beside him and jumped out of the car, leaving the engine running.

"Excuse me," I called over the blue roof of the Fiesta.

"You alright, love?" he called back then jammed a cigarette in his mouth.

"There's a red light on my dashboard," I said, trying to look helpless which was no great effort. I smiled hopefully. "You wouldn't have any idea what it means, would you?"

He lit his ciggie and looked at me with a faint air of contempt as though I shouldn't be driving without a thorough understanding of all possible warning lights and how to fix them then he realised I was a helpless female asking him, a macho male, for help and he puffed up his chest and sucked in his average sized pot belly.

“No sweat, doll,” he drawled and took a deep drag on his ciggie. He sauntered around the car and bent over with a grunt to stick his head in the door.

“Oil,” he said without any hesitation and turned off the ignition. He fumbled under the dashboard and did something that clicked and the bonnet jumped up an inch or so. I had a quick panic attack as it occurred to me he might be about to disable the car permanently in order to get me into his tow truck but squashed the thought. It was mid afternoon in a busy car park after all.

He sauntered round to the front of the car and shoved his hand under the bonnet then lifted it all the way up. Then he bent over the engine and pulled out a long thin stick.

“See that?” he said, pointing a grimy little finger at one end. “Should be covered in oil, it should.”

It looked pretty oily to me but he seemed to know what he was talking about so I said “Oh” and nodded as if I understood.

“So is that serious then?” I said when the silence stretched a little.

“Keep going much longer an' yer engine'll seize,” he said happily. “Got any oil, 'ave ya?”

“No, I haven't,” I said. A wave of diesel exhaust blew over me and I coughed. “Umm, where can I get some?”

“Should 'ave some in shop,” he said, waving the stick at the petrol station. “Know what sort of oil ya need, do ya?”

“Umm, engine oil?” I guessed.

He smiled condescendingly and stuffed the stick back inside the engine.

“Reckon you'll be needing synthetic 5W-20,” he said, “seeing as how this un's only a little 4 cylinder jobbie,” and sniffed.

“Oh,” I said, wondering what the hell 5W-20 was. “Ummm, so what do I ask for?”

“Tell ya what, doll, I’ll come with ya,” he said and removed his ciggie from between his lips for the first time. He dropped it on the ground and squashed it with his boot. Then his eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Got any money?”

“Yes,” I said and got my bag from the passenger seat. I pulled my keys out of the ignition as well.

He strode off towards the petrol station shop and I briefly debated locking the car then decided it wasn’t worth it. With its bonnet up and sitting beside a tow truck it was unlikely anyone would try to steal it. I hurried after him and followed him into the shop.

“Over ’ere,” he said and went to a section with piles of cartons of oil of different colours and sizes. I picked one up to see if it was 5W-20 but it only said ’2 stroke oil’ so I put it back.

“This’ll do it,” he said, picking up a huge plastic container.

“Do I need that much?” I asked, my heart sinking.

“Engine’s dry,” he said. “Need at least four litres, maybe more.”

“Oh,” I said and meekly followed him to the checkout where I nearly had a heart attack. £65 for some oil? Bloody hell! That was even more expensive than petrol. Aghast I waved my credit card at the little machine. This trip was turning out to be a lot more expensive than I’d anticipated.

The tow truck man had disappeared by the time I got the receipt so I hurried out the door to see he was already halfway to my car. He didn’t bother to ask if I knew how to put oil in it. He just pointed to a filthy cap and said “you put it in ’ere” before twisting the cap off. Then he slowly poured the entire contents of the container inside and dumped it on the ground.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Reckon so,” he said. “Just wait a minute then check the level to see if we need more.”

“Oh, right,” I said, hoping we wouldn't.

“So, you goin' far?” he asked.

“Middlesbrough,” I said.

“That where yer hubby is?” he asked, leaning his hip on one of the headlights.

“I'm not married,” I said unthinkingly as I wondered how long we'd need to wait before checking the level again.

“Oh yeah,” he said and heaved himself off the headlight. He pulled the stick thing out of the engine again and glanced at it before shoving it under my nose. “Don't let the oil go above that line there,” pointing to a groove cut in the stick. Even I could see the difference as the stick glistened with fresh faintly green oil. A drop gathered at the end and fell onto the tarmac. “There goes a quid's worth,” I thought sadly.

He shoved the stick back inside the engine and slammed the bonnet down.

“Keys,” he barked and I quickly handed them over. He started the engine and grunted in satisfaction. “Light's off.”

“Wow, great, thanks,” I said happily. “You've been very kind.”

“So, ahh, you fancy a cuppa, do ya?” he asked, holding onto the door so I couldn't get in and shut it. “Sommat to eat, maybe?”

“Oh, I'd love to,” I said, “but I've an appointment with my solicitor and I'm running a bit late.”

Something about the word 'solicitor' made him step back a little so I hopped into the car. He still had his hand on the door though.

“Ere,” he said before I could shut the door. “Give ya me card, like,

so's you can call me when you ain't in such a rush, like." He dug in one of the pockets of his overalls and pulled out a grimy card and handed it to me. "Anytime, see. Operates 24 hour a day I do."

"Great, thanks, umm, Dwayne," I said, glancing at the card. "Maybe on my way back then."

"Nice one," he said.

"Well, thank you very much again," I said, sliding the gear stick into first. "You're a life saver!"

"S'right," he said. "Any time, day or night, like this place."

"I won't forget," I said, wondering what he meant by 'this place'. "Umm, can I shut the door?"

"Oh yeah," he said and reluctantly let go.

I pulled it shut and checked the little light. It still hadn't come on. I gave him a wave and moved off and there was an almighty bang.

"Oh frigging hell, a puncture!" I almost shouted, slamming on the brakes and gritting my teeth. I opened the door and got out just as Dwayne hurried around the front of the car.

"Have I got a puncture?" I called, wondering if he'd put a nail or something there just to slow down my getaway.

"Only the bloody oil can," he said with a laugh, holding up the burst oil container. More money dripped slowly from it.

"Oh thank God for that," I said in relief. "See you."

He held up his thumb in an OK gesture and I climbed back in the car and drove off. Three miles down the road I cracked the window open a little and let his card blow away.

* * *

It was quarter past eight and dark when I got to the sign that said 'Welcome To Middlesbrough'. I pulled over a little past it and phoned Robin to say I'd arrived. He gave me directions to Borough Street and I briefly wondered why that was spelt differently to the 'brough' in Middlesbrough.

"Welcome," he said, opening the door to Rigsby & Son Solicitors. "I had nearly given up hope."

He was a lot younger than I had expected from our phone conversations although he was probably still in his early forties. He was wearing a three piece pin-striped suit with a dark grey bow tie which surprised me. I'd rather expected him to be in civvies.

"I ran out of oil on the way up," I said, going in.

"How unfortunate," he said, glancing at the old blue Fiesta parked behind a dove grey BMW under a street light outside his office. That these were the only two parked cars in sight in the centre of Middlesbrough on a Friday night said a lot for the local night life. "Still, you're here now. Can I offer you some coffee perhaps?"

"Oh thanks, no," I said as he ushered me into his office. "I got a takeaway coffee just outside of town."

His office was stereotypically that of a lawyer with dark wood panelling, a huge desk covered in files and three creaky old chairs. He sat behind his desk and the scene could have been from any time in the last two hundred years.

"Then shall we get down to business?" he asked, picking up a thick folder and opening it.

"Certainly," I said.

"If I can just have your signature here, and here, and here and here," he said, laying various pieces of paper on the desk in front of me.

"Umm," I said, and picked up my bag to see if I had a pen.

"If I may," he said and slid over a cheap ballpoint.

"Thanks," I said and signed the documents.

"Excellent," he said, gathering the papers together. He witnessed them then slipped them in the file and closed it. "I'll have copies posted down to you on Monday."

"Is that it then?" I asked in surprise. Somehow I'd expected it to be a lengthy process.

"Yes," he said with a half smile. "Although there is one other small matter." He opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a cardboard tube. He shook it and a roll of paper slid out. "You expressed some displeasure at not having an ornate share certificate similar to that used in the eBay listing so I took the liberty of having one prepared." He unrolled the paper and turned it so I could see. "I had one of my clerks photocopy the original onto a sheet of A3 and write your name in place of the original."

"Oh wow!" I exclaimed, studying the ornate certificate with my name on it. My name! Way cool! "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," he said, "although thanks should really go to Carmel. She has a neat copperplate hand, doesn't she."

"Yes, definitely," I said, delighted with the certificate. "You will thank her for me?"

"Naturally," he said and cleared his throat. "You will appreciate, of course, that this is not a valid share certificate. It is merely a facsimile and purely ornamental. The true certificate will be in the documents posted out."

"That's OK," I said as he rolled the certificate back up and neatly inserted it inside the tube. "Umm, I have a couple of questions, if that's all right."

His hand twitched as if to look at his watch but he managed to restrain himself. "I am at your service," he said and sat back in his

chair. It creaked.

“Well, my main question is why this company was up for sale on eBay,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about that. Surely there are better places to sell companies.”

“Ahh, indeed,” he said, steeping his fingers. I was a little afraid he was going to start talking in Latin. “And those avenues were explored but with no success. This company is in somewhat unusual circumstances and consequently unattractive to prospective business purchasers. Because of its restrictive covenants it is not even suitable for those wanting a shell company.”

“What’s a shell company?” I asked.

He gave his half smile again.

“A non-trading company that exists purely to be used as a vehicle for various financial manoeuvres or kept dormant for future use in some other capacity,” he said. “I daresay I should not say this but their use as cover for illegal activities is not unknown.”

“Right,” I said, not really understanding. “But why eBay?”

He sighed.

“This office was established in 1829 by one of my long distant relatives,” he said. “It has passed down the line from father to son although the name will soon have to change as my daughter is nearing completion of her studies and will be joining me. That is by the by, however. More importantly my father passed on some three years ago and I took charge. I am going through a process of modernisation. Doubtless you will appreciate that we have accumulated considerable old and outdated documents in the last two hundred years or so.”

“I can imagine,” I said encouragingly although I couldn’t really. I had no idea how much paperwork was produced by solicitors.

“Quite,” he said, leaning forward again. “I am in the process of reviewing all our old files and sending that which has no current

application to be microfilmed. We're running out of space."

"Right," I said. "So this railway company thingy is one of those you want to get rid of."

"Microfilmed," he said, holding up a finger in admonition. "We never get rid of any documents. However, once microfilmed they will be, by the nature of these things, more difficult to access. That process will, however, free up a lot of space in this building."

"But surely that file isn't that big," I said, pointing to the file on his desk.

"Alas that is not the only file pertaining to the Smocklebeck Saltburn Railway," he said. "Since its inception in 1859 the accumulated documents now amount to some eighteen feet of shelving."

"That is a lot of documents," I said, impressed.

"Indeed," he said. "In the eighty years or so of its operation there have been a number of court cases including one pertaining to a derailment and several to personal injury claims as well as the various negotiations over its absorption within the North Yorkshire Preservation Rural Municipality Corporation and the sale of land."

"I thought no land was sold," I said. "Wasn't that the point of that Municipality thing?"

"Up to a point," said Robin. "The Corporation absorbed the nine miles of the rail corridor that lay within its boundary but, of course, there were another three miles beyond that boundary. That land was sold when the company ceased operating in 1933."

"Oh, right, gotcha," I said. "Not that it matters, I suppose."

"You have another question?" he asked, rather pointedly looking at his watch.

"Just a quickie," I said. "You said on the phone that the land has to be used for a steam railway but you also said there is some sort of house

on it.”

“That is correct,” he said, opening the file and looking at a sheet of paper. I could just make out the word 'Assets' at the top. “The station master's house. It forms part of the railway station itself.”

“So someone could live there?” I asked.

“Ahh, you are wondering perhaps why no one else bought this company with a view to using it as a residence,” he said, nodding. “Also, that is not permitted. It would require a change of the status of the land from commercial to residential which would then result in the land reverting to the Government.”

“Oh,” I said flatly. I'd also wondered why no one had bought the place just as a cheap place to live.

“Of course, as the owner you would be well within your rights to live there,” he said, “provided the primary purpose of the company, namely the operation of a steam railway, was adhered to.”

“Oh well,” I said. “It was just a thought. So, what happens now? Since you've managed to offload the company onto me I suppose you're washing your hands of it?”

“Not at all,” he said. “We are merely transferring all the documents to microfilm and classifying the files as no longer current. If, however, as the owner, you wish us to handle some future business on your behalf then, naturally, we will be only too happy to do so. Was there anything else?”

“Just one quickie,” I said as a thought occurred to me. “Umm, you said the company stopped operating back in the 1930s and I think you said it has no trains or even tracks?”

“That is correct,” said Robin patiently.

“So wouldn't it need a lot of planning and funding to set up operating again?” I said, thinking as I spoke.

“Certainly it would not be a matter to be undertaken lightly,” he said.

“And that would take quite a while, wouldn't it?” I asked, not sure where I was going with this.

“Certainly it would not be wise to rush into such a matter without due consideration,” said Robin. He frowned. “Is that your intention?”

“God, no,” I said with a laugh. “I've got no money and I don't know any rich investors. It was just an idle thought. Umm, well, thanks for your time. I'm sorry to have ruined your evening.”

He smiled fully this time, not his usual half smiles.

“On the contrary,” he said, getting to his feet. “It's been a pleasure. It has been some considerable time since I have entertained a charming young lady on a Friday evening. Let me show you to the door.”

Chapter Nine

Robin carefully locked the door to Rigsby & Son (soon to be daughter) Solicitors then politely waited until I'd got in my car and had the engine running before he moved over to his BMW. I put the cardboard tube with my certificate in it on the back seat since it was too long to go in the glove box. I got out my phone to get directions to Saltburn and noticed he was standing watching me with the door to his car open.

"There's no need to wait for me," I called, winding down the window. "I'm just getting directions out of town."

"Ahh," he said and looked up and down Borough Street which was still deserted, apart from the receding tail lights of a car that had just gone past. "Well, if you're sure then?"

"I'll be fine," I called and gave him a wave. He hesitated then got in his car and drove away.

It was a little after nine so I headed off with Google Maps' robotic voice telling me which way to go and got maybe half a mile before I remembered I'd forgotten to ask Robin for the keys to the house. I pulled over and texted him. He didn't reply immediately so I drove off.

Saltburn seemed a nice looking place and had a beach but there were beach huts and a few people wandering around so I decided not to sleep there. I took the Staithes road out of town and kept to the speed limit so I could keep an eye on the coastline. Frustratingly the road veered well away from the coast and it wasn't until Boulby that it reappeared. I spotted a dirt track just past Boulby and followed it only to discover that there was no beach. As far as I could tell in the dark this section of the coast had a cliff and I could hear the waves breaking against the rocks below. The dirt track ended, fortunately, just before the cliff edge, and my headlights shone out across the sea, lighting up nothing more than a section of rusty wire attached to a rickety looking fence post. I shut off the engine and got out. There was something very strange going on.

I looked around as best I could in the darkness, wishing I'd thought to

bring a torch. There was a light breeze and the air tasted salty but there was something definitely wrong. It was almost like an atmosphere although it didn't feel bad. It just felt ... strange. After a few moments I shut off the headlights thinking that that would help my eyes get accustomed to the darkness. The sudden disappearance of the lights made me realise just how alone and isolated I was and I found I was straining my ears to pick up any sounds above the faint hiss of the breeze in the grasses and the splashing of the waves below then I burst out laughing as realisation hit me. It was quiet!

“Wow!” I exclaimed, hugging myself in delight. “Just, wow!”

I was a city girl, born and bred, and I'd never experienced silence like this. I'd lived my life so far against an unceasing backdrop of traffic noise, televisions, people yacking and God knows what else. It was so constant in London, even at night, that I wasn't aware of it until, as now, that backdrop had disappeared.

“Incredible,” I whispered, suddenly nervous of making any sounds.

I took a step forward and was embarrassed at how loud my footstep was on the loose gravel of the track.

“Shhh!” I hissed to myself and put my finger to my lips. I giggled and it sounded as loud as a roll of thunder.

I started to tiptoe towards the rusty wire then told myself I was being stupid and forced my feet down properly. Just as I reached the wire the clouds parted and the thin crescent of the moon appeared letting me see the shimmer of the waves at the bottom of the cliff. I looked out to sea and, far off, there was a tiny dot of light which flickered.

“I wonder what that is?” I thought then decided it was either an alien spacecraft heading my way or a ship far out. Of the two the latter seemed the more likely since the alien craft would probably be cloaked and the first I'd know about it would be when they beamed me up for some experiments.

“This is awesome,” I muttered as the fresh breeze on my face made my hair flutter. I held my arms out and embraced the salt air and the

quiet, loving every moment.

I turned around and the dark bulk of the car a few paces away looked solid and and reassuring.

"This'll do me," I said, suddenly aware I was not the least bit nervous or anxious.

I slowly walked back to the car and got my duvet and pillow out of the boot. I dumped them on the roof of the car while I got the driver's seat to slide forward, since it was a 3 door car not a 5 door one, then made myself a little nest on the back seat and remembered to retrieve the cardboard tube before I sat on it. I got in the back, pulled the door shut and locked the doors before taking off my shoes and snuggled up inside the duvet. I felt snug and safe and, after a few moments, a growing awareness that I needed to pee. For some reason I had not anticipated this problem as us city girls are used to toilets being dotted around the place.

"You're in the country now, girl," I told myself. "Do what the sheep do," and got out of the car again.

* * *

It was an uncomfortable night. Comfy though the Fiesta's seats are when sitting on them the car isn't designed to be a caravan and I could only sleep by lying on my side with my knees drawn up. I wasn't used to sleeping in my clothes either and after a while I sat up, with difficulty, and struggled to get my bra off as it was cutting in. That and undoing the button and zip of my jeans made some sleep possible, if only fitful, and I was pleased to see the dawn. Getting out of the car I did my jeans up again and looked around. There wasn't a tree in sight, just grasses and bracken and other sorts of vegetation covering the gently undulating ground. Here and there were outcrops of grey rock with moss on. Still, there were only a handful of fluffy white clouds in the sky and the day looked as though it was going to be one of those lovely autumn days that makes you want to go and have a picnic in a park with flutes of chilled sparkling wine and some mellow jazz playing in the distance.

I checked my phone and found that Robin had replied during the night. I hadn't heard the phone so I must have had some sleep.

"Regretfully there are no keys," he'd texted at 11.04. "I suspect they were misplaced when we were obliged to temporarily relocate offices during WW2."

"OK, thanks" I texted back. After 90 years it was unlikely any locks were going to be of much use anyway and had probably rusted into oblivion. Besides, I just wanted to have a look around and see what the place was like. It shouldn't be a problem.

I still had a little water in my water bottle so I drank that but it did nothing to relieve the pangs of hunger so I flipped the driver's seat back into place, leaving the duvet and pillow on the back seat. It was almost 7am and I had only seven hours to find the railway and drive back to London. As it had taken six and a half hours to drive up it looked as though it was going to be a close thing. My phone only had 47% charge as well.

I stopped at a petrol station on the edge of Staithes in the hope it would have coffee and a toasted bacon sandwich. Once I'd managed to draw the young man's attention away from my chest, which was still bra-less and enjoying the chill early morning air, I discovered that they had no coffee nor any sandwiches, toasted or otherwise, so I left with a can of Coke and a bar of fruit and nut chocolate. I chose the fruit and nut because it seemed the healthiest of the limited options. It occurred to me as I munched as I drove that the lad was probably only 14 or so and, given the population density of this part of the world, there was a fair chance he'd never seen a girl before let alone boobs. Still, his hormones seemed to be quite healthy even if the spots on his face didn't. Sadly he hadn't been distracted enough to make him forget to charge me.

A few miles later Google Maps insisted that I had reached my destination even though there was no sign of anything except moorland, an overgrown gravel track and a house way off in the distance. I turned around and backtracked slowly until the phone told me my destination was on the left so I pulled over.

“Maybe it's that track,” I thought to myself, peering out through the side window. It didn't look particularly prepossessing but then again who'd put a railway station in this desolate spot? It could never have had much in the way of passengers as Smocklebeck was a mile or so away, on the coast.

I got out of the car and walked over to the track. From this higher vantage point – my head being at least a foot and half higher than the top of the car – and without the frame imposed by the window it was apparent that the track went up a low hill and disappeared over the top.

“Hmm,” I thought and locked the car.

“Oh Sweet Jesus!” I exclaimed when my head was high enough to look over the top of the rise. I hurried the last two or three steps and stood there just totally overawed by the magnificence of the view. It was breathtakingly beautiful. As far as the eye could see there were gently rolling hills covered with a thick carpet of greens and yellows and purples. Dotted around were bushes that looked huge but were really only a couple of feet high. Heading off to my right there seemed to be a sort of valley that was lined with trees which disappeared off into the distance. Far away were some flat topped hills that bent the clear blue sky so it curved around them and met the horizon with a splash of cloud. I had the most incredible euphoric sense of ... vastness. It was as though I was the only person alive.

It was several minutes before I became aware of some grey stone buildings off to my left. They were so naturally a part of the landscape I hadn't noticed them until my eye followed the curve of the track down the gentle slope of the low hill.

“That must be the railway station,” I thought and slowly walked along the track, still gazing in awe at the landscape and breathing in the fresh air that carried a faint hint of dampness and living things without the slightest trace of diesel.

“It's definitely a station,” I thought as I got closer. I was feeling a little excited and a small bubble of euphoria, no doubt caused by the additives in the Coke, was trapped in my chest and kept threatening to

burst.

The track ended with a strange thing that looked like a wide ramp that just ended in mid air. A little to the left of the ramp were a couple of large wooden structures that looked a little unstable. To the right, however, just past the ramp was what was undeniably a platform. It had that undefinable look of a station platform that made it different from, say, a loading bay even though there was no sign of any rails. The platform was covered with an iron roof that had some intricate scroll-work hanging down at the front and part of it joined on to a house.

The track actually split just before it got to the ramp. Most of it went to the ramp but a part of it, maybe a yard wide, detoured around the ramp and headed for the end of the platform. As I drew level with the ramp I could see it was made of packed earth with stone sides and its top was the same height as the platform.

“Ahh,” I thought as I studied it. “It must be a ramp for loading freight. They must have pushed or driven carts up it and into the carriage. That makes sense. I wouldn't want to lift loads of heavy things up into the train. It's got to be, what, three feet high?”

Ramps, however, aren't that exciting so I lost interest after trying to lever off what looked to be a crumbling piece of stone but which turned out to be solidly attached. The platform itself was about ten feet further on and the track ended with four steps up to the platform. I started to walk across the gap and tripped and nearly fell flat on my face. After swearing and massaging my toes I investigated and discovered underneath the scrubby vegetation there were very big, very solid slabs of iron hard wood.

Puzzled, I stared at the slab and then it struck me, since I'm quick like that. This was a railway station and these were sleepers that held the rails! Cool. Fortunately there were no rails or I'd have probably broken my leg. I measured out the slab, as best I could, and it seemed to be about ten feet wide, which was probably wide enough for a single rail track but too small for a double. Looking along the remains of the rail track I could see the path it made as the vegetation was less dense and had different colours. As far as I could tell it seemed to follow the

line of trees that I'd seen from the top of the hill.

I climbed up the steps to the platform. It was fairly short and was backed by the wall of the house and both were made from that grey, very solid and dense looking stone that I'd seen for houses in Staithes and isolated farmhouses on the way. There were a few patches of moss here and there but that was about it. The place looked to be in surprisingly good condition, although it occurred to me that stone like this lasts for millions of years and isn't designed with built-in obsolescence in mind, unlike modern executive town houses. The side of the house that was the back of the platform was just stone with no windows or openings except one, boarded up with wood, near the steps. There was a painted sign attached to the wall just above which, although peeling and badly faded, still said "icket Offic".

To be honest the platform didn't look particularly interesting so I went back down the steps and carried on around the side of the house. It was a single story building with a door and I counted five windows. All the windows were shuttered. Down at the far corner but a little way away from the house was a small shed. I made my way through the low undergrowth to what was probably the main door to the house and twisted the handle. To my astonishment it creaked stiffly open.

I had a sudden feeling I shouldn't be there for some reason. It's probably more to do with the ingrained British sense of property more than anything, especially as Robin had said the place was deserted and hadn't been lived in for 90 years. Still, it didn't feel right to just barge in so I, very self consciously, knocked on the door then called out 'Hello' a couple of times. I would've wet myself if anyone had answered but it seemed the right and proper thing to do.

It was dark inside, since the windows were shuttered, but in the light from the doorway I could see that there was no furniture. I couldn't see the platform end as it was too dark but I could see that there was one of those old pot-bellied stoves in the corner of the room, near a door in the wall to my left. It seemed to be a lot less dusty than it should and there were only a few cobwebs but I put that down to the place being built of solid stone. I daresay not many spiders had been able to get in. I didn't feel comfortable going inside without any light so I backed out and closed the door carefully before going off to

investigate the shed.

It turned out to be an outdoor toilet and had nothing inside except a stone floor covered in moss and a toilet covered in dirt and cobwebs. The wooden seat cover was still up and, being an innately curious person, I peered inside. The toilet went straight into a hole in the ground. It didn't smell though, which made sense since no one would have used it for nearly a century so any organic matter in there would long since have decomposed. Being me, though, I put the toilet seat cover down and discovered it was cracked.

The other side of the house was much the same. Five windows and a door. Again the door opened, although with difficulty, and it looked to be the same room I'd seen from the other side. By the look of it the house was just two rooms with an outside toilet. There was nothing particularly unusual about it except for the attached platform.

I looked over the place again and noticed it had a roof of dark red tiles.

"Well, that's pretty cool," I said to myself and turned round to look at the view. It wasn't quite as good as it had been from the top of the low hill but it was still pretty spectacular so I wandered off up the remains of the rail track for maybe a hundred yards or so.

"So this goes for about nine miles that way," I said to myself, more for orientation than anything. "Hmmm."

I turned around and looked back at the house and smiled. It looked like a happy house, even though it was deserted and had no neighbours. It didn't exactly smile back at me but, I don't know, maybe it gave off good vibes or something.

"It's a shame," I said suddenly, surprising myself. "That's a nice house, a solid house. There should be people living there. It's a crying shame to let it just go to rack and ruin. Poor thing."

I had a funny feeling that the house spoke to me and agreed. Weird.

"Oh well," I said and pulled out my phone. "Holy shit! It's half past

eight! I'd better get going!"

I jogged back, trying to step on the sleepers, and went up the gravel track. I paused at the top of the hill and decided to take a few photographs with my phone so I hurried back down and took a couple of the house with the views in the distance and one of the platform and another of the big sheds. At the last minute I took one of the remains of the track going off into the distance as well then jogged back up the hill to get a couple of overview shots.

I checked the pics had come out reasonably well, shoving the phone up inside my t-shirt to cut out the glare from the sun and they looked OK. Then I looked around one last time and the tears started to well up in my eyes.

"It's so beautiful here," I whispered. "So, so beautiful."

Then it hit me. So hard I almost fell over. I owned this place.

"Frigging hell!" I exclaimed. "I own this place!"

Then I burst into tears.

Chapter Ten

*But how do you wait for heaven?
And who has that much time?
And how do you keep your feet on the ground
When you know
You were born
You were born, yeah
You were born to fly?*

I'd been driving along in a reverie when the words of a song on the radio seeped into my mind. I'd never heard it before and missed most of it since all that came after these words was a minute or two of up-tempo country instrumental then it faded away and the DJ dismally failed to tell me the name of the song or who it was by.

“So how do you wait for heaven?” I asked myself, frowning.

Actually that song could have been about me. I went into my degree in Hotel Management with ambition. I was going to manage somewhere up-market and significant, like Claridge's. By the end of my degree my ambitions had broadened and I was going to end up owning a chain of hotels with at least one in every place in the world I wanted to visit, like Sweden and Brazil and Vietnam and the Bahamas. Somewhere it had all gone wrong and even though I had an Upper Second Honours Degree and a solid looking promise of a junior manager job from the hotel where I'd done my work experience it had all fizzled away when COVID hit and I was lucky to get the job as a waitress at Angeleta's Café; a place so upmarket that its name was supposed to suggest 'Angel Eaters' and our name tags had Angel on them. I was Angel Sylvia, incidentally, which hadn't done my self esteem a whole lot of good but I'd got used to it.

When the next song, which I vaguely knew, had ended the DJ excitedly told all us listeners that it was 10:30 and time for a news update from Dragon FM: THE station for classic pop from the '80s and '90s. Not a lot seemed to have changed since the news updates at 9:00, 9:30 and 10:00 but the local traffic report told me I was near Nottingham which was encouraging as I should be able to get to work on time assuming there were no snarl-ups ahead.

Even though I knew I was born to fly, take-off hadn't started yet so I pulled into the services to get a take-away coffee and, on impulse while waiting for them to make it, I called up Dragon FM's website on my phone. I was idly curious about the song and hoped they'd have a play list so I could find out what it was. They didn't.

They did, however have one of those 'live chat' things because they 'value feedback from our listeners' so I opened it and Tania, with a cute little icon beside her name, welcomed me happily and asked if there was anything she could help me with today.

"What song was playing about 20 min ago?" I typed.

Tania thought about it then some dots waving in a line appeared.

"This seems to fit your timeline," typed Tania then some more waving dots appeared.

"Love To Love You, Baby by Donna Summer," she typed.

Another line of waving dots displayed their mojo as I tried to fit 'Love To Love You Baby' into the lyrics I'd heard and couldn't quite imagine it.

"Born To Fly by Sara Evans," appeared next then Tania quickly followed up with "Take On Me by A-Ha," without bothering with dots.

"That's the one," I said excitedly. "The title's right and it was before Take On Me."

The dots waved again and I waited to see what Tania had to say.

"Can I help you with anything else?" she asked.

"74," shouted the girl at the counter. She sounded harassed and irritable and she kept ineffectually pushing away some of her hair that had escaped her little hat and sticking in the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, that's me," I called after checking the number on my receipt. I waved it at her and she pushed a disposable cardboard cup on her

counter in my general direction without looking over. She put something wrapped in paper on top of it and turned back to her coffee machine.

I figured Tania was a chat bot rather than a real person so I just closed the little window without thanking her or saying goodbye and peeled back the paper. There was a large chocolate chip cookie inside which I hadn't ordered.

"Excuse me," I said to the girl and she looked at me exhaustedly. She seemed to have enough problems so I quickly decided not to add to them. It could even have been her first day there. She had the aura.

"Umm, thank you," I said and gave her a big smile. Maybe I could have suggested she took a five minute toilet break and chill out, and sort her hair at the same time, but, frankly, I couldn't be bothered.

She smiled back and pushed the strand of hair out of her face again then started to pour frothy milk into a cappuccino.

I took my coffee and cookie, went outside and double checked my receipt. Yup, I'd only paid for the coffee and I hadn't seen any signs about freebie cookies.

"Sweet," I said and hurried over to the car before anyone asked for the cookie back.

"What was that girl's name again?" I wondered as I put the coffee in the cup-holder under the dash beside the cigarette lighter. "Sarah someone?"

For the life of me I couldn't remember so to be safe I opened up a text message and put in 'Born To Fly by Sarah ???' and sent it to myself. My phone pinged a moment later to say I had a message and I ignored it.

I started the engine then broke off a piece of the cookie and ate it. It was incredibly sweet! It was so sweet it tasted almost metallic and there probably wasn't much in the way of chocolate or even flour in it. Just sugar and a few additives. Still, I quickly ate the rest and pulled

out of the car park. I was just about to rejoin the motorway when my phone pinged to say I had a text message.

I pulled over to let a huge juggernaut go past, one so big its cab was bigger than the Fiesta, and looked at my messages. There was one from me and one from Dragon FM.

“Oh,” I thought. “Maybe they've changed their mind.”

I opened it and found I had the opportunity to express my satisfaction with Tania's assistance on a scale ranging from 'mildly satisfied' to 'ecstatically happy'.

I reflected that modern technology incites rudeness and Tania may actually have been a real human and might have been offended that I didn't even say goodbye so I tapped 'ecstatically happy' and typed 'give Tania a pay rise' in the comments box. I also confirmed, on a scale from 1 to 5, that I would tell everyone how wonderful Dragon FM was although I didn't mention that all of my friends were in London and couldn't get Dragon FM. I was tempted to go back to their website and ask Tania why they were called Dragon FM as I didn't think there'd ever been a dragon in Nottingham but decided not to bother. I got almost all the way to Islington before the sugar high wore off.

* * *

“You're late,” snarled Winston as I opened the café door.

Bernie saw me and hurriedly dumped the rest of what she was serving on the customer's table and disappeared out the back.

“Only by 5 minutes,” I protested.

“More like ten,” retorted Winston, looking at his watch.

“Sorry,” I said. “Won't happen again.”

“Better not,” said Winston. “Take over the till, OK.”

“Sure,” I said and stepped aside to let Bernie, now wearing her coat

and carrying her bag, past. "Thanks Bernie."

She gave me a hug then disappeared off up the street in the direction of The Angel tube station.

"So, busy morning?" I asked, getting my name tag out of my bag. I pinned it on and shoved the bag under the counter beside the spare box of single serve sugar sachets.

"Not too shabby," said Winston which was his code for 'actually pretty damned good'. "Quietened off a bit now with the lunchtime crowd gone."

"Great," I said. "How's Angata?"

"She's a lot better," he said, dropping his voice and looking around in case anyone heard. "They're keeping her in over the weekend and think she can come home on Monday."

"Oh, that's awesome!" I said, pleased for him. "Hey, why don't we have an iced coffee to celebrate?"

"What do you think this is, a bloody charity?" he said grumpily.

"Sod you too then you miserable bastard," I said. The sugar high may not have entirely worn off after all.

His head jerked round and he stared at me.

"I should sack you for that," he said, mildly.

"But you won't," I said, crossing my fingers just in case. To be honest I was a little horrified that I'd actually called him a miserable bastard. I'd thought it several times but that's not the same.

"No," he said, "although I'm buggered if I know why."

"To prove you're really a lovable chap," I said, "who respects his workers and rewards their efforts."

"You're full of shit, you know," he said, a smile playing in the corners of his mouth.

"To my credit, yes, I did know," I said. "So, iced coffees?"

"Oh, go on then," he said.

"Jason," I called and he looked up from the coffee machine. "Five iced coffees."

"What?" exclaimed Winston.

"Be a couple of minutes," called back Jason, his face rigidly blank which meant he must have heard me talking to Winston. "I've got three lattes, two cappuccinos and two chais to do first."

"For all of us," I said and Winston scowled. "They all know," I added. "That's why they've been nice to you all week or hadn't you noticed?"

"Actually I did wonder," he said. "Agh, to hell with it. I need a smoke. That reminds me, can you stay late Monday? I've got a new girl starting and I want you to show her what to do and check her out. She'll be in after lunch although if you think she's OK she'll be doing the lunch shift."

"Sure," I said in surprise. "So is Jhansi leaving?"

"Yes," he said. "She quit yesterday and won't be back after today."

"Oh wow," I exclaimed. "She didn't say anything to me."

Jhansi was a uni student who'd been there almost as long as me and we were almost but not quite friends. She only did four hours a day to help with the lunchtime rush. I looked around and she was at the back of the café wiping down tables and collecting dirty dishes. She looked up with that sixth sense we have when someone is talking about us and smiled. I looked at her questioningly and she nodded a couple of times with a hopeful expression and went back to wiping.

"You did well to find someone else so quickly," I said, turning back to

Winston. "How can I help you?"

"Two black teas and scuns, sanking yous," said the elderly man. His wife beside him nodded and smiled. She was wrapped in a once brightly coloured shawl over a dingy brown dress that went from her neck to her shoes and her head was covered with a loose blue patterned head scarf. He, on the other hand, was wearing a shiny old black suit with a narrow dark blue tie. His thick moustache was almost white with nicotine stains at the ends.

"Certainly," I said brightly, ringing up English Breakfast tea since it was pretty black. "Would you like strawberry or blackberry jam with the scones?"

He stared at me, his lips moving indecisively. His wife gently pushed his arm and he whispered to her. She held his arm and whispered something back.

"Strawby," he said.

I smiled encouragingly and rang it up on the till.

"That's £16.50," I said.

The man pulled one of those little plastic bags you get cigarette filters in, the same brand Winston used incidentally, and painstakingly counted out £16.50 in small change. I quickly double checked as it didn't look right and gave him back a £1 coin.

"Kusura," he said, fumbling it back into the bag with shaky fingers, "sukur"

"It should only be a minute or two," I said as I saw Jason ladling dollops of ice cream into the iced coffees. "Here's your number."

I pushed over a metal stand with '7' on it and he stared at it. His wife whispered to him again.

"What for?" he asked.

“It's to put on your table,” I said. “so we know which table to bring your teas and scones to.”

“Ohhh,” he said and picked it up. They stood there for a few moments, uncertain what to do.

“There's a nice table over there,” I said, pointing. “By the window. The chairs are more comfortable there.”

The man looked around and his wife turned to see what he was looking at. He muttered something to her and they set off, the number stand clutched grimly in his hand.

I passed the order on to Jason and bent to get a couple of scones from the chiller.

“So how'd you find someone so quickly?” I asked seeing Winston still standing there watching me.

“She happened to come in and ask if we had any jobs,” he said. “Right after Jhansi quit. She looked OK so I thought I'd give her a try. I was watching you there. How come you're so patient with the difficult customers?”

“They weren't difficult,” I said, “just a little lost and confused.”

“OK,” he said. “Hey, if this girl isn't any good just say so, OK. There's plenty of others looking for work at the moment.”

“OK,” I said. “Does 'this girl' have a name?”

“Probably,” said Winston. “Buggered if I can remember what it is though. Here's your coffee. I've got her résumé somewhere. I'll look it up.”

“Oh thanks,” I said as Jason handed the rest of the iced coffees round. Esmeralda took hers with wide eyes and a trembling hand as she had only been there three weeks and was still scared of Winston.

“So what's this about?” asked Jhansi, no doubt wondering if this were

her leaving party and if she'd have to give a speech.

"Angata is coming out of hospital on Monday," I said. "Winston is shouting us a coffee by way of celebration."

There was a chorus of thanks and congratulatory comments then we stood there uncomfortably for a few moments sipping our coffees. Winston wasn't known for giving staff parties and none of us knew quite what to do. He solved the problem by going for a smoke and the rest of us drifted back to our various jobs.

"So you've quit?" I said as Jhansi was about to load the dishwasher.

"Yes," she said. "I am returning to India now my degree is finished. I am to be married."

"Oh wow, awesome!" I exclaimed. "That's wonderful. I never even knew you had a boyfriend."

"Sanjay is not my boyfriend," said Jhansi, straightening up. She looked at me with an unreadable expression.

"Ah," I said, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable as I realised this was to be an arranged marriage. I didn't know what to say. "Umm, I hope you will be very happy."

"He seems a nice man," said Jhansi. "I have spoken with him on Skype several times and my parents think very highly of him. He is a computer programmer in Delhi."

"So he's got a future then," I said. "Computers don't look like they're going away any time soon."

"Indeed," said Jhansi. She looked at me uncertainly then look around. There were no customers waiting to be served, Winston was outside, Jason was opening a fresh bag of coffee and Esmeralda was checking her beautifully manicured nails hadn't been damaged. Jhansi lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Can I ask you something? Outside?"

"Sure," I said automatically although my heart sank. She obviously

wanted some marriage guidance counselling and I was not the right person to talk to. Sure, I'd known a few guys but marriage had never been on the agenda, not even with the guy I'd lived with for eight or nine months after uni. What did I know of marriages, especially arranged ones?

She quickly pushed the Start button on the dishwasher and headed off to the front door as Winston was out the back. I checked the till was properly closed then reluctantly followed her.

"Listen Jhansi," I said when we got outside. "I'm probably not the right person to talk to. I've never been married and probably never will be."

"I know that, Sylvia," she said, "but that is not what I want to talk to you about."

"Oh God!" I suddenly thought. "She's pregnant!"

"Oh yes?" I asked cautiously. What on Earth do you say to a girl who's pregnant who's about to fly off to meet her husband that she's never met before? In another country?

"Someone left some leaflets on the tables this morning," she said, pulling a folded sheet of paper out of her pocket. "Cassie showed one to Winston and he collected them up and threw them away but I saved one."

"Oh yes?" I said, puzzled. "What were they?"

"Have a look," she said and gave me the leaflet.

I opened it up and frowned. It looked like a perfectly ordinary leaflet promoting tarot readings and animal guidance sessions, whatever they were, by some people called Clarity and Forest.

"OK," I said. "So what's the problem?"

"I am frightened," she said, watching a battered van drive along Upper Street. "I have known I was to be married for most of my life. It is our custom and I trust my parents to have made the right choice for me

but still I am frightened.”

“I can understand that,” I said. “Marriage is a big step even with someone you love.” I could have bitten my tongue off as soon as I said that but it was too late to take it back.

“I hear stories,” she said, this time watching a cyclist come back the other way.

“What sort of stories?” I asked.

“Of marriages with bad men,” she said quietly. “My parents will have chosen wisely but what if they have been deceived?”

“Ahh,” I said. “Umm, well, I suppose if that happens you could maybe get a divorce?”

“It is possible,” she said quietly and looked at me for the first time. “But it is frowned upon and no one will marry someone who is divorced. If he is a bad man then my life will be ruined.”

“I’m sure he is a very good man,” I said, taking her hand.

“I hope so,” she said then took the leaflet from me. “That is why I want to see Clarity. I want to know what my future holds.”

“Well, OK,” I said although I was a little sceptical of fortune tellers. “If you think it is a good idea.”

“I do,” said Jhansi simply. She folded up the leaflet again and put it back in her pocket. “I have already made an appointment for tomorrow.”

This time she watched someone on the other side of the road who seemed to be watching us although he was most likely debating whether or not to drop in for a coffee.

“Well, great,” I said, letting go of her hand. “Is it expensive?”

“£25,” said Jhansi then looked me in the eyes. “We are friends, you

and I, yes?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “And I’ll miss you. When do you fly back to India?”

“On Monday,” she said. “Will you come with me?”

“To India?” I exclaimed, shocked.

“No,” said Jhansi very seriously, “although I would like that most greatly if you did for I think I will be very much in need of a friend. No, will you come with me tomorrow to the fortune teller?”

Chapter Eleven

I woke up on Sunday in a bad mood. Not a foul mood, more just irritated with the world. The chorus of that damned song had got itself stuck on an endless loop between my ears and I was getting tired of being repeatedly asked who has the time to wait for heaven. That's the trouble with catchy tunes. They get hold and burrow into your brain like worms.

I groaned and rolled over to look at the time. I'd got home late because I'd had to work the late shift and it was now just after 9 which meant I had a fair amount of sleep although I could do with another hour or so. I hadn't slept too well in the car the night before and all that driving had been tiring too. Being about 9 also meant that I had a little under an hour to get ready. For what, I couldn't quite remember but I was pretty certain I had something to do at 10. That in itself was irritating as I worked six days a week so Sunday was my recovery day and I resented having to do things on Sunday.

"Oh frigging hell," I groaned as it came back to me and I rolled over to bury my head in the pillow. My irritation rose substantially.

Jhansi was picking me up at 10. To go to that damned fortune telling thing. And I'd never see her again after that since she'd quit and was going back to India. And I had that replacement girl to assess on Monday.

"Frig, frig, frig, frig, frig!" I muttered into the pillow and kicked my feet against the duvet a few times.

The toilet flushed and I heard someone shuffle back to their room. Probably Cheyenne as Gemma usually stayed with her boyfriend over the weekend.

"Frig," I said again but it came out tired and flat so I gave up and pushed myself upright. My phone now said 9:10 so I summoned all my mental strength to quash that irritating song and forced myself to go to the bathroom.

The shower helped although I didn't wash my hair. I could do that this

afternoon. A quick peek though the window showed the threatened rain had been and gone and it was now quite sunny so I pulled on a frock and ambled downstairs for some brekky. I was halfway through my second slice of toast and marmite when the doorbell rang.

The front door, as was usual when it rained, was reluctant to open but it did eventually and Jhansi smiled nervously at me.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you still coming with me?”

“Sure,” I said, “just a sec.”

I went back to get my bag and my half finished tea and shoved the toast in my mouth.

“Let's go,” I mumbled and finished my tea while she drove to Camden.

“So what's happening with your car?” I asked, tossing the last few dregs out the window.

“This is my cousin's car,” she said. “He lets me use it sometimes.”

“Oh right,” I said. “So are we nearly there?”

“I think that is the place,” said Jhansi as she drove past one of those hippy type shops that looked closed. “Was that number 91?”

“I don't know, I wasn't looking,” I said.

Jhansi took the next right, did an illegal U-turn and drove back.

“There's 91 over the door,” I said, peering at the place. There were also screens over the windows which were covered in abstract symbols and stylised animals and the shop looked run down and listless.

Jhansi suddenly slammed on the brakes and I lurched forward against the seat belt with a yelp. Then she reversed neatly into a parking spot without having to go backwards and forwards several times. I was quite impressed.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked, opening the door and looking down. She was maybe six inches away from the curb. On the rare occasions I tried to parallel park I usually ended up jammed against the curb or two feet away. I put it down to lack of practice.

“Delhi,” she said. “The traffic there is worse than London. Come on.”

“Are you still nervous?” I asked as I got out of the car,

“Of the fortune teller? No,” she said, locking the doors. “But I am anxious about what she will tell me.”

“About Sanjay?” I asked as we hurried across the road.

She didn't answer so I took that to be a yes.

“Are you sure the appointment is for today?” I asked as we studied the door. “Only it looks closed.”

“Clarity said to ring the doorbell,” said Jhansi anxiously. “But I don't see a doorbell.”

I couldn't see one either so I grinned when she looked at me for help and hammered on the door with my fist.

“Doorbells are just so *passée*,” I said and laughed.

“What?” she said then jumped about two feet in the air as the door opened.

“Hello,” said the lady, looking at us both. “Come on in.”

She was a middle aged woman and was wearing a long knitted dress of darkish blue. Her shoulder length blonde hair was tied back by a narrow strip of white cloth.

“Umm,” said Jhansi hesitantly. “I, um, made an appointment.”

“I know,” said the woman. “I'm Clarity.” She stepped back to let us into a moderately large shop that was crammed with strangely ornate

dresses and wall hangings and smelt strongly of incense. In the few moments I had to look around I saw a table laden with brass bowls of various sizes and another covered with crystals and rocks.

“This way, please,” said Clarity, pulling back a drape adorned with fauns.

Behind was a smaller room, bare apart from two chairs on either side of a table. There was a deck of cards on the table and nothing else.

“I'm afraid all my readings are strictly private,” said Clarity, looking at me. She'd clearly deduced that I wasn't Jhansi.

“Ah, right,” I said. “Umm, I'll go wait in the car then.”

“Oh there's no need,” said Clarity. “You can wait in the shop if you like. Perhaps a cup of tea or coffee or something?”

“Actually I wouldn't mind some tea,” I said.

“Great,” she said. “Now, Jhansi, if you'd just take a seat and focus your mind on the question you want to ask while I organise some tea for Sylvia.”

“How did you know my name is Sylvia?” I asked, taken aback.

“It's written all over your face, dear,” said Clarity with a smile and I blinked two or three times at her. I decided Jhansi must have used my name and I hadn't heard her. “If you'll just go back into the shop, Forest will make you something.”

She held open the drape again to let me through then dropped it behind me.

“Good luck Jas,” I muttered then looked around for Forest.

I heard a noise from the far side of the shop and went to investigate. I discovered there was a long glass counter covered in little wicker baskets of rings, bracelets, amulets, pens, pottery tortoises and some other strange looking stuff. There was also another middle aged lady

behind the counter arranging a selection of porcelain animals into a circle. She was wearing what I could easily imagine as what maidens in ancient Greek times would have worn whilst casting offerings into a pagan pond in a haunted forest.

“Are you Forest?” I asked.

“Sure am,” she said, looking up and smiling. “Clarity has sent you away, has she?”

“Yes, I said. “Apparently I’m not allowed to watch.”

“Well that’s not unreasonable if you think about it, Sylvia,” she said, putting the last of the little animals in place. “Jhansi may not want you to know her inner thoughts, desires and fears.”

“How did you know my name was Sylvia?” I asked, suspiciously.

“Clarity told me you were expected,” said Forest, “and you don’t look like a Jhansi. Do you want just tea or a reading as well?”

“I’d love some tea,” I said. “So, you do readings too?” Actually it wouldn’t surprise me if Jhansi had expected me to come with her and told Clarity who I was when she made the appointment.

“I do Animal Energy Guidance Readings,” said Forest. “Come into my room and we’ll put the kettle on.”

She pulled back another drape at the end of the counter and I followed her in.

This room was much cosier and was lit by a soft lamp whose shade was covered with a small lace tablecloth although the disembodied hand, black feathers and big stick with a face carved into it was a little disconcerting.

“Animal Energies?” I said, surprised. “What’s that? Tarot for dogs?”

“Not at all,” said Forest, going over to a niche where a kettle and some mugs lurked. “Have you heard of Spirit Guides? Sit down, sit down.

Sugar, milk?"

"Oh, both please," I said, sitting down in what looked like the visitor's chair. "Umm, yeah, I've heard of Spirit Guides. Aren't they the souls of Red Indians who tell you what to do in the spirit world or something?"

Forest laughed as she organised the teas.

"In a way," she said, "and they don't have to be Red Indians although some are, of course. More importantly, the Spirit World is filled with the spirits of animals who are able to help and guide you, or anyone else for that matter."

"Oh yeah?" I said, relaxing. I didn't really believe in this sort of stuff but it was warm and comfortable in the little room and Jhansi would be a while yet.

"There's your tea," said Forest, putting a plain black mug on a coaster on the table. She wore a leather thong from which some type of heavy rock hung and it bounced against her breasts as she stood up. She wore her hair in a high fountain ponytail which hung down her back like a counter-weight.

She sat down and looked pensively at me for several long moments.

"What?" I said suddenly, feeling unexpectedly naked and vulnerable. The room has taken on a ... tribal? ... atmosphere.

"I sense you are troubled," said Forest quietly. "There is confusion in your life. Yes, and a strong feeling that you are not fulfilling your potential. Am I right?"

"Umm," I said, confused. How on Earth could she sense this about me?

"Perhaps the animal spirits can give you some guidance," she said, her voice still low. "Would you like a reading?"

I just stared at her, perhaps unwilling to admit that, at long last, some guidance would be useful. For sure I was going nowhere on my own. I

seemed doomed to be forever in a rented room and working as a lackey in a second rate café as the teenage dreams I'd been so certain had been carved in stone slowly crumbled to dust.

“Call me Anna,” said Forest. “For some reason Clarity seems to think Forest is a better name. Drink your tea and relax while I call to the animal spirits.” She picked up a skin covered wooden hand drum that was propped against the wall.

“Umm, I'm not sure about this,” I said hurriedly.

“Of course you aren't,” said Anna confidently. “If you were sure you wouldn't need guidance, would you. Just relax and let the spirits find you.” She picked up the carved ivory hand and placed it on the table, facing me, on top of a small glossy rock.

I took a deep breath and the comfy chair I was sitting in seemed to engulf me and I started to relax.

“... and so after the space cleansing and inviting of the energies to bring clarity and insight into your situation, we can begin to hear what the spirits have to say,” said Anna in a faraway voice.

I realised Anna had been talking and so as not appear rude I nodded.

“Close your eyes and raise your hands whilst I spiritually tune the room, please,” she said. “Now, as I speak, wiggle your fingers.”

It was easier to agree than feel weird. I held on to that thought as Anna shook crushed crystals and seeds in a wooden container and pronounced the ways clear.

I peeked at that point and saw her moving a feathered item with a black stone and strands of hair attached before clamping my eyes shut firmly and positioning my shoulders stoically for what was to come.

The sound of a singing bowl's high vibrations entwined with Anna's voice talking about spirals, veils and some things being welcomed and I began to feel a tingling throughout my body, in a non-creepy way. Then she started to lightly beat on her drum and walk around the

room chanting softly. She bent over me from behind and I felt the rock between her breasts tap against the back of my neck and her hair slide over mine.

“You can open your eyes now, Sylvia,” said Anna. I did and found she was standing in front of me, the other side of the table. She sat down, picked up a deck of cards and held it out to me.

“Knock three times on the card deck, shuffle the cards then pass the deck back to me when you're ready,” she said.

She was leaning slightly forward with a relaxed expression, her green eyes alive with anticipation.

I tapped my middle finger joint on the cards then picked them up and began to shuffle.

“Should I ask a question or something?” I asked.

“There is no need,” she said. “The spirits know what guidance you need, not what you think you need.”

“Oh, right,” I said and passed the deck back to her. She took them and paused for a moment, weighing the cards in her hand then spread them like a fan on the table.

“Chose three,” she said so I did. She took them and laid them in a line face down on the table then dealt four more in a cross beside them. Finally she put one more down just past the four.

Defly she flipped over the first of the cards in the line and said “ahhh” in a knowing way.

“Oh bloody wonderful,” I thought to myself. “I'm stuck in this limbo forever, I just know it.”

“This card, the Eagle, circles the entire spread meaning,” she said, focusing her attention on the Eagle and ignoring me. “It represents soaring like an eagle over all aspects of your life to examine new opportunities or revisit old opportunities that have returned. The

Eagle energy encourages you to take hold and act on new opportunities as they arise, to be decisive before the window of opportunity slams shut.”

“At least it's not the tall dark handsome stranger cliché,” I thought.

Anna's eyes narrowed slightly as she turned over the other two cards in the line; the Frog and the Dragonfly.

“Mmm, yes, this is good,” she said. “The Frog is of the water elemental and represents renewal, of being cleansed of thinking patterns that no longer are appropriate for your life. The Dragonfly supports this. It can signify a new awakening within your heart and mind but it can also mean that there is some deception in your life. Perhaps from others deceiving you or perhaps you deceiving yourself. Interesting.” She drew out the 'interesting' so it sounded more like 'inter-rest-ting'.

I jerked at that and stared at her. Deception? Was I deceiving myself? What about?

“What do you mean?” I asked, hearing the tension in my voice. I twisted my hands nervously and, feeling my ring, gran's ring, I started to twist it round and round my finger. It felt reassuringly warm and heavy.

“There is more,” said Anna, turning over the four cards in the cross. “Hmm, look at this. We've got the Snake and the Chameleon,” with some emphasis on the 'and'. “The Snake loses its skin after new growth, uncomfortable but necessary and the Chameleon takes that further. It signifies great change and the need to be able to adapt to the new environment. Perhaps a new job or a move of some sort. The two together, the Snake and the Chameleon, are saying a change is needed, perhaps an uncomfortable one to begin with but definitely one where the Chameleon has to adapt itself to fit in with its new surroundings.”

She paused and I looked up from studying the cards.

“This one is interesting,” she said, not noticing me looking at her.

"The Dolphin. It's unusual to get the Dolphin with the Snake as the Snake suggests an element of discomfort but the Dolphin is a playful creature. I don't know your circumstances but what these cards are saying very strongly to me is that you need to make some significant changes in your life which may, on the surface, seem uncomfortable and will mean you have to adapt but you should retain your sense of playfulness and not let yourself take things too seriously and become overwhelmed."

"And the other two?" I blurted out.

"They are perhaps the most interesting of them all," said Anna. She turned over the last card that sat on its own then looked up at me for the first time since dealing the cards. "The Eagle is the overview and says that all aspects of your life need to be considered. The Frog speaks of changes in your ways of thinking and the Dragonfly of new awakenings. Then we have the Snake and perhaps a painful beginning to new growth with the need for adaptability as shown by the Chameleon."

"But still being happy," I said hurriedly, tapping the Dolphin.

"Absolutely," said Anna. "All that change, and frankly I don't think I've ever seen such an overwhelming spread calling for change and growth before, but that aside, all this growth and change without staying happy and playful would be most onerous. Most onerous indeed."

"And these two?" I asked again, tapping the Hippopotamus and the Rhino. They both looked very heavy and serious and I was more than a little scared to know what they meant.

"Ah, yes, these two," said Anna, picking up the Hippopotamus. She turned it over in her hand and inspected the back and my tension increased. "This one represents unrealised dreams."

"You mean the things that aren't going to happen?" I asked anxiously

"Perhaps," said Anna, picking up the Rhino as well. "The Hippo only represents the unrealised if you procrastinate. If you step out and have the confidence to do what needs to be done then the dreams will be

realised, not left unrealised.”

“So you're saying that if I make all these changes and put up with the pain then my dreams will come true?” I asked.

“No,” said Anna. “I'm not saying that. The Animal Energies are saying that,” and she tapped the Rhino thoughtfully with her thumbnail.

“But,” I said suddenly. “I know there's a big but coming, isn't there. It's that Rhino, isn't it. It's going to kick me in the ass, isn't it.”

“I've rarely seen the Rhino in that position before,” said Anna thoughtfully. “Its meaning is much the same as the Hippo, although more in line with solving problems, facing consequences and not avoiding issues. What's interesting here is that we already have that with the Hippo so why are the Spirits repeating themselves? And why there, of all places?”

“What there?” I said, confused. “What do you mean?”

“That position is the Blessings position,” said Anna tapping a corner of the Rhino on the spot where it had been. “It's more or less the outcome of changes you make, if you do them with a pure heart and good intentions.”

“So you're saying the final outcome will be more problems and pain?” I said aghast.

“On the contrary,” said Anna. “What it is saying is that if you make major changes in your life and face the problems and pain that may follow then your efforts will be rewarded.”

Chapter Twelve

I left Forest with a weird feeling of empowerment and despair, of an up-welling of my destiny to fly but at the same time a sadness, no, more a form of depression, because the path I was on wasn't going anywhere. OK I'd more or less figured that out for myself but it's a real slap in the face when the entire animal spirit world says you're a total loser and then tells you that any change is going to be painful. I hate pain. It didn't really register when I came out of Forest's room that Jhansi had a strange expression on her face. Wrapped in my own thoughts I dutifully asked how hers had gone and she'd said "I don't want to talk about it" which was, selfishly, fine by me. I spent the drive back to my place staring out the window and sending myself text messages as snippets came back to me.

The Rhino and the Dolphin were the first text because the Rhino seemed to be saying that everything would work out fine if I just found the courage and the Dolphin was saying I needed to chill out and not take things too seriously. Those two were strong in my mind. Probably, I suppose, because the one thing I really needed more than anything was hope. The Eagle was next because I remembered Forest talking about the eagle soaring over everything and looking for opportunities. Then I sent myself another message about deception, either someone close to me or my own self deception. I couldn't remember which creature had said that but the message seemed real enough. After all, we are surrounded by deception all the time, be it politicians, scammers or little lies of self-justification. Like buying a pair of shoes for £27 and rounding it up to £30 then convincing myself I'd managed to save £3 on the purchase to justify it as a bargain instead of admitting I'd casually wasted £27.

"So, um, here we are," said Jhansi, pulling up a little down the road from my place.

"Oh, right," I said, looking up from sending a text about snakes and chameleons. "Hey, thanks. Would you like to come in for a cuppa or something?"

"No, not today, thank you Sylvia," she said, turning off the engine. "Um, well, I suppose this is goodbye, then."

“Oh shit!” I suddenly thought, kicking myself for being so self absorbed.

“So did Clarity give you good news or bad news?” I asked.

“A little of both,” she said evasively then looked around at this fairly shabby part of Islington. “I’m going to miss London. And you and my other friends.”

“When’s your flight?” I asked, thinking vaguely we could have a girl’s night out before she went.

“7:30 tomorrow morning,” she said with a sad smile. “Air India, from Heathrow.”

“Ahh,” I said, realising an evening out would be impossible. “You don’t have to go, you know. This is the twenty first century and women have rights too.”

“Perhaps here in England,” she said, “but what would I do here? I have no money of my own and I would be cast out from my family. No, this is my destiny and I cannot escape it.”

“So Clarity didn’t give you any hope for the future?” I asked.

“No, indeed, she gave me much hope,” said Jhansi, “and some good advice, I think. Could we talk together, you and I, sometimes? We can Skype if you have it, or even just by email?”

“Sure,” I said, “I’d like that. And if you ever come back to England we’ll get together again.”

“Perhaps you might come to India one day,” said Jhansi with a half smile.

“Perhaps one day I will,” I said, smiling. “It’s on my list.”

“That will be delightful,” said Jhansi and we both texted each other our email addresses and Skype IDs.

“I must go now,” said Jhansi. “I still have some packing to do and my cousin has arranged a celebration dinner this evening.”

“Is someone taking you to the airport?” I asked.

“Yes, my cousin,” said Jhansi.

We sat in silence for a few moments then she gave me a perfunctory hug as though a shutter was coming down on this phase of her life. I got out of the car and waved as she pulled away and disappeared from my future.

“Frogs!” I exclaimed. “Dragonflies!” and hurried to text myself before I forgot.

The house was quiet and empty when I went inside. Well, as quiet as it ever got. Someone next door had some music going and a faint thump thump from the beat made itself felt around the rhythms of the traffic flow outside. There wasn't a sound from upstairs so Cheyenne was most likely out.

I made another cup of tea and left it in the lounge while I went to get rid of the last two then I sat in my favourite spot on the couch, the end nearest the door where it was warmer in winter, and went through my text messages about the reading. I visualised the spread out cards and realised one was missing. I also couldn't quite remember what the Frog and the Dragonfly were about.

“And there are some unrealised dreams in there somewhere, as well,” I muttered frowning, irritated that I couldn't quite remember. There had been a card that was similar to the Rhino, both in meaning and in character but try as I may it wouldn't come back to me.

“Not that it really matters,” I said to myself.

I kicked off my shoes and lay back on the couch with my tea mug cradled on my belly.

“The long and the short of it,” I thought, “is that I'm in a rut. I'm going nowhere and I have to somehow get out of this rut. OK, she said

it's going to be a little uncomfortable and painful but I'm 99% certain she said things would work out in the end. That was the Rhino, wasn't it. Or was it? Maybe it was the dragonfly? Anyway, it doesn't matter. The main thing here is that she didn't really say anything I didn't already know. I know I'm in a rut so what do I do about it?"

I finished my tea and put the mug on the carpet beside me. Gemma would have a fit if she saw that but she wouldn't be back until Monday evening after work. She stayed Sunday nights with Duncan so she could get an extra shag and went to work from his place. I didn't know Cheyenne's routines but I was sure she wouldn't mind about mug rings on the carpet or if she did she wouldn't say anything.

"Well, one thing's for sure," I said out loud. "I need money and somewhere to live. OK, that's two but they go together. I need money to live somewhere and I need somewhere to live otherwise I'll never get another job. I can always quit the café, since that's going nowhere, but getting another job could be difficult."

I ran through the list of guys that I knew, surprising myself that it was longer than I thought it would be, but none of them were any great shakes in the way of opportunities, either for a job or marrying into wealth. OK, Mackie was a musician but his band, Molten Plastic, weren't headed for stardom since they were, to put it mildly, crap. They had a following of about ten who were girlfriends and relatives and that was about it.

On the other hand, though. Hmm, this was a possible opportunity. I did have this land up in Yorkshire which could be sold. OK that lawyer had put it on eBay because he wanted a quick sale and he'd filled the listing with legal jargon. Maybe, just maybe, if I re-listed it more attractively I'd be able to sell the place for a decent amount. Maybe even a few thousand which would allow me to quit the café and focus twenty four seven on finding a decent job with great prospects rather than waiting aimlessly for an occasional agency to email me about something. I could also then get some more upmarket clothes, power clothes, to show I was someone to be reckoned with and not just a low level waitress with jumped up expectations.

"That's the Eagle talking," I thought, beginning to feel decidedly more

positive. "An opportunity has fallen in my lap and I'd be a fool not to take advantage of it. It's a beautiful place and I'm sure with the right presentation someone will snap it up for a tidy amount. Sweet, so that's decided then. That place in Yorkshire has to go."

I must have drifted off to sleep around that point because the next thing I knew was the front door slamming.

I jerked awake and fumbled for my phone. It was almost 4 in the afternoon!

"Hey," said Gemma, coming into the lounge and seeing me. She also saw the mug on the carpet and pointedly picked it up with a sour expression. She dumped it on the little table at the end of the couch and gave me a filthy look.

"Hey," I said, swinging my feet off the couch before she could glare at me for that as well. I yawned. "So how come you're back so soon?"

"Duncan's got an Expo in Belgium tomorrow," she said, throwing her jacket over the back of an armchair before slumping into it. "He's on his way to Heathrow now."

"Oh, right," I said. Duncan did something with computers but I had no idea what. "So you didn't give him a lift?"

"He took a taxi," she said, looking around aimlessly. She wasn't used to being here on a Sunday afternoon and it probably felt strange. "His company pays for it. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were going away for the weekend? Where's Cheyenne?"

"I've no idea," I said. "I haven't seen her since Thursday. No, I only went away Friday night. I had to work Saturday."

"Oh yeah, that's right," she said, her attention elsewhere. "That thingy you got off eBay or something, wasn't it?" She picked up her bag and rummaged through it then put it down with a sigh.

"Some land," I said. "Hey, Gem, can I ask you something?"

“Don't marry him” she said with a derisive snort.

“Who?” I said, taken aback

“Matt,” she said then frowned, “or is it Mike?”

I had to laugh.

“I broke up with Matt last year,” I said, “and Mike was a no goer from the start.”

“Oh,” she said, looking properly at me for the first time. “That's a shame, I rather liked him. So who is it this time?”

“I'm not seeing anyone,” I said.

“So who was that who tried to fix the door?” she asked frowning again.

“That was Frank,” I said. “And we broke up, ohh, six weeks ago.”

“Then my best advice is to become a lesbian,” said Gemma, stretching out her long legs, “since you obviously can't keep a man.”

“I could if I wanted to,” I said and managed to squash a remark about being more picky than she was since she got through more guys than I did. That said, Duncan was still around after almost a year which was impressive for Gemma.

“Yeah they're not really worth the effort, are they,” she said in a tone of voice that suggested Duncan was nearing his 'use by' date. “So what you want to ask me?”

“You're in marketing, aren't you,” I said.

“I was the last time I looked,” she said, looking a little complacent, “but it's a cut throat world. Could be out on my arse tomorrow.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” I said. “Umm, I was wondering if you could help me sell something.”

“You mean that thing outside?” she asked. “Take it to a scrap metal dealer, They’ll probably give you fifty quid for it.”

“I don’t mean the car,” I said, “and it’s worth a lot more than fifty quid. At least five hundred.” The only cars Gemma knew anything about were Porsches. Not that she’d ever owned one as she was too low in marketing to be able to afford one but she did like the guys who owned them.

“Whatever you say, sweetie,” she said. “So what do you want to sell?”

“Some land,” I said. “You remember that place I bought last weekend off eBay? The place I went to look at on Friday?”

“That was land?” she said, blinking in surprise. “I thought it was a share certificate or something.”

“Well it was,” I said, “but there’s some land that goes with it.”

“Right,” she said, sitting upright. “So you want to sell it already? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” I said, “I just need some money and I thought with the right marketing it might sell for a decent amount.”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “With the right marketing you can sell anything. Tell me about it.”

“I’ve some pics,” I said, picking up my phone. I found them and handed the phone to her.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, looking at the house with the view in the background. “That is awesome!”

“It is lovely, isn’t it,” I said.

“How come you could afford to buy a place like that?” she asked, flicking through the other pictures. “I thought you were skint. This must have cost you millions.”

“£5,” I said, perking up at the sound of ‘millions’. It had a nice ring to it.

“Bullshit,” she said, going back though the pictures. “How much was it really?”

“£5,” I repeated. “It’s got some major legal problems.”

“Might have guessed,” she said, bursting out laughing. “Jesus, you’re a born loser, Sylv! Trust you.”

“You what?” I exclaimed, deeply hurt by that. “That wasn’t very nice!”

“Only joking,” she said soothingly, realising she’d hurt me. “You’re not a loser at all, just in a bit of a rut, that’s all. It’ll pass. These things always do.”

I reflected she was probably right. If I wasn’t a loser I wouldn’t be in a rut or if I was it would be a rut that was part of my overall strategic plan on the way to somewhere else. Still, with Forest’s help I was now forming a new plan and Gemma could help so I squashed my annoyance.

“So I was hoping you could help me with a bit of marketing,” I said.

“Well, sure,” she said, staring at the picture of the old track as it headed off into the distance. “Anything for you, hon. Tell me about the legal problems.”

I did and by the time I ground to a halt she was staring at me aghast.

“Jesus,” she said when it was apparent I’d finished. “You don’t do anything by halves, do you.”

“Who’s doing what by halves?” asked Cheyenne, coming in the lounge. She looked like she was wearing what she’d gone out in the night before so I figured she’d just got back.

“Sylv’s bought a place,” said Gemma, passing my phone to her.

“Wow!” exclaimed Cheyenne, looking at the photo. “That's not in London, is it? Looks a bit like north Wales.”

“It's in Yorkshire,” I said.

“You must be rich as,” said Cheyenne, giving my phone back to Gemma. “You couldn't lend me fifty quid 'til payday?” She grinned to show it was a joke, or so I hoped.

“Sorry,” I said. “I spent every last penny on that place.” Actually I still had roughly £850 in the bank from gran but they didn't need to know that.

“She wants to sell it,” said Gemma. “Listen, Sylv. I don't think I can help you. This is a major job.”

“I would've thought it would be easy to sell,” said Cheyenne. “Just list it with a local estate agent. I'm sure it'll be snapped up quickly. It looks like something out of a movie.”

“Yeah, it's not that easy,” I said, feeling a little gutted at setbacks already. “There's a few legal problems. I was hoping Gemma would help me with some marketing but it seems to be too much for her.”

“I could always ask some of the guys in the office,” she said thoughtfully. “I'm just an assistant and write some copy and check mock-ups. I'm not one of the creatives yet.”

I was tempted to say this was an opportunity for her to show her creative side and get a promotion but decided not to.

“That would be great if you could,” I said instead. “Umm, would they charge much do you think?”

“Probably only £300 an hour,” said Gemma and laughed at the look on my face. “Only teasing you. There's one of the creatives who'll probably help. He's got the hots for me. Send me the pics and an overview of the problems and I'll talk to him tomorrow.”

“Great,” I said and she tossed my phone back.

I texted the images to her phone then settled down to write an overview. Cheyenne went up to her room to change and Gemma turned on the TV and went to make some coffee. She read the text when I sent it, asked a couple of questions then turned the TV off again and closed her eyes.

My phone pinged to say I had a message so I checked. It was Jhansi thanking me for going with her and wishing me all the best for the future. I texted back wishing her the same then went back through my messages about the Animal Guidance session and suddenly remembered that the one I'd missed was the Hippopotamus and that it signified unrealised dreams. I seemed to remember that Forest had said that the Hippo in conjunction with the Rhino meant that the unrealised dreams could become realised. I quickly sent myself a text about that in case I forgot then browsed through the others again.

“Oh Gem,” I said when I went back too far and found my message about that song on the radio. “Have you still got that app on your laptop for downloading YouTube videos?”

“Sure,” she said, half opening her eyes.

“Can I borrow it?” I asked.

“Help yourself,” she said and closed her eyes again. “It's in my room.”

I went upstairs and fetched her laptop then went into my room to get a USB cable in case I did find the song. That way I could transfer it to my phone and play it whenever I wanted. I could get YouTube on my phone, of course, but each time I played the song it would eat into my data download limit for the month. Saving it as an MP4 or an MP3 was better.

I logged in, as Gemma had very kindly given me her log in details for just such occasions, and Googled 'born to fly sarah' and it immediately came back with Sara Evans.

“Cool,” I said and went to YouTube. Sure enough Born to Fly by Sara Evans was available and had been viewed about ten million times. Apparently it was released in 1992, which made it five years older

than me.

I fired up the downloader and downloaded it as an MP4 video then again as an MP3 audio then plugged in the cable and transferred them both to my phone.

“Laptop's on the table, Gem,” I said and she waved a hand without opening her eyes.

It looked like she was drifting off to sleep so I plugged in my ear-buds so I wouldn't wake her.

“Oh wow!” I whispered and giggled as I watched the video on my phone.

For some reason they'd made the video so it looked like something out of that really old movie The Wizard of Oz with Sara Evans as Dorothy. I have to confess it didn't work for me although Sara had really nice long black hair. Mine was almost as long but was a fairly drab mid brown in comparison. Still, it was the right song. I shut the video down and played the audio instead.

The second verse,

*So I confess my sins to the preacher
'Bout the love I've been praying to find
Is there a brown eyed boy in my future?
He says 'Girl, you've got nothing but time.'*

made me giggle again as it was blue eyed boys that made my knees go weak not brown eyed ones and I'd never go to a preacher anyway but the next verse was the one about waiting for heaven and being born to fly.

“Is it just a coincidence?” I wondered as the song came to an end. “I suddenly come across a song older than me that I've never heard before about being born to fly just as I go to an Animal Guidance person who tells me that everything is wrong in my life and that I need to change? Is there some hidden message here or am I just clutching at straws? Should I go and talk to a scarecrow or a preacher?”

Cheyenne came back in at that point and turned the TV on. She and Gemma started watching something god-awful so I went to the kitchen to make a sandwich and took it to my room where I lay on my bed.

“So how do I wait for heaven?” I asked myself, “and what’s the point anyway? Isn’t it better that I change my patterns of thinking and become born anew, like Forest said? Yeah great. Sounds good but how do you actually do it? How do I get rid of my old ways of thinking and change the direction of my life? And in which direction? How do you make yourself grow?”

Like the song said,

My daddy he is grounded like the oak tree

My mama she’s as steady as the sun

Well, you know I love my folks

But I keep staring down the road

Just looking for my one chance to run.

except that I barely knew my dad and mum was a bit flaky at times but here was the song saying I had one chance to run and the animal spirits seemed to be saying that that one chance had come and I had to take it. But which way do I run? Where? How? My head went round in circles over and over again until I gave up. So what was wrong with being a waitress? At least I had an income and somewhere to live which was more than a lot of people. And, like the preacher in the song said, I was only 26 and I had plenty of time, didn’t I? Maybe the change in thinking I had to do was to learn to be content with what I had and stop chasing the rainbow.

Bullshit!

The answer came to me in the middle of the night as yet another bloody verse of that damned song wormed its way through my dreams.

Hey 'cause I will soar away like that blackbird

I will blow in the wind like a seed

I will plant my heart in the garden of my dreams

And I will grow up where I want, wild and free.

Yeah!

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up refreshed, invigorated and empowered. The sun was shining, albeit behind thin clouds, and the few birds that were left in Islington chirruped at each other happily. I had a plan! A strategy even although I wasn't quite sure of the difference between a plan and a strategy. Whatever, I had one!

I needed a job in order to live somewhere and I needed somewhere to get a job. A basic fact of life that traps most people but once that trap is broken I could soar away like a blackbird! I even had a garden to plant my dreams in that was, most importantly, rent free. Take away the need for £300 a week just for a room and the need for a job to pay for it reduces dramatically. My plan, strategy, life re-envisioning, call it what you will, was to bugger off to my place in Yorkshire and live off the grid for a bit while I re-invented myself. OK I'd still need a little money for food but there was bound to be some sort of casual work I could do while I forged a new pathway. Take away the need for rent and I could stop being a waitress.

What I would do instead could wait for a while. Like the song said, *plant my heart in the garden of my dreams and grow up where I want, wild and free!* My old station was the garden where I would flourish! Maybe, in time, I'd even be able to start another railway business and become a Head of Industry!

I jumped out of bed with an enthusiasm I hadn't felt for a while and walked to work with a spring in my step, singing *Born To Fly* and getting strange looks from the sad, grey people making their way to their dead-end jobs. My rent was paid up to next weekend so I'd finish work on Saturday morning and drive up to an exciting new life on the Yorkshire Moors. I could even go swimming in the sea since I would be near the beach although I still didn't know which sea it was.

"Morning everyone!" I called happily as I strode in through the door to the café.

"Hello," said Sunita, beaming at me. "You look happy."

"I am!" I said and danced a few steps. "Where is everyone?"

“Cassie’s in the toilets,” she said. “Bec’s phoned in sick, Laura’s not here yet and Winston won’t be back in until after lunch.”

“You what?” I exclaimed, feeling suddenly deflated. How could I give notice if the boss wasn’t here?

“Umm, Cassie’s in the toilet ...,” started Sunita again, her smile wavering.

“Yeah, I heard,” I said and realised that two or possibly three of the five people normally there weren’t there so we were going to be run off our feet. “Jesus!”

“Morning Sylv,” said Cassie, coming in the back. “You heard?”

“About everyone being off?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said as our first customer came in. “Just as well it’s Monday, huh.”

“At least it’s only ’til 10:30,” I said, shoving my bag under the counter. “Oh shit!”

“What?” said Cassie as she, Sunita and the man stared at me in alarm.

“Jhansi’s gone!” I said, the last of my enthusiasm draining away. “I’ve got that bloody new girl to train up.”

“Perhaps I won’t bother,” said man and walked out again.

* * *

“So how’s she going?” asked Winston when he eventually turned up around 2.

“Chalita?” I asked, my feet hurting since I hadn’t had a chance to sit down since I’d arrived. “She’s OK, I guess.”

“You guess?” he asked sharply.

“Well, she’s no experience,” I said, leaning against the cold room door, “so she’s a little slow and being from Thailand she isn’t familiar with English cooking but she’s very enthusiastic and the customers seem to like her.”

His eyes narrowed.

“So what are you saying?” he asked. “Take her on or not?”

“You could do a lot worse,” I said. “She’ll pick it up soon enough. Besides, ...” and I petered out as I really didn’t feel up to a confrontation.

“Besides what?” he demanded.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath while saying “Yorkshire” a couple of times in my mind.

“I’m leaving,” I said and felt an immense upwelling of relief, enthusiasm and joy rush through me like a heroin shot, not that I’ve ever had a heroin shot but that’s what I’m told it feels like. It was the first time I’d said anything out loud about my plan and it felt good. The Eagle would be proud of me, or the Rhino or whichever one it was.

Winston just gaped at me, his mouth hanging open unattractively.

“What?” he said after what seemed like an age.

“Scuse me,” said Sunita. “We need some more milk.”

I stepped back and she hurried into the cold room and came back out with three cartons of milk.

“I’m leaving,” I said and she stopped to look at me then hurried off.

“You can’t do this to me,” said Winston. “I thought you’d be here forever! Hey, that bloody Rhonda at Café Rock isn’t poaching you away, is she?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to another job. I’m going up north to find myself.”

“Then you’re a bloody idiot,” said Winston. “There’s nothing up north except flat caps and sheep. Your place is down here in London. Tell you what, I’ll give you a raise. How does £1 an hour sound?”

“Pathetic,” I said, visualising sweeping vistas of moorland in my head even though I’d have killed for a £50 a week pay rise only a few days ago.

“£1.50, then,” he said, lowering his voice, “but don’t tell the baristas. That’s more than they get.”

I hesitated but only for a few moments. All he was really doing was putting more honey in the trap as I’d still be a dead end waitress in a cheap rental.

“No,” I said. “I have to do this. I don’t want to be a waitress for the rest of my life.”

“£1.75 and that’s my last offer,” he said. “And I’ll change your job title to Assistant Manager.”

“But it’ll still be the same job,” I said. “I’d just be a waitress with a fancy title. Sorry but no.”

“Shit,” he said and kicked the cold room door angrily. “So when’re you leaving? Today?”

“I thought after work Saturday,” I said. That way I’d have a week’s pay with no rent to cover which would be very useful.

“Well that’s something, I suppose,” he said, trying to guilt me for moving on with my career rather than aiding his. “You pregnant then?”

“You what?” I exclaimed, surprised. “Why would you think I’m pregnant?”

“Why else would a girl like you chuck everything up and disappear into the badlands?” he asked. “There’s got to be a guy involved somewhere.”

I smiled. “No, there isn’t,” I said. “It’s just that I don’t want to be a waitress any more.”

“I suppose I’d better bloody take her on then,” he said, looking over to where Chalita was trying to figure out how to use the sandwich press even though I’d shown her twice already. I could see in his eyes that he’d already moved on from me.

“Great,” I said and went over to help Chalita.

* * *

“Heya,” said Gemma when she got home that evening. She slammed the front door shut and threw her bag onto a chair.

“Have a good day?” I asked, looking up from the list I’d been making.

“I’ve had a shite day,” she said. “Major balls up in the graphics section and muggins here had to sort it all out. I bet you had a bloody good day though.”

“Actually, I quit,” I said.

“‘Bout bloody time,” said Gemma, pulling off her fashionable ankle boots. “So you’ve got a decent job at last then?”

“Umm, well no, not really,” I said.

She looked up from massaging her foot in alarm.

“So how’re you going to find the rent?” she asked.

“Well, I, umm, wanted to talk to you about that,” I said.

“I can’t afford to carry you, you know,” she said, letting her foot drop. “If you can’t pay the rent then I’ll have to ask you to leave. Maybe if

you ask nicely they'll give you your job back.”

“I don't want the job back,” I said, “and I won't be getting in arrears. I'm moving out on Saturday and I'm paid up 'til Sunday.”

She just stared at me then started to laugh.

“Oh, nice one, Sylv,” she chuckled. “You really got me going there. Oh, hey. I had a meeting with Ashley, one of our Account Managers about your little problem. He said it looked like an interesting challenge and he's going to think about it.”

“That's great,” I said, “and will you thank him for me but I've changed my mind. And I really am moving out on Saturday.”

“Oh effing bloody wonderful,” she groaned and flopped back into the chair. She stared at me for a while. “You pregnant then?”

“Why does everyone assume I'm pregnant?” I exclaimed.

“Why else would you chuck your job and move out of your home?” asked Gemma. “You're moving in with a guy, aren't you.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” I said. “No, I'm going to go and live in my place in Yorkshire and find myself.” I'd read that in an article in Cosmopolitan and liked the sound of 'finding myself'. “I'm stuck in a dead end rut here.”

“Then you're a bloody idiot,” said Gemma. “This is London! It's the place to be if you want to get ahead not up in some god-forsaken little northern dump.”

“Hey, I may come back when I've decided what to do with my life,” I said, stung that no one seemed to understand.

“I'll give you a week,” said Gemma, hoisting herself to her feet. “You won't be able to stand it up there, all those sheep and country yokels. I'll keep your room open for a week but after that you'll have to find somewhere else.” She flounced into the kitchen and started making clattering noises.

“Well, sod you,” I said quietly and went up to my room. I was starting to feel sad and was wondering if this was such a good idea after all.

Zoe texted me mid evening, wanting to know if I was up for going clubbing on Saturday. I texted back saying I was moving to Yorkshire that day.

“What the hell for?” she texted back

“To re-evaluate my life,” I texted.

She didn't reply for a while which I took to be a good sign, until it arrived.

“You're a blood fool,” she texted. “Who am I going to go clubbing with now?”

At least she didn't ask if I was pregnant.

* * *

With three out of three thinking I was being stupid I spent a while thinking things through again and decided that I was doing the right thing after all. OK, it could all go horribly wrong but I was only 26 and if it did I could always come back to London and be a waitress again. I did have three years experience which put me ahead of the crowd and Winston and Gemma would give me good references. It occurred to me that when people called me an idiot they were thinking about themselves – Winston and his staffing, Gemma and her rent, Zoe and her clubbing – and not thinking about me. Regardless of what they thought, it was me that was in a rut and me that wanted more from life so it was me who had to change things and not do what they wanted. OK, maybe moving to Yorkshire might not be the best possible move but it was one I could do and, most importantly I thought, was breaking the cycle and making change possible. There would be problems, Forest had assured me of that, but she'd also been confident that I'd be able to overcome them and be whatever it was that the animal spirits were guiding me towards.

There were still doubts in my mind so I turned my arguments over in

my mind a couple of times before making the phone call I was most dreading.

"Hello mum," I said when she answered.

"Sylvie, darling, how are you?" she said happily. "Are you dropping down over the weekend?"

"Umm, well I wanted to have a chat with you about that," I said, nervously.

"Oh, this doesn't sound too good," she said, her happy tone switching to worried in an instant. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"Oh, mum, of course not!" I exclaimed. Actually I was starting to get seriously miffed by how people seemed to see me.

"Well, I was 24 when I had you," she said, "and your clock is ticking, you know."

"I know," I said, "but I'm not planning on having any kids for a while yet so you can stop thinking about grand kids." For some reason the list of my ancestors in the prayer book came into my mind but I pushed it away.

"So what is it then?" she asked.

"Um, well, I've, er, quit my job and I'm moving up to Yorkshire to find myself," I said in a rush. There, it was out now.

"Oh," she said then paused. "Well, I've been wondering when this would happen."

"What do you mean?" I asked, totally taken by surprise.

"It's in your blood," she said. "I was off travelling around North Africa in an old bus with some friends when I was 19 and your gran lived in a commune in Wales for a few years in the 60s. I was hoping you'd grown past that but I suppose it had to happen sooner or later."

“So you don't think I'm an idiot, then, do you?” I asked.

“Oh probably,” she said with a laugh, “but then I was too. You can't settle down until it's out of your system. You will stay safe though, won't you? No drugs or bad men.”

“Oh there won't be any of that,” I said. “I'll be living on my own in an old railway station. I just need to get out of this bloody dead end that I've got myself into. Up there I can think and figure out what it is I really want to do since I don't seem to be getting anywhere with the hotel business.”

“So you didn't get that job in Yorkshire, then?” asked mum.

“What job?” I asked.

“You said you were going up for a job interview last weekend,” she said.

“Ahh, right,” I said, remembering. “No, that was a bit of a porkie so you didn't worry. No, I went up to look at the place.”

“The station?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Is it still in use?” she asked. “I don't really like the idea of you living in a station with all those people milling around. You know, like that film we saw about that man who lived in an airport for ten years or something.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that film,” I said. “Whatshisname was in it. No, it's an abandoned station. It shut down in the 1930s.”

“Oh good,” said mum, “and it's good you're going back to your roots.”

“What roots?” I asked, surprised again. “We have roots in Yorkshire?”

“Yes, we originally came from there,” said mum, “or at least my side of the family did. I think it was my great grand mother who got

married and moved down to Oxfordshire, not long before the First World War and it was my mother who moved into Kent when she left the commune when I was born.”

“I never knew that,” I said, wondering at the coincidence. “Do you know where in Yorkshire your great grand mother came from?”

“Oh dear me, no,” she said, “although I think it was somewhere on the coast. Whitnal, Whitby, somewhere like that.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “There’s a Whitby only about ten miles from my station! I wonder if she came from there?”

“Well, it’ll give you something to do when you get bored,” she said. “You can go to the library there and search your ancestry.”

“So what was her name?” I asked, jumping off my bed to get the prayer book.

“I have no idea,” said mum. “My mother’s maiden name was Bland and her mother never married so her mother’s married name would have been Bland as well but I’ve no idea what her maiden name was or her first name.”

“Mildred Bland,” I said, finding the entry in the prayer book. “Her maiden name was Ainley.”

“How on Earth did you know that?” asked mum. I could hear the astonishment in her voice.

“You remember that old prayer book gran left me?” I said. “Well, there’s a list of all of us inside the cover. It goes all the way back to Letitia Metcalfe who would have been my great six times grandmother. I don’t know when she was born but she had a daughter called Anne in 1861. I think that ring gran gave me was hers as well. It’s got an inscription inside to Letitia.”

“Well there you go,” said mum. “You can do us a family tree!”

“What was that?” I asked, as the ring on my finger seemed to pulse a

little as I put the prayer book down and distracted me. I held the phone with my shoulder while I took the ring off and peered closely at it but it didn't pulse again.

"I said you can do us a family tree," said mum again.

"Well, it's an idea," I said, slipping the ring back on. It must have been a trick of the light as I moved my hand although I wiggled my hand around trying to make it pulse again, without success. "Hey, you must come up and visit when I've got the place tidied up. You'll love it there!"

Chapter Fourteen

Whatever doubts I had about my stupidity disappeared along with Islington. I felt almost drunk with euphoria and excitement tingled everywhere that could tingle. I didn't even swear at a pedestrian who stepped straight off the pavement in front of me, her eyes locked on the phone in her hand. I was on my way!

It was almost like going off on holiday except that, the best part, I wasn't coming back. I'd hugged the girls at the café, promising to stay in touch, and exchanged farewells with Winston then run home to get the car. Gemma had been decidedly chilly all week, Cheyenne hadn't been at all impressed and neither were there to say goodbye so I left the keys on the kitchen table and slammed the front door behind me. It felt symbolic. A door closing on the past.

The car was laden with things I'd got from the Oxfam Charity shop in Islington High Street. A foam mattress, not too badly stained, some pots and pans and cutlery and a folding card table that was a little rickety plus some other odds and ends. I even had a toaster which was a mistake. I realised as I was putting it in the car that my house, *my house!*, probably didn't have electricity. I checked the photos I'd taken and there weren't any cables running to it so I took the toaster back inside and asked for a refund of the £3. The self-righteous elderly lady at the counter had just sniffed and pointed to a sign that said 'No Refunds'. I explained I'd just spent £34 there and had got the toaster by a mistake. She looked condescendingly down her nose at me then told me I was welcome to donate the toaster back to the shop. Her attitude irritated me so I kept the damned thing and went to the other charity shop in Islington High Street and bought a folding camping chair that had a couple of small cigarette burns and half a dozen flannel sheets since I'd probably have a lot of cleaning to do.

Squeezed in between my suitcase and rucksack was a camping stove with some spare gas refills that I'd got from the Outdoor and Camping shop and two lovely antique-looking lamps that were solar powered. The little panel sat outside in the sun and connected to the lantern by a cable so they could be used indoors and they looked cute. Just in case they weren't very bright I also bought a heavy duty torch that came with a thingy so it could be recharged from the cigarette

lighter in the car. I stopped briefly at a supermarket to get some food and said a happy goodbye to my old life.

I headed off up the Al(M) with each lamp's solar panel charging on the dash, the torch plugged into the cigarette lighter and a song in my heart, secure in the knowledge that there was plenty of oil in the engine and air in the tyres. The teenage son of the people next door had spotted me on his way back from school with the bonnet up and my head inside the engine compartment and asked if there was a problem. I'd told him I was trying to check the oil and he kindly showed me where the dip stick was. I'd always thought 'dip stick' was a term of abuse but apparently it actually is a thing. He also suggested I check the air in the tyres and came with me to the petrol station to show me how. Then he asked if I fancied a McDonald's so I let him buy me a burger but declined the opportunity to go to the cinema with him.

It was still light after my uneventful drive but I managed to miss the gravel track despite Google Maps' Robot and had to reverse back a little way. I went along the track and up over the little hill and stopped so I could look at the place. God knows why anyone built a railway station there but my euphoria, which had slowly drained away with the long and tiring drive, exploded again. I got out of the car and gazed in rapture at the scenery, my blood fizzing a little. Nothing had changed although I could see some sort of contraption beside one of the two sheds which I hadn't noticed before.

It was probably five minutes before I got back in the car and drove slowly down the track and parked beside the ramp. The sun was low on the horizon and the few clouds in the sky were rose red and the place had a warm glow to it. I got out of the car and slowly walked around the ramp and over to the door of the house, letting my fingertips run along the uneven stones of the wall. The windows were still shuttered so I stopped and tried to prise one open but it wouldn't move so I figured it was bolted or something on the inside. The door creaked as it opened and I made a mental note to get some WD-40 then went back to the car to get one of the lanterns as the house was as dark as one of my ex's heart inside.

OK, the lantern wasn't the brightest of lights ever invented but it cast

a warm happy glow rather than a harsh fluorescent blue and lit up at least half the room. I slowly wandered around, pleased that there was absolutely nothing spooky in the atmosphere. It smelt a little musty and there was thick dust on the floor and a few cobwebs here and there but it was nothing like the way old abandoned houses are shown in movies. At the platform end there were two plain wooden doors and I went over to the nearest. This led into a small room which I guessed was the kitchen as it had a small stove inside.

“OK,” I murmured to myself. “It probably burns wood or something. I’ll figure that out tomorrow.”

I turned to go back into the other room then paused. Something was missing here. I turned back again and held up the lantern. Obviously there was no fridge or freezer or even cabinets, I didn’t expect those, but I had a definite sense that something that should be there wasn’t there.

“Hmmm,” I muttered and went back into the main room.

For some reason I was expecting a bathroom behind the other door but it wasn’t. It was completely empty apart from four very narrow steps that led up to a raised platform, rather like a small stage, and a shelf mounted on the wall below another shuttered window. Puzzled, I went up the steps and peered closely at the window then I realised. This was the platform end of the house and this must be the Ticket Office window! And, because the platform was three feet above the ground the office and window must be three feet higher up as well. It was obvious once you knew. I smiled and started to back down the steps when the glint of a coin on the shelf caught my eye.

“That’s odd,” I muttered, picking it up. “They must have missed it when they packed everything up.”

Strangely the coin wasn’t covered in dust but I put it in my pocket and went back into the main room.

“I know that’s not the bathroom,” I said, pointing at the door in the wall beside me. It went to the outside on the other side of the house to where I’d come in. I knew that because I’d peered in through it when

I'd been up the previous weekend. "So it must be that one over there."

I walked across the room, my feet slapping on the dusty flagstones and paused at the pot-bellied stove. It had a metal pipe which ran up into the ceiling, presumably so the room didn't fill with smoke. I studied it for a few moments then bent and twisted a handle that seemed to be holding a plate at the front shut. It took a bit of an effort to open but it did with great reluctance and I peered inside. There was a fair amount of what looked like mummified ash and nothing else so I pushed the plate shut.

"So where's the bloody bathroom?" I said, opening the one remaining door. Inside was just a bare room. Not even another stove let alone a bath or a shower.

Puzzled I went out again and did another circuit of the room. There were five doors, as before. Two went to the outside world, one to the kitchen, one to the ticket office and the other to that empty room. If this was the living room then the other one was probably the bedroom. But no bathroom.

"Oh shit!" I exclaimed and hurried back into the kitchen. There was no sink and no taps. In fact there weren't even any pipes!

"There's no water!" I exclaimed and went round checking all the doors again just in case I'd missed one. "How can you have a house with no water?"

I ran out of the house and over to the outdoor toilet and double checked. There was no water here either. As I'd noticed before but not really registered the toilet was effectively just a hole in the ground.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed as I slowly went back to the house. I needed the lantern outside now as well as the sun had set. "So how did they wash?"

Well there had to be a water supply of some sort since I was pretty sure that even in the 1850s when the station was built people washed themselves. OK, maybe they didn't have showers twice a day but they still had baths. I'd seen them in old movies. And they needed water to

cook and drink.

“There must be a well here somewhere,” I thought. “Oh well, I’ll find it in the morning. It can’t be far away. One night without washing won’t hurt me.”

I went back in the house and decided that the room at the end would be the bedroom and the bigger room with all the doors would be the living room. I went back to the car and brought in all my stuff in four trips, putting the mattress and bedding in the bedroom and the chair and table in the living room. The kitchen stuff went, naturally, in the kitchen. That done I decided to have a nice hot cup of tea and only then did it really hit home. There was no water! I couldn’t have any tea!

“Bugger!” I said loudly.

I checked my phone, pleased that there was a strong signal, and found it was still only 6:30. I had no idea when the shops shut in this part of the world but I’d seen supermarkets in Middlesbrough which probably stayed open ’til 10 or maybe even midnight. I went out to the car and drove back to the main road.

“Is it worth going all the way to Middlesbrough?” I wondered. “It’s a good twenty five miles. Smocklebeck’s only a mile or so but it’s a tiny place and probably doesn’t have a supermarket but Whitby might. That’s only ten miles but it’s in the opposite direction so if it doesn’t I’ll have to come all the way back again to get to Middlesbrough.”

I pondered the problem for a few seconds then decided to go to Whitby. I’d need to go there to find out about food shopping anyway so I might as well do it now although I also had vague plans to grow some veggies. On the way it struck me that this had been a steam railway and steam needs water so they must have had a decent supply. I had no idea how much water a steam engine used but it must have been a lot.

“And coal,” I said, keeping my speed low on the unfamiliar roads in the dark. “They must have got through a lot of coal so I bet that both the stoves used coal as well. They must have kept it in one of those

sheds.”

To my great delight there was a supermarket on the edge of Whitby so I got a big ten litre container of water, a couple of big plastic buckets, a pair of heavy duty rubber gloves that were a disgusting shade of yellow, a hundred feet of rope that said on the label it was good for up to 50kg, a broom, a mop and a box of matches since I'd forgotten to get some when I bought the gas cooker. If there was coal in a shed I'd need matches for that too.

“You getting rid of a body?” said the youth at the otherwise deserted checkout with a smirk.

“Back in a minute,” I said, not really listening to him. I went back and got another ten litre container just in case I didn't find a well in the next couple of days. I grabbed a bar of fruit and nut chocolate too. He didn't bother to be a smart Alec second time round, just scanned the stuff and put it back in my trolley for me.

Back home I made some tea using my gas cooker, discovering in the process that if you turned the knob all the way round it auto-ignited, then emptied a can of soup into a saucepan and left it sitting on the cooker to be heated a little later. Cup in hand I prowled around the living room getting a feel for the various areas and deciding that the table and chair should go near the stove, but not too near. After fiddling around a little I found a spot where a slight unevenness in the flagstones countered the unevenness of the table's legs and made it almost solid. I finished my tea then gave the bedroom a quick preliminary sweep with the broom. This turned out to be a mistake as the dust billowed up everywhere so I grabbed my bedding and shut the door on it all to settle.

Part way through my soup and bread I decided I didn't like where I was sitting and put the saucepan on the floor while I reorganised the table and chair. It felt better in its new spot with my back to the bedroom so I finished the soup and dumped the saucepan in the kitchen.

“I've only really bloody done it!” I thought to myself gleefully as I sat in the chair and just chilled. “I'm free!”

OK, at some point I'd run out of money so that was something to be considered but it was off in the future and I was confident I'd find some sort of paid work. Maybe they needed farm labourers round here or something. Actually, what little I'd seen of Whitby suggested it might be something of a touristy area so there were bound to be cafés and things. Maybe I could have a stall on the beach selling whelks and other disgusting looking shellfish. Still, that was for later.

I dug out a piece of paper and a pen and made myself a little list of priorities, exploring and finding the well being at the top and finding a job not being on the list at all then pulled out my phone and Googled when Yorkshire got electrified. 1901 apparently although it wasn't until the early 1930s that more than half of the homes had electricity. Given that this station had closed down in 1933 it wasn't surprising they never bothered to electrify and since they'd have been using coal for the train, using a little extra for the house wouldn't have been a hassle. Maybe one day in the future I could explore getting the house connected or perhaps even a little generator but that was a long way off. The glow of the lantern, even though it was electric, was gentler than a normal electric light and I couldn't offhand think of anything I needed electricity for. The lamps were solar and the torch and my phone could be charged from the car.

I was happy! For the first time in a long time I was actually happy. OK, I'd felt happy quite a lot in the last few years but sitting there on a camping chair in a dusty old house I realised that that had been a fake sort of happiness, a 'put up with it' kind of happiness. This was the real thing. I gazed around and felt deeply content. It was only then that I noticed hooks set in the beams of the ceiling. I stared at them for a while wondering what on Earth they were there for. Surely they hadn't hung sides of meat here? Anyway, the hooks didn't look strong enough for that. Maybe they were for strings of onions or something but wouldn't they go in the kitchen? Anyway, the ceiling wasn't that high so sides of meat or strings of onions would be forever getting in the way. Laundry perhaps, but outside would be better. I gave up thinking about it after a minute or so and picked up the lantern from the table. The ceiling was a little too high for me to reach on tiptoe so I stood on the chair and hung the lantern from one of the hooks.

Of course! There was no electricity so they must have used oil lamps

or something like that and the hooks were there to hang them from! It not only made sense but made the room even more cheerful with an overhead light instead of one on the table. Maybe subconsciously it mimicked the sun? Anyway, I got out the other lamp and hung it further along although I didn't turn it on. These were new lamps and I had no idea how long the batteries would last before needing to be recharged.

I wandered round the room again admiring it from different angles with its new lighting scheme then wandered over to one of the windows to see how to undo the shutters. Nothing was immediately obvious so I leant against the wall and shoved my hands in my pockets and found the coin.

“Oh yeah,” I thought, pulling it out. “I wonder how old it is?”

I stood under the lamp and looked closely at the coin. It wasn't familiar but on one side it said 'VICTORIA DEI GRATIA BRITANNIA: REG: F: D:' around the head of a woman with a bun and on the other side it said 'ONE SHILLING' inside a wreath with 1860 underneath.

“Surely not?” I said, frowning.

I'd heard of shillings, of course. They were part of the old British money from long before I was born and cropped up in books and plays I'd had to read in English Lit. in school but I'd never seen one. More to the point, the station had shut down in the 1930s and surely any coins from the 1800s would have been banked or spent or something, not left lying around?

“Did they even have shillings back in 1860?” I wondered. I had a vague recollection that Dickens had mentioned shillings so I Googled 'shillings' on my phone. It turned out they went back to the 1500s and there were twelve pennies to one shilling and twenty shillings to the pound which seemed an absurdly complicated way of going shopping. 'VICTORIA DEI GRATIA', I also discovered, meant 'Victoria by the grace of God' and 'REG' was short for 'Regina' or Queen' which tied in with the date since Victoria was the Queen in 1860.

Still, with twenty of them to the pound that meant a shilling was only worth 5p although it was a lot bigger than a 5p coin.

“It's probably not worth even that,” I muttered, scanning the Wikipedia article, “since it won't be legal now anyway.”

Just out of idle curiosity I Googled 'what is a 1860 shilling worth'. According to the website allcoinvalues.com, an 1860 shilling in good condition was worth about £5 but 'good' here meant only about 10% of the design was still remaining. I turned the coin over in my hands several times and, not being an expert, it looked brand new to me. It still had that shine that coins fresh from the bank have and there didn't seem to be any scratches. In fact, the design stood out very clearly. I got my purse out of my bag and had a look at the coins I had. They were all dingy and marked.

“Interesting,” I said to myself and looked at allcoinvalues.com again.

The abbreviation 'Unc' meant 'uncirculated' and the coin should have 100% of its design and some lustre. 'BU', on the other hand meant 'brilliant uncirculated' and should have 100% of the design and full lustre.

I had no idea what 'full lustre' actually meant although my coin looked pretty shiny. I went back to the chart on the website to look at their values and whistled in surprise. Even if my coin had only 90% of its design, and it looked perfect, it was worth £160. 'Unc' upped that to £350 and 'BU' wasn't even mentioned.

“Bloody hell!” I said slowly. “Bloo-dy-hell!”

Chapter Fifteen

I slept well that Saturday night, apart from waking up every now and then to sneeze from all the dust a few inches from my face. The previous days had been emotionally draining and the long drive hadn't helped. I woke up in a strange place, spent a few seconds working out where I was then lay there for a while marvelling at how fast everything had happened.

"Jesus, is it really only two weeks?" I laughed and shook my head in disbelief.

I spent a while thoroughly exploring the station and discovering that one of the sheds had been a coal store and the other had been some kind of workshop or repair shed. Neither had anything left inside as both had been broken into and the doors left hanging. Between them was a rusty old derelict machine that could have been anything but had probably been a pump. It had a pipe on one side that came out of the ground and another on the other side that looked as though it had once gone up a wooden frame. The frame was now collapsed and the pipe broken but its position suggested it was used to pump water into the train which was encouraging. It meant there was an underground water source so I hunted around the other side of the house from the cesspit and discovered an old brick-lined well hidden under some bushes.

It took almost half my hundred feet of rope to get a bucket all the way down but when I hauled the bucket back up I was seriously impressed to find it was full of clean water. How a plastic bucket which floats on water managed to fill up I have no idea but it did which was the important thing. OK the water smelt and tasted a bit earthy but that probably meant the chemical pollutants from local farming had been filtered out. Certainly by the time I'd finished sweeping the dust from the floors and washing down the walls, which took most of the day, I didn't have any stomach upsets. Some sort of winding mechanism would have been nice since hauling a bucket of water up fifty feet or so is tiring but I'd probably get used to it.

After a dinner of pasta cooked in my very own well water I tried to go into eBay to put the shilling up for sale but my phone was down to

12% charge and I didn't want to risk being completely phoneless in case there was an emergency. I tried plugging the phone into the cigarette lighter in the car to charge but after an hour it was only up to 16% and I was worried about draining the car's battery so I abandoned the idea and went to bed.

In my explorations I'd discovered that the shutters over the windows weren't hinged at all. They were just wooden panels with nails in the sides that sat on square hooks embedded in the walls. The nails and hooks had fused together with rust which was why they didn't move. A few blows with a stone solved that problem although I was going to need to get new nails and hooks if I ever wanted to use the shutters again. I stacked them against the end of the house and spared them no further thought.

I woke on Monday morning to find the dawn light streaming in, even though the windows were filthy, and my heart leapt with pleasure. Cleaning them was on my 'to do' list but first I had to go into town. Partly to get some more food and some heavy duty window cleaner and partly to find somewhere I could charge my phone.

Impatient to be there and back so I could get on with playing with my house I set off way too early for any shops to be open and drove into Smocklebeck itself to see what the place was like. I'd been expecting a quaint little fishing village or something like that but the reality was a shock. The place was almost like a ghost town. It nestled at one end of a bay, at the bottom of a steep road heading down to the sea and the rest of the bay was fronted by towering cliffs. At some point in the past, Smocklebeck had clearly been a large village but most of the houses were now run down and empty. Only one of the three pubs, The Smugglers Rest, still showed any sign of life and the two remaining shops were a hardware store, which also sold live bait, and a newsagent with bread and milk. There was a long jetty that went some way out, probably to deep water, but only a handful of small fishing boats were tied up. There was no one around apart from an old man sitting on a bollard on the jetty smoking a pipe and gazing out to sea. He looked up at the sound of my car but didn't wave or acknowledge it. To be honest I found the place a tiny bit depressing.

It made sense though, I realised, as I drove back up the steep road.

Back in the 1800s Smocklebeck was probably a thriving fishing community and the station was needed to get the catch to the markets. Quite possibly some of the locals also took the train to Saltburn or even Middlesbrough for jobs there. Something had happened, perhaps the area had been over-fished or most of the men went off to the First World War and didn't come back. The village had declined and with it the train service to Saltburn. Tourism hadn't reached this far and, even if it did, it wouldn't revitalise the trains.

Whitby was much nicer. It had cobbled streets and a river and shops and looked prosperous. I drove round for a while then spotted the library so I found somewhere to park and wandered in. A nice lady there told me I could plug in my phone if I was a member so I joined and she said I could use their computers as well.

I copied the photos of the shilling onto one of the computers then logged into eBay and listed it for sale. A lot of the other coins were on one week auctions so I did the same and also selected the 'Buy Now' option. After a few moments thought I decided to set the reserve price for the shilling at £50 and the 'Buy Now' price at £280. If it didn't sell I could always drop the prices later.

That done I went into Google to do some research. Cheyenne had said when I showed her the pictures of my house that it looked like it was out of a movie and I'd been thinking about that as I drove up on Saturday. Not all movies are filmed in the studio and I was curious to see how the movie people found their locations. As it turned out, and probably inevitably when you think about it, there are companies that act as agents for locations. It seems anyone who has some property can list that property with an agent and one day some film company might be making a film and want to hire it.

I checked my phone and it was already up to 39%, thereby demonstrating that mains power is more powerful than car battery power, so I sat back and stared out of the window for a few minutes, drumming my fingers on the desk and thinking. Then I did a search for 'location agents england' and found that virtually all of them were in London. One, however, was in Liverpool. It was, appropriately, named The Northern Locations Agency and had a little online form for enquiries.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” I muttered and filled in my details and asked if my house would be suitable for a movie location. I attached the photos of the house and views and sent it. Then I sat back and wondered what to do next. The phone was up to 44% and I wasn't interested in reading the news.

“Excuse me,” I said, wandering over to the nice woman at the desk. Her name was Tammy according to her name tag.

“Hello,” she said smiling up at me from her computer. “Phone charging all right?”

“Beautifully,” I said. “Umm, I was wondering. I used to have a relative who might have lived in Whitby. Do you know if there are any old records I could maybe look at? The Council, maybe?”

“Oh we have full access to the digitised archives,” she said. “Do you know when your relative was born?”

“Ahh, no,” I said. “All I know is her married name and that she had a daughter in 1861.”

“She was likely married a few years before that,” mused Tammy, “although hopefully not 25 years before. Let's have a look.” She closed whatever she was doing on the computer and opened something else.

“Why 25 years?” I asked.

“The archives only go back to 1837,” said Tammy. “What was your relative's married name?”

“Letitia Metcalfe, with an 'e',” I said.

“And her husband's name?” asked Tammy.

“Metcalfe, I'd guess,” I said with a little laugh, “but I don't know his first name.”

“Not to worry,” said Tammy and she bashed away at her keyboard. “Umm, no. No-one by that name got married in Whitby, at least after

1837 although there was a Reginald Metcalfe who married in 1878. Let's try widening the scope to the whole of Yorkshire."

"OK," I said. I glanced back to where my phone was but there was no one near it. In fact, apart from me and Tammy, there seemed to be only one other person in the library and he was browsing the DVDs.

"Ahh," said Tammy, studying her screen. "There was a Letitia who married a John Metcalfe in 1860 in York. That's probably her."

"So she wasn't from Whitby, then?" I asked, vaguely disappointed.

"She could well have been," said Tammy. "The Marriage Register doesn't give the place of birth even though it was on the marriage certificate. Still, her maiden name was Coverdale so we can look up Letitia Coverdale's birth records so long as she wasn't over 23 when she got married."

"1837 again?" I asked, reaching over the counter for her pen. She noticed and gave me a piece of paper so I could write down Coverdale.

"Yes," said Tammy. "Although people got married a lot younger then." She clicked around with her mouse then started typing again. I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring even though she looked to be in her early to mid forties.

"Ahhh, this looks promising," said Tammy, staring at the screen. "There are several Letitia Coverdale births registered in Yorkshire. One in 1838 in Leeds, one in 1840 in Ilkley and one in 1844. The others are later and would have been too young to have got married and had a child in 1861."

"I've an idea where Leeds is," I said, tapping the pen on the paper thoughtfully, "but Ilkley?"

"Oh that's over in the far north west of Yorkshire," said Tammy. "I'd say your relative is the 1844 one since she was born in Smocklebeck."

"Smocklebeck?" I exclaimed, opening my eyes wide in astonishment.

“The Smocklebeck?”

“Well, as far as I know there's only the one Smocklebeck,” she said, looking up again. “It's not far from here but then you know that. You live there.”

“That's incredible,” I said, staring down at the name Coverdale on the piece of paper.

“I suppose,” said Tammy doubtfully, “but then a lot of people from around here were born around here.”

“That's not what I meant,” I said, feeling absurdly pleased that my great times six grand mother Letitia had been born in Smocklebeck. “I've only recently moved up here from London. It's incredible to think that one of my long dead relatives came from the same place.”

“Ahh, yes, I see what you mean,” said Tammy. “A bit like coming home, I suppose, although I'm from Northumberland myself.”

“Ahh, I was wondering what your accent was,” I said, even though I hadn't been. I tend to accept people as they are rather than worry about their class origins. “So I wonder why my mum thought she was from Whitby.”

“Oh I imagine that is simply because most people have heard of Whitby,” said Tammy. “It's a popular tourist resort whereas Smocklebeck was more known for ...” She petered out thoughtfully.

“For what?” I asked. “I can't imagine it being well known for anything.”

“Hmm? Oh smuggling,” said Tammy. “You know, 1860 rings a bell.”

“Smuggling?” I exclaimed. “What on earth would they be smuggling around here? Drugs?”

“Oh Lord no,” said Tammy. “There wasn't any of that around back then and it wouldn't have been illegal anyway. No, Smocklebeck was one of the main centres for smuggling tea, gin and brandy from

Holland. I read somewhere that smuggled tea could fetch as much as sixty times the price they paid for it in Holland because of the high taxes in England. It was probably much the same for brandy and gin and I daresay other things. Once you've got the infrastructure set up you can smuggle pretty much anything."

"Wow, that's a lot," I said.

A guy I used to know who smoked told me that the tax on cigarettes was about 80% of the selling price so that meant the cigs sold for about five times their cost. Sixty times was a hell of a lot and no doubt it was still a lot cheaper than buying the legal tea otherwise it wouldn't have been worth the risk of buying it. Just the thought of it made my eyes water, for the tea, not the cigarettes. I like tea.

"But 1860," said Tammy, tapping a long manicured fingernail against her teeth. "Why does 1860 ring a bell?"

"I've no idea," I said, shrugging. I wondered if Letitia had known any smugglers. Maybe that's why she married someone from York, to get away from them.

"It's something to do with Smocklebeck," she said. "And smuggling."

"Umm, does your computer say what John Coverdale did for a living?" I asked. It had crossed my mind that maybe Letitia married him in order to expand the family's smuggling operations. In business it's known as 'vertical integration'. Buying up a competitor is horizontal integration whereas buying a supplier or customer is vertical integration since it helps to guarantee your sources or outlets. Maybe John Coverdale had been a publican or banker.

"Umm, it will say on their child's birth certificate," said Tammy. "Let me just have a look. What was the child's name?"

"Anne," I said. "Born in 1861."

"Ahh, yes, here it is," said Tammy. "He was a printer."

"OK," I said. I didn't see any obvious need for a printer in a

smuggling operation but then it could just have been a cover. I couldn't quite imagine 19th century smugglers printing advertising leaflets.

"Are you in a hurry?" asked Tammy, "only I think there might be something in the newspapers."

"Not really," I said. "You mean today's newspaper?"

Tammy laughed. "No, no, no. The newspapers of 1860. There might be something in the Whitby Bugle."

"OK," I said. "I'll just check my phone."

The man had left without borrowing any of the DVDs and no one else had come in. My phone was 100% charged so I unplugged it and stuffed the charger in my bag.

"Is there anywhere in Whitby I can get coal?" I asked, rejoining Tammy. She'd moved over to a big microfiche reader and was looking through negatives of newspaper pages.

"Umm, there's Whitby Coal and Coke Merchants," she said. "Over in Granby Street. Do you need some coal?"

"I just wanted to ask about prices," I said.

"It's not far," said Tammy. "Why don't you pop over there now instead of hanging around here? I might be quite a while."

She seemed quite happy and it occurred to me that staffing a deserted library might get a bit boring.

"OK," I said. "I've got a bit of shopping to do as well. I'll drop back in before I go home."

She smiled and returned to scanning the papers.

Clive was a wiry old man with coal dust ingrained in the creases of his face making him look almost Indian. He wore a threadbare tweed

waistcoat and a cloth cap. He probably wore trousers as well but he never came out from behind his grimy counter. He also seemed cross that I didn't even know the difference between coal and coke, although I assumed he didn't mean cocaine, let alone the details of any of the twenty or so different varieties of coal he had on offer. After a fairly lengthy explanation which I pretended to pay attention to he conceded that what I wanted was 'domestic smokeless briquettes' at £20 for a 50kg sack or £190 for a half ton.

“How long does it last?” I asked, wondering how much I needed.

“Millions o' years,” he said without a trace of a smile. “Comes owt t'ground, see.”

“Umm, I meant for burning,” I said, feeling intimidated.

“'Bout a kil an arr,” he said gruffly, “less'n you be 'avin' a right big burnup.”

I thought about it and decided he meant a kilogram would last for about an hour in a reasonably sized fire. A hundred kilos would mean a hundred hours of fires which would probably see me through the winter.

“Umm, two sacks then,” I said. “Do you deliver?”

I didn't think the Fiesta would cope with a hundred kilograms of coal in the back and I didn't want the mess anyway.

“Aye, w'in ten mile,” he said. “Where be you?”

It turned out that Smocklebeck was just outside the ten mile limit but he'd deliver for free anyway since he liked me or felt sorry for me or something. Maybe he just wanted to get rid of me and go back to his newspaper. Either way I was a bit scared to ask when but I figured that I'd probably be home whichever day it was and paid him in cash since there was no sign of a card reader.

Walking back to the library I spotted a café. From the outside it looked quite quaint with single roses in plastic wine flutes on the three

outside tables. On the off-chance I walked in and asked to see the manager.

The spotty young girl looked at me worriedly in case I was going to complain about her then hurried away. The café had an elderly couple sitting at a table inside and a middle-aged couple outside, both smoking. The place had a run down atmosphere, as though it was on its last legs.

“How can I help you?” asked a rather plump woman with grey hair pulled back in a tight bun and an apron with a couple of smears on it. “I’m the manager.”

I confess I took an instant dislike to her so instead of asking if they had a job spare I asked if they had a toilet instead.

“Down the road, past the library,” she said gruffly as though annoyed I was wasting her time with such trivia instead of asking the girl.

“Thanks,” I said and quickly walked out.

I paused on the pavement and spotted a charity shop run by the PDSA on the other side of the road, next to a computer and mobile phone shop. It occurred to me to see if the charity shop had any lace curtains which I could use to soften the edges of the windows in the house so I went over to see. Impressively they did so I got enough for all the windows even though they didn’t all match then popped into the phone shop to see if they had any ideas for extending the battery life of my phone. Even more impressively they did too as I had lower expectations of phone shops than charity shops. They had a little gadget about the size of two USB sticks which was a spare battery that plugged directly into the charger socket of my phone and which could be charged using my own phone charger. The salesman assured me that it would triple the time between charges so I bought one.

“Ahh hello, Sylvia,” said Tammy when I got back to the library, trailing wisps of lace curtains from the bundle under my arm. She was back behind her counter, idly gazing at a woman browsing a bookcase. “Did you get some coal?”

“Yes,” I said. “Thanks for your help. Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes,” she said happily and brought a sheet of A4 out from under her counter. “I printed the page for you.”

“Awesome,” I said as she placed it in front of me.

“Notorious Cap'n Midnight Executed!” shouted the headline in big black letters.

I quickly scanned the rest of it. Apparently the notorious smuggler and highwayman Cap'n Midnight had been hanged at York Assizes following his arrest and trial.

“He was the leader of the Smocklebeck smugglers,” said Tammy, watching me read it. “Do you suppose your Letitia knew him? Look at the date.”

I did then looked back at Tammy in puzzlement.

“It was only a month or so after her marriage,” said Tammy. “She'd have been in York then and probably watched him hang.”

Chapter Sixteen

Driving back out of town I spotted a discount variety shop. I pulled over and went in but they didn't have any plastic washtubs, only those ones for the washing before you wash it which are like a lattice. They did, however, have a decent sized black plastic storage tub with a lid which I got as well as a couple more buckets, a six-pack of multi-coloured sponges and a stiff scrubbing brush. When you live without piped water and taps buckets suddenly take on a new importance. I could even line them up outside when it rained so I didn't have to haul water from the well. In time, when I could afford it, it would be worth getting someone in to install a pump and some pipes to the house but, for the foreseeable future, buckets were the way to go. My plan was to turn the Ticket Office into a makeshift bathroom, hence the storage tub. It could sit on the raised platform and be used as a sink or put on the floor when I wanted an all-over sponge bath. The Ticket Office was right next to the kitchen so when I had some coal I could heat water and it wouldn't be far to carry. I could even just shut the door on any slopped water and leave it to dry.

Driving back to Smocklebeck I wondered if Letitia had actually known this Cap'n Midnight, whoever he was. It hadn't occurred to me to ask about books on local history at the library and Tammy hadn't mention anything but now I thought about it it could be interesting. After all, bad boys always have a certain romantic charm. Maybe Letitia had fancied him but she could just as easily have been terrified of him.

"I wonder how I can find out where she lived?" I thought. "Smocklebeck's a really small place and I'd love to know what her world was like. Did she live by the sea or a little further back?"

She might even have heard Cap'n Midnight and his men unloading their smuggled booze in the middle of the night or carrying the stuff past her house in carts. She might have lain curled up under her blankets with little frissons of fear and excitement running through her. For sure in a small place like that everyone would know everyone else's business and would know not to talk about it.

Back at the house I unloaded my stuff and dumped it near the kitchen while I put my little gas cooker, which now sat on top of the stove, on

to make a cup of tea. While the water was heating I took the tub and the sponges into the bathroom and stopped, frowning.

“How did that get there?” I wondered.

I dumped the tub on the floor and picked up the shilling on the shelf. It looked different, not as shiny new, but that was probably the light. Puzzled I went back to the kitchen and looked inside my cardboard food box. The paper towel I'd wrapped the shilling in was still there, tucked under the packet of bread. I pulled it out and unwrapped it. My shilling was still inside.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed, looking at the shilling on the towel and the one in my hand. “What the frig is going on here?”

Seen together, the one I'd just found was clearly a bit worn and had lost its new gloss. I turned it over and it said 1857 on the back.

“How is this possible?” I muttered.

For some reason I went outside and looked around although it was unlikely anyone who was leaving shillings in the house would still be lurking. Then I went back inside and studied the ceiling of the ticket office. It looked much like the rest of the ceiling so I put the bucket upside-down on the stage part and stood on it so I could tap the ceiling. It sounded much like a ceiling and there was absolutely nothing to suggest someone had hidden a cache of coins up there and the bag had rotted or been chewed by rats and the coins were now leaking out.

“This is really weird,” I said out loud and gave the ceiling another tap just in case. Nothing gave way and cascaded money on me like a winning slot machine so I got off the bucket.

No other ideas came to me so I wandered back into the kitchen and turned off the gas. The water was just on the edge of boiling so I made some tea and went to sit on the doorstep.

“I suppose it is possible that someone is coming in when I'm not here,” I thought, looking out past the well into the distance. “The

place isn't locked but why would they leave old coins?"

I could understand, to an extent, some weirdo wanting to attack and rape a lone female in a deserted house. After all, I'd read somewhere that 90% of crimes are driven by opportunity and I daresay my very existence here presented an opportunity but why announce themselves by leaving money? Old money at that. And why shillings? Why not half-crowns or something more valuable? I'd seen a really old movie once about a 1 million pound note, apparently the Bank of England had printed two of them for some reason, and the impact being given one of them had on the hero's life. It would be nice if my benefactor left one of those instead of shillings.

I couldn't fathom it so I gave up thinking about it. I got my phone out and went to allcoinvalues.com to see what this one was worth. Comparing the 1857 coin with the 1860 coin it seemed to me that most of the design was still there so it could be classified as Very Fine (75%) or Fine (50%) or somewhere in between but probably not Extra Fine (90%). A Fine shilling they reckoned was worth a mere £16 and Very Fine £35. Admittedly not in the million pound bracket but £16 wasn't to be sneezed at since the coin had a face value of 5p and I'd found it anyway. It wasn't like it was a family heirloom or anything. I took a couple of pics and listed it on eBay with the other one. The 1860 coin had a bid of £51 which was a little exciting as it meant bidding was already over the reserve price and there were still a few days to go. It's a well known anomaly of eBay that the serious bidding starts in the minutes before the auction closes and eBay told me there were nine people watching the auction which was pretty cool.

I finished my tea and went back to the ticket office but there were no more coins unsurprisingly. I arranged the tub and my sponges and various other odds and ends like soap and shampoo on the stage then grabbed a bucket and went out to the well. While waiting for it to fill, I had already learnt that I could judge that by the weight, I studied the brickwork lining the shaft and wondered just how it had been built. The well was barely wider than I was so how a brickie got down the hole with his trowel and mortar and bricked his way back up again was a mystery. Digging a fifty foot deep hole two feet wide would have been a problem in itself.

“Maybe they shoved children down there,” I thought, “like they did with chimney sweeping,” and hauled the rope back up. I emptied the hauling bucket into the other bucket and went back into the house. I really really wanted to scrub the windows clean.

* * *

I woke up with a start and looked around. Dawn was just beginning to lighten the sky and seep in through the freshly scrubbed window. I'd been really impressed when I cleaned them to find that the glass was thick and there were slight distortions of what lay behind as you moved your head which meant the glass had been hand made. That wasn't in my mind though as I lay there wondering what had woken me. The silence was deafening so I rolled over and pulled my duvet closer around me.

Then something hissed.

Alarmed I jerked awake and sat up.

“Are there snakes in Yorkshire?” I wondered, looking around nervously.

I couldn't see anything so I stared suspiciously at the dark patch of the open door. There it was again! Another hiss. Well, more of a whoosh.

“Oh Jesus!” I muttered as I heard a voice. It was faint and I couldn't make out the words but it was definitely a voice.

I debated what to do for a few moments, my heart thumping, then slipped my feet off the mattress and felt around for the torch and my phone, nearly slitting my hand open on the carving knife I'd put beside the bed. I'd put it there after my thoughts about women being raped in isolated places and forgotten about it. I picked that up too and let the duvet slide off.

I padded as quietly as I could to the door and listened. The whooshing came again and seemed louder although the voice had stopped. There was a sharpness to the whoosh, more like a sudden release of air rather than, say, a gust of wind. I looked around the

living room and, as far as I could tell, both doors to the outside were shut although the ones to the kitchen and bathroom were open. I was reluctant to announce my presence by putting the torch on so I clamped my phone and the knife under my arm and put my hand over the torch lens. My hand glowed disturbingly redly when I turned the torch on but I let a narrow shaft of light escape from between two fingers. To my relief the outside doors were definitely shut so I turned it off again. There was another whoosh and my head jerked around. It seemed to come from the kitchen end.

Warily I stole across the living room floor, every sense set to max. This time I heard two voices, both male yet both indistinct.

“Jesus, what the hell do I do?” I muttered and jumped at the sound of my own voice.

I really didn't want to go outside and confront these men but at the same time I really wanted to know what was going on. It was a dilemma. The windows were on the sides of the house and the voices and whooshing seemed to come from the platform end.

“The Ticket Office window!” I thought suddenly. “I can have a look from there.”

I tiptoed across the living room floor, grateful that I'd left the door to the bathroom open as it creaked and I'd forgotten to get any WD-40. I edged into the tiny room and remembered that the ticket window didn't have any glass. All it had was a wooden shutter, fitted on the inside and held in place with two butterfly clasps.

Cautiously I lifted the tub off the stage, freezing once as that whooshing hiss came again then, feeling the steps with my hands, I went up the narrow steps and, with a trembling hand, I undid the butterfly clasps. The shutter fell inwards and crashed noisily onto the wooden stage.

“Oh shit!” I screamed in my head and wished I'd had a pee before I got out of bed.

There was no sound of voices. No footsteps coming over to investigate.

I counted to five then counted five more before leaning forward to peer through the ticket window.

There was a sudden swish and a figure appeared in front of me. I half screamed and stepped backwards, nearly falling off the platform.

“Ow do, Letitia,” said a woman’s voice and a hand appeared in the window. “Gonna be a wet day, I reckon.”

The hand reached in and put something down on the shelf then withdrew.

“What?” I said, recovering my senses slightly. “Who’s that?” My voice came out quite high pitched and strangled as my throat was dry and tight.

I turned the torch on and shone it through the window but there was no one there. I stepped forward and stuck my head out, waving the torch around. The platform was completely deserted. There was no one there and the whooshing and the voices had stopped.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

“I’m only dreaming,” I said out loud. “She called me Letitia so I’m in the middle of a dream!”

I relaxed since it was so obviously a dream. I’d learnt more about Letitia that day and here I was dreaming about her now.

“How silly to be scared of a dream,” I said with a self conscious laugh and went back to bed.

* * *

I woke up again some while later. Light was now streaming in the windows so it was probably around 8am or so. I looked at my phone and it said 9:03.

“That was a funny dream,” I muttered as it came back to me. “I wonder why I called myself Letitia?”

There was a definite chill to the air as I got out of bed so I quickly stripped off my pyjamas and got dressed. I popped into the kitchen to put some water on then hurried out to the lavvy for a pee. It looked like it was going to be another nice sunny day. I made some tea and marmite sandwiches and deposited them beside the doorstep where I liked to sit and look at the view then went to have a quick wash in the bathroom.

An icy shaft slashed through me and my stomach knotted.

The plastic tub was on the floor and the shutter to the ticket window was lying on the stage.

I backed out and went to slurp some tea. It was hot and scalded my mouth a little but the sharp pain woke me up completely. I put the mug back down and took some deep breaths to steady my nerves then slowly went back to the bathroom.

The tub and the shutter hadn't moved. They were still where they shouldn't be.

My nostrils flared and my lips tightened but I really didn't want to think about it.

"I must have left it like that before I went to bed," I said. "In my dream I conflated that with Letitia. Dreams can be weird like that. That's all it was. A dream."

I picked up the shutter and went up the steps to put it back in place and something on the shelf glinted at me. It was another shilling.

"Oh goody," I said brightly, refusing to think about it.

I put the coin in my pocket and twisted the butterfly clasps to lock the shutter in place then descended again and put the tub back on the stage. I tipped in some cold water from the bucket on the floor and washed my face thoroughly then washed my hands and dried myself with the towel. Then I went back to sit in the doorway and have my breakfast.

“So this place is haunted,” I thought.

It seemed silly to be honest so I said it out loud and it seemed sillier.

“It was only a dream,” I said. “That doesn't mean this place is haunted.”

But what about the coin? That was real.

“Just an over active imagination,” I said firmly. “There was no coin.”

To prove it I put my hand in my pocket and found a coin in there.

“Aghh shit!” I exclaimed.

It was another shilling. This time from 1859. Probably Very Fine to Extra Fine and worth anywhere between £35 and £160.

I stared at it. Then I turned it over and stared at the other side. Then I held it sideways and stared at the edge as I slowly rotated it between my fingers. Then I got up and went to the kitchen and checked the other two were still there. They were. I now had three one shilling coins, all old. One from 1860, one from 1857 and one from 1859.

“Am I going mad?” I asked myself. “Maybe I'm hallucinating. Maybe there's something in the water. Maybe someone's running a meth factory nearby and the waste is polluting my water supply.”

More from something to do than anything else I took photos of this coin, front and back, as well as a photo of all three together then made myself another cup of tea. I wrapped the three coins back up and shoved them under the bread then went back to the doorstep. I wasn't feeling hungry anymore but I forced myself to eat my marmite sandwiches.

“OK,” I said suddenly. “You're a graduate. Granted Hotel Management isn't Nuclear Physics but you're still intelligent. Treat this as a hypothetical 'what if' scenario for an assignment. Evaluate and discuss.”

It seemed to me that there were only three possibilities. Either I was hallucinating or going mad, which I lumped together as a single possibility since they were closely intertwined, or I was still dreaming or the house was haunted.

The second would be easily resolved. At some point I would wake up and discover it was all a dream. With a bit of luck I would still be in Islington and none of this had happened. I could live with that.

The first was more difficult. How would I ever know if I was hallucinating or going mad for that matter? Does a mad woman ever know she's mad?

The third was perhaps the worst of the three. If I was mad I'd probably be quite happy, it's just that everyone else would be upset about it. And if I was dreaming I'd wake up and be no worse off than I was before, even if I was still in Islington. If, however, this old station was haunted then things could go horribly wrong. What if it was a poltergeist? What if it was some evil undead creature that would suck my life spirit out of me and leave me zombified? Even if it was relatively benign it could make life very difficult.

I tossed some thoughts around for a while then pulled out my phone and checked the picture. Yup, there was definitely one with three coins in it. Mind you, I could easily be hallucinating that. I rebooted the phone and checked. The photo was still there, although I could have been hallucinating rebooting the phone as well.

Well, one option would be to text the photo to someone and see if they could see the coins. I was reluctant to do that as if I sent it to mum or Zoe and they couldn't see the coins, it was just a photo of some birds eggs or a stain, then they'd start to worry.

"I know," I said. "I'll go into town and go to a café for a coffee. I've got to get some WD-40 anyway so I can open the windows and uncreak the doors. I can show someone at the café the pic and ask what they see.

Delighted to have uncovered something proactive to do, regardless of how meaningful it might be since I could conceivably hallucinate

someone saying they could see the coins, I jumped out and hurried to the car then jogged back to get my bag.

* * *

I found a nice looking café on the sea front and went in. There were a few customers inside and the two girls behind the counter looked cheerful.

“Hello,” said one of them, smiling at me. “How can I help you?”

“Can I have an espresso?” I asked, thinking that a hard jolt of the strong stuff might help wake me if this was a dream, although it was going on for a long time if it was and was surprisingly detailed.

“Would you like anything to eat with that?” she asked.

“No thanks,” I said.

“That’s £2.80,” she said, ringing it up on the till.

“It might be a dream after all,” I thought, “since that’s well below London prices.”

“Where are you sitting?” she asked as I handed over a fiver.

“Ohh,” I said, twisting to look around the café. “How about over there, in the corner?”

“That’s table two,” she said and noted that as well. “Do you want the receipt?” She held out the change.

“No thanks,” I said, taking the change. “Umm, would you do me a favour?”

“If I can,” she said brightly.

“Would you tell me what you see in this picture?” I asked, feeling decidedly stupid.

She frowned as I held out my phone then slowly took it and looked at the photo.

“Umm, it looks like three foreign coins on a bit of paper towel,” she said doubtfully. “What I am I supposed to see? Is it one of those trick photos?”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “That’s perfect.”

“Oh, all right,” she said doubtfully and gave me my phone back. She gave me a funny look as well and went off to give my order to the other girl and no doubt tell her about the mad woman at table two. I decided to leave it a few days before asking if they had any jobs going.

I made my way over to table two just as my phone pinged to tell me I had an email. I glanced over and both girls quickly looked away, giggling. Then my girl went to serve someone who’d just come in.

I logged into my email and found that someone had used the ‘Buy Now’ facility to purchase the 1860 shilling at £280. The sale had been confirmed by eBay and the money had already been transferred to my PayPal account.

“Bloody hell,” I exclaimed staring at my phone. The new customer sat at the table beside me and looked over curiously. “I must be bloody dreaming after all!”

Chapter Seventeen

“Oh you fool!” I exclaimed suddenly. That espresso must be powerful stuff as I'd only had one small sip so far. “Of course Letitia knew that smuggler!”

I pulled off my ring and there was the proof, admittedly too small to read without a magnifying glass, but I knew what it said; 'Letitia Forever Midnight'. Its meaning was now crystal clear. Letitia and Cap'n Midnight knew each other very well, perhaps they were even lovers, and he'd given her this ring as a token. OK, given his background he'd probably stolen it but it was still a romantic gesture. He's probably got someone to engrave the inside with letters too small to read so Letitia's secret wouldn't be revealed if someone found it.

“Jesus, what if her husband found it?” I thought, trying to read the inscription again. “No quickie divorces back then. He'd have probably beaten her to death and found someone else.”

I slowly turned the ring over and over in my hands thinking about what it must be like to marry someone when your heart wanted someone else. Poor kid. She'd been, what, 17 when she had her daughter so she was probably only 16 when she got married. I wondered what she looked like. She must have been fairly pretty to have had a husband and a lover by the time she was 16 or 17, unless it was an arranged marriage although I was fairly sure arranged marriages had gone by then.

“I wonder what kind of life you had?” I thought. “Were you happy?”

I looked up as the man at the next table made a funny gasping sound. His face looked panicked and he clawed at his tie with one hand while the other squeezed the bacon and egg out of his toasted sandwich.

“Are you all right?” I asked, twisting to look properly at him.

He half turned to me, his eyes wide and staring, and started making short sharp noises like a frog as he repeatedly tried to suck in air. His face was turning red.

“Man choking!” I shouted loudly and leapt towards him, knocking my table over.

I shoved his table forward then dragged him out of his seat and hit him as hard as I could five times between his shoulder blades. He lurched forward and half fell on the table, still choking so I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back upright before grabbing him around his belly with both hands. I jerked my hands back five times then pushed him forward again so he was half lying on the table and thumped him between the shoulder blades again. On the third thump something flew out of his mouth and he started to gulp in huge lungfuls of air.

“Come on, sit down,” I said, grabbing his chair and shoving it under him. He sat down shakily and reached for his table so I dragged that back as well. He hunched over it for a few moments, gripping the edges tightly, then started to relax. The colour in his face was fading and his breathing seemed to be back to normal.

“Are you all right now?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said and sat up straighter. “Phew, thought I was a goner there.”

“Is he all right?” asked the girl who’d served me, coming over. The other girl was still standing behind the counter, staring, with a milk jug in her hand. “Should I call an ambulance?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” said the man recovering his dignity. He smiled at her. “Panic over.”

The other people in the café started to go back to their conversations and the girl, after hovering uncertainly for a few moments, put my table upright again and picked up the sachets of sugar and sweetener that had gone flying.

“Umm, do you want another?” she asked, pointing to my espresso which was all over the floor.

“Yes,” said the man. “And bring me a glass of milk, would you?”

“Sure,” said the girl and backed away.

“Thank you,” he said, looking up at me. “You saved my life.”

“Your welcome,” I said and walked around his table to get back to mine.

“My name is Jarrod Hastings,” he said, pulling a crisp white handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe the sweat off his face. He looked to be in his mid to late fifties with that distinguished salt and pepper grey in his goatee and hair that some men get. “What's yours?”

The girl came back with a dustpan and brush and a cloth and started to clear up the remains of his breakfast and my espresso cup.

“Sylvia,” I said, “Sylvia Avery,”

“How very appropriate,” he said. He noticed my enquiring look and intoned “What is light, if Sylvia is not seen? What is joy if Sylvia is not by?”

“Ahh,” I said, my face clearing. “Two Gentlemen of Verona. You know your Shakespeare then.”

“Well, one gentleman of Gloucester,” he said with a chuckle, “but I would be joyless by now if you hadn't been here. Will you join me so I can express my thanks better? Your espresso is on me, naturally, but perhaps something to eat?”

I didn't have any pressing need to rush off and it would be nice to talk to someone again after a few days of monastic silence at the station so I smiled and shifted over to the spare seat at his table. I had the 1860 coin to post off but the Post Office would be open for hours.

“Are you going to have something to eat?” I asked.

“I've rather lost my appetite,” he said with a rueful smile, “but don't let that stop you.”

I hesitated for a moment then said I'd have a vanilla slice as I felt the

need for something sweet after that moment of panic.

“Scuse me,” said the girl. “Is this your ring? Only it was under that table over there. Umm, I think it’s broken.”

She held up my ring and the moonstone was hanging off.

“Damn,” I said irritated, taking it. “I was fond of that. It was my grandmother’s.”

“Can I have a look?” asked Jarrod.

I passed it over and he studied it for a few moments then bent the moonstone back into place. Then he turned it over a couple of times and the moonstone popped out again.

“Is it repairable?” I asked.

“It’s not broken,” he said and pushed the moonstone into place again. “Look.”

I took the ring and sure enough it looked fine. I gave it a shake and the moonstone didn’t fall out.

“Wow, thanks,” I said happily. “That makes us even.”

“I think not,” he said. “The stone was meant to come open like that but I wasn’t meant to die today.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking at my ring again.

“I fully intend to live into my nineties, at least,” he said with a straight face.

“No, I meant the ring,” I said, laughingly.

“Ahh, thank you,” he said as the other girl came over with another espresso and his milk. “Can we have a vanilla slice as well?”

“Sure,” said the girl. He pulled out his wallet and handed her a twenty

pound note.

“Make it two,” he said and she smiled and went off.

“You see that part of the ring itself,” he said, pointing with a manicured little finger nail. “Where the gems attach to the ring itself?”

“Yes,” I said, peering at it. There was a tiny gold plate on each side which I'd just assumed was part of whatever held the stones onto the ring.

“It's a catch,” he said. “Press it.”

I very gently pressed the plate and the moonstone popped up slightly from its surrounding cluster of tiny gemstones. Puzzled I squeezed a fingernail underneath and the stone swung open. There was a tiny picture of a man inside.

“Oh way cool,” I said, impressed. I pushed the stone back and opened it again.

“I think it's called a locket ring,” said Jarrod. “I take it you don't know whose picture that is?”

“I didn't even know it opened,” I said.

“So he isn't your boyfriend or husband?” asked Jarrod.

I just smiled and slipped the ring back on my finger. He was probably a friend of gran's, or Letitia's.

Jarrod let the silence hang for a few heartbeats until it was apparent I wasn't going to commit myself on the matter of men in my life then he very smoothly changed the subject.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked. “Are you a nurse?”

“Oh God no,” I said. “I just did a first aid course at Uni and I've had a couple of chokers before.” I regretted referring to him as a choker immediately but it was out there and I couldn't take it back. “I used to

work in a café.”

“Ahh,” he said then frowned. “Is that what they call the Heimlich Manoeuvre?”

“Actually no,” I said. “On my course they talked about that but it’s banned in Britain because you can too easily break ribs and damage organs. We were told thumping someone between the shoulder blades is much better.”

“Well it worked for me,” he said with a smile. “So you don’t work in a café any more? Do you live around here?”

“I don’t work,” I said, “and I live a little further up the coast. How about you?”

“Me? Oh I just run a few AirBNB places,” he said. “I actually live down south, in Gloucester, but I’ve properties in most resorts around the country.”

“You’re a long way from home,” I said as vanilla slices appeared in front of us. The girl handed Jarrod his change which he pushed into a pocket of his suit jacket.

“Thanks,” he said and took a sip of his milk. “Ahh, that’s nice. My throat’s a little sore. Yes, I’ve got four rentals here in Whitby but the woman who looks after them for me had decided to stop and go to Birmingham for some ridiculous reason. I’m up here to find a replacement.”

“I’ve a degree in Hotel Management,” I said quickly, my ears pricking up at the word ‘replacement’.

“Then you’re far too over qualified,” he said, pushing my vanilla slice over. He paused. “Are you looking for a job?”

“Actually, yes,” I said. “I worked in a café in London for three years then chucked everything up and came here. Some money for food would be nice.”

"You're homeless?" he asked in surprise. "Seriously?"

"Oh no," I said with a laugh. "I own a few acres. It's just that I have no income."

"Couldn't you rent your place out or farm it or something?" he asked.

"No, sadly," I said. "I'd have to rent somewhere myself if I did and it wouldn't be worth it. Besides, there are legal problems which restrict what the land can be used for."

"Oh?" he asked. "What sort of legal problems?" He forked some custard into his mouth and looked enquiringly at me.

I was reluctant to go into too much detail as the station would be easy to find and I didn't know him at all.

"There's some sort of covenant," I said vaguely. "The land is owned by a company that's dormant but if it is re-started doing something other than what it was originally intended for the land reverts to the Government."

"I see," he said, licking the fork reflectively. "And you own the company?"

"Yes," I said, "but it's not worth anything. If I try to sell the land then it reverts to the Government as well. It's a very strange situation."

"But you can live there?" he asked.

"Technically no," I said, having some of my vanilla slice. The sugar hit the spot perfectly. "My lawyer says that that would mean reclassifying the land as residential but since nothing's happened there for nearly a century he doesn't think it'll be a problem for a few years."

"Hmmm," he said, frowning. "That's an unusual situation."

"Tell me about it," I said with a laugh. "Anyway, I'm using it as a base while I figure out what to do with my life."

"I see," he said. "And have you figured that out yet?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm just living one day at a time. Something'll happen sooner or later."

"Personally I've always found it doesn't," he said. "If you want something to happen you have to make it happen."

I toyed with telling him about my Animal Energy reading and decided he wouldn't be impressed.

"You're probably right," I said instead. "So what does this job of yours entail?"

"Buying and selling investment properties," he said, frowning.

"No, I meant the one here in Whitby," I said with a giggle. "Not your job, the one you're looking for a replacement for."

"Ahh," he said. "It's more of a caretaker role than anything. It involves monitoring the bookings and making sure all the facilities are up to scratch when the clients arrive and checking for damage after they leave."

"That doesn't sound too hard," I said.

"It really isn't," he said. "Most of the time the bookings are for an entire week so it more or less involves going round all four on a weekly basis although sometimes there's a booking for just a weekend. The main issue is being on call for when problems arise such as no hot water or something. It doesn't pay much either."

"OK," I said. "Umm, roughly how much?"

"You mean you're interested?" he asked, looking surprised. "Wouldn't you be better off in a hotel?"

"Probably," I said, "but it passed me by. I graduated just before COVID hit and the whole tourism industry went dead. It's picked up again but the hotels are taking on new graduates not ones who

graduated a few years ago but still have no experience.”

“Yes, I can see that would be a trap,” he said. “COVID cost me a fortune. How old are you?”

“I’m 26,” I said. “Is age a factor?”

“No, not really,” he said. “I was just curious.”

I sat back, not knowing quite what to do next. I certainly wasn’t going to beg him for a job. He sat back as well, probably also not quite knowing what to do. It was a fair bet he’d never been asked to give a stranger in a café a job before. He’d already finished his vanilla slice so I slowly worked my way through the rest of mine.

“It’s quite right of you not to go into the details of your legal issues,” he remarked. “These things are usually best kept private.”

I nodded and had some more of my slice. I had a funny feeling he was going to say something else.

“Only I was thinking,” he said. “Going by what you’ve told me the legal side was drawn up some time ago and there’s probably a loop hole, if you just look at it creatively enough. Even if there isn’t I’m sure you could do the absolute minimum to satisfy the conditions of the covenant and then do what you want as a side venture.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, pausing before eating the last bit which was thickly coated in white icing.

“Well, since we’re here on the coast it’s probably some sort of fishing business,” he said, watching me. “Let’s say the land stays with the business as long as there is some fishing going on.”

“OK,” I said slowly, wondering where he was going with this.

“Now maybe in years past the company owned a couple of big trawlers,” he said, “and that was what was in mind when the covenant was drawn up but it actually refers to the process of fishing rather than specifying two trawlers. So long as some sort of fishing is going

on then the precise wording of the covenant is met even if the intent isn't."

"So you're saying that a rubber dinky going out once a week and catching a fish would be the same?" I asked.

"You probably wouldn't even need to catch a fish," he said. "After all, fishing is an activity not an outcome. So long as you can show some sort of fishing activity is going on then you're covered."

"Interesting," I said and stuffed the last piece of iced puff pastry into my mouth.

"So what's your phone number?" he asked, taking a slim leather bound notebook out of his inside pocket.

"Excuse me?" I said in surprise.

"I'm seeing a couple of people about the caretaker role," he said, sliding a slim silver pen out of the little loop in the side of the notebook. "If neither of them are suitable perhaps I can call you?"

Even though I had a suspicion that might not really be what he would want to call me about I gave him my number. After all, he couldn't give me a job otherwise and to be honest I wasn't wholly averse to other things. He was an attractive man and clearly not short of a bob or two even though he was old enough to be my father.

"Excellent," he said. "Well, it's been a delightful pleasure meeting with you, Sylvia. We must do this again sometime."

"Sure," I said. "Anytime you find you're choking just give me a call."

He thought about that for a moment then laughed at the absurdity of it. He flipped his little notebook over and started to tap on the tiny calculator built in to the back of it.

"The remuneration is a percentage of rental income," he said, "and rentals fluctuate over the year, tourism being seasonal but as an estimate, averaged over the year, it would amount to somewhere in the

region of this.”

He turned the calculator to face me. It wasn't a fortune but it would certainly keep me in food and coal.

“Still interested?” he asked, taking the calculator back.

“Yes,” I said then added, rather cheekily, “and with my background you may find in the long term I can manage your empire nationally.”

He sat back and looked levelly at me for a few moments then looked at his watch.

“I really must go, Sylvia,” he said, pushing his chair back. “Thank you once again.”

I smiled and nodded in acknowledgement and he left. I noticed through the window that he drove a dark cream coloured Lexus so he was probably doing quite well. I thought back over the conversation and decided I really ought to go through the packet of papers Robin the Solicitor had sent me. They'd arrived the day before I quit London and I hadn't even opened the envelope. Maybe there was some aspect of the arrangements that could be exploited.

I clicked open the moonstone of my ring a couple of times thoughtfully then held it close to my eyes to try to make out the picture. It was clearly the head of a man, blonde and clean shaven with even features and some sort of cravat around his neck but his eyes were too small to make out. The way he held his head though suggested a roguish, devil may care nature. 'Smuggler' was entirely believable.

“So you were Letitia's lover, were you?” I thought and smiled. “Good for you, girl, good for you.”

I clicked the locket shut again and slipped the ring on my finger. It felt very comfortable and familiar, almost as though it had been made for me.

“Would you like something else?” asked the waitress. She slapped a

damp cloth down on the table and pushed it round half-heartedly. "Umm, the missus says to say thank you for sorting that man, like, only it ain't never 'appened 'ere before."

"That's OK," I said, looking up at her worried face. "I won't tell anyone."

She grinned in relief and stacked the dirty dishes and took them away.

I glanced out of the window and Jarrod's Lexus was gone so I pulled out my phone and looked at the picture of the three coins.

"I suppose I can deal with a haunting," I thought. "After all there are loads of haunted houses around and people live quite happily in them. Some of them are even tourist spots. It's just that ghosts aren't really there, are they. They're just apparitions with no substance. So how come they're leaving money behind? What the hell is going on?"

Chapter Eighteen

Even though I'd been there for four days the silence and the beauty of it all was nowhere near beginning to pall. I sat on the doorstep gazing out over the moorland until long after the sun had set, glorying in it all. Even the dark red of the clouds which threatened rain added to the sheer magic and majesty of the scenery. I'd even seen rabbits!

Regardless of what the future held I didn't miss the hustle and bustle of London and the constant background noise of people and traffic. Since I'd been here I'd heard perhaps half a dozen cars drive past and seen not one single aeroplane in the sky. There was a clarity to the air, free from pollution, that seemed to nourish me and the smells were of the earth and nature, not of diesel fumes and smoking kebabs. Even Whitby, with its five car build-up of rush hour traffic, now seemed busy and fast paced. My priorities had already changed so much that I could barely remember the old me, the one from two weeks ago, who worked six days a week for ... well, for what? So I could pay a lot of rent for a pokey little room in a shared house? How vacuous and pointless it now seemed.

"I just love it here," I whispered and felt content.

The moon was up, giving a silvery grey cast to some clouds that straggled after the heavy clouds further to the west, and some stars twinkled brightly. I'd almost forgotten the existence of stars because of the ever present light in London and I made a mental note to get a book or something that would tell me what the constellations were. I knew they were up there because I looked up my horoscope every now and then but I'd never seen my own sign, Gemini, in the night sky. I didn't have a clue where it was, beyond being 'up there' somewhere but the sky here was huge. Way way bigger than it was in London and the stars seemed to go on forever. Here the sky went from horizon to horizon whereas in Islington it was just something, usually murky, between the tops of buildings.

I also wanted to phone Robin as I'd been thinking about what Jarrod had said. I'd spent the afternoon reading through all the legal documents in the packet he'd sent me, managing to stay awake only through sheer effort of will. The crystal clarity of the air had fed my

brain and my imagination. I now had a couple of ideas that I wanted to run by him and if loop holes were good enough for wealthy businessmen and politicians they were good enough for me. It's not like I was defrauding anyone after all. If the land did revert back to the Government they wouldn't do anything with it so I might as well keep it to myself and enjoy it.

* * *

I woke in the early light of dawn to that whooshing hissing sound again but this time I wasn't frightened. I was curious. I got off my mattress and found my lantern and phone then pulled on a jumper as it was decidedly chilly. I didn't have the knife to worry about as I'd figured it would be pretty useless against a ghost and I'd put it back in the kitchen.

I waited for a few moments for the whoosh again just in case I'd imagined it. I hadn't so I flicked the lantern on and headed straight for the ticket office. The torch was a lot brighter but it only had a narrow beam whereas the lantern's light went all around. It also made shadows from the few things I had in the living room and they moved a bit creepily. It was eerie but I knew what they were. Just shadows.

A couple of thumps, like heavy wood dropped onto metal, made me pause in the middle of the living room. I listened, breathing as quietly as I could through my open mouth but they didn't repeat. After fifteen or twenty seconds or so I carried on and went into the bathroom. I'd left the ticket office shutter down before I went to bed and I could hear voices quite distinctly. They were a little distant but they were definitely male. That made me a little anxious so I hesitated then went into the kitchen to get the carving knife just in case they were real men and not ghosts after all. Why real men coming to get me would talk amongst themselves on the way I didn't know but maybe they were drunk. After all, word of my being here could have reached the pub in Smocklebeck and some of the locals may have drunk enough courage to come to investigate.

I pushed the plastic tub to the side then softly climbed the steps to the little stage in the ticket office. The moving shadow of something in the ceiling caught my eye and I looked up to see a hook I hadn't noticed

before.

“Makes sense,” I thought and hung the lantern on it.

Moments later someone stepped into the light that spilled out onto the platform.

“Ow do, Letitia,” said a woman's voice. She sounded like the same woman who'd spoken the previous day. “Gonna be a wet day, I reckon.”

My heart rate suddenly increased dramatically and I felt short of breath but I edged forward and saw a young woman in a shapeless black woollen dress with a shawl over her head obscuring her features.

“Hello,” I said nervously. “How are you?” Well, what else can you say when a ghost says 'hello'?

“Ohh, mustn't grumble,” she said and stuck her hand through the window. I noticed her hands were quite rough and calloused and her nails were chewed. She put a coin on the shelf then withdrew her hand and moved away.

I leaned forward and stuck my head through the window but she'd gone.

“How odd,” I thought and picked up the coin.

Unsurprisingly it was a shilling. I slid it off the shelf then I pulled the neck of my jumper open and dropped the shilling into the breast pocket of my jammies then stuck my head out of the window again. It was difficult to see properly as the light from the lantern didn't reach far enough but was there something large and dark past the platform?

“Eh up, lass,” said a gruff male voice and I leapt backwards with a strangled cry. A broad, weather-beaten face with a dirty white beard and bushy eyebrows appeared in the window. “You a'reet, lass? Din't mean t'scare you, like.”

“No, I'm fine,” I said, recovering from my surprise.

He looked at me for a few moments then grunted. He, too, put a coin on the shelf. His fingers were so gnarled he probably couldn't make a fist.

“Appen,” he said gruffly and walked away.

I poked my head through the window and saw he had a curious rolling gait, like a sailor. I could still make out a faint shadow of him as he passed beyond the edge of the light and it seemed like he stepped up onto something even though I was pretty sure he was almost at the edge of the platform. There was another wooshing hiss and suddenly everything went quiet. Other than the tweeting of birds and my own breathing there wasn't a sound. Not even any voices. It was almost like someone had turned off a radio. I toyed with the idea of going outside and decided that whatever was going on had stopped, which was a relief. I was a bit nervous of going outside, to be honest, even though there was nothing to stop these people coming in.

I waited for perhaps a minute but nothing happened so I picked up the coin and went to make some tea. My heart was back to normal by the time the water boiled and it was noticeably lighter outside. I sat on the doorstep and looked for some rabbits but I didn't notice any. Maybe it was too early for them.

“Well, they seemed harmless,” I thought. “It was like they were buying tickets for the train.”

I thought it over and it seemed to make sense. What else would ghosts haunting a railway station be doing? It also made sense of that strange movement that man had done. Putting aside the ghostly element, he'd bought a ticket and got on the train. Big deal. The whooshing hissing sounds were probably the train itself although I had no idea what a steam train sounded like. I'd only ever used the London Underground trains which sounded like screaming banshees as they slammed out of the tunnels or one of the Inter-City trains when I went to visit my mum. I had no idea what they sounded like either since the train was always so far away from the carriage I was in that I couldn't hear it, not that I'd ever made a point of listening.

I took the two coins from my pocket and studied them. One was from

1853 and looked quite worn. The other was 1859 and in pretty good condition.

“That one's probably only Very Good,” I thought, “although the other's Extra Fine. So probably a fiver and the other maybe as much as £150.”

I leaned back against the doorpost and reflected that, as hauntings go, this wasn't actually scary. In fact, assuming I could sell all the coins on eBay I'd do quite well out of it. If they left me coins that fetched £150 a day then I'd actually be making more than I did at the café and I wouldn't have to pay tax on it. All I had to do was get my head around thinking of them as tenants paying me rent and it shouldn't be a problem. In fact it was better than that since they wouldn't make a mess or have wild parties.

A rabbit, or was it a hare?, suddenly shot out of the heather nearby and dashed across in front of me before disappearing again. I watched it go then started to laugh. I'd just remembered a silly joke someone had once told me.

Me: Doctor, Doctor, I'm worried about my granddad. He thinks he's a chicken.

Dr: That's no good. We'd better get him into a hospital for treatment.

Me: Oh, we can't do that. We need the eggs.

“We need the eggs!” I chortled, staring at the coins in my hand. “Oh Lord!”

It was only when I realised that my laughter was beginning to sound hysterical that I forced myself to stop and went to the kitchen to put the coins with the others. I'd photograph them and put them on eBay later.

“Actually, this could become a problem,” I thought when I went back to my doorstep with a marmite sandwich. “If I end up getting two or even three shillings a day and selling them on eBay, sooner or later someone is going to notice it's the same person selling them and start to ask questions. Hell, the Inland Revenue may even start to investigate and make me pay tax or the Treasury will investigate me

for fraud.”

There was an obvious short term solution which was to create several eBay accounts and mix the sales up but what if this went on for years? If my ghosts were leaving two shillings every day that was roughly seven hundred a year and over twenty years that would be fourteen or fifteen thousand shillings from the 1850s. Hell, what if it went on for fifty years? That would be thirty five thousand and they probably never minted that many in the first place. Well, they probably did actually. They probably minted millions but the only reason an Extra Fine shilling was worth as much as it was was because of scarcity. If I flooded the market the few collectors out there would probably stop collecting them.

“That’s no bloody good,” I muttered. I could probably find other outlets to sell the coins without causing waves but I’d still be flooding the market so the price would drop. It was very simple economics.

“Maybe they could be melted down and used for something else,” I wondered. “I bet they’re not made of silver though and you probably need a licence to sell precious metals anyway. Bugger.”

Still, it would be a while before that happened and the coins might not keep coming forever. After all, there hadn’t been piles of them when I’d arrived. A couple of new eBay accounts would muddy things for the next few weeks while I thought of something else. It occurred to me that an investor like Jarrod might even go so far as to buy up existing coins and hoard them in order to force the price up but I couldn’t afford to do that and I didn’t think he’d be interested if I suggested it. Still, if nothing else, these coins were helping me come to terms with my neighbours.

* * *

I was about to phone Robin the Solicitor when my phone rang. The display said ‘unknown number’ and I stared at it suspiciously. I’d only had one phone call since I’d arrived and that was from mum, checking I’d arrived safely. My friends, or so I used to think of them, had been conspicuously remiss in phoning or texting. I couldn’t really blame them since I was no longer a part of their lives and none of them

could fathom why I'd chucked everything up anyway. The fact that I hadn't bothered to phone or text any of them myself probably didn't help but their lives were now so completely different to mine that I probably couldn't relate to their issues anymore. Anyway, I let the phone ring out in case it was a scammer and waited to see if they left a message.

Surprisingly whoever it was left a voicemail. I thought about it for a few moments then listened to it. It was someone called Tristan something from the The Northern Locations Agency about my enquiry.

"Oh cool," I said, pleased, and rang back.

The girl who answered knew who Tristan was and told me his surname was Saddleworthy before happily telling me he was on another call. She promised she'd let him know I'd rung and disconnected without asking who I was.

"Stupid twat," I said and rang back. I got someone else this time and she also promised to tell Tristan Saddleworthy I'd rung. I made a point of giving her my name and phone number before she disconnected and she repeated the number to prove she'd written it down.

I waited for a few minutes but he didn't ring back so I rang Robin. He didn't sound particularly pleased to hear from me. No doubt the files had been microfiched and I'd been erased from his memory.

"So how can I help you, Miss, uh, Avery?" he asked.

"I've read through the documents you sent me," I said and hesitated. Not because I wanted some praise for having even attempted such a task but because I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to say.

"I'm pleased to hear it," was all he managed to say. There was no hint of an undercurrent of 'well done' or 'how brave of you'.

"Um, well, yes," I said. "Um, I wanted to ask you something."

“Indeed?” he asked. I sensed rather than heard a sigh and a quick look at the time. He was making me feel nervous.

“Um, yes,” I said. “Umm, the covenant expressly says that if the company operates it must operate a steam railway, yes?”

“As I recall it does,” said Robin. “Is it your intention to do that?”

“Well, that's my question,” I said. “How big does the steam train have to be?”

“Well, I'm not an engineer,” he said, “but I imagine it would have to be rather large in order to pull carriages.”

“Oh, that's not what I meant,” I said. “I meant how big would it have to be to abide by the covenant.”

“I don't think I quite follow you,” he said, sounding a little bored.

“Well, um, let's say I had a steam train that was half the size of a normal one,” I said. “Would that do?”

“I imagine so,” he said.

“What about one, say, a fifth of the size?” I asked a little anxiously.

There was silence as he thought about this.

“I think you'd better tell me what it is you have in mind,” he said eventually.

“Well, as far as I could tell from the documents,” I said, “the company has to have a steam train but I couldn't see any mention of a size or purpose so I was thinking, umm, what if it was a little steam train on rubber wheels that just did short rides for kiddies. Like at a tourist park or something.”

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully.

I took that as encouragement so I carried on.

“What if it was even smaller?” I asked. “This is an old railway station so what if I just put up an exhibition with a few educational signs on the history of steam trains with a working model steam train on a couple of feet of track. Would that be OK?”

“I confess you have me at a loss, Sylvia,” he said. “I’m inclined to say that your proposals are significantly outside the spirit of the agreement but I’m going to have to go back and check the documents myself for the precise wording. In the final analysis it is the wording that counts, not the intent.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” I said, encouraged by his switch to my first name. Clearly I’d moved up in his world again although it occurred to me he might be anticipating a lengthy and profitable court case if I went ahead.

“On first reflection,” he said slowly, “it seems to me that if there is a business operating which involves some machine which could reasonably be identified as a steam powered train that would suffice. Do you plan to make this a business?”

“It’s only an idea, not a plan,” I said, “but what if I set up a train ride for kiddies and charged them? That would be a business, wouldn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he said. “I don’t know that it would necessarily be profitable however.”

“I didn’t see anything in the covenant about being profitable,” I said. “I was thinking maybe doing that one day a week so it was a business of sorts and kept the place safe but didn’t inconvenience me too much. Like with the exhibition. I could use one of the sheds and open on, say, Sundays and charge people a pound or two to visit. Maybe if I wanted to make some more money I could turn the nine miles of old track into a hiking path or a nature trail for cyclists.”

“These are certainly ideas worth looking into,” he said, “considering your objectives.”

“And does the steam engine have to actually work?” I asked, an idea popping into my head. “You said so long as it looks like a steam train.

What if I could get hold of an old clapped out one that didn't work. I could have a small museum."

"You might run into difficulties with that one," he said. "As I recall the word 'operating' was used and one could argue that a non-functioning train is not, technically speaking, operating."

"But it could be argued that it was operating in an educational sense," I said.

"True," he countered, "but I rather think you would prefer not to go to court to make that point. It would be expensive and the judge may not agree."

"Definitely not," I said. "I want as little hassle and cost with this as possible."

"In that case might I suggest an alternative?" he asked. "The company has not operated for some ninety years as I recall. If you produced a plan to re-start the company's operations, complete with paper designs and costings it would show intent and if you were to re-design the plan and re-cost it, say every five years you could make a case that you are waiting for market conditions to change. That would cost you nothing more than a few sheets of paper and an afternoon of your time every few years."

"Really?" I asked. It sounded like a good idea to me. After all, we'd covered business plans in my degree and I'd got a Distinction for my assignment for a proposed hotel in a hypothetical city in Dubai. "You think that would work?"

"Not indefinitely," he said, "but after ninety years I doubt the Government or the National Park Service is in any hurry to resolve the situation."

"Wow, thanks," I said. "You've been a great help."

"But please do not rush into anything, Sylvia," he said. "I need to extract the documents from the archives and check the precise wording. We may be barking up the wrong tree. Give me a day or two

and I'll get back to you.”

“OK, great,” I said. “I'll look forward to hearing from you.”

My phone rang as soon as I'd hung up and I nearly dropped it.

“Hello?” I said breathlessly.

“Is that Sylvia Avery?” he asked.

“Speaking,” I said.

“Awesome,” he said. “Tristan Saddleworthy of The Northern Locations Agency. I just wanted to have a chat about your railway station.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Oh really?” I said, suddenly focused. “So you think it has potential?”

“Definitely,” he said. “Obviously it does have limited appeal but within its specialisation it does have a photogenic quality.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, irritated by the 'limited appeal'. I thought the place was lovely.

“I'm sorry?” he said, obviously taken aback that someone didn't know what he was talking about.

“'Limited appeal',” I said. “What does that mean?”

“Ohh,” he said. “Umm, I just meant that it would be no good for an urban setting for example. There isn't a lot of call for rural stations.”

“Oh, right,” I said, forgiving him. “I misunderstood.”

“Although your outdoor toilet could prove popular,” he said. “They're quite rare these days and if the story-line calls for one yours could be quite attractive. I assume there's a proper toilet inside the house?”

“I'm afraid not,” I said. “It's a very basic house. Is that a problem?”

“I'm glad you told me that,” he said and I heard him type something on a keyboard. “Prospective clients need to be told this in advance. Is there anything else one would normally expect that is missing?”

“Umm, well there's no electricity and no showers or anything like that,” I said, my heart sinking. “Is that a problem?”

He thought about that for a few moments.

“No, shouldn't be,” he said. “If a major film or TV company is interested they'll bring their own generators as a domestic supply isn't enough anyway and a smaller operation can hire one for the day. You aren't usually expected to provide showers, just some tea and coffee. You do have water, don't you?”

“Yes, there's a well,” I said. “Pure fresh unpolluted water.”

“Maybe you should bottle it,” he said with a laugh. “Have you tasted the water here in Liverpool?”

“I'm afraid I've never been to Liverpool,” I said, “although London water isn't that great.”

“I imagine not,” he said. “Actually, I like it.”

“London water?” I asked, a little confused.

“No, the, ahh, primitive rustiness of your property,” he said. “I can sell that. A location unsullied by modern contrivances that will complement the ambience and facilitate the performers getting into character. Yes, I like that,” and then typing started again.

I supposed that my station did have a primitive rustiness. That was why I loved it.

“So you think it's worth going ahead?” I asked.

“Before I answer that,” he said, “can I ask you a question? What are your expectations?”

“Umm, I don't think I really have any,” I said. “It was just an idle thought. I didn't even really expect anyone to get back to me.”

“Excellent,” he said. “We get a lot of people wanting to list some very ordinary properties and expecting to make a fortune which doesn't happen. There's a good chance you'll never have a major studio wanting to use your place although I would think you might get some of the minor TV companies showing an interest and, of course, advertising agencies. How much were you anticipating being reimbursed?”

“I have no idea whatsoever,” I said. “You tell me.”

“Everything is negotiable,” he said, “although if you do have a minimum you need to let me know.”

"I'm clueless," I said. "Give me a ballpark."

"Difficult," he said. "Umm, well, if one of the major studios wanted the entire location for an extended period then I think realistically I'd start negotiations at twenty thou' a week but if we're talking a low level art video for, say, a university project then I'd probably start at a hundred an hour. On the other hand, for a big budget commercial I'd probably be looking at, ohh, perhaps three thousand for a half day. Was that the sort of fee you had in mind? Hello? Are you there?"

"I'm sorry," I said a few moments later. "There was some static on the line Could you repeat that?"

Actually I'd stopped listening at 'twenty thou' a week' and was just staring at the phone in disbelief when I realised he was still talking. Twenty thousand? Pounds? A week?

"Sounds fine to me," I said, trying to sound supremely relaxed when he'd finished repeating himself.

"But don't have high expectations," he said. "If you're lucky you might get a major production once every few years and probably never. The bulk of your bookings will be low end stuff like a photoshoot or a uni project. Maybe the occasional TV commercial. On the other hand, the small scale stuff usually only involves perhaps half a dozen people, maybe even just the photographer and a model. If Universal Studios decided to shoot an entire movie at your place you'll have a hundred or more people all over the place and several tons of equipment there for months which can be something of an inconvenience although you could end up as an extra in the movie yourself."

I visualised that and immediately erased twenty thousand a week from my mind. Even half a dozen people for an afternoon would be a bit intrusive.

"I'd be happier with something low key," I said.

"Good," he said, sounding relieved. "The big money is in America and Bollywood and tends to stay there. So, would you like to move forward on this?"

“What does that involve?” I asked.

“Just your verbal agreement for now,” he said. “Then I can get your place listed and start promoting it. Oh, there is one thing. The photos you sent were taken by you on a mobile phone?”

“Umm, yes,” I said. “Is that a problem?”

“It is a bit,” he said. “They’re fine for sending to friends and so on but they’re not really good enough to attract project directors and location managers. If you’ve no objection I’d like to send over a professional photographer. That’ll cost about £400.”

“Ahh,” I said. “That could be a problem. I don’t have £400.”

“Awkward,” he said and fell silent. “Listen, umm, would you be willing to sign an exclusive with us?”

“How do you mean exclusive?” I asked.

“Oh, just that you agree not to list your property with any other location agency,” he said. “If you’re willing to do that then we’ll pay the photographer and take it out of your first booking.”

I thought about it for a few moments and decided I couldn’t be bothered to start chasing agents.

“How about I sign an exclusive and you pay for the photographer?” I asked, my Hotel Management studies finally beginning to prove to be of some worth. “After all, I’d be paying anyway so where’s the benefit to me of sticking with you beyond delaying the payment for a while?”

“Agreed,” he said quickly which made me laugh. That must have been his plan all along and it made me feel good. He must think my station was worth the effort. “When would be convenient?”

“Anytime,” I said. “I rarely go anywhere.”

“Great, I’ll get that organised,” he said, “and get an exclusive agreement out to you. Just sign it and send it back.”

We exchanged pleasantries and hopes for a long productive future together.

I hung up and checked the phone's battery. It was a little low so I plugged in the spare battery thingy I'd got in Whitby and discovered it didn't work.

"Oh bugger!" I exclaimed and screwed up my face. I didn't really want to go into Whitby again so soon although I still hadn't got any WD-40. I pulled the thingy out and shoved it back in a couple of times but that didn't work so I pulled it out and turned it over in my hands, studying it. It seemed to have a little light at one end which wasn't lit but, more significantly, there was a tiny little switch next to it. There was some very small writing as well but it was unreadable because the letters were embossed on the casing and black on black is difficult to read. Still, a switch was a switch and presumably it did something so I flicked it over and the little light glowed a faint green.

"Cool," I muttered and rammed it up my phone's backside again then checked the power. 100%.

"Awesome," I muttered and went to make some tea.

Part way through heating the water I decided to go and have a nap instead. After all, it had been a busy day, what with two ghosts turning up at the ticket office, my long talk with Robin and then the unexpected and exciting news from Tristan.

"Funny name, that," I thought as I drifted off to sleep. "Tristan Saddleworthy. I wonder how he managed to survive growing up in Liverpool with a name like that."

* * *

I woke up mid-afternoon and sat for a while on my doorstep, drinking my tea and thinking over the conversations. Tristan had sent the agreement and I'd looked it over, baulking a little at the 22½% commission he expected then decided that 77½% of something was better than 100% of nothing and that he'd be doing all the work. All I had to do was make a few teas and coffees. I also worked out that 77½

% of twenty thousand was still over fifteen thousand which was nice even though I'd probably never get that kind of booking. It was a pdf document so I digitally signed it and emailed it back to him.

That done I gazed out over the landscape and it slowly dawned on me that when people had lived here they probably grew their own veggies. Maybe even kept some chickens or a cow. There was a faint hint of something, I couldn't put my finger on it, but the general layout of the land beside the house on the well side looked as though it might, a long time ago, have been a field. The general lie of the land looked fairly flat with a slightly artificially symmetric looking low mound that formed a rectangle. Of course, I could be imagining it as the whole area was rampant with shrubbery but the mound might have marked the perimeter of a small field and helped keep the rain inside.

I slowly finished my tea, thinking how nice it would be to have my own veggie garden. Of course, if I did go down that path I wouldn't use pesticides and I figured that some veggies growing might even make the place look better in a film. It would be more realistic and look lived in rather than a tangled wasteland. I even had a small video going in my head of myself in a white frilly apron walking among chickens and scattering grain for them to peck although my mental film studio rebelled at milking a cow. For some reason milk was supposed to come in plastic bottles and sterilised, not hot and frothy and full of bacteria from the back end of a cow.

After a while I pulled on some trainers and slowly walked around the patch, wondering how difficult it would be to clear. I couldn't afford to get someone in with a bulldozer so I'd have to do it by hand and it looked, quite frankly, backbreaking. Still, there's something to be said for the satisfaction and achievement of doing the hard yards yourself and I amused myself by thinking about what to grow. Potatoes, obviously, and onions and carrots. Maybe a few cabbages and something that produced sweet juicy berries. Melons would be nice but I didn't think the climate of Yorkshire would suit them. Melons seemed more tropical. An apple tree or two would be nice, maybe even oranges, but I had a vague idea they took years to grow.

"I wonder what they grew back in the 1860s," I thought. "I wonder if it was much the same then?"

I pulled my phone out of my hip pocket to look online to see how much a cheap wheel barrow and a spade would cost when a loud, piercing whistle split the air. I damned nearly wet myself in fright and whirled around to see what it was then just stood there and gawped. A train was pulling into the station!

“What the fuck?” I exclaimed, rooted to the spot.

Then fear and panic overcame me and I ran headlong to the house and clung to the wall, shaking.

“There's no bloody track!” I exclaimed after a minute or so when the wall had helped restore a little of my equanimity. “How can a train be running without a track?”

I very cautiously edged my way along the wall, very conscious of the sound of steam escaping, and let one eye peer around the corner.

“Jesus, it *is* a bloody train!” I thought. “With two carriages.”

One of the carriages, the one furthest from the train was surprisingly small but it did have a door and a couple of windows. The other was basically just a big wooden box on wheels. As I watched, the door opened and four people got out. One of them looked like the woman who'd bought a ticket that morning but the other two women and the man I hadn't seen before.

“She must be coming home from work,” I thought and stuffed my fingers in my mouth to block a hysterical giggle.

One of the women thanked the man for holding the door open for her and helping her onto the platform. Then they all, but not as a group, made their way along the platform and down the steps before disappearing in front of the train. They all seemed strangely dressed but I was too mind-numbed to analyse it.

Nothing much happened for a while although the train made various noises then a big jet of steam came out of the side. Then a young man, twenty or so by the look of him, climbed down from the compartment of the train. He was wearing corduroy trousers and a

filthy shirt and had a cloth tied around his neck and a flat cap on his head. He looked faintly familiar. He made his way down to the passenger carriage and slammed the doors shut then went back to the train and vanished into nothingness.

“You what?” I exclaimed. “How can someone just disappear into thin air?”

I waited for a bit but he didn't reappear so I cautiously brought my other eye around the corner of the house. He still wasn't there.

“Maybe he jumped back in the train when I blinked?” I thought.

The train had fallen silent, apart from creaking noises as it cooled so I waited and watched. Still nothing happened. None of the passengers came back either.

I edged forward a little more so I could see the full length of the platform and beyond although the train was blocking my view of the sheds.

“Maybe he's in the sheds,” I thought. “Surely this can't be real?”

I looked up and down the platform and then behind me then listened. Apart from the sounds of the train and a faint whistle of the breeze it was quiet. No voices, no whistling or shovelling of coal.

“Hmm,” I thought and stepped out onto the platform. I had an overpowering urge to touch the carriage to see if it was real. Instead I stumbled as my feet suddenly felt different.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed, looking down to see what I'd tripped over. I wasn't wearing jeans. Instead I was wearing a dress that went down to my ankles. It was brown in colour and not a heavy knit but it was still a dress and I didn't own a brown full length dress and certainly not one with full length sleeves. Also my trainers weren't trainers anymore. They were black leather lace up ankle boots with low heels. I didn't own any of them either. I stood there for some time fingering the material and lifting each foot in turn to study the boots.

“Weird,” I muttered and reached for my phone in my hip pocket to take a picture of what I looked like full length. My phone wasn't there, and not just because I didn't have a hip pocket. I felt all over my body and looked at the ground around me but my phone was nowhere in sight.

“This must be a dream,” I muttered and slapped my face hard. It hurt but nothing changed. The train was still there and I was still in a brown dress and ankle boots.

No matter how strange something is, you get used to it after a while, especially when absolutely nothing happens. A little nervously I stepped forward and caught the toe of my boot in the hem of my dress and stumbled. I tittered nervously and hoicked up the dress a little then stepped forward again. It was a lot easier. I edged over to the carriage and reached out to touch it then jerked my hand back, just in case.

“In case of what?” I mouthed and forced myself to touch the carriage. It was solid. I ran my fingers up and down the painted surface a few times then rapped it with my knuckles. It was still solid and hurt my knuckles.

“Jesus,” I said, wishing I knew more expletives that would help me come to terms with the situation. I didn't so I stood there for a few moments, just looking at it.

It was only then that I realised just how small it was. OK it looked to be as high as most railway carriages but it was only maybe a quarter of the length and had only one door. It also looked to have a flat roof and every railway carriage I'd ever seen had a rounded roof, not that I was a train enthusiast. For all I knew this was the standard carriage used in Yorkshire.

Feeling incredibly brave I walked forward a couple of paces, remembering to lift my dress, and twisted the handle of the door. It opened, alarming me, but I pulled myself together and stuck my head inside. Instead of the usual dingy upholstered bench seats of Inter-City and underground trains there were just a dozen or so simple wooden chairs, the cheap type you often see at dinner tables, bolted to the

floor. They were arranged in three rows of two pairs with an aisle between them.

“Wow,” I said, very conscious that 'wow' was grossly inadequate.

I was tempted to get in but decided it wouldn't be prudent and closed the door again, very gently. I slowly walked along the length of the carriage, the heels of my boots making sharp clacking sounds on the stone platform. The other carriage, the one that looked like a plain wooden box, had a sliding door in it. There was no need to open it as the faint smell of fish told me it was a freight carriage.

“So this must be how they shifted the fish to the cities,” I murmured then froze when I realised what I had said. Or rather, not what I had said but the implication of what I'd said. It was as though I had already accepted the existence of this train and was putting it into the context of some scene from the past. A train from the Smocklebeck Saltburn Railway Company going about its business carrying passengers and freight. A train that had stopped running in the 1930s.

“Oh ...,” I started to say then stopped because I couldn't think of anything strong enough to convey my feelings. In fact that word probably hadn't even been invented. What do you say when you encounter a train that hasn't run for nearly a hundred years while wearing old fashioned clothes you didn't know you had? How are you supposed to feel? Fear had subsided but confusion didn't begin to describe it. There was an element of awe as well as huge helpings of wonder and a whole heap of other emotions without names.

It didn't help that the train itself had SSSR painted on the side in large maroon letters.

“Smocklebeck Saltburn Steam Railway,” I muttered, reaching up to touch the letters.

It was only then that I realised the train was the wrong way around. I stepped back to get a better view and it definitely was, even though it was oddly shaped. The few steam trains I'd seen, mostly in films but also once when a man friend of mum's took us both on an outing to a railway museum, had been long, sleek elegant things which roared

across the prairies trailing great plumes of black smoke. This one was quite short and looked almost squashed, like it had run into something at top speed. Steam trickled gently out of various valves on top of it although no smoke came out of its smoke stack.

“Mind you, it probably doesn't need to be big,” I said. “It's only got two carriages to pull.”

Or push. The freight carriage was at the smoke stack end of the train and the driver's compartment was at the back end, just in front of a large metal box covered in coal dust.

“Oh I get it,” I said after looking at it for a while. “The train must push the carriages to Saltburn then pull them backwards. There's nowhere to turn it around!”

“Lettie?” said a gruff voice behind me and I very nearly screamed and had a heart attack. “Lettie? What be you doing back 'ere?”

I slowly turned round to see the young man who'd been driving the train. He had one of those oil cans with a very long spout in one hand and what looked like a hammer with a very long handle in the other.

“That there husband a'yorn be 'ere, 'n all?” he drawled, gesturing with the oil can. “Or 'ee done kicked tha' out a'ready?” He laughed good-naturedly although he looked questioningly at me.

“Umm,” I said, wondering why he'd called me Lettie. He looked even more familiar than he had before but I couldn't place him. He certainly wasn't the old man I'd seen in Smocklebeck and I didn't remember seeing him in Whitby. “Umm, do I know you?”

He stared at me in astonishment then burst out laughing.

“Aye, that be a reet good 'un,” he exclaimed, pushing his cap to the back of his head. “Do I know 'ee? Aye and me being yer brother Sam an' all!”

Chapter Twenty

I stared at him for several seconds then my nerve broke and I ran headlong for the safety of the house. My toe again caught in the hem of the dress and I sprawled headlong on the platform, hurting my elbow.

“You be a’reet there, pet?” asked Sam, picking me up bodily. “Tha’ took a reet tumble tha’ did.”

I shoved him hard and he stumbled back in surprise. I dashed madly down the steps, dress hoicked up almost to my knees, and pelted into the house, slamming the door behind me. I leant against it, my chest heaving and my heart thumping, waiting for the footsteps and the shove against the door. They didn’t come.

“Oh, Jesus, get me out of here,” I cried and looked around wildly for something to wedge against the door.

There was damn all. I grabbed the flimsy card table anyway and used that. If Sam tried to force his way in it might last three seconds, maybe even as long as four if he was tired. It was only then that I noticed I was wearing jeans and trainers. I stared at my legs for a few moments then collapsed against the wall.

“I can’t cope with this,” I muttered and started to cry as I slid down the wall and hugged my legs. “I can’t bloody cope!”

It didn’t last long. I’m pretty tough when all’s said and done and, if my jeans were anything to go by, it was all over. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve and sniffled back up the bit of snot that had dribbled out; crying is a messy business. I took a few deep breaths then stood up and put my ear to the door. I couldn’t hear a thing.

Very cautiously I lifted the table out of the way, opened the door and peered out. By rights I should be able to see the back end of the steam train itself but there was only the platform and the ramp on the far side of the track. I eased the door shut and tiptoed across the living room to peer out the other door. The end of the passenger carriage should have been visible but it wasn’t. I gently shut that door as well

and tip toed into the ticket office. The shutter was still down so I got up onto the stage thing and peeped out. The platform was deserted and there was no sign of any train. I felt drained and confused and, if truth be known, not a little ashamed with myself for running away. This Sam person seemed to think he knew me and if I'd had any sense and presence of mind I'd have talked to him and subtly questioned him about who he really was and what was going on. Instead I'd hit him and run away in panic. Worse I'd gone sprawling and must have looked like an idiot.

"Well, it seems to be all over," I muttered, ignoring the little voice in my head that added "for now." Now was all that mattered. The future could look after itself. And the past, if it came to that.

Out of habit I reached for my phone as I slowly walked to the kitchen. It wasn't in my hip pocket.

"Shit!" I exclaimed and went back into the ticket office. It wasn't there either, nor was it in the living room.

"It must have fallen out when I fell over," I muttered and eyed the door. I didn't really want to go back out just yet but then I felt almost naked without my phone. I took a deep breath, squinted at the door and then threw it open in a show of bravado. I half ran up to the platform but my phone wasn't there either. I looked over both edges of the platform in case it had bounced or been kicked. Nope, no sign of it. Then I remembered I hadn't had it when I first noticed I was wearing a dress so I hurried to the other end of the platform to see if it was there. It wasn't.

"Where the hell is the bloody thing?" I asked the world in general. My usual trick to find my phone when I'd lost it was to get someone to ring me but I was all alone.

"When did you last see it?" I asked myself. I couldn't remember since I usually have my phone with me and in my hip pocket but I was pretty sure I had it when I was wandering around my future veggie garden.

"That's right!" I exclaimed. "I was going to look up wheel barrows!"

I hurried over to the well and there it was, gleaming plasticly in the sunshine on the brick wall. I picked it up with a sigh of relief. My lifeline to the rest of the world was reattached.

I went back to the house, phone firmly in my hand, and returned the table to its rightful place then went to the doorstep to sit and think. I felt a desperate need to talk to someone about all this but who? My mum would just freak and have nightmares for weeks and my various friends would be mildly interested for a few moments then want to tell me about the state of their relationships. They were very predictable. One thing was for sure, no one would believe me and they'd all just assume the solitude and silence was driving me round the bend. I considered going to the police for about half a millisecond then dismissed it as absurd. Some people had got off a train at a railway station and the train driver had spoken to me? They'd laugh all the way to the duty psychiatrist.

I wondered about the solitude for a few moments then remembered the coins. They were real. I had the money from the first one in my PayPal account to prove it. To reassure myself I logged in to PayPal and checked. Yes, the £280 was definitely there. I checked eBay as well and there were a couple of bids on the 1859 coin although there were a few days to go. I hadn't listed the other three yet. I went to the kitchen and checked. Yes, all four were still wrapped in the paper towel under the bread.

I searched my mind for everyone I knew up here but Robin and Tristan were out, obviously, as was Jarrod. There was a slim chance he was still going to offer me a job but he'd run a mile if I phoned him to talk about ghosts or my sanity. Apart from them there were only the two waitresses at that café and the girl at the supermarket checkout who'd asked if this was my natural hair colour. I'd said it was even though it wasn't and she'd been very jealous which, bitch that I can be, made me feel good. It wasn't an outrageous lie. It's just that my natural colour is mousey so I darken it a little to make it a richer more lustrous brown.

"Tammy!" I exclaimed and ran to get my bag without giving it a second thought.

"I wonder why he called me Lettie," I thought as I sped towards Whitby. "And that other woman called me Letitia as well. Twice. That's so weird. Maybe they just mistook me for someone called Letitia but that's one hell of a coincidence what with me having a long dead relative called Letitia who was born in Smocklebeck. I wonder if I look like her?"

Hello," said Tammy with a smile as I marched into the library. "Back so soon?"

The place was still almost deserted although there was an elderly couple browsing the Large Print books near the entrance. The old man had his dentures out and was cleaning them with his hankie.

"Hey," I said, smiling back. "I wanted to ask your help again." I'd got a cover story prepared on the drive into town so I didn't just blurt out about ghosts.

"Oh yes?" she asked, seemingly eager to help.

"You remember you found out about one of my ancestors?" I said. "Her birthplace and so on?"

"That's right," said Tammy. "She was born in Smocklebeck although I've forgotten her name."

"Letitia Coverdale," I said and Tammy nodded. "Is there any way we can find out if she had a brother?"

"Of course," said Tammy and shifted slightly so she was in front of her computer. "I take it you don't know his name?"

"Sam, I think," I said. "Probably a little older." He'd looked to be around twenty and Letitia had left to get married in York when she was 16 so if any of this was to make sense he'd likely been born three or four years before her.

"When was Letitia born?" asked Tammy, logging in to her databases.

"1844," I said.

“Ah, yes,” said Tammy. “Let's hope he wasn't a lot older. The records only go back to 1837. Let's assume for the moment he was also born in Smocklebeck ... ahh, here we are. Aren't computers wonderful? I would have hated to be a detective in the 19th century. Samuel Coverdale, born 1841.”

I stared at her thinking that Sam had said I, Lettie, was his sister, until she got embarrassed and said “What?”

“Sorry,” I said and smiled reassuringly. “I was just thinking. Does your computer say who their parents were?”

“Ahh, you want to check it's the right lad, sensible,” said Tammy. “His father was Joshua Coverdale and his mother was Violet Coverdale. Is that right?”

“I don't know who Letitia's parents were,” I said, remembering that the SSSR had been set up by one Joshua Coverdale. It said that in the documents that Robin had sent.

“Not to worry,” said Tammy, writing the names down on a piece of scrap paper. “I'll look Letitia's birth details up again.” She did her business and confirmed Letitia had the same parents as Samuel. It was pretty much a foregone conclusion but it was useful to have it confirmed.

It occurred to me that if I was being mistaken for Letitia and Sam was reappearing then perhaps Joshua or Violet might also turn up. Maybe even Letitia herself.

“Can you find out about deaths in there?” I asked.

“Definitely,” said Tammy, closing one database and opening another. “Letitia's or Samuel's?”

“Joshua and Violet,” I said without thinking.

“Joshua died in 1863,” said Tammy after a few moments.

“Does it say what he died from?” I asked.

"It only says 'from injuries received'," said Tammy. "That could mean anything."

"Hmm, yes," I said. "How about Violet?"

"She died in 1844," said Tammy a few moments later. "In childbirth. That was quite common in those days, especially as the nearest hospital would have been two days ride away. I don't expect they had a doctor in Smocklebeck either."

"So that would have been when Letitia was born," I mused, reflecting it couldn't have been much fun to have grown up in a railway station with only a father and a brother. She probably had a toy train to play with instead of a doll.

"Anything else I can help you with?" she asked. "Only it's coming up to closing time."

"Oh, um, do you know anything about ghosts?" I blurted.

"Ghosts?" asked Tammy. "In Yorkshire? There's hundreds of them!"

"Wow, really?" I asked.

"The best known is Treasurer's House in York," said Tammy, leaning back in her swivel chair. "Apparently twenty Roman soldiers march through in formation every now and then and there's an old monk who wanders through Bolton Abbey. Those who've seen him say he's got a very lined and wrinkled face and he wears a cassock and a cloak. But if you're interested you should go and have a meal at the Black Swan Pub in Helmsley. Sometimes an old, well-dressed man wanders around the dining room and other times a young blonde woman. It's quite an attraction. I've eaten there a couple of times but no one appeared." She screwed up her nose ruefully. "But my favourite is Hodroyd Hall in Barnsley. One of the kitchen maids was murdered and her body burnt in the fireplace in the main hall. No one knows why but I reckon it was because she refused the advances of the master of the house so he killed her."

"Wow, that's a lot of hauntings," I said.

“Oh those are just the most famous,” said Tammy. “If you go to the Tourist Office they’ll give you a list of tours of haunted houses you can go on all over Yorkshire. Like I said, there’s hundreds of them, thousands maybe. And don’t forget our own Whitby Abbey. There’s a horse drawn carriage that’s been seen driving through it any number of times. Did you know Whitby Abbey was the inspiration for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said. “Any haunted railway stations?” I tried to make it sound joking but it didn’t ring true, to my ears at least.

“Yorkshire’s riddled with them,” said Tammy, shutting down her computer. “Mostly around Leeds but there are ghost trains everywhere.”

“You are joking,” I exclaimed.

“Not at all,” she said. “You can Google it if you like. They’re not real ghost trains though.”

“Excuse me?” I said. “What’s the difference between a real ghost train and an unreal one? Aren’t they all unreal?”

Tammy laughed.

“No, the ghost trains are real enough,” she said, “except they don’t officially exist. There’s one I know of because my brother’s been on it. It’s the 17:19 from Leeds to Staithes. Runs everyday except Sundays and no one’s on it except for a few anoraks.”

“You’ve lost me,” I said, my mind boggling at the possibility that there were other stations like mine. “Your brother’s been on a ghost train?”

“They’re not really ghost trains,” said Tammy with a laugh. “Not like in the films. They’re just train lines that have shut down but can’t close.”

This sounded familiar.

“Why can’t they close?” I asked.

“Closing a train line requires an Act of Parliament,” said Tammy. “Most rail companies don’t want the expense or political hassle of trying to get an Act passed so they shut down the line and keep a train running the bare minimum to show the line is still in use. Staithes is a good example as it has no services at all now except the one ghost train so it’s effectively a ghost station.”

“Right,” I said as realisation dawned. There’d been something about this in Robin’s documents but the legalese had been so dense I couldn’t make head nor tail of it but what Tammy was saying made sense. So long as the SSSR company existed, supported by the covenant, the Government couldn’t take the land back but if it formally closed then they’d pass an Act and grab the land.

“Anyway, we’re now closed,” said Tammy, retrieving her bag from under the desk.

“Ahh, sorry,” I said. “Hey, thanks for your help. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” she said and pushed her chair under her desk.

I turned to go then a thought struck me. “Hey, you don’t suppose there’s a photograph of Letitia anywhere do you?”

“Not a chance, unless she was famous,” said Tammy, putting on her coat. “Photography started in the 1820s but didn’t filter down to the common folk until around 1900. I suppose there might be a portrait of her but I doubt it. Only the wealthy could afford an artist to paint a picture and there were precious few of those in Yorkshire back then. Was she famous? Didn’t she marry a printer?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“So she wouldn’t have been on the stage then,” mused Tammy. “No, I’d be very surprised if there’s a picture of her anywhere. If you’ll excuse me, I have to lock up.”

“OK, and thanks for all your help,” I said.

She followed me to the entrance. She locked the door behind me and I

gave her a departing wave. After all, it's one thing to be helpful and chatty when you're bored at work but something else to be pestered out of hours.

I drove home slowly, deep in thought. It all made some kind of crazy sense. After all, Letitia, her father and brother ran the railway and Letitia had left in 1860 when she went to York to get married. The most recent coin I'd been given was also dated 1860 and it had looked brand new. And the coins were real and the train had felt real so maybe they weren't ghosts after all. Somehow the people of 1860 were coming to me, thinking I was Letitia. But a train as well? With carriages? That seemed absurd.

Then I remembered the long brown dress and the ankle boots. If they were coming to me then why would my clothes change?

"Oh God," I exclaimed and pulled over to the side of the road. I'd read a book about something like this. It was called *The Time Traveller's Wife* or something like that. I couldn't remember who wrote it.

"So I'm going back in time?" I asked myself, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "Seriously? This isn't bloody science fiction, you know! You're a bloody fruitcake!"

I stared out of the window at some sheep grazing on the headland. Beyond them was the sea, although I still didn't know which sea it was.

"OK," I said. "I admit the possibility that I'm going mad or hallucinating, but how do I explain the coins? And my arm."

I pulled back the sleeve of my jumper and inspected the graze from where I'd fallen trying to get away from Sam. It was still there and scabbing although it looked a little red around the edges. I poked it and it hurt.

"Beam me up, Scotty," I said experimentally. Unsurprisingly nothing happened except one of the sheep raised its head to look at me. Even if there were aliens or people from the future up there it was very

unlikely that the one who operated the transporter was actually called Scotty.

“Seems to me I have three options,” I said. “One is to abandon everything and run away. One is to admit I’m mad and just live with it and the other is to find out if this is all actually happening.”

If I ran away I had nowhere to run to except perhaps Islington. Winston would probably give me my old job back but in truth I’d said goodbye to that old life and there was no way I’d ever go back to it. It wasn’t that I’d simply quit my job and quit my share house but I’d also quit the lifestyle psychologically. If I had to run away I’d run away and live in the car on benefits but I was never going back to London and all that crap again.

“You’d be mad to go back,” I muttered, “and you’re mad staying here!”

I cackled at the thought and scared myself with how creepy I sounded. A bit like a witch. I tried a flirtatious girly giggle and that was much more me so I did it again and felt better.

“Maybe I am going mad,” I told the sheep. It must have caught my eye as it looked away then turned and rejoined the others. “But maybe I’m not. It’s a fifty-fifty chance so let’s say this is really happening. After all, Tammy said there are thousands of haunted houses in Yorkshire so it stands to reason that some of them will be genuine and some of those may not even be hauntings but portals into other dimensions.”

I rather liked the sound of that. My station was a portal into another dimension! Way cool! Maybe I could talk to the Tourist Office and get the station added to one of those haunted houses tours? I dismissed that as soon as I thought it. These were my relatives, after all, my people. It didn’t seem right showing them off to the paying public like monkeys in a cage. Much relieved I started the engine again and put the Fiesta into gear then slapped the steering wheel with my hand and groaned. I’d forgotten, yet again, to get any WD-40!

Chapter Twenty One

The hardware shop in Whitby was closed when I got back into town but the supermarket had some WD-40 so I got some, as well as some milk and a few other odds and ends. I drove back home and stopped at the top of the little hill overlooking my house and just sat there for a while. Even though there were strange, inexplicable things going on I had an almost uncanny certainty that there was nothing to be frightened of. Unlike, say, when you walk alone along a street in London at night, with the few street lamps casting only patches of light, and you start to hear footsteps behind you, a muttered voice, a glass bottle breaking. There was nothing like that here. Yes, it was strange but these were people going about their business and they seemed to think they knew me and were friendly. Even my panicked escape from Sam hadn't been from fear of attack or molestation. It was simply a reaction to the overwhelming strangeness of it all. He'd been friendly enough if surprised to see me and that was quite reasonable if he thought I was his newly married sister who'd gone to York. I was the one that shouldn't have been there, not him. And yet I was there. And these people gave me money.

OK it was a mystery but life is full of mysteries. Like why do people move to cities and slave all day for a pittance in order to stay there as slaves? At least I was somewhere I loved and I was free. No doubt some physicist somewhere was working on some equations that would explain this little space-time distortion in my part of the world. Maybe he or she would figure it out in my lifetime and then come up with a way to explain it to me in easily digestible chunks. In the meantime, and I realised this as I was sitting in the car just gazing out, all I had to do was accept it for what it was and stay in love with my new life. It wasn't that hard, after all.

With a smile I released the handbrake and let the Fiesta free-wheel slowly down the slope. I parked in my usual spot and sauntered, carefree, into the house. I dumped my bits and pieces in the kitchen then, armed with the WD-40, I went round squirting the stuff into every hinge I could find, leaving all the doors and windows open as if to symbolically open myself up to my ... well, neighbours seemed easiest. Then I went round again and screwed some little hooks I'd got into the wooden window frames. In some ways the hanging of my lace

curtains was more symbolic of my acceptance than simply arriving and dumping stuff. Putting hooks in the window frames to hang the curtains was me having a real physical impact on the very structure of the place, enmeshing myself to the house in a small way.

After a while it got a bit draughty and chilly so I went round closing all the doors and windows, feeling the house enfolding me within itself. The curtains and the warm glow from the lantern suspended from the ceiling made me feel contented although there was a problem looming. I wanted to put up a few shelves and pictures to make the place more cosy but I had no idea how to put nails or screws into stone walls. Still, that was a problem for another day when I had some money.

* * *

I awoke to the sounds of activity outside again. Fortunately I am by nature a morning person so it wasn't an issue, and I could always go back to bed after the train had gone. I lay there for a few moments then turned on the lantern beside my mattress and got up. I was still in my jammies and my jeans, jumper and trainers were on the floor nearby where I'd left them. There was no sign of a brown dress or ankle boots. I quickly got dressed, grabbed my phone and hurried to the ticket office.

There was no one there when I took down the shutter so I peered out. The dim outline of the train was there and someone, probably Sam, was slowly walking along the platform with his long handled hammer tapping the wheels. I looked down at myself and I was in the brown dress.

"When did that happen?" I wondered. "Still, at least I'm not wearing a corset!"

At least I didn't think I was although I'd never worn a corset so I didn't know what it felt like. I pinched the side of my waist and it felt like there was just the wool of the dress so I peered out the window again and something felt funny. My hair, which normally hangs to around the bottom of my shoulder blades although I slept with it in a pony tail, wasn't on my back the way it should be. Puzzled I

straightened up and tried to run my fingers through my hair only to discover it was all piled up behind my head and held in place with bobby pins.

“Wow, weird,” I muttered and ran the camera app on my phone to see what I looked like. Sure enough my hair was up in a neat bun on the nape of my neck with two tendrils hanging down from the front to frame my face. Admittedly it was quite dim in the pre-dawn light but even so I thought it make me look a little sexy and demure. Not a style I'd ever had before but certainly one worth considering for the future. I took a selfie and the flash startled me.

“Ow do, Letitia,” said the now familiar woman's voice.

“Ow do, love,” I said, trying out the Yorkshire dialect I'd been hearing for the last few days. It sounded strange to my ears but the lady didn't react other than to give me a shilling and complain about how the damp weather was making her father's arthritis play up. I sympathised and took the money then quickly took a photo. The phone flashed again and she quickly turned away.

“Sorry,” I said, immediately regretting what I'd done but it was too late. She was already hurrying to the train. Sam must have seen the flash as he turned to look then shrugged and carried on tapping the wheels of the train.

“Ow do, lass,” said a man as he moved to block the ticket office window. “Ow much t'Saltburn, like?”

He was a lot younger than the man who'd bought a ticket the day before and clean shaven. He was wearing a loose fitting black suit that made him look like an undertaker.

“Oh, umm, a shilling,” I said, guessing that was the fare since that was what everyone else paid. I wondered if he wanted a ticket since there weren't any but he fumbled with a small cloth bag and deposited three coins that weren't shillings on the shelf. I noticed the cuff of his jacket was worn and frayed. He nodded then turned and walked to the train without waiting for a ticket.

“Maybe they didn't bother with tickets,” I thought. “After all, there's only the one place they can go to.”

I put my phone down and picked up the coins one by one. They were, apparently, a sixpence and two threepences. That amounted to twelve pence and I had a vague recollection there were twelve pence in a shilling. I had a sudden panic attack in case someone one day wanted some change as I didn't have any. Nor, if it came to that, did I have a clue what denominations there were above a shilling or how much change would be required. Still, everyone so far had had the right money and there didn't seem to be anyone else waiting. I tried to pick up my phone as I wanted to get a shot of the train and found it wasn't there.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed and scanned the shelf then the stage floor but it was nowhere to be seen. I fumbled with my dress and discovered I had no pockets. I'd seen the man put the coins down on the shelf and he'd definitely not picked up my phone so I went down the stage steps with the lantern and searched the floor there. There was no phone to be seen.

“I must have left it in the bedroom,” I said uncertainly although I was sure I'd taken a couple of pictures. I'd seen the flash, hadn't I?

I was about to go back to the bedroom when I heard a loud rumbling like a wooden sliding door being slid shut then there was a piecing whistle and some slow puffing noises.

“Oh shit, it's leaving!” I exclaimed and ran through the living room to get outside.

I found the platform wreathed in steam and the train slowly moving away. Surprisingly the steam was quite warm and damp which I hadn't expected. I'd seen steam trains in movies and they gave off lots of white fog which people always walked through, probably because it added to the romance of the scene, but it had never actually occurred to me that it really was steam. I'd always sort of thought it was more for effect than anything. Interestingly I noticed there were rails on the sleepers and only a few weeds.

Sam waved from his driving compartment and shouted something but I didn't catch what it was so I waved back and the train gathered speed.

"I wish I had my bloody phone!" I muttered, watching it go. "Where the hell can it have got to?"

The train whistled again, some way off down the line, so I turned to go back into the house and very nearly screamed. There were two horses and carts on the other side of the track with three or four men. One cart was at the top of the ramp and the other was at the bottom, already moving away. Both were piled high with empty crates. One of the men glanced up from tying a rope and saw me. He said something to the man on the other side of the cart who turned to look and they both waved so I waved back. Then one said something and the other laughed in that coarse way men do when someone's made a dirty joke so I figured it was at my expense. I didn't know whether to frown at them or ignore them so I decided to go back to the house instead.

"Well, I suppose that's over for today," I said, shutting the door behind me. I stepped forward and stumbled as my ankle boot changed into a trainer. I actually saw it happen!

"Frig!" I exclaimed, staring at my foot. It was definitely a trainer and the leg above it was cased in faded blue denim. "What just happened? How did it do that?"

I checked the other foot just to make sure then swung my head from side to side. My pony tail flapped happily against my shoulders. I reached behind my head and pulled it round. It was definitely my hair.

"I wonder if it's the house?" I said, leaning back against the door thoughtfully. "This happened yesterday as well. When I came inside everything was back to normal."

I opened the door and peered out. There was no sign of anything untoward so I walked up to the platform. There were no rails for the train and the sleepers were thickly covered with assorted plant life.

"But if it's the house," I thought out loud as I slowly walked back, still

in jeans and trainers, “why can I see the people and the train from inside and why does the train and stuff disappear when I go back inside. It doesn't make sense. Surely if it's the house I'd only see these things when I'm outside.”

Pondering I went into the kitchen to make the oil that the brain runs on, English Breakfast Tea, extra strong. I put my mug on the floor beside the doorstep where I like to sit then searched my pockets.

“Where're those coins?” I muttered. “I couldn't have put them in my pocket since that dress didn't have any pockets. I must have left them in the ticket office.”

I went back and sure enough, there on the shelf, beside my phone, were the four coins.

“Aha!” I cried and snatched my phone up before looking at it suspiciously.

“It wasn't there just now,” I said, puzzled. “No way would I have not seen it. Hmmm.”

I scooped up the coins and put them in my pocket then, holding my phone a little more gingerly than usual, I went back to my doorstep and sat down. I had a swig of hot tea just to bring some normality back to my brain then took a deep breath. I opened Gallery and there, right in front of my eyes, was a photo of me. In a brown dress with my hair up. I quickly closed Gallery and had some more tea before reopening it. Yup, I was still there. So was the other picture of the woman but I'd seen her before. This picture of me was a me I'd never seen before. My hair was coiled in a bun on the nape of my neck and the tendrils hung down the front and, I noticed as I studied it, it seemed to be my natural mousy brown rather than my usual two or three shades darker dyed brown. The dress, I noticed, although I hadn't before, had a high lace collar to it and had thin but discernable red stripes woven into it. The style was definitely old fashioned.

“I look kinda sweet, actually,” I thought, studying it. I looked a little younger too and a little innocent. More like when I was nineteen or twenty rather than my brasher twenty six.

“Just a minute,” I said, pursing my lips. “I was inside when I took this so it can't be the house. If it was I wouldn't have changed until I was outside.”

Reluctantly, because I quite liked how I looked in the photo, I put the phone down and picked up my tea again.

“And why did my phone disappear then reappear?” I said, before taking a mouthful. “Logically you would think since mobile phones didn't exist in the 1860s it would have disappeared before the dress appeared. How would it be possible for the phone to go back in time and take a picture before disappearing?”

I thought about it and one thing did occur to me. The phone stayed with me and worked while I was holding it. The moment I put it down it disappeared and didn't reappear until the trip, or whatever it was, was all over.

“Just a minute,” I said, freezing. “Just one cotton picking minute here. Didn't I say it's all over for today? Was that before or after I went back to jeans?”

I could definitely remember leaning against the door and saying “that's over for today” but for the life of me I couldn't remember whether that was before or after I'd stumbled and seen my trainer.

“And didn't I say something like that yesterday?” I muttered.

I put my mug down and put my hands over my face trying to remember. I'd run away from Sam and gone into the house and I was pretty sure I'd said something about ending it or getting me out of there or something but, try as I might, I couldn't remember the exact words or the sequence of events. Certainly I'd run away from Sam and back to the house and everything had switched to normal again but whether it was before or after I'd said something about stopping I didn't have a clue.

“But it's a possibility,” I muttered, staring out over the moor between my fingers. “That's at least twice I've said something about ending it or it being finished around the time it did finish. Certainly it's worth a

try next time it happens. Maybe I'll have some control over stopping being back in the past."

Of course, I had no answers about how it started. Every time, apart from the time I'd been out by the well, I'd been asleep when everything had gone backwards.

"I suppose it could be triggered by something when I'm dreaming," I thought, "but that wouldn't explain the well."

I sat there thinking until I'd finished my tea then I went inside to make another. While the water was heating I put the new coins with the others then took my tea back to the doorstep. According to allcoinvalues.com sixpences and threepences were worth a similar amount, although a little less, than shillings.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed, looking at other coin values. A mint condition 1860 half penny was worth around £9000! I hoped someone would pay their fare in brand new half pennies. That would be somewhere around two hundred grand!

"Dream on!" I said and laughed at the absurdity of it all. I was finding coins from the 1850s and selling them online and making money from it! Crazy.

"It's a shame I can't take the money back and put it somewhere to earn interest," I said and laughed again. "A hundred and fifty years interest should be quite a lot. Then I could take that back and re-invest it. I could end up a bloody billionaire! Hell, if it's that easy everyone would be doing it."

I had another slurp of tea and thought about it some more. It actually wasn't that easy. I had no way of knowing when or even if I'd go back again or if I could move around beyond the station. For sure I wouldn't have a car or fuel so I wouldn't be able to pop into Whitby and I had a vague feeling even if I did the banks wouldn't open an account for a woman.

"Maybe Sam would come with me," I thought, "but then he'd want to know where I got the money from. And I probably couldn't take the

money we use here back with me and if I did the bank wouldn't accept it. Oh well. It was a nice idea anyway."

The sun was now fully up although there were a lot of clouds around. I swilled the dregs of tea in the bottom of my mug then tossed them out.

"I was thinking about the veggie garden," I thought, looking over at the well. "I was wandering around thinking about how to clear the area and what to plant then I heard the train whistle. Why would thinking about veggies make me go back in time? Maybe it's something to do with the well?"

I put my mug down and wandered over to look at the well. I remembered that that was where I'd found my phone after yesterday's ... excursion ... so whatever had caused it probably had happened while I was at the well. I peered inside then walked around it a couple of times and looked back at the station but nothing seemed to have changed.

"Nope, not the well," I said and slowly walked back towards the house. I stopped midway and looked around. "Didn't I wonder what they grew back then?"

I felt fairly sure I had wondered that and not long afterwards the whistle had blown.

"Worth a try," I muttered and said out loud. "What veggies did they grow in 1860?"

I held my breath for a moment then looked around. Not a damned thing had changed! I shrugged and looked at my feet then stiffened. I was in ankle boots and a brown dress again.

"Holy effing crap!"

Chapter Twenty Two

It must take a few moments for whatever it is that happens to actually happen because when I looked up from my feet I found I was standing in a field of fairly recently turned earth. From where I stood I could see the railway track was clear of weeds and there was smoke coming from the chimney of the house. There were other changes as well, like the chickens that were slowly advancing towards me in the hope of food and the washing line that went from the side of the house to a pole stuck in the ground. It had a single ragged shirt hanging from it.

I looked up as some drops of rain landed on me. There were some heavy clouds overhead and behind so, with a thrill of excitement in my blood and a nervous tension in my belly, I cautiously went over to the door and gently pushed it open. To my surprise the place was furnished. There was a solid looking wooden table over to the other side of the room with a tablecloth and four high backed wooden chairs. There was a candelabra on the table with wax drippings running down its sides. There was also a plate with some crumbs and what looked like a pewter beer mug; probably the remains of Sam's breakfast. Up against the wall was a heavy dresser with patterned crockery neatly arranged on its shelves and two or three strange looking brass objects sitting on top. In amongst them was a small white statue of someone on a rearing horse with a sword held out in front of him. In a corner was a spinning wheel and there were a couple of uncomfortable looking easy chairs in front of the fireplace with embroidered cushions. Each side of the door to the bedroom was a framed embroidered piece of cloth. One, which hung crookedly, said 'The Lord Is My Shepherd' and the other said 'Wherever I Wander There Be No Place Like Home'.

For some reason I was too shy to go inside. Even though this was going to be my place in the future it was someone else's at the moment and I felt I was trespassing. Also, even though Letitia herself was probably in York and Sam was up the line with the train their dad was somewhere around and I was wary of meeting him. I gently closed the door then opened it again because a thought had come to me. Letitia had only recently, according to the records Tammy at the library had found, got married and left. Presumably she'd lived here with her father and brother and yet, unless there was another room I

hadn't come across, there was only one bedroom. Intrigued, and not a little concerned about a teenage girl sleeping in the same room as an older brother and her father, I tiptoed across the living room and stuck my head around the bedroom door.

There were two small, cramped looking beds, one made, the other unmade with blankets tossed carelessly aside. As well as a chest of drawers and a wardrobe there was also a homespun cloth hanging from the ceiling which divided the room. Nervously, as Joshua might be sleeping behind it, I tiptoed over and peered around. There was another small bed which was, fortunately, unoccupied and a low bedside table with a plain glass vase with some dead flowers in it and a candlestick decorated with a pair of cavorting cherubs.

"This must be where Letitia slept," I thought touching the thin bare mattress. "And the two men were the other side."

Apart from the dead flowers and the cherubs, which didn't seem like the sort of thing the men would like, there was nothing else to suggest this was a girl's boudoir. I did notice though that her bed was in much the same place as my mattress would be in years to come, underneath the window. I let the cloth fall back and opened the wardrobe. There were no women's clothes in there at all. Just a couple of heavy looking men's suits, one clearly tailored for a man with a large belly so it wasn't Sam's, and a single top hat. The top two drawers of the chest were empty, apart from mothballs and some sprigs of dried lavender, and the bottom two had a few shirts and what looked like men's underwear although I had no intention of picking them up to see.

"The whole family probably slept in here," I thought, looking around. "Violet too, if she hadn't died, and any more kids they might have had."

I tried to imagine the room with a married couple and half a dozen or more children of varying ages sleeping in here but my mind quailed at how cramped it would have been and yet that's what they would have been expecting when Joshua first built the place. Then again, he was an engineer so perhaps he'd planned to add more rooms as children came along. He wasn't to know his wife was going to die young. Still, I was pleased Letitia had some privacy, even if it was just a hanging

cloth.

Feeling like I'd been prying into someone else's private life I went back to the outside door and peered out. It was raining properly now.

"Well now," I said to myself. "This is all very interesting but can I get back?"

I wondered what to say then shrugged and said, quite simply, "Take me home".

To my surprise it worked and I was back in my version of the house. The field outside was back to being an overgrown mess and it wasn't raining. It was a relief, to be honest, but also more than a little exciting. I had absolutely no idea how or why this was working but it did seem, on the surface at least, as though I had some control. So, being an educated woman of the 21st century, I started to experiment.

I won't bore you with the details. Some things worked and some didn't and I soon realised that there was a pattern. Any reference to something around 1860 took me back and any reference to the present, my present that is, brought me home. On the other hand, I didn't seem to be able to go to any time other than Letitia's time or my own. Asking for 1800 didn't do anything, nor did asking for 2200. On the other hand, and this was fascinating, if I was holding my phone or a bucket when I went back I still had the phone or bucket so long as I held on to it. If I put the thing down it disappeared. On the other hand, if I held on to my mattress or the Fiesta it didn't go back. Why? I had no idea but maybe it was something to do with size.

"But if small things disappear," I wondered when I stopped experimenting for some tea and something to eat, "why don't the coins disappear when the person lets go of them? How come I can keep them?"

The same happened with a piece of coal I picked up from beside the 1860 fireplace and an 1860 apple I found in the kitchen. They both stayed as well, even when I wasn't holding them. Weird. The apple tasted fine too when I ate it even though it was a hundred and sixty years old.

After a while though it started to get a little tedious. After all, very little actually happened at the station in either time. On the other hand, wherever I happened to be at the time I spoke a magic word, be it in the kitchen or a few hundred yards down the track, that was where I was when I arrived. It even worked on the tarmac road over the hill although it was just a dirt track in the 1860s.

Halfway through my tea a possible reason for the coin anomaly occurred to me. My phone and the plastic bucket could not possibly have existed in the 1860s so, when I let go of them, they disappeared. On the other hand, the coins from the 1860s could exist in the present, since the world was full of old coins, so they didn't disappear. To test this I got a stone from the back yard and held it in my hand when I went back to 1860. When I put it on the doorstep it stayed there which made sense since stones existed in both times. I felt I'd achieved quite a lot although Dr Who or Captain Picard would probably have been quite dismissive. On the other hand, repetition brings familiarity and acceptance to even the weirdest of things so by mid afternoon hopping backwards and forwards in time seemed no more unusual than going to an outside toilet with no flush. Frankly, as a modern city girl, an outside toilet with no flush actually seemed weirder.

* * *

I was stark naked, standing in the black plastic storage tub having a sponge bath when the noises began. The beeping sounds could have been a bird but they seemed too regular so I leaned over and peered through the ticket office window, dripping on the shelf. I couldn't see anything but the beeping was getting louder. I wrapped my towel around myself then paused to mentally check I was in the present and not, accidentally, back in the past. I shook my head at my stupidity and got out of the plastic tub, which wouldn't have been there, then went outside. The beeping was considerably louder and was accompanied by a low growling sound. Intrigued I went onto the platform just as the back end of a low loader appeared over the hill and reversed slowly down towards the station.

“Yay!” I said happily. “My coal's arrived!”

Actually several tons of coal had arrived as the low loader was still half loaded with sacks of coal. They were neatly arranged in rows and didn't seem to have anything tying them down. The truck stopped with a hiss of air brakes just before it hit the ramp, a sound that took me instantly back to London, and sat there rumbling to itself for a while, belching diesel fumes. I wrinkled my nose at all the pollution it was emitting and once again blessed whichever guardian angel had brought me to this little idyll.

A door slammed and a man, of average height but double the normal width appeared around the back of the truck. He was wearing overalls, a broad leather jerkin and heavy gloves as well as a thick layer of coal dust. His eyes lit up when he saw me standing on the platform.

"'Allo darlin'," he called with a wave. "Gettin' me bah'th ready are yus?" He leered at me and licked his lips.

I went a little pink as I'd forgotten I was wearing just the towel.

"Umm, so you've brought my coal then," I said, unimaginatively, wishing I could run inside.

"S'right," he said coming closer so he could get a better look. "So where d'you want it then?"

He had me stumped. I hadn't actually given a moment's thought to where to put the coal. The fact that it was on order was as far as I'd got with my thinking.

"Ummm," I said, one hand holding the top of the towel so it didn't accidentally slip and the other unconsciously checking it wasn't gaping lower down. "Ummm."

"Avery, yeah?" he said, tearing his eyes away to look at a clipboard. "Two sacks? That all?" he added in disbelief. "T'weren't worth coming all this way, ceptin' for the view, like," and his eyes returned to me. It didn't help that he was on the ground and I was on the platform, three feet up. Fortunately the towel was quite big and he couldn't see past my knees, or at least I hoped that was the case.

“Umm, just dump it somewhere, anywhere,” I said hurriedly. “Umm, I’ll be back in a minute.”

I scurried back into the house to get some clothes on and felt his eyes on me all the way. Fortunately jeans and a jumper don’t take long to put on and I hopped back, trying to get my trainers on at the same time. I crashed into him just outside the door and bounced off like a tennis ball. He must have been at least twenty stone and with the kind of muscle that comes from lugging 50kg sacks of coal all day. He caught me with one filthy hand while slipping the sack of briquettes off his back and putting it on the ground with the other.

“You be all ’reet there, lass” he asked, his face wreathed in concern. “Dint mean t’bump int’yus, like.”

“I’m fine,” I said, steadying myself and rubbing my upper arm where he’d grabbed me. “I should have been looking where I was going.”

He grinned amiably and I got the impression he was probably not much older than me underneath all that coal dust.

“So this do yus?” he asked, jerking a thumb at the sack of coal leaning against the wall.

“Oh, yeah, great,” I said.

“Ah be gettin’ t’other,” he said and ambled back towards his truck.

I heard my phone ping to say I had a text message and I instinctively turned to go see who it was then decided it would be rude. I wasn’t in London anymore where the phone was more important than the people around you. I followed him and watched with something approaching awe as he casually slapped another 50kg sack and it fell off the truck like a small bag of lollies. He caught it in one hand and let it swing up and onto his back in a single graceful movement. Had I given it a thought I would have imagined delivering coal to be a heartless job but he seemed to have developed it into almost an art form.

“So yus noo round ’ere, then, is ya?” he asked, ambling back to the

house. "Ain't delivered 'ere afore."

"I only moved in a week or so ago," I said and marvelled at how short a time that actually was. I felt like I'd been here years.

With a nonchalant flip of his shoulder he swung the sack down and leaned it neatly against the other.

"Like it 'ere do yus?" he asked, looking at the moorland beyond the house.

"I love it here," I said, feeling a surge of emotion.

"Aye," he said. "Reckon so. Grand, innit." He gazed around then suddenly turned and beamed at me. It transformed him from a truculent looking gorilla into a cheeky chimpanzee and I felt absurdly pleased he liked the place.

"Well, best be getting' on, like," he said and started ambling back to his truck. "See yus in a week or two."

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"That bitty coal?" he said jerking his head back. "Last yus a week, mayhap two at best. Gonna be gettin' cold soon, I reckon. Be needin' more right smart."

"You think?" I asked. "I thought that would be enough for the winter."

He started to laugh then it turned into coughing and I wondered what state his lungs were in. He wheezed a little then got himself under control again.

"More like yus be wantin' a couple o' tons," he said. "When t'cold comes yus'll be burnin' fire all day an' night just stayin' warm."

"Oh," I said, being much more used to gas fires and central heating. "Well, I'll see how it goes and get some more when I need it."

"Aye," he said and climbed into his cab. "See yus."

“Thanks,” I called and he drove off.

I walked back to the house thinking about this new development. If I did get two tons where would I keep it? I couldn't leave it out in the rain as it probably wouldn't light if it was soaking wet. On reflection the coal shed seemed the best idea even though it would mean frequent trips. For the time being though, seeing as how I only had the two sacks, the toilet would do. I grabbed the corners of one of the sacks, intending to carry it over, and nearly slipped a disk.

“Bloody hell, that's heavy,” I exclaimed, newly impressed with how strong the delivery man had been. I couldn't even get it off the ground!

I tried to drag it and gave up after a yard or so. The sack sat there and seemed to be laughing at me. I glowered at it then went inside to get a bucket. My phone was blinking so I went to see who'd texted me. It was Tristan from The Northern Locations Agency saying a photographer would be out next Friday, weather permitting. I texted back OK and went back out with the bucket. It took four bucketfuls to shift each sack and there wasn't a whole lot of room left in the toilet when I'd done. Still, none of the briquettes fell into the cess pit and I took the last bucketful into the kitchen. Doubtless the delivery man would take the empty sacks back with him so I folded them neatly and left them on the platform, under a stone so they wouldn't blow away.

I couldn't be bothered to light a fire to make some tea, especially as I'd never lit a coal fire before, so I used my gas cooker. While the water was heating I went back to my sponge bath and washed the coal dust from my face and hands then rinsed my jumper and jeans which had managed to get covered as well. It was late afternoon so I put on my dressing gown rather than get dressed again.

“It's been a hell of a day,” I said to myself, gazing out over the moors.

I cradled my tea in my hands and blew on it to cool it. It was actually probably around the time that Sam would be bringing the train back but now I had the measure of this time travel thing I didn't feel any need to go back and watch. After all, I had yet to think up a cover story why I, being Letitia, was back or who I, not being Letitia,

actually was. I didn't think saying I was a distant cousin would work since he probably knew all her distant cousins since they'd be his cousins as well.

"And I wonder where her dad is, too," I thought. "Why isn't he here, running his railway?"

It occurred to me that time was on my side here, which made me laugh, then I stopped laughing when I thought about Letitia. It couldn't have been much fun growing up in this isolated place and sharing a bedroom with her dad and brother. What did she do all day? And how did she get to meet a man from York anyway? Had he been a passenger? A friend of the family? She must have been a nice girl though, if that photo of me that everyone thought was Letitia was anything to go by.

"Did she have to hump coal from the coal shed to the house?" I wondered, "or did one of the men do that? She must have been a lot stronger than me. And, come to that, how did Joshua manage with a three year old and an infant to look after when Violet died? Who watched them while he drove the train? Or did he dump them on a woman in the village?"

My phone suddenly started to ring and I looked at it in surprise.

"Oh, what does he want?" I muttered when I saw it was Jarrod Hastings. I felt a twinge of excitement as he probably wasn't ringing to tell me he'd given the job to someone else. If that was the case he would just let it slide.

"Hello?" I said, answering.

"Is that Sylvia?" asked Jarrod.

"Yes, Jarrod," I said. "How's your throat?"

"Oh fine, thanks to you," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks," I said. "What can I do for you?"

“Ohh, all sorts of things,” he said, “starting with dinner tonight. Shall we say 7 o'clock at the Chinese in Whitby?”

Chapter Twenty Three

I agreed, of course. Ordinarily I wouldn't go to dinner with a possible employer since that had all sorts of implications but this seemed, at least on the surface, a little different. He was, after all, a relative stranger in Whitby, staying in an AirBNB and not really knowing anyone. Admittedly the AirBNB was his own but after the incident in the café perhaps he felt he owed me more than a simple brush off if he'd found someone else to look after his apartments here. On the other hand, if he was going to give me the job and this dinner was a preliminary to something else, well, I was 26 and capable of looking after myself. At least I had a car and wasn't dependent on him to take me home and the Chinese restaurant in Whitby was a pretty public place.

He kept me guessing with small talk until my chicken and cashew nuts and his beef in black bean sauce arrived then dumped a proposal on me that blew my appetite away completely. It seemed that he had doubts over the entire AirBNB business model continuing much longer. In his view, and I couldn't counter what he was saying since I'd never stayed in an AirBNB, there were too many loopholes that were exploitable by owners, such as charging excessive cleaning fees, and this was having a negative impact. The basic concept of renting a nice place for a few nights for a holiday was being eroded and all the extra rules and hidden conditions being imposed by greedy owners were pushing people back to the simple convenience of hotels and motels which don't have those hidden extras. In his view, AirBNB weren't doing enough to protect the tenants and, in the medium term, this would bring them down.

“So what I'm proposing,” said Jarrod, “depends largely on your background in Hotel Management. I have around a hundred and fifty apartments, cottages and so forth and I see no reason why they can't be managed in much the same way as a moderately small hotel with a hundred and fifty rooms. Granted there's a difficulty with their spread out nature but hotel chains have that same problem and it shouldn't be insurmountable. It's more a matter of thinking of the properties as a single but decentralised hotel. What I want to do is abandon the entire AirBNB model and go independent and that's where you come in. Spend the next year or so managing my properties here in Whitby

and exploring the others I have along the Yorkshire coast and think about how to take that nationally. You're young and free spirited so you shouldn't be constrained by old practices and methods."

"So you're basically wanting me to set up another AirBNB in competition with them?" I asked, my mind grappling with the sheer audacity of the proposal. The panic would come later, I was sure.

"In a sense," said Jarrod with a smile. "Although all the properties would have the one owner, me, so there'd be no issues trying to keep multiple disparate owners happy. Think of it perhaps as a chain of very small hotels, certainly as a single entity."

My chicken and cashews was stone cold by the time I got around to tasting it and it didn't taste particularly nice so I pushed it away. By the end of the evening we'd agreed that I would 'do the rounds' with Maureen, the woman who had been looking after his places in Whitby, before she left and give it some thought then talk some more. I left with my mind reeling. The best I'd hoped for was the part-time caretaker role and to be offered manager of a national network of independent holiday apartments was scary.

I drove home, my mind a whirl of ideas, blind panic, questions and fear. On the one hand it was almost a dream come true but on the other hand, did I even want that kind of commitment anymore? I'd changed since leaving London and the simplicity of my life now was wonderful. Did I really want to abandon it so quickly? Then again, if I only did the caretaking of the local properties would Jarrod put pressure on me later? What if he brought in someone else for the national role? How would I feel about that?

I missed my turn-off and went a couple of miles towards Saltburn before I realised. I turned round and drove slowly back, trying to focus my mind on finding the turn-off. It was dark and there was no moon but I spotted it and went up the track and down the other side of the hill. I parked in my usual spot, got out of the car and felt it straight away. There was a tension in the air. Almost a buzzing. I looked around but there was very little to see in the darkness. There weren't even any stars so it must have been cloudy.

“Probably a storm coming,” I thought and sniffed the cold clean air. There was no hint of dampness but that didn't mean anything. No doubt a local could predict the weather a week or more ahead by the smell of the air but I was a city girl. I could smell rain but only when it was almost upon me.

I shut the car door but it only half caught so I opened it again and slammed it. The noise seemed obtrusively loud and something, a bat probably or perhaps an owl, squeaked a surprised complaint. I locked the car and wished I'd thought to bring a torch. I could sense rather than see the ramp beside me so I pulled out my phone and slowly made my way to the house through the undergrowth using the faint light of the phone's display. The phone had a torch built into it but I could never remember how to turn it on and it drained the battery pretty quickly anyway.

I found the house and quickly put on one of my lamps and hung it from a ceiling hook then went to change. I'd put on a dress for the evening but it wasn't warm enough for the chilly stone house. Jeans and a jumper were much better. I put the kettle on to make some tea then did a quick dash to the toilet to get rid of the wine I'd had with dinner. Outside the tension in the air was still there. In fact, I realised when I got back to the house, it was inside as well. In fact it seemed to be building. I made my tea and grabbed a couple of slices of dry bread to compensate for not having had my chicken and cashews and went to sit on the doorstep. There was a bit of a breeze blowing and I thought I could smell a far off dampness but it could just have been the tea, steaming gently on the doorstep beside me.

“Jesus, what an evening,” I thought with a giggle. “I kinda thought he just wanted a quick shag.” My giggles turned to laughter and I hugged my knees with the absurdity of it all. Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, my laughter ended abruptly. Something felt wrong. Or rather not wrong, just different.

I stared out but beyond the light from the doorway with my distorted shadow in it the darkness was complete. Nothing, as far as I could tell, was out there. I twisted round but there was nothing inside the house either.

“What's happening?” I thought as a shiver went through me. It was probably because of the chilly breeze but I got up and went to the kitchen to get the torch. I walked outside a few steps and shone the torch around but there was nothing untoward, not even a fox.

“Hmm,” I muttered and walked over to the platform. There were no steps at this end but it was only a three foot jump so I jumped up and slowly walked along the platform. It was only around ten-ish so the early morning train wouldn't be leaving for a long time yet but the tension was still there. In fact I could almost touch it.

“Oh you're just being stupid,” I muttered as I shone the torch around. “It's all that talk with Jarrod that's got you worked up. Stop being an idiot.”

We'd left it that I could have the lowly caretaking job regardless and making a decision on the national one was still some way off so there was no reason for me to be tense about it. I had a couple of months at least to think about it. I tried to force myself to calm down and relax but the tension, if anything, grew even more palpable.

“There's nothing here, you idiot!” I said out loud, spreading my arms and turning round a couple of times. “Go to bed!”

I went back around the side of the house again, jumping down from the platform, and went to get my tea. I sat on the doorstep and had a couple of sips then nearly spilled it everywhere as a voice said “Letitia!”.

“You're imagining it,” I said, as firmly as I could. “There's no one here and even if there was Letitia isn't here. She died a hundred years ago, in York.”

Just to be safe I quickly walked around inside the house, checking behind the doors, then again outside. There was no one there although a light pattering of rain had begun.

“It must have been the wind,” I said, trying to hear the name 'Letitia' in the breeze. I couldn't but that didn't mean that a gust hadn't made that sound earlier.

I went back to the doorstep and had some more tea. This time I felt the voice calling rather than heard it.

“But I’m not Letitia!” I exclaimed and scowled.

“But maybe the voice is calling from back then,” I thought and suppressed it immediately. It surged up again and along with it I felt an urge to go back and find out.

“You need to go to bed,” I said, gripping my mug tightly. “All this talk with Jarrod is making your mind go lumpy.”

“But it wouldn’t hurt to go back for a few moments,” my lumpy mind told me. “It’s not like anything’ll be happening. The train’s not due to leave until dawn.”

Actually I wasn’t too sure about that but it made sense. What would a small rural community want with a night service? It wasn’t like London with businesses and nightclubs operating all night long. Nothing would happen here until the men brought the fish.

I went to the kitchen to rinse my mug then back into the living room to fetch the lantern. I made my way to the bedroom intending to go to bed but I had this nagging urge to go back and see what was happening.

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” I said impatiently. “Just do it then go to bed. Go back.”

Nothing much seemed to happen except my clothes felt different. I looked down and in the light of the lantern I could see I was wearing a nightdress. It felt like flannel and went all the way down to my ankles. My feet were bare and I was standing next to a bed.

“Cool, it still works,” I said happily.

There was a pair of simple slippers beside the bed so I slipped them on my feet. They fitted perfectly, even down to the toe and heel indentations. I pushed aside the cloth hanging from the ceiling and held the lantern up. There were two beds there and both were empty.

"I wonder where Sam is?" I muttered. "He's got to get up soon to drive the train."

I froze for a moment, wondering why I'd even thought that since it wasn't my problem if the train ran or not then decided it was simple relief at not finding Sam in bed. Interestingly the air of tension seemed to have gone. Had it just been me or had this place in this time been calling me?

I wondered whether to go back to my own time and go to bed then decided not to. If it had been calling me then presumably it would keep calling until I found out why it was calling. A little ball of fear in my stomach made itself known and I hesitated.

"Oh don't be a daft wimp," I muttered. "If anything here was going to hurt you it would have by now."

Holding the lantern tightly in one hand and my phone in the other I made myself walk into the living room. It was as it had been when I'd been experimenting although now it was dark with just a faint glow coming from the dying embers in the fireplace. I went over to the door that went to the toilet, something in the back of my mind telling me I could say I was going to the toilet if anyone asked. I know it was stupid since if I met anyone they'd think I was Letitia who had every right to be there but I still felt, for some reason, that I was trespassing.

I opened the door and peered out. It was dark and moonless but there was no rain. There were, however, noises coming from the platform. In fact, if I concentrated, I thought I could see the dark bulk of the train standing there.

"Well, that makes sense," I thought, pressing my shoulder against the doorpost. "Where else are they going to leave it overnight? Maybe Sam's doing some repairs or something?"

Actually that didn't make sense. If Sam was doing repairs he'd need a light and there weren't any lights. Also he'd be making repair type noises, spanners on bolts or something rather than muffled thumps and faint whispers.

The little ball of fear in my stomach reappeared and got a little bigger. Who'd be whispering and thumping, however muffled, in the middle of the night? Surely the fishermen wouldn't be bringing the fish this early?

"Well there's no way I'm going to go to sleep now," I said to myself. "And I do bloody well own this place!"

I made my way along the side of the house and tiptoed up the steps to the platform. In retrospect it was a bit pointless since whoever was there would have seen the light from the lantern no matter how quiet I was but it seemed a good idea. The sounds seemed to be coming from inside or behind the freight car so I tiptoed back down the steps and past the train. I could feel a warmth from its boiler but it wasn't boiling hot so it wasn't likely to be leaving anytime soon. I had no idea how long it took a steam train to get up steam but it was definitely going to be a lot longer than simply turning a key in the ignition.

Just in case anyone saw it, I put the lantern on something that protruded from the back end of the train, a coupling or buffer or something and, as soon as I let go of it, the lantern disappeared.

"Twat!" I muttered under my breath. I should have realised that however antique the thing looked a solar powered light wouldn't have existed in the 1860s.

Armed only with my mobile phone, which was pretty useless really since it would have no signal to latch onto for a long time yet, I peered around the side of the train.

I couldn't see much since everything was dark but I sensed several people going up and down the ramp to the train. I shifted round a little further as someone whispered something then a strong smelly hand clamped itself over my mouth and an arm went tight around my chest hurting my boob a little. I tried to scream but the hand over my mouth wouldn't let me. I lashed back with my heel and succeeded only in hurting it as it hit something solid. To say I was terrified would have been the understatement of the century.

“Cap'n!” hissed a voice behind my head. It was a man's voice, deep, raspy and a little hoarse. “Cap'n!”

“What?” hissed another voice from ahead of me. It was a little higher pitched and didn't rasp. I caught a faint movement as something darker than the night turned and I tried to whimper. I felt cold and clammy all over.

“I be catching a little fishy what be watching us,” whispered the raspy voice.

“Avast there,” said the voice quietly and all movement on the ramp stopped. I heard someone jump off the ramp and quietly walk over.

“Feels like a girlie,” whispered the raspy voice and he moved his arm against my boobs. I felt a snigger more than heard it. What I did hear though was something that sounded suspiciously like a sword being drawn from a scabbard.

It wasn't though. It must have been a flint or something as there was a spark and then a glow as a lantern was lit. An old fashioned lantern that used oil rather than a solar one. A moment or two later the lantern was quite bright and the man who'd walked over hid it under his cloak so what light there was only lit me.

“Godverdamme,” he said in surprise then wrenched the other man's hand away from my face. “Kloetzke! Get your filthy hands from her!”

The man instantly let go of me and stepped back, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. I stumbled at the unexpected release and the man in front of me grabbed me with his spare hand. Inexplicably I immediately felt safe and protected as though just his touch was enough and I sagged against him.

“Letitia?” he said, a hint of confusion in his voice. He lifted his cloaked arm so more of the light fell on me. “Letitia?”

It didn't seem the time or place to argue so I just nodded weakly.

“I knew you would come back to me,” he said happily. He stood me

upright and took my hand so he could kiss the moonstone ring I was still wearing. "Tis me, Hans. You are safe now."

Chapter Twenty Four

I gasped when his lips touched my ring but I stood there like a prize lemon staring at the ring and not knowing what to do. I daresay I should have snatched my hand away but the thought never occurred to me. Him holding my hand seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. Besides, I didn't want him to let go.

“Get back on watch,” he said gruffly, his eyes shifting to the man behind me.

I don't know if the man went or not because at that moment I looked up from my ring and his eyes were looking into mine. What little wits I had left deserted me and he chose that moment to drop his head and kiss me on the lips. A tremor went through me. I squeezed his hand tightly and kissed him back with a deep hunger I'd never felt before.

“Ahh Letitia,” he murmured when I finally let him go. “I had thought I would never kiss your lips again,” and he hugged me to him.

I held my face up hoping he'd kiss me again but he didn't. Instead he released me from his hug and stroked my cheek, letting his thumb brush gently over my lips and starting little fires all over my body.

“Alas there is much to do here if we are to catch the tide,” he said softly. “Tis grievous for me to part from you so soon but needs must. Go, prepare some food and I shall return shortly for there is much that needs to be said.”

He kissed me again then gave me a small push before turning back to the men on the ramp. In a daze I managed to make my way back to the house although I have no idea how I managed. My legs trembled and my knees were weak. I managed to open the door and fell back against it, pushing it shut, my heart fluttering.

“Wow,” I exclaimed. “Wow!”

I touched my lips with my fingertips and remembered the sensations that his lips had caused, the sensations that had still not entirely gone.

Who was this guy? Even then I had a strong feeling I knew.

I giggled stupidly and touched my lips again then ran my hands over my torso imagining they were his hands and getting all hot and bothered again.

“Hans hands,” I muttered and giggled again. “Hans hands!” It had a nice ring to it. Then I remembered why I was there. “Food! He wants food!”

Unthinkingly I hurried into the kitchen. There was a lamp hanging from the ceiling which was casting only a tiny glow so I got it down and turned the knob a fraction so the wick glowed brighter. It was enough so I checked the stove only to find it had gone out completely. I grabbed the small shovel that was propped beside it and hurried into the living room. The embers in the fireplace still glowed so I got a shovelful and carried them back into the kitchen. I tossed them in the stove and blew on them several times so they glowed rosy red then added a few more from the wooden bucket. I touched the top of the stove with my fingers and found it was already getting warm.

“Like his lips,” I thought and felt a little weak again.

I grabbed one of the pots that hung from a beam and put it on the stove before taking a sack of oats from the wooden cupboard.

“Food for how many?” I thought suddenly. “Oh please God he isn't going to bring the rest of them in here too?” I hesitated then poured some oats into my hand and dumped them in the pot. I added another half handful since he was probably hungry and poured in some water. The others could get their own damned food. I wasn't going to cook for them.

“He likes his porridge salted,” I muttered and grabbed the lump of salt from the cupboard and scraped a little off with a knife into the pot. I stirred the oats with a wooden spoon then stepped back to let the mix heat.

“How did I know he likes it salty?” I said suddenly. “Jesus, how did I even know where the oats were? I've never cooked oats in my life, how

did I know what to do? And who is this guy anyway? I'm not his servant!"

I scowled at the pot then reached for my phone but it wasn't on the bench where I'd put it when I took down the lamp.

"Idiot," I muttered then it hit me. I was still in 1860! I was in a flannel nightie and I'd been kissed by a guy called Hans with a Dutch accent! The memory of the kiss came back to me and I felt myself going red at how my body had reacted.

"You little slut!" I muttered to myself and giggled while touching my lips again with my fingertips. "You don't even know what he looks like!" A part of me said it didn't matter what he looked like and another part of me seemed to be saying I knew exactly what he looked like. It was ... disconcerting ... to say the least.

"Oh shit, he's coming back in a minute," I muttered and tried to pull myself together. "He wants to talk and he thinks I'm Letitia. Oh God, what do I say?"

I heard the living room door swing shut and footsteps cross the room. I tried to make myself feel frightened but instead I found I was hoping he'd kiss me again, whatever he looked like. As the kitchen door opened I took a step forwards rather than backwards.

He was at least a head and a half taller than me and he had long dishevelled blonde hair that was gathered in a little ponytail on the nape of his neck. In the light of the oil lamp I could see he had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen and his smile when he saw me turned my spine to jelly.

"Letitia," he said quietly and stood there looking at me.

"Hans," I said, nervously taking a half step forward.

In two strides he was kissing me again although this time I cooperated fully, wrapping my arms around his broad chest. The slight stubble on his cheeks merely added to the overall impact he was having on me. We kissed and hugged each other until the porridge in the pot boiled

over with a lot of hissing. I broke away, reluctantly, and snatched up a cloth to move the pot from the heat.

“Umm, your porridge is ready,” I said.

“I thank you,” he said simply, reaching out to touch my hair.

“Sit and eat,” I said, hoping against hope it was not only cooked but palatable.

I found some wooden bowls in the cupboard and put one on the table in front of him. I tipped the pot over it and the porridge slowly oozed its way out. It seemed a bit thick to me but Hans didn't say anything, he just watched me with that smile on his face, ruining my concentration. When enough seemed to have come out I put the pot back on the side of the stove and got a spoon from a box in the cupboard and handed it to him. He let his fingers run over the back of my hand, sending sharp little tingles up my arm, before taking it.

“Ja, is gut,” he said, taking a mouthful.

“I'm glad you like it,” I said.

He frowned slightly but took another spoonful.

“So,” he said, “we talk, ja?”

“Umm, OK,” I said.

“What is this 'OK'?” he asked. “I do not know this word.”

“Oh, it, umm, means, 'yes',” I said, cursing my stupidity. I should have realised that 21st century idioms wouldn't go down too well here.

“Is what they say in York?” he asked.

York? Why York? I nodded in agreement as it seemed easier.

“And your husband?” he asked, taking another spoonful of porridge. “Is he here also?”

“My husband?” I blurted then managed to get a grip on myself as I realised. He thought I was Letitia and Letitia must have by this time gone off to York to get married. With a sudden clarity I realised that Hans must be Cap’n Midnight. The very same Midnight whose name was inscribed inside my ring. “Ah, yes, my husband.”

This added a new dimension of complexity. Aside from the fact that I wasn't Letitia even though he thought I was, I didn't want to tell him I wasn't her. Not yet anyway. I needed to think things through.

“Umm, it's a little complicated,” I added, wishing my brain would work a little faster. “Umm, he's not here.”

“He permits his wife to travel alone and unprotected?” demanded Hans, slamming his spoon down into his porridge. “What manner of cur is this?”

“Well, no, not really,” I said. “Umm, do you trust me?”

“With my life,” he said.

My heart flipped at that and I had to pause for a breath.

“Then please trust me now,” I said. “Something has happened but I cannot tell you what it is just yet. Later, perhaps, but not at this moment.”

His eyes narrowed then he began to smile again.

“Ahh,” he said, reaching over to take my hand. “You have killed him or had him killed. This does not surprise me for he was not worthy of you. Worry not, your secret is safe with me.”

I blinked several times. This wasn't the kind of reaction that I'd expected but he seemed happy enough with it and it was infinitely more believable than the truth. Hopefully I'd be able to straighten things out before Letitia came back for a visit.

“I knew you would return,” he said, keeping hold of my hand but turning it so the ring was uppermost. “The rings bind us forever.”

“Rings?” I blurted. “You mean there is another?”

“Surely you have not forgotten?” he asked, staring at me in dismay. “We swore our love eternal on those rings before you departed to take the hand of another.”

“Ah, yes, that ring,” I said. “Umm, do you still have yours?”

He smiled and untied the cravat around his neck and pulled a ring from under his waistcoat. It was on a chain around his neck. It was similar to mine but the moonstone was set in simple gold without all the gems around it. He clicked the side and the moonstone opened.

“I have gazed upon your face every day,” he said, looking down at the ring, “but the portrait does not do you justice.”

“Can I see?” I asked.

He unclipped the chain and handed me the ring. Inside was a tiny image that looked similar to me although it must have been Letitia.

“Where did you get these?” I asked, looking inside the ring to see if it had an inscription. It did but it was too small for me to read.

“You have forgotten so soon?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “but I want to hear you tell me again.”

I had a feeling he didn't believe me but he explained that he'd bought the rings from a sailor who'd got them from somewhere in the South China Sea and he'd paid a travelling gypsy to cut the inscriptions and place a charm of unyielding love upon each. While he was talking I opened the moonstone of my ring and the image was definitely of him.

“Are you here for long?” he asked. “'Tis dangerous for the constable of police will doubtless come here first looking for you. Does your father know?”

I groaned inwardly. I'd forgotten about Sam and Joshua. I'd managed

to avoid Sam since that encounter on the platform but Joshua, Letitia's father, would be a different kettle of fish since he'd no doubt made Letitia marry that guy in York rather than go off with Hans. I wondered if he had a shotgun.

"Umm, no," I said. "I haven't seen either of them yet. Do you know where they are?"

"Your father is constructing a railway from Thwaite to Hawes," said Hans. "He will doubtless be away another six months or more."

"And Sam?" I asked.

"He is helping my men load the train," he said. "There is one wagon left to unload then, alas, I must be gone for there is a gunship nearby and 'tis best to avoid trouble."

"Perhaps it would be best if Sam does not know I am returned," I said. "Umm, I can find somewhere to stay in Smocklebeck for now while I figure out what to do."

"Then if that is your desire I shall not speak of you," said Hans. "What happened to you in York?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I shall listen with the greatest of interest when you come to tell me of your ... misadventures ... with your husband," said Hans. "You were married these four weeks past and already your speech is much changed. Aye, and there is a look in your eyes that was not there before. An innocence now departed I venture for there appears to be a fire within you that was not there before also."

"Well, that's married life for you," I said with a forced laugh.

"And there it is once more," he said. "A strangeness in your tongue. I have been to York many times and yet I have heard none discourse as you do now. How is this so?"

"Oh, umm, I spent much time with a group of artists," I said,

improvising rapidly. "While my husband was about his business. They sought to entertain me with a new form of speech they had invented. Do you not like it?"

"Tis good you are back then," said Hans. "For myself I desire nothing more than your presence and your continuing good health but there will be many in these parts that will say it is not becoming for a young lady such as yourself to speak in such an uncouth manner."

"I'm sorry," I said, bridling a little at being called uncouth. "I shall endeavour to curb my tongue."

"Ahh, I have offended you," he said, jumping to his feet and pushing the narrow table aside. "A thousand apologies. 'Tis not for myself that I speak so for I would love you even if you spoke in the manner of savages from Australia but I would not have you criticised by those of small wit and no manners. I beg your forgiveness." He knelt at my feet and took my hands in his.

"You love me?" I said when I was able to catch my breath.

"Most assuredly and with ever constant devotion," he said and kissed my fingers.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. Other guys had said that to me before but I'd never quite believed them. Hans said it with absolute assurance and the truth was clear in his eyes, those deep whirlpool eyes of clear blue that swallowed me whole.

"Wow?" he said frowning. "Wow? 'Tis a strange word but it has a certain charm to it. What does it mean?"

"Umm, it is a way of expressing delight and pleasure," I said. "Umm, the artists believed it to be a more convenient expression than a lengthy discourse on the subject."

"Indeed?" he said. "These artist friends of yours would seem an innovative crew. Perchance one day you will do me the honour of introducing me?"

"It would be my pleasure," I said, wondering what the hell to do about that.

"Wow," he said and smiled. "Did I say that correctly? Wow?"

"You said it perfectly," I said and took advantage of his kneeling to kiss him again.

"Wow," he said when I let him go. "And thrice wow!"

"And double thrice wow," I said, stroking his face. "When will I see you again?"

"Tomorrow night," he said, standing up. "I return to Holland now to fetch fresh cargo and will return with the tide. You will be here still?"

"Do you still anchor your ship off Smocklebeck?" I asked, surprising myself. How did I know that? Actually it was probably just subconscious logic. Where else would he park his ship?

"Ja," said Hans. "'Tis safest to bring cargo ashore in the dark by longboat."

"Then I shall meet you at the jetty," I said. "T'would be safer than meeting here, I venture." My words sounded funny to me but Hans didn't seem to mind.

"Wow!" said Hans. "Ahh, and will you come aboard again?"

"I would like that," I said, wondering about the 'again'. What had Letitia been up to? Mind you, I couldn't blame her.

I listened after he'd gone for his footsteps to go past the house then quietly said 'go back'. Not a damned thing happened. The half eaten porridge still sat on the table and I was still in a flannel nightie.

"Go back," I said with a touch of urgency in my voice. Still nothing happened although the light from the oil lamp flicked.

"Oh shit!" I exclaimed. "The bloody thing's not working!"

I froze as someone made a groaning sound just outside the kitchen then I heard a couple of footsteps.

“Jesus! That must be Sam,” I exclaimed then clamped my hand over my mouth. If I could hear him groan he could probably hear my voice.

I hurriedly snatched my ring from the table where I'd left it and looked around. There wasn't time to clear up the porridge so I just abandoned it, hoping Sam would think he'd made it for himself and forgotten about it. He probably wouldn't think that but there wasn't anything else I could do.

I half ran into the living room just as the door opened and Sam came in. He looked tired and he stretched his arms again and yawned. I stepped back quickly into the kitchen and half closed the door. With a bit of luck he'd go straight to bed. I backed away from the door, listening intently to his footsteps as he walked around the living room, and knocked the pot off the stove. Being cast iron and heavy it hit the stone floor with a nasty thud.

“Who be that?” roared Sam a moment later. “Who be in my damned kitchen?”

I heard his feet hurry over and the door slammed open.

“Oh Christ!” I exclaimed, looking round wildly for somewhere to hide. “Please take me back, now!”

Chapter Twenty Five

I had the briefest of glimpses of Sam's angry face turning to amazement before the kitchen went dark and cold. I stood absolutely still for a few moments, giving my heart time to calm down a little then fumbled my way into the lounge to find the other lantern. It took a while but I found it eventually and its soft glow filled the room. I collapsed into my fold-up camping chair with relief. It occurred to me that Sam must be thinking he was seeing ghosts or dreaming or something and might be sitting in the house all alone and scared. I wondered if I should go back and reassure him but I figured it would only make things worse. It was one thing to see the ghost of your sister and a whole different thing for that ghost to re-appear and try to explain why it wasn't your sister but actually some long distant relative from the future and everything was really all right.

A memory of Hans' kisses came into my mind and I blushed at how I'd responded. So much for being a cool woman of mystery! Still, one thing was now fairly clear. My ring, the ring Hans had given Letitia and which had been passed down to me, made it all possible. I was still clutching it tightly in my hand from where I'd snatched it up. I opened my fingers and stared at it for a while then slowly turned it over and over. It looked like a fairly ordinary, if old fashioned, ring. Then I pressed the little lever and the moonstone popped open. There was Hans again. The picture was too small to see his eyes but I knew they were staring at me with their intense blue and all kinds of shivers went through me. Nice shivers, not nasty ones, and a little naughty. I blushed again then lifted the ring to my lips to kiss it before shutting it and slipping it back on my finger.

"How is he doing these things to me?" I wondered, shifting in the chair to get more comfortable. "He's just a guy and I've known a few guys."

OK, I had to admit I had known a few guys in my time and thought I'd loved one or two of them, well three if truth be known or four if you counted that boy at school in the year ahead of me who'd never even noticed I existed, but it had never been like this. Just the thought of him made me feel weak and hot and confused and breathless and all tingly at the same time. How was this possible? Even my hair

tingled.

“Best not to think about him then,” I muttered and laughed at the sheer stupidity of that thought. As if that would be possible.

“I wonder if he's back on his ship yet?” I thought. “Is he thinking of me or is his mind on getting the ship ready to sail and whatever cargo he's planning to get?”

I touched my lips with my fingertips again, remembering his kisses and living them all over again. I felt unsettled, part of me wanting to rush around in excitement and part of me wanting to curl up in a ball of delicious imaginings. Compromising I got up and went to find my phone. It was in a corner of the kitchen, near the door. I must have kicked it there when I stumbled out after coming back. It was working fine and I was astonished to discover it was only half an hour or so after I'd got back from dinner with Jarrod. I could barely remember that had even happened.

“So in half an hour I've gone from not knowing Hans existed to being totally smitten?” I said, my voice filled with wonder. “I never thought love at first sight was possible.”

It didn't feel right though. In my heart I knew this wasn't love at first sight. Deep inside I knew it was an old love. One that I hadn't been aware of until now but one that had lain dormant within me, waiting only for that moment, that special moment, when it would awaken and consume me, all over again. I opened the ring and kissed Hans' image then clutched the ring with both hands to my chest.

* * *

I hadn't expected to sleep but I did and woke in a foul temper.

I didn't know why I was in a foul temper, I was in too foul a mood to think about it, but I stomped out to the toilet and cursed the coal that lay all over the floor around the seat then stomped back into the kitchen. I tried to light some coal in the stove but it wouldn't catch so I cursed that and threw some of the coal at the wall. Then I stomped out to the well to get some water as there wasn't enough to make some

tea and spilt it all over the kitchen floor trying to pour some into my saucepan. I cursed that as well and ignored it. Fortunately the gas cooker lit as it would probably have gone flying out of the window if it hadn't. I stomped back into the living room to get my mug and swore at the trail of wet footprints I left behind. While the water was heating I tried to make a marmite sandwich and succeeded only in ripping the slices of bread to pieces with the cold margarine. The bread did go out the window and I hoped it would choke the birds.

I managed to calm myself down enough to carry my tea over to the doorstep but my sitting spot had lost its charms. I didn't want to sit there and gaze out over the moors. Not today, anyway. I turned back but the chair in the living room looked ugly and uncomfortable so I went outside. Strangely, even though it was cloudy and the ground was wet, the sun seemed to be quite high. I stared at it for a few moments wondering why it wasn't where it normally was when I got up then pulled out my phone. It was almost one in the afternoon!

"Bloody hell!" I exclaimed, staring at it in disbelief.

Mind you, if my phone said it was nearly one then it must be nearly one. Phones don't lie about these things. Just to be sure I went on the internet and Googled what the time was. Unsurprisingly it was nearly one in the afternoon, at least in Yorkshire. It was all sorts of different times in other places.

I wandered over to the platform wondering about this and decided that I must have lain in bed for hours thinking about Hans. Certainly I remembered thinking about him and I was pretty sure I hadn't gone straight to sleep. And I had gone to bed several hours after my usual bedtime. Maybe one in the afternoon wasn't too far wrong after all. I sat on the platform with my legs hanging over the edge, staring along the overgrown track that wended its way to Saltburn, a dozen or so miles away.

It didn't take long to work out why I was in a foul mood once I'd had a few sips of tea. It was pretty simple really. It was that bloody Hans.

"Bastard!" I exclaimed and snarled at a bird flying overhead. Incredibly it didn't fall to the ground in flames. It just ignored me and

got on with its own life.

I'd gone to bed delightfully enraptured with the knowledge that I had found the love of my life and woken with the knowledge he didn't love me. It was that boy at school all over again. Hans didn't love me because he loved Letitia. He'd only said he loved me because he thought I was Letitia.

"Bitch!" I exclaimed. "You bloody bitch!"

I couldn't even accuse her of stealing Hans from me because she'd got there first, by about a hundred and sixty years, but that was no excuse. She should have known I'd come along sooner or later and left him alone. Why else pass the ring down through the generations? That ring was destined for me so Hans and I could be together but the bloody cow had made him fall in love with her instead! Bitch!

"No way am I meeting that sod on the jetty now," I muttered fiercely. "He can bloody well go to York and find her himself if he bloody loves her that much!"

I finished my tea, my mind filled with dark and dangerous thoughts, then I stomped back into the house and threw the ring in the fireplace. Once I'd figured out how to light a coal fire I'd light one and melt the damned thing.

It didn't take long for Google to tell me the best way was to use firelighters. Apparently you put a firelighter in the fireplace and piled a little coal around it then light the firelighter. When the coal caught you put some more on. It seemed easy enough but for one tiny little problem. I didn't have any firelighters.

Irritably I got my bag and drove into Whitby. They had some firelighters in the supermarket so I got some and some more milk and a few other odds and ends, including a bar of chocolate since I felt in dire need of a medicinal dose of fat and carbohydrate. On the way back the Fiesta got lost and drove itself into Smocklebeck and parked beside the jetty. I've no idea why since I didn't want to be there but I got out of the car and gazed out over the cold grey North Sea.

"I hope you drowned," I muttered, knowing, deep in my heart, that I didn't really.

I wandered along the beach until it ended in a cliff, all the way hoping Hans would suddenly appear in a longboat and whisk me away to his ship where we'd make love in his hammock and be happy but he didn't. There was only one boat in sight and that was a huge tanker way way out on the horizon. Instead I amused myself by throwing some pebbles at the cliff and watching them bounce into the sea then I walked slowly back to the car. I felt empty, as though my life had no meaning. In fact I just wanted to cry but I wouldn't let myself.

When I got home I dumped the firelighters and other stuff in the kitchen and took the chocolate to the doorstep. I was halfway through when I realised I was thinking about what to wear when I went to meet him.

"You're an idiot," I said, folding the tin foil around the other half of the bar. "Why waste your time going to meet a man who loves someone else? It can only end one way and it'll be your heart that's broken, not his."

I was certain that countless women had said much the same thing over the millennia and had had their hearts broken regardless. I was feeling restless and agitated so I went to check my clothes anyway. Most were still in the suitcases and needed to be taken out and hung somewhere. I didn't have a wardrobe but they could still hang from the edges of the stones in the walls or something.

I couldn't find anything to wear that would be suitable for meeting Hans. Everything I owned was too modern, too twenty first century. I was pretty sure he wouldn't approve of anything that displayed ankles, let alone knees and for sure I had nothing except jumpers that went up to the neck. I grabbed my bag and hurried out to the car to go buy a new outfit. I was about to turn onto the road to Whitby when I realised it was Saturday and only the supermarkets, pubs and petrol stations would be open. I swore, turned around and sprayed some gravel with the viciousness of my clutch action.

"You're not going to meet him anyway," I said to myself, trying to

reason my way out of my renewed bad mood. "Get over it, girl."

I unwrapped the tin foil from the chocolate and broke off a couple of squares. I was about to pop them in my mouth when I realised what a complete and utter fool I actually was. It didn't matter in the slightest what I wore! I didn't even need any makeup or to wash my hair. Hell, I could even go stark naked or in a suit of armour, if I had one. I was going back in time and when I met him I'd be wearing whatever the time lords had chosen for me to wear. Like the high neck brown dress or the flannel nightie. I had no say in the matter. Even my hair would be done, most likely tied up in a bun like before but you never know.

"Except you're not going to meet him," I reminded myself. "He doesn't love you. He loves Letitia."

There was a little niggling thought at the back of my mind that I looked a lot like Letitia and Letitia wasn't available so ... but I squashed it and went to find my ring in the fireplace. It was a little dusty but seemed otherwise fine so I opened it and Hans looked at me. I realised at that moment that earthquakes, fires, floods, famines and wild horses wouldn't stop me going to meet Hans at the jetty. So what if he loved Letitia? That didn't mean a thing except that he was capable of love which was a positive, not a negative. It wasn't like she was going to stand in my way. After all, she was married and a long way away and I was here. I had to eat the rest of the chocolate to help me come to terms with this.

Chocolate finished I Googled what time the tide started to come in, reasoning that it would be difficult to ferry his cargo if the tide was going out and discovered that it would be around 7:30, a little after sunset. Of course I didn't know if the tide would be at the same time on this day in 1860 but I was pretty sure that he wouldn't start bringing over the stuff in daylight.

"OK," I said to myself, phone in my hand and ring firmly on my finger, "if I allow an hour to walk down I'd best leave around 6:30."

That seemed reasonable but for want of something to do, since I couldn't use my nervous energy to swap outfits or otherwise fill the time, I checked the weather forecast.

“Oh bloody wonderful,” I muttered. “I’ve got to walk all that way in a frigging storm!”

I looked up at the sky and, sure enough, the clouds were gathering. Even to my untutored eye it looked like a storm was building.

“But then it might not be raining in 1860,” I thought. I twisted the ring around my finger then suddenly said “go to 1860”.

It was a sunny day, cold but clear. Sam was in the field beside the house, turning the earth with a spade. Fortunately he had his back to me and didn’t look round. I quietly muttered “go back” and it was cloudy again and the field was a tangle mess.

“Hang on a minute,” I said, thoughtfully. I help up my ring finger and looked at the ring. “Every time I’ve gone backwards or forwards I’ve ended up in the same spot I was when I left. When I ran away from Sam on the platform I was in the living room and ended up in the living room. When he came into the kitchen I ended up where I was in the kitchen. Interesting.”

I got up and slowly walked a hundred yards or so down the disused track. I said “go to 1860” and found myself standing on a sleeper between two iron rails.

“Cool,” I said and went back to the twenty first century.

This time I walked along the gravel track to stand beside the tarmac road that went to Whitby. I uttered the magic words and found I was in the exact same spot but the road was a dirt track, not tarmac. It was still clear and chilly too. I walked along the dirt track to the turn-off to Smocklebeck then went back to my time. The turn-off had moved ten yards or so towards Whitby and both roads were now tarmac but it was the right turn-off. The signpost said so.

“Way cool!” I said happily. I didn’t have to walk to Smocklebeck and it didn’t matter what the weather was. I could drive there!

Awesome! I had a date with the most fabulous man, the love of his life wouldn’t be anywhere nearby and he thought I was her anyway. I

could work my charms on him unimpeded and still drive home afterwards, assuming he didn't set sail with me still on board. Even if he did the car wouldn't get towed away for another hundred years or more! Sweet.

I slowly walked home, my foul mood of earlier now fully dissipated. In fact my tummy was now full of anticipatory butterflies doing aerial acrobatics as I tried to imagine holding myself a little aloof but knowing full well I'd jump into his arms as soon as I saw him.

"I hope he doesn't smell of fish," I said suddenly, stopping at the top of the little hill on the way to the house. "He didn't last night. Hah, he isn't a fisherman! He said himself he's going back to Holland to get another cargo. I wonder what he gets?"

I pondered this as I walked back to the house and then suddenly remembered what Tammy had said.

"Oh God! He's a smuggler!" I exclaimed. "Jesus! That's what he's gone back to Holland to get! That's why he has to offload after dark! Oh my God!"

Then I remembered Tammy had given me a printout of a newspaper article she'd found about a smuggler being hanged. Captain Midnight. The same Midnight that was inscribed inside my ring.

"Where did I put it?" I cried out, starting to panic. "Where did I put the bloody thing?"

Frantically I ran into the kitchen and rummaged through my food box and the plastic bag I used for rubbish but it wasn't there. I ran back into the living room and rifled through my notebook and a few other papers on the table then into the bedroom to go through the packet of documents from the solicitor just in case it had got mixed up with them. It hadn't. I couldn't find the printout anywhere.

"Think, damn it, think!" I cried, looking around wildly. "You came out of the library with it. What did you do then? You must have gone back to the car. The car!"

I ran out to the car then ran back to get my keys. I ran back to the car again and threw the door open. The printout was in the glove box, folded and a little crumpled.

“Oh Jesus, no!” I wailed, reading the headline.

I slumped against the side of the car and slowly slid down until I was squatting, the printout in my hand.

I stared at it, willing the headline to change but it didn't and I began to cry.

“Notorious Cap'n Midnight Executed!” it said. And it was dated just five days away.

Chapter Twenty Six

A panic seized me. I had to warn him! Maybe he could sail away before he got arrested! I grabbed my phone and car keys and rushed out of the house. Surely to God there'd be someone in Smocklebeck who could row me out to his ship?

I skidded to a halt at the jetty, beside two or three other cars. I leapt out and scanned the sea but there was no sign of a big sailing ship, just a family having a picnic on the beach and a solitary boat some way out with a couple of people fishing.

"You all right?" asked a youngish woman. She peered up at me from the open window of the car next to mine.

"What?" I nearly screamed, turning to her.

She flinched and wound her window up most of the way.

"You seem a little upset," she said.

"Oh, umm, sorry," I said trying to bring my voice back to normal levels. "I, umm, yeah, I'm supposed to meet someone but he isn't here."

"Have a fight, did you?" she asked and opened the glove box. She fished around then pushed a half empty packet of wet wipes through the gap in the window. "Sorry. I don't have any tissues."

"Yeah, something like that," I said, calming down some more with the normality of the situation. "Thanks."

I took the packet and extracted a couple of wet wipes then pushed the packet back through the window. It fell on her knees and she grabbed them. I used the two I'd kept to wipe my face and eyes.

"Sorry," I said. "Umm, I'm sure he'll be along soon."

It occurred to me that Hans was probably still sailing over from Holland. After all, he didn't want to be here before sunset and that

was still a good two hours away. I smiled at the woman in the car then wandered over to the rubbish bin at the end of the jetty to get rid of the wet wipes. A youngish man came out of the pub and looked at me as he walked over. He nodded in a pleasant enough way then went round the back of the car next to mine and got in the driver's seat. The woman immediately closed her window completely and said something to him. They both looked at me then the man shrugged and started the engine. He reversed then pulled the car in a U turn and drove away.

I scanned the horizon again but there was no sign of any ships so disconsolately I slowly walked back to the car and got inside. The wind was gusting and it was quite chilly. The people on the beach started packing their things away and the two little kids ran over to the waves to have a final splash around. Everything seemed so very normal.

I sighed and picked up the crumpled printout. I hadn't read it fully, only the headline so, for want of anything to do, I read it through. Apparently the notorious highwayman and smuggler Hans Hoedemaker, also known as Cap'n Midnight, Cap'n Dutch and a few other aliases had been arrested by the newly formed East Riding Constabulary at Melton on Sunday, following a tip off. Cap'n Midnight was then taken to York Assizes and, after a short trial on the Tuesday, was sentenced to be hanged on the Friday. The article, printed on the Friday evening, was confirmation that the hanging had occurred and the body taken from Knavesmire, where the execution had taken place, to York Hospital where it was, and this made me cringe and almost start crying again, 'to facilitate the education of those learning the surgeon's noble craft'. Undoubtedly that meant he'd been dissected until nothing usable of him was left. The article also noted that as there were no known relatives the condemned man's clothing had been given to the hangman in partial recompense for his labours. Fully half the article was given over to eulogising the East Riding Constabulary and particularly Major Bernard Grenville Layard, the Chief Constable, for their sterling work in apprehending such an incorrigible villain. No other villain of such consequence had been captured in Yorkshire in the four years the police force had existed.

I read it through twice then looked up Melton in Google Maps. It was

a village some fifteen miles inland, on the way to York. Why Hans would be going to Melton I had no idea but he had to be stopped. I didn't care in the slightest that he was a smuggler and highwayman, only that he was the man I loved. Perhaps, given a little time, I'd be able to help him mend his ways but that would be impossible if he was dead.

"So, how do I stop him going to Melton?" I wondered as I put the printout down on the passenger seat.

I watched as the man on the beach brought their picnic stuff, rugs and chairs back to their car while the woman caught the kiddies and scrubbed them with a towel. They didn't want to leave and one managed to break free and dash back into the sea. I could hear his, he most likely was a boy although I couldn't make out any details from this distance, mother's scolding voice then the father went back and bodily dragged the lad out of the sea. He exchanged kiddies with the mother and carried the more obedient one back to the car while the mother towelled the renegade. It didn't give me any real ideas though. Yes, I was fairly sure I could keep Hans' mind off going to Melton for a while but he undoubtedly had a pressing reason to go there and sooner or later he would. When he did someone would tip off the police and they'd come and get him.

I mulled over thoughts of staying as Letitia and making him promise not to go to Melton but I doubted that he would. After all, this was the 1860s and women were supposed to stay in the background. Being an experienced smuggler he was also probably used to taking all sorts of risks and getting away with them and wouldn't listen to my fears.

"There's nothing else I can do," I thought, tapping the steering wheel. "I've got to tell him the truth and show him the newspaper article otherwise he'll never believe me. But that means he'll know I'm not Letitia and probably won't want to see me again."

The little boy broke free from his mother as they crossed the car park but his dad ran after him and caught him again and shoved him into the back seat of the car. The lad was screaming and lashing out and both parents looked tired and harassed. Once in the car with the door shut the boy must have realised he had no more options so he settled

back and looked over at me with a beaming grin then pinched his sister's leg. She started screaming.

"Don't ever have children," the woman said to me as she got in the car. "They'll ruin your life forever."

I smiled sympathetically as she looked sorrowfully at me then she brushed her hair out of her eyes, slammed the door and put on her seat belt. The man got in the driver's seat and they drove off. I'm no expert on children but it seemed to me the boy might have been hyperactive or ADHD which I was sure were treatable. Then again, maybe they didn't like the idea of pumping a young boy full of drugs. Ultimately they had to make the decision themselves about what was best for the boy and accept the consequences.

"Accept the consequences," I muttered as I watched them drive away. "Shit!"

* * *

It took forever for the sun to go down. I could probably have gone over to the pub and got something to eat but I really didn't want to. I wanted to stay in the car, fretting and checking my phone every few minutes. It seemed more productive somehow. So did scanning the sea even though there was no way I'd see the ship since I was way off in its future.

I decided to leave it half an hour or so after the last of the sun disappeared behind me before doing anything but that time dragged by even more slowly. Every minute seemed to last for a year or more and after eight minutes or so I got out of the car. I left my phone and the article on the passenger seat as it seemed to me that if I explained things to Hans then disappeared and returned with them he might be more inclined to believe me. If he still didn't believe me then all I could think of was to grab him and try to bring him forward in time with me although I suspected that wouldn't work. It hadn't with the car or my mattress but just maybe there was a place for him in my time and it would work. It was worth a try anyway.

I locked the car as a chill breeze off the sea sliced through me and I

wished I'd had the sense to bring a coat. Still, I hadn't so I had to put up with it. I put my keys on the top of the passenger side front wheel since they probably wouldn't go back with me and when I returned I wanted to be able to get them quickly, not search around the car park in the dark. I leaned against the Fiesta with a heavy heart, knowing that if I did manage to stop Hans from going to Melton and being arrested he'd know I wasn't Letitia and probably wouldn't love me any more. Still, I could live with that, or I hoped so anyway. At least he'd still be alive. I couldn't bear the thought of letting him go to his death and not doing anything about it, even if I never saw him again.

I retrieved the keys from the top of the wheel and unlocked the car. I picked up my phone and checked how much power it had. A little over 60% which was more than enough to take a couple of pictures of him before he walked away from me forever. I put the phone on the seat again, locked the car and put the keys back on the wheel. The place was deserted although the wind blew the rope of a flagpole so it banged a crazy rhythm against the pole. On the other side of the car park there was a single light outside the pub that illuminated its sign; The Smugglers Rest. I noticed it had an old and battered image of a three masted ship and wondered if it was Hans' ship. It probably wasn't since I vaguely remembered Tammy saying smuggling had gone on for centuries along this stretch of the coast but I liked the idea of Hans being memorialised in some way, even if it was only an old pub sign.

"It's time," I muttered and pushed myself away from the car. I turned to face the sea and held my arms out sideways as if to embrace and accept whatever was going to happen. "1860".

The weather changed instantly and drops of rain splashed into my face. I could feel some thick heavy cloth over my head and shoulders so, assuming it was a shawl or similar, I pulled it tighter then looked around. The jetty had six long low flat wagons, lined up one behind the other and the horses, two for each wagon, stood there looking thoroughly dejected. Six men were huddled in a group at the far end and I could just make out their voices although I couldn't hear what they were saying.

The Smugglers Rest was open. I could see people through the

windows and hear occasional snatches of voices. The other two pubs, long since abandoned in my time, were also in business although there was no one in what would eventually become the car park. It struck me that very probably all the locals knew smugglers were going to be unloading that night and made every effort to make sure they didn't see a thing. My car had gone, obviously, and there were rows of fishing boats tied up along the jetty and the foreshore.

Feeling exposed I made my way over to the nearest fishing boat and leant against it, hoping no one would see me and start asking questions, not that there was anyone around except the men with the wagons and they didn't seem to notice me. I didn't know what they'd do if they found a woman watching them and I didn't want to find out. I hoped Hans wouldn't be long.

After perhaps ten minutes or so I became aware of some wet splashing sounds that weren't the rain or the sea so I peered around the side of my fishing boat. The six men had separated and were walking back to their wagons. Further over I could just make out a large row boat making its way towards the shore. There was a sudden flash of light as someone uncovered a lantern momentarily and an answering light from the last of the wagons. It must have been a prearranged signal as the row boat suddenly veered towards the jetty and there was a brief exchange of words before someone on the boat tossed a rope. Moments later a cloaked and hatted figure leapt from the boat onto the jetty and grasped the hand of the front waggoner. More words were exchanged then the figure, most likely Hans as he was the ship's captain, turned back to the boat. No doubt whispered orders were given. although I didn't hear a thing, because perhaps half a dozen men jumped onto the jetty and barrels and boxes started being tossed from the boat which were caught and and passed along a line of men to be stacked on the first wagon. Further back I could see the front of another boat making its way into the jetty.

The cloaked figure stood and watched for perhaps ten or fifteen seconds then turned to look around. The man sitting on the first wagon said something then pointed to where I was hiding and the cloaked figure looked over.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered and stepped out into the open. The

cloaked figure waved, said something to the waggoner then hurried over.

“Letitia?” asked the figure as he got close. “Is that you, Letitia?”

It was too dark to make out his face but the voice was the same so I said “Yes” and he pushed the top of my shawl back and kissed me. Every thought I had of telling him who I really was and warning him of his arrest went out of my head. I just clung tightly to his wet cloak and returned every one of his kisses with three of my own. Or possibly four, I wasn't really counting. His hands found their way inside my shawl so, demanding an equality that probably didn't exist in his world, I worked my hands inside his cloak and let them roam as well. He was clearly pleased to see me since I could feel his sword hilt further round to the side.

“Wow!” he said when I finally let him come up for air.

“Yes, wow,” I said happily, keeping my hands inside his cloak. “I've missed you!”

“Ja and I also,” he said and looked back at the wagons. “When the first longboat is unloaded we go to my ship.”

“Yes,” I said, dreamily then remembered and jerked back. “No!”

“No?” he said, a puzzled edge to his voice as he also drew back.

“I need to talk to you,” I said nervously. “There's something I need to explain.”

“We can talk on my ship,” he said, coming forward again to slip his hands under my shawl. “Tis warm and dry and there is food awaiting us, aye, and best wine and brandy.”

“No, I cannot go to your ship,” I said, knowing that if I inadvertently tried to go forward in time from the ship I'd probably drown since the odds of there being another ship in that exact spot were non-existent. “We must talk here, on land.”

He looked at me for a few moments and I very nearly changed my mind. I desperately wanted to go with him to his ship and sail away, just the two of us. The fact that the ship probably needed a decent sized crew to sail anywhere was irrelevant.

“Ja, very well,” he said slowly after a while. “You are here alone?”

“Yes,” I said and it suddenly occurred to me that he probably thought my husband was alive and well and had come to get me. “Umm, is there anywhere we can go where it is quiet and not raining?”

I sensed rather than saw his eyes narrow and he drew back a little, pulling his hands from under my shawl.

“Wait here,” he said and turned. He walked over to the first boat, which was almost empty, and spoke to someone directing operations on the jetty. There were two other boats lined up behind the first and a fourth was just coming into view. I waited anxiously until Hans came back.

“We will go to the Crab and Horseshoe,” he said. “’Tis the quietest of the three and likely the roof does not leak. Come.”

I looked around and the furthest of the three pubs had a sign of a horseshoe with a crab inside it so that was probably the one. I wanted to hold Hans’ hand as we walked over but he didn’t offer it to me and I was too scared to take it on my own. He was probably expecting bad news. He pushed the door open and we went inside. It was fairly dark, being lit only by scattered lanterns and a large fire but was quite full of men drinking and being rowdy with a handful of women. Hans went over to a big fat red faced man and spoke with him then handed over a few coins before returning to me.

“There is a room upstairs,” he said, trying to speak quietly but the background noise was quite loud.

I looked over at the red faced man who caught my eye and leered at me then Hans took my hand and pulled me towards the stairs. We walked up and Hans pushed open the second door and peered in. Apparently it was empty so he pushed the door fully open and we

went inside. It was a small room with an unmade bed and no chairs but it did have a lantern hanging from the ceiling. It also smelt unpleasant. A mixture of stale beer, unwashed bedding, mice and other unidentifiable things.

“This would not be my first choice,” remarked Hans, sitting on the bed, “but it will suffice for bad news. What is it you need to explain?”

“Oh God,” I thought as my hands started to tremble. I sat on the bed as well. Not right up close to him as I sensed something had withdrawn inside him but not too far away either since I desperately wanted to be very close to him.

He sat there for a few moments, just looking at me then stood up again and took off his hat and cloak and tossed them to the floor. Then he turned to me and gently lifted off my shawl and folded it neatly before putting it on top of his cloak. Then he unbuckled his sword belt and sat back on the bed, his sword beside him and in easy reach.

“Speak to me Letitia,” he said.

I just stared dumbly at him, my throat tight and my heart pounding.

“Letitia?” he said again, reaching out to touch my hand. “What is it?”

“Oh God!” I screamed in my head then forced the words out of my mouth. “I am not Letitia!”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Hans burst out laughing and reached out to pat my leg but I shifted backwards hurriedly.

“No, listen!” I exclaimed. “I’m not Letitia. I’m her grand-daughter, well, her great great great great great great grand-daughter to be exact and I inherited this ring when granny died a few weeks ago.” I hoped I’d got the number of ‘greats’ right but it didn’t really matter.

“So who are you?” asked Hans with a smile. “Her great aunt Mary, perhaps? Come, Letitia, stop these silly games.”

Again he reached for me and again I backed off a little.

“No, I’m Sylvia,” I said. “Sylvia Avery. I was born in the year 1997.”

“And there is the absurdity of your tale,” said Hans. “The year be 1860 or had you forgotten?”

“I know damned well what year this is,” I said and immediately regretted my flash of temper. “That’s the whole point! I’m not Letitia, I just look like her but I’m from 160 years in the future!”

“Numbers were never your strong point, my sweet,” said Hans smiling, “less’n with counting shillings. 1997 be 137 years after 1860, not 160.”

He confused me there and I had to mentally re-check my maths before I realised.

“Nooo, I was born in 1997, Hans,” I said willing him to listen and accept. “I’m twenty six now so I’m actually from 163 years in the future.”

“Does your father know this?” asked Hans with a laugh. “He swore blind you be only 16 not an old maid same age as me.”

“Of course he does,” I said, thrown off balance. “Although I haven’t seen him for years.”

"T'would not be fair to say that," said Hans, relaxing against the wall behind the bed. "He was at your wedding and after you be wed he went to Thwaite on a job. 'Tis but four weeks."

"He is not my father!" I exclaimed. "He's Letitia's father!"

"And Sam's not your brother, then?" he asked. "'Tis a strange tale and one that beggars belief for you bear more than a passing resemblance to Letitia and moreover wear her clothes. I know her well. Tell me, Celia, why do you kiss me as she does?"

"I'm Sylvia, not Celia," I said harshly. Why wouldn't he believe me? They always did in the movies I'd seen!

"Ah ja, Sylvia," he said, with heavy emphasis on the Sylvia. "And the kisses? Why does Sylvia kiss me with such passion when we have never met before?"

I didn't have a ready answer for that and just stared at him, speechless. If he didn't believe I was from the future there was no way he was going to believe I'd inherited my love for him from my six great gran. In fact, he probably wouldn't believe I loved him at all.

"You have no answer to that charge, I see," he said and stood up. "Come, stop this childish game. I have business to attend to if 'tis your intent to not accompany me to my ship."

"It isn't a childish game!" I burst out. "It's true!"

He sighed and sat back down again.

"Oh Letitia, Letitia," he said, taking my hand. I snatched it back quickly. "Let us suppose that what you say is Gospel truth. What is the reason for this miracle? Why would a descendent of Letitia come back through time and masquerade as Letitia when the real Letitia is still here?"

"But she isn't," I said. "She's in York and you're going to be hanged!"

"Ja, 'tis more than likely," he said, sitting back again and watching me

with those eyes that took my breath away. "I hear tell the bounty on my head has been raised to £500, alive or dead. Doubtless many would like to claim that for themselves."

"And someone has," I said, "or will very soon. You are to be arrested when you go to Melton tomorrow."

"How do you know I go to Melton on the morrow?" he asked, snapping forward and grabbing my wrists hard. "I have not told you!"

"I read it in the newspaper," I said. "Let go! You're hurting me!"

"You read it in the newspaper," he said softly but he did let me go. I rubbed my wrists and stared sullenly at him. "How, pray, do you come to read of my deeds in the newspaper before those deeds are done?"

"I'm from the future," I said. "The newspaper said you were hanged next Wednesday."

"And you have this newspaper with you?" he asked, "or is this yet more of your play?"

"I have it with me," I said, "except it's in the car. I'll go and get it."

"Car?" he asked, before I could go back to my time. "What is 'car'?"

"It's like a carriage," I said, "but without horses. I used it to drive from the station to here."

He burst out laughing again and slapped his thigh.

"Oh you do amaze and tantalise me, dearest Letitia!" he exclaimed. "A horseless carriage, no less! Your imagination astounds and delights me. How, pray, is it pulled? By doves, perhaps, or fairies?"

"It's what we use in the future," I said, getting off the bed. "If you will excuse me I'll go and get the newspaper article and you can read it for yourself."

He graciously gave me an overly ostentatious wave of his hand and

settled back to see how I would get out of the trap since I obviously couldn't travel through time.

"Take me forward," I said and the room suddenly went dark. "Oh frigging shit!"

I'd forgotten that the ring took me back to the exact same spot and that I wasn't in the car park near the car any more. I was in a god-damned room in a derelict old pub! And I didn't have my phone to light the way.

The place was as dark as Hades and smelt of rot and damp. I felt around until I found a wall then followed it very cautiously hoping against hope all the floorboards were intact. The door opened very stiffly and I paused, trying to remember the route I'd taken to get up to the room. The stairs were a lot further away than I remembered and one gave way as I went down. Fortunately I had a tight grip on the banister although that sagged and threatened to give way. The main door, when I found it, was very solid and locked but after cursing and some exploring I found a broken back door and slipped outside. The rain had stopped and it was lighter outside than in so I was able to run to the car and retrieve my phone and the printout.

I wasted half a minute or more trying to work out how to turn on the phone's torch then cursed my stupidity. I didn't need the torch! All I had to do was go back to 1860 and walk through the lit pub and go up to the room! I dumped the phone on top of the car then went back to 1860. I hurried across the, yet to become, car park and into the pub. Hans was nearly at the bottom of the stairs and his face looked angry.

"Oh Jesus, I must have been a long time," I thought in dismay and hurried across to meet him. Halfway across the bar room a drunken man grabbed my arm and pulled me onto his lap. Surprised I sprawled across him.

"You be a new one, my pretty," he slurred and pawed the front of my dress. "Give us a kiss then, sweetie." His breath was foul.

I tried to slap his face but a strong hand grabbed my arm and hauled me upright at the same time a fist landed in the man's face. He half

rose from his bench then fell full length on the floor. The pub went silent and I heard someone mutter “’Tis Cap’n Dutch!”.

“I would ask you not to make a spectacle of yourself,” said Hans quietly as he set me upright. “Come upstairs again and this time preserve your dignity.”

“But that sod grabbed me,” I exclaimed, rubbing my arm.

“’Tis a dockside public inn,” said Hans a little gruffly. “Respectable women rarely venture in and never alone.”

He headed for the stairs and several men got quickly out of his way. I followed, very conscious this time of the looks I was getting although no one did anything. Still, on the positive side he at least thought I was respectable which was good news considering he probably thought I was a lying trickster trying to make fun of him or something.

“Where did you go?” he demanded when we got back to the room. “You left very quickly. ’Twas most impressive if foolish.”

“I’ve got the newspaper article,” I said, waving it at him.

“You still maintain that foolish story?” he said, frowning at me. I had a feeling that he was no longer treating this as a joke. Hopefully we were making progress and it wasn’t simply because I’d allowed myself to be mauled by a drunk in the bar.

“Just read the article,” I said hurriedly. “Then you’ll believe me.”

He stared at me for a few moments then snatched the paper from my hand. It disappeared as soon as I stopped touching it.

“Oh bloody shit!” I exclaimed. “Go forward.”

In the pitch black of the room I felt around until I found the piece of paper then returned to 1860. Hans was still barely an arm’s length away and he was staring at me in extreme alarm, his eyes wide and, was it possible?, frightened.

"I'm back," I said, happily waving the printout. "I can't let go of it, you see." It slowly dawned on me that something was wrong. "What's the matter?"

"You disappeared then reappeared," he said, slowly backing away. "Godverdamme!"

"It's all right," I said stepping forward and pushing the printout at him. "I'm still Sylvia. Read it. Please read it."

"Get away from me you devil!" he suddenly shouted and twisted to grab his sword and pull it from its sheath on the bed. "Get away, witch, or I shall run you through!"

I leapt back in panic as he thrust his sword in my direction.

"Hans, no!" I shouted. "I'm not a devil, I'm me! Sylvia! Letitia's granddaughter!"

"Begone foul spirit!" he growled, his face pale. "Begone. Return Letitia to this world and never return from whence you came!"

"But Hans, it's me," I screamed at him. "I'm me, I'm real! I love you!"

He rushed forward, violently pushing me aside with his arm. I bounced off the wall and fell to my knees as he ran from the room.

"Hans!" I shouted, winded. "Come back!"

By the time I got to my feet and was able to look through the door he'd disappeared. I hurried to the top of the stairs and there was no sign of him.

"You stupid frigging idiot!" I cried and nearly fell down the stairs in my haste to chase after him. When I got outside the car park was deserted although I could hear the splashing of oars as a boat pulled away from the jetty.

"Hans!" I screamed as I ran over. "Hans! Come back!"

“Begone, witch,” came faintly across the waves. “Begone lest I call a priest and exorcise you!”

Aghast I tripped over something unseen on the jetty and went sprawling.

“Oh Hans,” I whispered quietly, the tears beginning to flow. “It wasn't meant to be like this! Why won't you believe me? Hans!”

There was no reply.

* * *

I lay on the wooden boards of the jetty for a long time, adding my tears to the swell of the waves. I felt crushed, rejected. Not only had the bastard not believed me, he'd pulled a sword on me and thrown me against the wall. I'd probably never see him again either. Slowly I got up and tried to walk back along the jetty but I tripped over again and felt something slice the edge of my hand.

“Oh bloody wonderful,” I said dispiritedly.

I inspected my hand and it looked to be bleeding quite freely although it didn't seem to hurt. It stung but it didn't hurt.

“Great,” I muttered and turned to look out to sea. There was no sign of a boat coming back. “Might as well just bleed to death and get it over with.”

More out of habit than anything as I was devoid of any sort of curiosity I looked at what I'd tripped over and found it was a discarded case of bottles, most likely fallen from the back of one of the wagons. Most of the bottles were broken so I'd probably cut my hand on some of the glass. One bottle was still intact so after staring at it for a while I picked it up. I couldn't see the label in the dark and to be honest I didn't care. I felt completely empty and a little light-headed. Drained, emotionally and physically.

“What the hell happened?” I asked, wandering back to the end of the jetty. “Why didn't he believe me?”

I couldn't fathom it. It wasn't like this in the movies. They were supposed to say something along the lines of "I believe you and I'll love you anyway no matter what". As far as I knew no script writer had ever told them to say "begone witch or I'll exorcise you!".

My hand was starting to throb as I gazed vacantly around the car park, wondering where my car was. I held up my hand and noticed, without any particular interest, that blood was dripping off my little finger and the slice ran jaggedly from the heel of my hand to the gap between the little finger joint and the one next to it. It looked black rather than red. I poked it with the top of the bottle in my other hand and was surprised to find it now hurt.

"It's not supposed to be like this," I said and scowled at my hand before flinging my arms out and screaming "It's not supposed to be like this!"

Someone staggered out of the pub at that moment. He saw me and tried to come over but ended up falling on his face.

"Stupid sod," I muttered. "Oh yeah, I'm still back then, aren't I."

With the immense weight of the knowledge that everything had gone hopelessly wrong crushing the life out of me I stood there for a few moments, swaying. My body felt limp and my brain felt dead.

"Oh what the hell does it bloody matter now?" I muttered. "Go back."

I saw the dark bulk of the Fiesta appear and I walked slowly over to it. My keys and phone were still sitting on the roof where I'd left them although the doors were unlocked. I got in and dumped the bottle on the passenger seat then looked at my hand. It wasn't bleeding. In fact there wasn't even a cut.

"Great," I muttered listlessly. "So I'm not going to bleed to death after all. Shame."

I started the car and slowly drove back to the station. I left it where I usually parked and got out then reached in for the bottle. Out of habit I made for the kitchen when I got inside in order to make some tea

but, frankly, I didn't want tea. I wanted to get totally pissed. I turned on the lantern, hoping the bottle was vodka but there wasn't a label. It didn't have a screw top either. It had a cork. Whoever heard of vodka with a cork?

"Oh God," I muttered. "I hope it's not wine."

Not that it mattered since I didn't have a corkscrew. Aimlessly I wandered over to the side door and sat on the doorstep. I still had the bottle in my hand.

"Frigging idiot," I muttered. "Why couldn't he just have believed me? Why couldn't he just read that bloody article?"

I started to cry again. Hans had disappeared into the night, thinking I was a witch.

"He must hate me," I sniffled, my tears flowing freely. "Why, why, why didn't he just listen and believe me? He going to be hanged and I'll never see him again!"

I tried to push the cork into the bottle with my thumbs but it wouldn't budge so I stared at it through blurry eyes for a few moments then smashed the corked end against the stone wall. It broke off and some of the alcohol spilled out.

"Yay!" I exclaimed tonelessly and took a swig, not caring if I was swallowing broken glass or not. "Woah!"

It wasn't vodka, it was gin. And pretty rough too by the taste. Just how bootleg gin should be. Three long swigs later I wasn't sad and despairing anymore. I was angry. Bloody angry.

"How dare you fucking call me a witch!" I shouted. "You fucking bastard! I try to save your miserable bloody shit life and you call me a fucking witch! You deserve to be frigging hanged! I hope it bloody hurts!"

I took another swig from the bottle and noticed the ring on my finger. Very carefully I got onto my knees and put my head on the floor so I

could see just how carefully I put the bottle down

“There you go, sweetie,” I said, sliding it against the doorpost. I patted it then managed to get back on my bottom again without knocking it over.

“See this?” I said to the bottle, taking my ring off. I held it close to the bottle so it could see the ring. “This is the cause of all my problems, you see. Looks like a nice ring, doesn't it, but it isn't. Oh no. It's a fucking evil ring, like that ring in the Lord of the Rings. If it wasn't for this ring I'd never have heard of the fucking Hans and he wouldn't think I was a frigging witch. He'd be in love with me not that bloody Letitia bitch, witch, thingy. And I'll tell you something else, I'm going to destroy this frigging ring. Oh yes I am. Then Hans'll be sorry 'cos I won't be able to go back and visit him when he's in prison. He'll be sorry all right. Calling me, me!, a damned witch. Think's he's going to exorcise me, does he? I'll frigging teach him. Watch.”

I lifted my arm right back to throw the ring away and ended up flat on the floor. I struggled to get myself upright then tried again, this time throwing the ring far out into the field while shouting “get back to where you bloody came from!”. There must have been something wrong with my aim because it bounced off the doorpost beside me and disappeared.

“Bloody good riddance,” I said and had another drink. Then I burst into tears again.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Some persistent irritating noise half woke me. I rolled over a little and blearily opened an eye half way. Damn it was cold! Something out of focus was flashing so I shut my eye and rolled back again, groping futilely for my sleeping bag. The noise stopped. I was asleep again when it pinged. Then the bloody noise started again.

“Is that my phone?” I tried to mutter but my lips seemed to be stuck together.

I rolled over again, wishing I'd got a softer mattress, and managed to grab the phone. The screen was lit but my eyes wouldn't focus enough to see who it was. Not that it mattered. Whoever it was would ring back again later if it was important. I went back to sleep with my phone clutched in my hand.

The third time I woke up naturally. At least, nothing woke me as such although it wasn't really natural. Every joint in my body ached although my head thumped and parts of my face felt sore. I also needed to go to the lavvy but it seemed very likely that I wouldn't be able to get up. Apart from the aches and pains I didn't really have the energy. It was easier to lie there, to be honest. Except that it wasn't. My mattress had got so hard it was pushing my bones in unexpected and painful ways. I tried to groan but my mouth wouldn't open.

I breathed in deeply through my nose then counted to three to make a massive effort to get up but lost count somewhere around two. It was hard to think with all the wool in my head. After a while I decided to try rolling over and get onto my hands and knees. That seemed to work but for some reason my mattress had turned into a flagstone.

“What?” I thought, staring blankly at it.

I looked around and found that I was on my hands and knees with my bum poking out the door.

I grabbed the doorpost and used it to get unsteadily to my feet. I was definitely in the doorway. And there was a half empty bottle lying next to the doorstep with a broken neck. Gingerly I bent over and

picked it up. It smelt of gin.

“Right,” I thought. “Gin. Why was I drinking gin? I don't even like the stuff.”

I gently put the bottle down and tried to yawn but my lips hurt and were stuck together. I felt around with my fingers and it seemed like there was something crusty on my lips and chin. I gingerly picked up my phone, turned on the camera app and stared at myself in horror. I looked like a vampire just after dinner. My first reaction was panic as it was obvious someone had broken in during the night and beaten me up but realisation slowly dawned. I hadn't been beaten up, I'd been drinking from a bottle with a broken neck and must have cut my lips.

“Idiot,” I thought and slowly made my way to the ticket office bathroom to wash my face. It turned out I had half a dozen small cuts in my lips, one on the tip of my tongue and a small gash on the end of my thumb. They'd all bled profusely but on the positive side the gin had probably disinfected the cuts quite effectively.

I couldn't face traipsing all the way to the outside toilet so I peed in my plastic washtub then went to make some tea. I couldn't face sitting on the doorstep either so I sat in my camping chair and tried to figure out why I'd been drinking gin from a broken bottle. It took a little while before I remembered my abortive effort to try to persuade Hans not to go to Melton. I started to cry again then went back to bed to wallow in self pity and disgust with myself for not anticipating his reaction. For some reason it had never occurred to me that he might not believe me.

* * *

Surprisingly I did sleep and woke up feeling better physically, at least I could move around, although I felt very emotional and depressed. I couldn't face eating anything but tea sounded good so I made some and sat on the doorstep thinking dark thoughts about hangings and thwarted love. The hot tea stung my sore lips but I felt I deserved it, or worse.

“Just a minute,” I said out loud when my tea was nearly finished. “He's

had all night to think about it as well! Maybe he's changed his mind or at least got over his fear and is thinking about it. I've got to go back and try again! Go to 1860!"

Nothing happened so I said it again then realised I wasn't wearing the ring. I looked around but it wasn't anywhere to be seen so I checked in the kitchen, the bathroom and the bedroom but couldn't find it.

"When did you last see it?" I said to myself and thought back. I had a half memory of sitting on the doorstep and throwing it out into the field.

"You stupid twat!" I exclaimed and ran out into the field to search for it.

I was sobbing in despair several hours later when I still couldn't find it. He'd probably reached Melton by then and been arrested so I gave up. I considered filtering the bits of broken glass from the bottom of the gin bottle and drinking the rest but frankly I couldn't be bothered. Even living seemed pointless now although, fortunately, it didn't occur to me to use the broken bottle to end my self-loathing and despair.

* * *

I was up at dawn on Monday morning, out in the field again hoping the dawn light would glint on the ring in a different way. I spent most of the morning searching with a vague idea in my head of somehow organising a jailbreak. Maybe I'd even be able to get hold of some of his crew to help me. After all, some of them were probably quite familiar with the gaol in York and would know which guards were bribable. After a lunch of tea, since I still couldn't face anything to eat, I drove into Whitby to get a strimmer to cut down some of the undergrowth and make it easier to search. It wasn't until I got home that I realised I didn't have any electricity to power the damned thing. I threw it as hard as I could against the wall and started crying again.

* * *

I was still deeply depressed and upset when Tuesday dawned but more fatalistic. The newspaper article had said he was tried on the Tuesday

so it was probably too late now even if I did find the ring. I did, however, check my phone and found that I had had several calls and messages, two on Sunday and two on Monday. One of the Sunday ones was from my mum who'd left a message to say she was just ringing to see how I was. She left another, more urgent, on Monday. I sent her a text saying everything was fine and apologising for not replying on Sunday as I'd forgotten to charge my phone. The other Sunday call was from Maureen who wanted to know if I'd do the round with her on Monday. I hadn't replied so she'd phoned again on the Monday morning saying if I was still interested she'd meet me in Whitby at midday. I hadn't got that call as I'd been searching the field so she'd probably told Jarrod I hadn't turned up.

Frankly I didn't really care but as I sat there feeling more miserable than I'd ever felt before in my life it occurred to me that I would still need to eat sooner or later even if I didn't feel like eating at the moment. In fact I hadn't eaten since Sunday but that was irrelevant since tea is quite fortifying. Unenthusiastically I phoned her and explained that I'd run over my phone with the car and had to get a new one but fortunately the SIM was undamaged. She was distant and iffy to begin with but seemed to bond with me over the broken phone as she'd dropped hers down a toilet once, lost three others and thrown another at an ex husband so she was familiar with the problem of being phoneless. We arranged get together on Friday afternoon, her last day, and do the round of Jarrod's properties. I then phoned Jarrod and fed him the lie as well since Maureen had told him I hadn't turned up or answered her calls. He seemed relieved although I didn't really care one way or the other. It also occurred to me that with the ring now gone I probably wouldn't be getting any more valuable old coins to sell.

* * *

Wednesday was spent mostly sitting round wondering how Hans was feeling in gaol and if he was getting enough to eat. I wasn't. I made a couple of marmite sandwiches with the last of my bread but it was stale and after nibbling a corner I threw them both to the birds. The milk was off too so I was now drinking black tea. I wondered what it was like sitting in a cold, dank cell knowing you were going to be hanged very soon. I felt a certain empathy. With Hans thrust so

suddenly into my life then taken away again so quickly I felt my life was coming to an end as well. OK I wasn't going to be hanged but everything now seemed hollow and pointless. Even the beauty of the moors had lost their charms. I'd have thought about chucking the place up and going back to London if I could be bothered. On the other hand though my lips were healing, not that I'd ever kiss anyone again.

* * *

On Thursday I ran out of teabags.

I contemplated giving up drinking tea but decided I'd probably dehydrate if I did that since I was still bursting into tears at regular intervals, when I wasn't moping. Late morning I roused myself to make the effort and ran a brush through my hair for the first time since Sunday then drove to the supermarket in Whitby. I bought a packet of 200 teabags since I didn't want to be endlessly traipsing back and forwards as well as some milk and a Mars Bar. At the checkout the date on the pile of newspapers jumped out at me. It was the 5th of October.

"What the hell?" I said, picking one up. "But it's Thursday, not Friday."

The newspaper confirmed this. Just under its banner and above the headline about some war in the Ukraine was the day and date. Thursday 5th October. Confused I paid for my purchases and stumbled back to my car.

"But Hans was hanged on Friday, 5th October," I muttered. "Isn't that tomorrow?"

I sat in the supermarket car park and Googled 'what day was 5 oct 1860'.

"Oh Jesus!" I exclaimed, staring at the result. In 1860 the 5th of October was a Friday but this year it was a Thursday.

"So he's already been hanged?" I exclaimed and slammed my hand on the steering wheel. A small dog in the car next to me started yapping

in alarm. It was stupid of me I know but I'd been kind of thinking I might go out onto the loading ramp at the station around the time Hans was hanged on Friday and have some sort of little memorial service but those frigging Time Lords had cheated me of that as well. He'd already been hanged and I'd missed it. Unsurprisingly I burst into tears again.

I hadn't had any tea for a while so my tears didn't last that long. I dried my eyes then started to drive home. At one point I picked up the Mars Bar and peeled back the wrapper but just the smell of food made my stomach heave so I wound down the window and tossed it to the gulls.

"Maybe it'll still be on Friday," I muttered. "After all, dates are human things so how would the ring or whatever controls this know about the 5th of October? The days are based on the spinning of the Earth so that makes more sense."

Feeling a fraction more cheerful, especially as it occurred to me that Hans would probably forgive me for getting confused over details like that, I resolved to have a memorial service on Friday anyway. I started composing a personal eulogy in my head. It was surprisingly difficult as I realised I actually knew virtually nothing about him. All I knew was my feelings.

I parked the car, picked up the tea bags and milk and left the paper in the car. I walked down to the front door and pushed it open then dropped the lot when there was a footstep behind me.

"So that is your horseless carriage, ja?" said a voice.

I screamed and spun round so fast I made myself dizzy.

"Hans?" I shouted. "Hans?"

Then I fainted.

Chapter Twenty Nine

When I came round I found I was lying on my mattress with my pillow under my head. I sat up quickly when I remembered seeing Hans then lay down again as it was obvious I'd only had a nap and dreamt about him. Why I'd go for a nap still dressed I didn't know but it wasn't wholly unknown. I thought about making some tea but I figured I'd dreamt about getting some more tea bags as well. All in all it seemed easier to stay in bed. After all, what was there to get up for?

Barely a minute later I heard faint footsteps cross the living room and I sat up again, this time distinctly nervous. They seemed to be coming closer.

"Who's that?" I shouted, picking up my torch. It wasn't much of a weapon but there wasn't anything else.

"Tis me, Hans," said Hans, coming in the door. He held a steaming mug in his hand.

"Hans?" I exclaimed and nearly fainted again. I managed to keep a grip though and scrambled out of bed. I stood there like an idiot staring at him.

"Wow," he said with a smile. "Is right, ja?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demanded. "Are you a ghost?"

"No, I am not ghost," he said. "These little bags? The box says tea but never have I seen tea such as this. 'Twas fortunate there were directions as well."

"Umm, they're tea bags," I said, my mind trying to cope with this. "A fairly new invention."

I couldn't contain myself any longer so I leapt forward and wrapped my arms around him. He felt very real and solid and so what if he was a ghost? Apparently I was a witch so it all made sense, in a strange twisted way.

Impressively he managed to hug me back, match my kisses with his and not lose his balance or spill more than about a quarter of the mug. I, on the other hand, couldn't let go of him. I had this insane feeling that as long as I had a tight grip he couldn't disappear.

"Wow," I said when I started to become afraid my kisses would open the cuts on my lips again. "Just wow! What are you doing here? I thought you were hanged."

"I know not what is happening nor where I am," he said, "but I venture you are Sylvia and not Letitia?"

"Yes I am Sylvia," I said, "and this is Smocklebeck Station but it's 2023, not 1860."

"And this is what you wear in 2023?" he asked.

"Yes," I said happily. "Don't you like it?" I gave him a twirl without letting go of his hand.

"Twill take some getting used to, I venture," he said.

I suddenly realised he was wearing what most of the local men wore, jeans and a thick jumper. His heavy cloak, tight trousers and cravat were presumably a thing of the past.

"You'll find a lot has changed," I said. "But you'll get used to it."

"Have you been fighting?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I said, surprised.

"You have cuts on your lips," he said. "How is that?"

"Ahh, that was my own stupid fault," I said, feeling very stupid.

I explained about breaking open the gin bottle after he'd called me a witch and getting drunk and he was very apologetic.

"I am Hans Hoedemaker, Midnight Dutch, and afraid of nothing," he

said, "or so I thought. But when you said what you said and disappeared and reappeared that night I feared greatly for I thought I had been cast down into the underworld."

"Yes, you called me a witch and threatened to have me exorcised," I said. "I didn't like that. I was only trying to save you."

"And being a fool I did not see that," he said. "'Twas only after my arrest in Melton that my mind turned to what you said and I began to see it for the truth it was."

"So you believe me now?" I asked, taking the tea from his hand. It was tepid but wet so I drank it. It tasted a little watery as well so I don't think he let the water properly boil first. That said it was a fair bet he'd never seen a camping gas cooker before so he'd done well to even warm the water.

"As I sat in the cell it came to me that not only were you telling me true but that you had taken a fearful risk in coming to tell me at all," he said. "I know not of travel through time but doubtless there is much that can go amiss."

"I've no idea," I said, "but I had to warn you whatever the consequences."

"And for that I owe you much," he said. "Even though I feared you were a demon I was nonetheless forewarned of the arrest."

"Do you know who shopped you?" I asked, still not letting go of his hand.

"Shopped? What is this please?" he asked, looking puzzled.

"Umm, informed on you," I said.

"Ahh, so. Ja, 'twas the man I was going to see," he said. "The police were waiting for me when I arrived."

"So how did you escape?" I asked.

"The way I always escape," he said laconically. "I gave a guard a hundred pounds to look the other way."

"It was really that easy?" I asked, surprised.

He laughed.

"No, this time it was not so easy," he said. "The East Riding Constabulary are only newly formed and counted me as a major feather in their cap. I also had to give the Chief Constable five hundred pounds to find another poor dog to hang in my place and fifty pounds to provide for this man's widow."

"You mean they hanged someone instead of you?" I asked, horrified. "Some innocent sod died to save you?"

"I venture he was not so innocent," said Hans. "Mayhap he was not Midnight Dutch but doubtless he was guilty of many things else he would not be in gaol as well. For certain his widow was grateful for the money and will no doubt marry again."

"Well, perhaps," I said. I wasn't certain of the morality of this but the one who'd been hanged was a stranger and Hans was alive and well which was the important thing. "But how come you are here, now?"

"And that is where my fortunes took a strange turn," said Hans. "I vowed in gaol that if I got the chance I would return to Smocklebeck to find you should you return. Letitia is lost to me forever but you, Sylvia, you came to find me and save me and for that I owe you a most mighty debt. But wait, 'twould seem you are thinner than when we last met. Have you been ill?"

"I've not been eating properly," I admitted, "but that doesn't matter. Tell me what happened."

"As you wish," said Hans. "I bought a horse and rode like the wind to Smocklebeck but could not find you. I spoke with Sam and he had not seen you either although he confessed to seeing an apparition on three occasions that he took to be Letitia. He had, moreover, written to tell her of this and enquire as to her health but had not yet had a reply.

"Twas as I spoke with Sam that I saw he had this ring in his possession."

Hans held out his hand and I gasped. My ring was on his little finger.

"I've been looking for that," I said. "How come Sam had it?"

"I could not tell Sam the significance of the ring," said Hans, "for I gave it to Letitia in strictest confidence for it would not be seemly for her husband or father or brother to know of our feelings for each other. I did, however, admire the ring and asked how it came to be in his possession. 'Twould seem he found it in the field but a few days ago and thought it would make a nice trinket to give his betrothed. I made him an offer for the ring and we settled on five guineas. I neglected to say that I spoke your words to my own ring in the hope that I would be carried to you but to no avail. Your ring seemed to me to be my last chance, not least because you no longer had it."

"And did it work?" I asked, breathless.

"Ja," said Hans. "I hid out of sight of Sam and spoke your words. To my great surprise the train and track disappeared and the manner of my clothing changed. I surmised that I had somehow moved into your time. I was about to resume my search for you when I heard a most alarming noise and hid myself in the wilderness once again. 'Twas you in your horseless carriage and my heart was filled with such a joy as I have never known before."

"Oh surely Letitia managed to do that," I said, desperately wanting to believe him but fearful of Letitia.

"Ja, it is so," he admitted, "but there is another thought that has been much in my mind."

"And what is that?" I asked, saddened and a little disappointed.

"That you are Letitia," he said. "Now I am with you again 'twould seem that likely you are not for Letitia would never be seen in such garb as you wear but yet my heart speaks as strongly for you as it did for her. Mayhap stronger for she left me for another whereas you

risked all for me. Granted it was at her father's most forceful insistence for he desired a good match for his only daughter. I cannot find it in myself to fault either for my arrest and hanging showed him to be right in not favouring me. I fancy you are made of sterner stuff for you say you had no father and doubtless had to make your own way in the world without his guidance."

"So what are you saying?" I asked, feeling weak. Undoubtedly it was from lack of food.

"I know not," he admitted, "but likely I love you for there is an intensity in me that I did not feel even for Letitia."

"Forget Letitia," I said. My knees gave way as I looked into his bright blue eyes and he grabbed me and held me against him. "She's been gone a long time whereas you and I are both here."

He had the sense to not try to argue with me or even speak. He just kissed me and stroked my disgustingly unwashed hair and let things take their natural course.

"So what happens now?" I asked when we stopped for breath.

"We eat?" he asked.

"Good point," I said. "We'd better go and get some food because there isn't any in the house. What I meant though was will you be going back to 1860?"

"I know not," he said. "There is nothing there for me but a death sentence. Will you be returning to then?"

"I suppose I could," I said, "but I don't want to end up a widow there. Why not stay here?"

* * *

I was snoozing happily in bed with Hans' strong arms around me when someone pounded on the door in the morning. He was awake instantly and reaching for his non existent sword.

“Relax,” I said drowsily. “This world is a lot safer than yours. It's just someone at the door. I'll see who it is.”

I got up and put on some clean clothes then went to the door. There was no one there.

“Strange,” I said and walked a little way out towards the toilet.

Behind my car I could see another. A big four wheel drive.

“Hello?” I called, looking around. “Anyone there?”

“Oh hello,” said a middle aged man, appearing on the platform. “I was just looking around. I'm David Bailey. Are you Sylvia Avery?” He hurried over to greet me.

“Yes I am,” I said. “Umm, how can I help you?”

“I'm the photographer,” he said then added when he saw my lack of comprehension, “from The Northern Locations Agency? To take some pictures?”

“Oh, God, yeah,” I said. “Sorry, I forgot all about that. Hey, how's it going?”

“Lovely place you have here, Ms Avery,” he said, looking around. “Great ambience. Very photogenic.”

“Thanks,” I said, “and call me Sylvia. Would you like some tea?”

“Oh I could murder a cuppa,” he said. “Got some at a petrol station on the way here and it was disgusting.” He eyed the strimmer that still lay where it had landed but didn't say anything.

“Great, come inside,” I said, ignoring the thing. “Oh, this is Hans, my husband.” Even though it wasn't true just saying it filled me with happiness. “Hans, this is David. He's come to take some photographs.”

Hans was obviously about to ask what photographs were so I quickly shook my head and he didn't. Instead he came over, held out his hand

and said “Goedemorgen” rather stiffly.

“Ohh, you're a Dutchman,” said David. “I was in Amsterdam a few years ago. Lovely place.”

“Ja,” said Hans as we walked into the house. “I am from Rotterdam but I have been to Amsterdam many times.”

“Jesus, it's a bit bare in here, isn't it,” exclaimed David looking around.

“Umm, well we've only just moved in,” I said quickly. “And we can't afford much in the way of furnishings yet.”

“Yeah, know what you mean,” said David. “It was like that for me and the wife when I were just starting out like. Actually, you're a very attractive looking couple if you don't mind me saying so. I'm thinking a few nice shots of the two of you with this house behind would look very good on your agency profile page. Might even get you a few extra bookings because you look decent and trustworthy. Not like some of the owners I've met.” He sniggered and looked at us expectantly. “I can retouch your lips later, of course. Make 'em a bit fuller too if you like.”

“Um, well, sure, why not,” I said. After all, if a portrait of Hans and me could secure a £20,000 a day movie location fee it was well worth doing. Same with my lips really.

“Great,” he said. “Let's get that out of the way then we'll have some tea and you can show me around. Stay dressed just like that. More natural. Fits the atmosphere.” He laughed

“Where do you want us?” I asked, taking Hans hand. He looked thoroughly bemused and I reflected he would have no concept of a photoshoot whatsoever. Even though Tammy had said photography had been invented in the 1820s it probably hadn't become commonplace by 1860.

“How about over by that well?” asked David. “Very evocative.”

“OK,” I said and led a reluctant Hans over to the well.

“Just relax,” I whispered. “I’ll explain later.”

“Lovely, lovely,” said David, looking at a screen attached to his camera. “Sylvia, if you could turn just a little more to your right and lift your chin? Perfect, and stick your chest out a bit? Beautiful, beautiful. Hans, if you could smile a little and not look so stern? A bit more? Yes, hold it.”

The camera clicked.

“Wanna see?” asked David, walking over.

“Love to,” I said as he froze in mid stride, staring at the camera screen. Then he looked beyond the well with a puzzled expression.

“Bugger,” he said, looking back down at the screen. “Bit of a glitch, sorry. We’ll have to do that again. It looks like there was someone behind you.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “Show me.”

He twisted the screen so I could see it. There was definitely someone else in the picture. It looked like a woman in a long brown dress walking away from the well, an arm half raised in a cheerful farewell.