

An illustration of a woman with long, wavy red hair, wearing a dark top and a light-colored shawl. She is looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile. The background is a soft, warm yellow with faint floral patterns.

A
Taste
of
Honey

Lynette Rees

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Lynette Rees

Dedication

To Colin,

For all the times I shut myself away in the room next door, tapping on my computer—it was worth it. Thank you for your loving support.

Chapter One

Her heart beating wildly beneath her low-cut blouse, Fran Santini licked her lips. *Remember to keep your cool, move slowly, be in control. Inhale and then let it out again. Steady.*

The bar was crowded as usual for this part of the city on a Friday night. She had to nudge her way past groups of laughing men and gossiping women to get to where she wanted, but that place seemed a long way off.

She stole a glance at her watch. *Have to make eye contact with the target, that's important.* The man in the corner cuddling his pint of Guinness seemed preoccupied. She needed him to look up, to look at her. *Keep walking. Get closer.* Now she was straight opposite him. She coughed. He appeared not to hear. He looked so out of place in this trendy establishment, she felt sorry for him until she remembered the telephone conversation she'd had with his wife. "The cheating bastard. I'm sure he's been seeing another woman for a year. I want proof so I can nail the son of a bitch!" With those words ringing in her ears, Fran cleared her throat.

The man looked up. The first thing she noticed was his eyes; they were so soulful, fringed with heavy, dark lashes. She found it hard to take her own off them. They were the kind of green you could lose yourself in. For a moment, she forgot why she was here. Her mouth dry, she said, "Er, do you mind if I sit?"

He said nothing, just shook his head, indicating she could sit down if she wanted. Boy, she had a feeling this was going to be hard work.

Out of his pocket, he pulled a battered tin and some cigarette papers. Taking some tobacco, he deftly placed it in the middle of one of the papers and made a roll-up. She watched as he ran the tip of the paper

across his tongue and sealed the cigarette. Now was her chance. She leaned forward, so he would get a flash of her ample cleavage, and used her huskiest voice, the one she used for jobs like this.

“Do you mind?” She placed one of her own cigarettes between her lipstick-painted lips. She didn’t normally smoke, but knew it looked seductive and, after all, she had been forewarned he was a smoker.

“Mind what?” he replied, in what sounded like an Irish brogue.

“I was hoping you would give me a light.”

“Oh.” He took a match from the box and struck it. She leaned even closer as the flame touched the tip of the cigarette. “You have to inhale at the same time.” The corner of his lips curved upwards into a half smile. She felt foolish, but she was right about one thing—he was Irish. “Now, you’re not really a smoker, are you?”

“I am,” she replied indignantly and inhaled deeply to prove she was, prompting a coughing fit. If ever Francine felt like the ground should swallow her up, it was right at this very moment.

“Here.” The man handed Fran her drink. She observed he had a tattoo of a shamrock on the back of his forearm. As she took the glass from his outstretched hand, his fingers brushed against hers. A tingly feeling danced over the surface of her skin, taking her by surprise. This wasn’t going to be easy. He didn’t seem the type of person she thought he was. But his wife’s description had been accurate: collar-length, dark brown hair, green eyes, goatee beard, smoker. But no mention of a tattoo. How strange.

Now what? “Come on, you’ve got lucky.” She licked her lips. If she could just get him outside in a compromising situation, a photographer awaited to snap a picture of them together.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I thought you might like to come home with me for a night cap?”

“I don’t usually go off with strange women, darling!” His eyes widened and he drained his pint, then slammed it down on the table.

So that was his game, was it? He had probably guessed his wife had someone following him.

Fran tried to keep her voice controlled. “Isn’t that what lecherous men like you want? A mistress, while your poor wife stays at home looking after the children?”

He gave her a hard stare, as if she had a screw loose. “I don’t know what you’ve been drinking, but I reckon you should make that your last one. I ain’t the marrying kind. And I certainly don’t go around picking up strange women with all the morals of an alley cat.”

Well, he would say that wouldn’t he? If he suspected something.

He got up out of his seat and grabbed his combat jacket from the back of the chair. Shaking his head and muttering under his breath, he pushed past her.

Immediately, Fran was on her feet. “You no-good, two-timing son of a bitch!” The pub chatter ceased and everything went deadly quiet. She hadn’t realised how far her voice would carry. It felt as if time had stopped and all the pub’s regulars were on freeze frame. This was so not how to do her job. It was unethical, but she just couldn’t help herself. The man was arrogance itself.

She watched as his shoulders tensed up. The back of his neck appeared to shrink down into his shoulders. Slowly, he turned.

People were giving him the evil eye and whispering. *Good. What did she care if everyone in the pub knew about him?*

The man took a deep breath. “Lady, I have never seen you before in my life and, if I ever see you again, it will be too soon.” Then he pushed his way through the crowd that parted like the Red Sea to allow him to pass.

Fran followed close after him. Once on the street, she gave a thumbs-up sign to the photographer slouched against the wall across the road, to indicate he should follow them. One thing was for sure, the Irish bloke could walk at a hell of a pace. For someone who smoked, he seemed ultra fit. Fran’s high-heeled shoes pinched her feet and one of her heels got wedged in a crack in the pavement.

“Stop!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs. “I want a word with you.”

The man paused and turned to face her, then burst out laughing as she toppled over and lay spread-eagled on the pavement. Any dignity she had now disappeared. Her dress hitched up around her thighs and her stocking tops were on full view. Fran felt her face heat up.

When his laughter ceased, he ran over and helped her to her feet.

“I can manage, thank you.” She brushed the dirt from her new dress. She had torn it and broken a fingernail into the bargain.

He steadied her, taking no notice of her protests to keep away. Aware of his closeness, she shivered. Brought back to reality, she heard a click behind them. Oh no, she had forgotten—the photographer.

“What the...?” The man furrowed his brow, his lips tightening. “I don’t know what your game is, little lady, but you’d better keep away from me before I do something I might regret.” He quickly walked away.

“Yeah, run away,” Fran shouted after him. “That’s what men like you do. You’re all the same!” She remembered the photographer. “Did you get that?”

“Yep. I fired off a few shots from across the road, but the best one was when he steadied you after you had fallen.” The photographer frowned. “Hey, I’m not too happy about setting this chap up.”

“You’ve done it before, Ralph. Why the pang of conscience?”

“Something doesn’t feel right. Are you sure you had the right bloke?”

“Let me tell you, Ralph, I’ve been in this game for some time now and I know we got the right man.”

* * *

Camille Johnson fingered the large black and white prints and handed them back to Francine. “It’s not him.”

Fran’s stomach flipped over. “Are you sure? Take another look...”

“I think I’d recognise my own husband. I’ve never seen that man before in my life.”

“But I was so sure after the description you gave me. You said where he would be drinking and that he had a goatee beard.”

Mrs. Johnson raised her eyebrows and threw her shoulders back, now towering over Fran. “I said nothing of the sort.”

“Yes, you did. You said, ‘collar-length brown hair, green eyes and goatee beard’.”

Mrs. Johnson looked up at the ceiling in desperation. “I said, ‘collar-length brown hair, green eyes and that he would go to bed’. I meant he would go to bed with the woman in question. I can assure you that my husband does not have a goatee beard!” She flared her nostrils in disgust.

Fran looked at the floor. “Oh! Sorry. It’s just that you don’t see many men with goatee beards these days, so I just assumed.”

“Never assume, dear. It just makes an ass out of you and me. I shall expect a refund, of course.”

Fran swallowed. Now she would have to explain to her boss why she’d failed on this particular assignment. She had been so sure, too. Never mind, she was hardly likely to see the man again, was she? It was his local and she never drank there. She also made it a rule not to return to a pub where she had set up a honey trap. This one she would just have to chalk up to experience.

As she left the office for home, a small giggle escaped her lips at the thought of Camille Johnson with *that* man. Chalk and cheese. Camille Johnson appeared so full of herself and that man, he appeared so down to earth. Not ordinary, mind you. Possibly a bit of a loner. Hardly Camille’s type at all. Fran had only spoken to the woman on the phone. How was she to know she was dealing with a woman dressed in a designer outfit, who didn’t have a hair out of place?

Daphne, the middle-aged receptionist, looked up from her desk as Fran was leaving.

“A hit or miss?” she asked, munching a donut.

“A definite miss.” Fran could only guess Daphne was thinking nearly all Fran’s honey traps somehow went to pot. She must be the worst honey trapper in the business.

Fran said her farewells and made her way down a long flight of Victorian stairs and out into the car park below. Her faithful scooter, Veronica, Ronnie for short, stood waiting to take her home. Fran opened the box at the back and got her helmet out, cursing under her breath at the sheer stupidity of it all. Francine had just one hour before she started work at her parents’ restaurant. If Mamma and Papa only knew what her other part-time job was, they would have forty fits.

The drive home was arduous. A stream of heavy traffic from the city centre had built up, but her scooter was able to weave in and out of it. She would have less time to put her feet up than she thought. At least she could have a strong cup of coffee and a sandwich. Mamma and Papa thought she worked in an office. She did, so that was hardly a lie. But they thought she typed letters, answered phones, spoke to clients. Well, she did, so that part was truthful. What she had failed to tell them was she set up cheating men.

Oh, there had been the odd case where the wife wanted reassurance her hubby didn’t have another woman. Francine had been happy to reassure her that, yes indeed, her husband had spent every Thursday playing darts at his local with his mates, or whatever.

But more often than not, it was bad news and she needed to supply the evidence for it—hence, the photographer. She also kept a personal alarm and a radio connection, which got her through to the Peace of Mind office, a front for the honey trap business. Fran thought the name sounded more like a therapy centre than an undercover agency. Then again, it gave the women what they most wanted—peace of mind.

Fran rounded the corner on the scooter, turned off the engine and wheeled it into the yard at the back of the restaurant. The clatter of plates and steamed-up kitchen windows told her it was a busy evening. She removed her helmet and took the wrought iron steps up to her flat, letting out a long breath as she unlocked the door.

Merlin, her Persian cat rubbed himself up against her legs, weaving expertly in and out of them just as she had done herself in the rush hour traffic.

“Good boy.” She knelt down, scooped him up and buried her face in his fluffy fur. This was just what she needed right now, a good cuddle. At times like this she was so glad she lived alone—without a man in her life. But a cat was something else. Cats didn’t nag at you or demand your attention. Well, maybe they did now and again, but at the end of the day, as long as Merlin was well fed and warm, that’s all he cared about.

Fran filled the kettle and looked absently out the kitchen window. Not the best view in the world—the back alley. The words, alley and cat, took her back to what the man had said last night. *“I certainly don’t go around picking up strange women with all the morals of an alley cat!”* What kind of impression had she made? She shuddered to think. Maybe he thought she was a hooker or someone from the newspaper when the photographer had shown up. For the first time, she felt a pang of guilt. He hadn’t asked for any hassle, had he? When she’d turned up, he had been quietly sitting in the corner, nursing his pint of Guinness, oblivious to everyone and everything around him.

Distracting herself from any negative thoughts, she switched on the radio and pulled two slices of bread out of the wrapper. Salami and tomato would have to do; she didn’t have much time before she would be needed at the restaurant. *Oh well, back to the grind...*

* * *

Travis O’Connell straightened his tie. He felt uncomfortable. It was the first time he had worn a shirt and tie since his Uncle Dougal’s funeral, when Travis had returned to Donegal a couple of months back. Still, he thanked his lucky stars the agency had contacted him about this job. An urgent vacancy needed to be filled quickly, they had told him. He was a trained chef and out of work for the past few months. He didn’t

mind that it was an Italian restaurant. He loved Italian food and he was a quick learner, a willing student.

He had felt tensed up all day and he knew why. That woman from last night. She was like a lunatic. For a moment, he wondered if she was some kind of a stalker. Maybe she had been watching him without his knowledge for ages. You often heard of that kind of thing. He had to admit though, he had experienced a sort of a thrill when she had fallen over, revealing her stocking tops. Now they were a pair of legs to die for, weren't they? He tried to banish the picture he had conjured from his mind. No matter what the woman looked like, she could be dangerous. He regularly read about it in the newspapers.

Nah. Why would anyone stalk him? He kept to himself. What would her motive be anyway? Unless she fancied him—that would explain her getting the photographer along. He'd seen a film like that once. This woman had been so besotted she had taken hundreds of pictures of a man and displayed them all over her house. He swallowed. Not only that, she'd kept a file on him, too. He loosened his collar. She had even recorded the times he left the house, where he went and rifled through his trash can. *Stop it, you are getting carried away, man*, he chided himself. *Concentrate on the job in hand. Get to the interview. Sell yourself. You need this job.*

Outside The Vine Tree, he straightened his tie and took a deep breath. The restaurant was open for business. He would have to walk in and ask at reception for Mr. Ronaldo Santini, the owner. At least he would get a feel for the place; he could judge the atmosphere. He knew he was lacking in confidence. It had been a while since he'd been made redundant from his last position. The Greek owner had thought Travis had his hands in the till, when nothing could have been further from the truth. He guessed the owner's son had been taking the money to fund his drug habit, but he could hardly tell his boss that, could he?

Gingerly, Travis edged open the front door to be greeted with a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The place had ambiance. Several tables had little alcoves for those who wanted a more intimate experience. Colourful seascape paintings and photos from the old country were displayed with

pride on the wall. A large fishing net was strung over the ceiling. Red and blue clear glass bottles and conch shells decorated the shelving. The smell from the kitchen was wonderful. Travis's mouth watered and his stomach growled. It was more than he could bear. He had lived off baked beans, lentils and bread for the past week. He had to get this job.

A young couple were tucking into a dish of seafood and feeding one another from the same plate; a family, which seemed to be in the middle of some sort of celebration, took over the largest circular table in the middle of the room; and a party of young women were giggling at the back of the room—a hen party perhaps, the way one of them was dressed in angel wings, a tiara and an L-plate adhered to the back of her barely-there dress.

Travis stood transfixed, his heart beating like a jackhammer.

“Have you booked a table?” a good-looking, dark-haired man asked.

“No...I...” Somehow Travis couldn't find the words he was looking for and feared he might bolt out the door. But the reminder of an empty stomach and more bills kept him rooted to the spot.

“Sorry, we're fully booked this evening. You should have made reservations in advance,” the man said in curt manner.

Travis made up his mind he wasn't going to like him. Imagine if Travis had been a client of this restaurant. The man was too abrupt, not welcoming enough for his liking.

Travis inhaled deeply and stood up straight, meeting his height inch for inch. He remembered the old trick to act confident, even if he didn't feel it.

“I'm here for an appointment with Mr. Santini, about the vacancy you have.”

The man narrowed his eyes as if he didn't believe Travis.

“Wait here. I'll get my father to sort this out.”

Sort what out? Didn't he realise his father was interviewing for staff?

In the distance, as Travis waited under the watchful eyes of some of the patrons, it became evident from the raised voices coming from the

kitchen that something was up. He was just about to leave when an older, bald-headed version of the young man hurriedly walked across the restaurant with his hand outstretched.

“You must forgive my son, Antonio. I didn’t warn him about this. You see, I think he wanted to step into the role of head chef here, but in my opinion he’s not that good. Don’t get me wrong, he’s an adequate chef but I need someone who can run that kitchen well.”

Travis gulped. He hadn’t realised the vacancy was for a head chef. Not only was he applying for a role he had never carried out, but he would make an enemy of the boss’s son.

Travis was about to explain there must be a mix up when Ronaldo Santini ushered him over to a quiet alcove and clicked his fingers at a young waitress.

“Now what will you have to drink, Mr...”

“Travis O’Connell. I’d like a strong coffee, please.”

“Some brandy in it, too, I wouldn’t mind betting?”

Travis smiled. He was going to like Mr. Santini. He owed him some honesty at least. “Before we start, Mr. Santini, there is something I should tell you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Although I am a trained chef and a competent one at that, I have never worked as a head chef.”

Mr. Santini’s eyes clouded over. *Oh well, another job down the drain.*

“How many years experience have you had?”

“Ten. I’ve worked on board ship, in fancy hotels and restaurants.”

“Have you had much responsibility in any of your jobs?”

“Oh yes. I’ve had to train up other chefs, been responsible for ordering, worked as a head of a team, etc.”

“Then I believe it should be a doddle for you, Mr. Travis.”

“O’Connell.”

Mr. Santini furrowed his brow. “Sorry, Mr. O’Connell. When can you start?”

He had the job, he really had the job. He was brought back down to earth by the thought that Mr. Santini was desperate for a head chef.

“As soon as possible.”

“That’s a deal, then,” said the old man, vigorously pumping Travis’s hand. “Just bring in your references and you can start tomorrow at nine o’clock in the morning.”

References? He didn’t have any. That was going to be a blow. He had left the Greek restaurant under a cloud of suspicion, so he could hardly ask Mr. Rousakis now, could he?

* * *

Francine entered the steam-filled kitchen via the back door.

Big brother, Antonio, stood at the hob stirring a large pan of spaghetti sauce. He looked a little stressed, the way he concentrated on the task in hand. Normally, he carried it out automatically. He looked up, his face relaxing when he saw her.

“Hi, Sis, what happened to you?”

One day he was going to find out what else she did for a living, one day they might all find out—but not at this moment.

“Just a bit delayed in the rush hour traffic.” It was a half-truth. Would anyone forgive her or even pat her on the back if they knew the whole truth? She very much doubted it. “What’s going on?” she asked to change the subject.

“Looks like Dad’s interviewing for a new head chef. I told him I’d be up for the job, but he won’t have it. Why does he have to bring a stranger into the family business, Sis?” For a moment, Antonio sounded sad.

“I suppose it’s because he fears you might leave some day soon...”

“I won’t. I promise. Those wanderlust days are behind me. I just want to find me a nice girl to settle down with.”

“Where’s that coffee?” Mamma stood by the serving hatch. “Don’t tell me you haven’t made it, Toni. Not when your father specifically asked you to.”

Antonio shook his head and carried on stirring.

Mamma threw up her arms in despair. “*Mamma mia*, how come I raised a boy like you who won’t even listen to his own papa?”

“It’s okay, Mamma.” Fran had to save the situation and rescue Antonio yet again from his bad behaviour. She picked up a white order slip the waitress must have left for her brother. “He asked me to do it. I won’t be long.”

“They want brandy in it, *cara mia*.”

“Okay.” Fran shot her brother her best scathing glance and gave him a dig in the ribs for good measure. “For heaven’s sake. Grow up. Will you get over it? You don’t have the experience for head chef.”

“Maybe not. But I bet I know more about Italian cooking than that Irish bloke sitting out there.”

“You got something against the Irish?” she asked, filling up the two coffee mugs from the silver Gaggia machine.

“Not at all. Not if they aren’t after the same job as myself. I’ve been waiting for years for Dad to put me in that position, yet he never does.”

“Perhaps, before you take on that sort of responsibility, Antonio, you’re going to have to prove yourself. Oh and by the way, I like Irish people.” She thought back to the Irish bloke in the pub, poor man. She would make a conscious effort to be nice to this one should he get the job. She knew Papa went very much by his instincts and they never proved him wrong. The last chef had been great, but he had to leave suddenly and go back to Scotland when his father had taken ill.

She opened a bottle of Five Star brandy and poured a tot into each cup, placed them on a tray with a plate of raffia biscuits and pushed open the swing door that led into the restaurant.

Humming quietly, she made her way to the alcove where her father sat with the interviewee. Her father was in full animation, gesticulating wildly with his hands. He appeared to be getting on well with the man,

whoever he was. Fran could only just make out the back of him, smartly dressed and leaning forward across the table, hanging onto her father's every word.

"I've brought the coffees." She placed the tray on the table, and was just about to introduce herself to the prospective new chef when she froze in horror. It was him, the man from the pub last night. He was obviously just as horrified. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open as if to say something, but he closed it again.

The moment was broken as her father said, "Fran, I'd like you to meet the new head chef, Travis O'Connell. Mr. O'Connell, this is my daughter, Francine."

Shifting her gaze from the floor, Fran looked into the man's eyes, silently sending him a message. If her father should ever find out what her other job was...

Travis searched the woman's face. What was she trying to tell him? She was pleading with him not to mention anything about last night, he guessed. This was going to be a great way to have his revenge on a lunatic woman. He was about to say, "Mr. Santini, I am afraid I can no longer work here. I cannot work with a woman who tried to set me up, who walked into a pub and caused trouble for me last night." But instead, he smiled, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on hers. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Santini. I look forward to working with you."

The woman in front of him gulped. He had her over a barrel now and, oh, how he would love to *have her* over a barrel. She owed him big time and she knew it.

"Likewise, Mr. O'Connell. If there's anything else I can do for you, please let me know."

"I'm sure I'll think of something," he muttered under his breath, grinning as he watched her walk away in a daze, almost bumping into another table. He had rattled her cage just as she had rattled his last night.

Chapter Two

Travis fished his key out of his trouser pocket and inserted it in the lock. “Home Sweet Home” was a scruffy caravan on a dilapidated piece of private land owned by Herman Goldfink, a man who made Scrooge appear generous. It was better than nothing. At least Travis had his own place with no one to disturb him except for a stray dog he had nicknamed Buster. He had found him one wet, windy night tucked away under a hedgerow by the side of a busy main road. Tethered by a fraying rope to a post, Buster had no doubt been left for someone to find. And he, Travis O’Connell, happened to be that lucky bloke.

Buster was good company whilst he had been unemployed, but now he worried how his faithful companion was going to cope when he worked at the restaurant. He bent down and ruffled Buster’s coat. “Never mind, ole fella. At least I can sneak you out some leftovers. You won’t starve any more.” Buster looked up with huge, doleful eyes and whimpered. Could he understand that a change was afoot or had he just missed his master today? Dogs sensed things. Travis’s plan was to save up money from this job and buy himself a nice house with a garden for Buster to play in. That would be good.

He pulled out a can of lager from his makeshift fridge—a cooler box and some frozen packs. Marge, who lived in the next caravan, froze the packs on a daily basis so he could store things for a few hours. It wasn’t so bad this time of the year, but in the summer he had to be careful not to leave things around without any refrigeration. He pulled back the silver tab and took a swig. Loosening his tie, he flopped down on the bed settee and thought back to the girl at the restaurant. How could one bloke be so unlucky, running into a mad woman twice in two consecutive

days? Still, it could be good fun—getting back at her. She obviously felt uncomfortable in his presence and he sensed she was keeping something from her father. Maybe she was on the game or something like that?

Still, no use worrying about such things. If he lived for a thousand years, he'd never understand the mind of a woman. The only female he had any sort of a rapport with was his mother but, as she remained in Ireland, he rarely got to see her. Two or three visits a year, if he was lucky. If he made it through his trial period with this job, he could afford to see her more often. Smiling, he pictured Ma on the old smallholding she still ran. She was the proud owner of a horse, a cow, ducks, geese and chickens. She lived miles from the nearest town. The thought of his mother brought him comfort. That's what he loved most: good, clean air and fresh, rolling fields. The nearest thing he got to green was Meadow Croft Park on the outskirts of Cardiff. He was definitely a country boy at heart.

A rap on his caravan door brought him back to reality. He put down his can and smoothed back his hair. Marge, his neighbour, stood on the doorstep. Her mouse brown hair messed up, dark circles beneath her puffy eyes and her striped pinafore askew. He wondered how she managed to bring up six children in that caravan next door. Okay, it was somewhat larger than his, but then again he didn't have much to care about except for Buster. But poor old Marge had been abandoned by her lorry-driving husband years back.

"Well, ain't you going to ask me in? Or do I have to stand on ceremony?" She had both hands planted firmly on her hips, her front teeth more exposed than usual. Marge always showed more front teeth when she was being sarcastic.

"Yes, come on in. I'm just having a lager. Want one?"

She wiped her hands on her pinny and hesitated before replying, "Yes, I'd love one."

"Come in then and sit down. You look as though you could do with a rest."

“You can say that again.” Marge let out a sigh and reclined on the sofa, kicking off her fluffy bedroom slippers. He dreaded to think what was going on in the caravan next door with all those children left unattended. Simon, the eldest at sixteen, was pretty good though. He usually took over the reins if Marge needed him to.

“So, what’s the special occasion? You’re dressed up like Buster’s dinner.” She eyed him up and down as he handed her a can.

“Oh, nothing much, just fancied a drink that’s all.”

“Just a drink, my eye. What are you all ponced up for?”

“I’ve been for an interview...”

Marge’s eyes rounded like two saucers. “Where? When? How?”

No wonder she sounded so excited, he reminded himself, he had been out of work for a long time. “At The Vine Tree. Do you know it? It’s near the old market place in the city.”

A look of recognition swept over Marge’s features. “Yes, I know it quite well. A nice Italian family runs it.”

“That’s the one. Anyhow, I’ve been taken on and I start tomorrow.”

“What’s wrong? You look a bit worried.”

“I am, very. Mr. Santini has asked for references from my last employer, but I haven’t got any to give to him.”

“Why not?”

“I was sacked. Supposedly caught with my hands in the till. But I swear it wasn’t me.”

Travis wondered for a moment if even Marge would believe him. He breathed a sigh of relief as she said, “Don’t worry. I have known you long enough to know how honest you are, Travis. I’ve trusted you with my kids and I don’t trust many with those little darlings.” She lifted a finger to her chin, looked up and smiled. “Do not fear. We’ll come up with something.”

“You sound pretty assured, Marge.”

“Oh, I am.” She placed her can down on the table, got to her feet and folded her arms. “I am.”

* * *

Fran scraped the last of the dinner plates, swilled them quickly under the tap and slotted them into the dishwasher. She was tired. She was always tired at weekends. *No wonder*, a little voice said. *That's when the restaurant is busy and those are the days you are most needed for your other job.*

Other job. That was a joke. She might just as well put her resignation in now for all the good she was at it. In six months she had caught out just two men. She must be the worst honey trapper in the business.

And she dreaded to think what would happen if her parents discovered the truth. Boy, how she needed that money. That was the reason she had been so gung-ho last night. She should have checked her facts before approaching the guy and she had been totally out of order, the way she had spoken to him. But she had just felt so bloody angry. *And we all know why, don't we?*

Brad was back in town. Brad Simpson. Not only had he left town, taking her heart with him, but he had got her best friend, Suzie, pregnant. *Brad the bastard!* She slammed down a plate on the counter, smashing it to smithereens.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Antonio came over to her side and tilted her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"It's nothing." She pulled away and carried on loading the dishwasher.

"I have heard that Brad is back," he announced behind her, as if second-guessing her thoughts.

"So what? Like I give a stuff!" She spat out the words like venom.

"So, I was just wondering, is that why you are so upset?" Antonio's voice took on a softer tone.

"No, it's not just him." She turned to face her brother. "Well, it is and it isn't. It's just I feel so silly. All the time he was cheating on me with my

best friend, who's now pregnant by the way. In the end, he dumps us both, and now Suzie and I aren't friends anymore."

"You could be if you wanted." Antonio picked up a stray tea towel from the shelf and hung it on a peg. "You were both victims."

"But how could she do such a thing to me, Toni? We'd been friends since we were at nursery school together. She knew he was my fella."

"I suppose. And I guess that makes it worse than if she were some faceless bimbo, eh?"

Fran nodded, tears blinding her eyes. She hated anyone to see her cry.

"Come here." Antonio held out his arms and beckoned her. She hesitated before walking into them, feeling comforted by his strong embrace. Toni was a catch for any girl. A shame he was so damn headstrong and quick to fly off the handle.

As he soothed her and wiped away her tears, she remembered even though he was hotheaded, he was also quick to forgive, except where a member of his family was concerned. If anyone did anything to hurt one of them, that person had better watch out. She half believed Brad had left town for that reason. Rumour had it Toni had given him a pasting for cheating on his sister.

Sometimes, it was reassuring to have an older brother like Toni, but other times... A pity he wasn't more like Mario, their eldest brother, who had the night off to take his wife, Angela, to see a chick flick. He knew how much it would mean to her.

Family honour was important to both brothers, but in different ways. For Antonio, revenge was all-important, for Mario it was not hurting the person you loved in the first place. Chalk and cheese, both brothers.

She wondered how the new chef would fit in with the brothers. Toni would resent Travis, but Mario, even though he was experienced, would be happy to take orders from a stranger. He trusted and respected his father's judgement.

Fran gulped at the thought of the Irishman starting work tomorrow. No way could she avoid him, and the worst part was she owed him some kind of an explanation.

Tomorrow was not going to be a good day.

* * *

“Beautiful ladies, sit over here,” was the first thing Travis heard the following morning as he entered the restaurant. Mr. Santini busied himself drawing out two chairs from the elegantly laid table, settling down an elderly pair of ladies, who looked like sisters, into the little alcove in the corner. Travis glanced at his watch, wondering for a moment if it had stopped. How was the restaurant open for business already? It was only nine o’clock. Most restaurants hardly opened their doors before eleven-thirty.

Spotting his new protégé, Mr. Santini handed a pair of menus to the ladies. He beamed as he came towards Travis, taking him by surprise as he grabbed him into a bear hug.

Coming up for breath, Travis smiled and patted the man on his shoulders.

“I see, Mr. Travis, that you are a very punctual man. I like that in my staff.” Mr. Santini ushered him into the corner.

Travis was about to correct his boss about his surname, but thought against doing so. The middle-aged man would probably get the hang of his name before too long.

“Now before you start...I am sorry to say...” *Mr. Santini looks so grave. Has he changed his mind about giving me the position?* “I need to see your references.” Then he burst out laughing, as if he had cracked a hilarious joke. Only it wasn’t funny, not to Travis. Thank goodness Marge had come to his rescue last night, typing up an impressive reference that was all true. Okay, he hadn’t exactly been employed by Marge, so that was deception by omission, but he had cooked meals for the family and babysat. She boasted of his culinary skills and vouched for his honesty

and reliability. He only hoped Mr. Santini would not go to great lengths to check out the reference.

They both sat in a little alcove as Travis handed the sealed envelope to his prospective employer. Then he held his breath.

Mr. Santini eased open the envelope with his thumb, took out the letter and extracted a pair of half-rimmed glasses from the top pocket of his shirt. Sitting forward, he perused it. Every so often, he raised his eyebrows, scratched his chin and nodded.

Oh no, please let me get away with this. If I do, I promise I will faithfully serve the Santini family, no matter what. A pang of guilt overtook him at the thought of deceiving Mr. Santini, but a vision of him and Buster starving to death in that fridge of a caravan, put pay to further thoughts of remorse.

At length, Mr. Santini put down the letter.

“Well done, son.” He leaned across the table and shook Travis’s hand. “This is an excellent reference, your old boss thinks highly of you.” Mr. Santini sat back. “Now tell me...”

Oh no, Mr. Santini was going to ask about his last employment.

“Mr. Santini!” A high-pitched voice beckoned from across the room. “We’d like to order, please.”

In an instant, Mr. Santini was on his feet. “Welcome to the firm,” he said to Travis, pumping his hand up and down. “Please do excuse me while I serve the Usherwood sisters. We don’t normally have customers this time in the morning, but they visit the city on the first Monday of every month and have been coming to the restaurant for twenty years. I always open specially for them. They stay for hours and then go shopping in the afternoon.”

Travis smiled to think of Mr. Santini putting himself out for his customers. He was grateful to the sisters himself; they had stopped Mr. Santini asking any awkward questions.

“Go into the kitchen and see Francine. She’ll show you where to start.” Mr. Santini turned and walked off towards his customers who were both beaming from ear to ear. He obviously made them feel

important. Mr. Santini smiled and plucked two red carnations from the vase on the table to give to each lady. The sisters giggled like a pair of young girls. “Someone will come along shortly to take your order, ladies...”

* * *

Fran put a large pan of water on to boil. She'd already spied the sisters' arrival and even though her father always offered them a menu each, she knew they would have exactly the same thing they ordered each time. Prawn cocktails, spaghetti Bolognese, finished off with a tiramisu. They consumed a bottle of the house white and a large cappuccino each last of all. She imagined at home they never ate this way, probably had good old plain home cooking, but she couldn't for the life of her understand why they wouldn't try a couple of new dishes for a change.

The sisters had never married. Instead, they had taken care of their elderly and, by the sound of it, cantankerous father. The old man had died at the ripe old age of ninety-nine a few years back and Fran guessed their monthly treat at the restaurant had been an escape for the both of them, a tradition they had happily carried on.

A cough from behind startled her so she almost tipped the pan of water over the front of her apron. It was him—the Irish fella. She swallowed. Then said sharply, “Don't go creeping up on me like that again. I could have scalded myself.”

“But that was cold water in the pan, I just watched you fill it.”

How long had he been watching her? “Yes, but it could have been hot water,” she stressed. “What do you want?”

“Your father sent me. I'm due to start work today. He said you would show me the ropes.”

“Me?” She blinked. “I'm only a mere waitress and dogsbody in this family firm, my brother would be the best one to show you.”

“Okay. Go get him then.”

“Unfortunately, he’s not here. He’s gone to the market to buy some fresh vegetables and herbs. He shouldn’t be too long. Make yourself useful and get some prawns from the fridge for me, please.”

Travis gave a mock salute and clicked his heels together. “Shouldn’t it be me, telling you what to do?” He smiled at her.

“In due course, you will have every chance to do so, but for time being you are the new boy who doesn’t know his backside from his elbow.”

Travis straightened his shoulders. Boy, this one was going to be hard work. “Are kitchens all that different then? I’m sure I can find my way around. Let me see...there’s the hob, there’s the oven...over there we have the sink and in the corner the refrigerator. All sounds a bit straightforward to me.” He watched her flush a deep shade of crimson from her neck up.

“Okay. I’d better leave you to it, seeing as you already know the ropes.” Smiling, she removed her apron and let herself out through the back door.

Oh dear, he was hardly going to impress Daddy, was he? Thinking on his feet, he picked up a notepad and pencil and made his way into the restaurant. One sister pored over the menu, while the other rummaged for something in her mock alligator skin handbag.

“Ladies, I’ve come to take your order.” He fished a pencil out from behind his ear.

The grey-haired twosome stopped what they were doing and peered suspiciously down their noses at him. “Where’s Francine?” asked the larger of the two. “She always comes to take our order, or if not, then Antonio. Mr. Santini said he was going to fetch one of them.”

Travis sucked in his breath. “I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with me.” A sliver of irritation coursed through him. Were all the restaurant’s customers like these two? Or were they an exception that broke the rule? “Now what will you have?”

The smaller lady tutted as she retrieved her spectacles from her handbag, perched them on her button-shaped nose and scanned the menu. "Francine always gives us plenty of time to make up our minds."

"Yes, she does. Always does that," the larger lady agreed.

"Okay, I'll come back in a few minutes." Travis flashed them one of his best smiles. "How about, in the meantime, I fetch you a bottle of wine?"

"That would be lovely," replied the small lady, "but I'm afraid we always start our wine when we have the main course."

"An aperitif then?"

"No, no!" The large sister banged her handbag down on the table. Then he got it. This pair had come here for twenty years, they probably liked to sit at the same table and eat the same food. No wonder they didn't like someone else serving them. It upset their routine.

"Okay. I'll come back to serve you later." Travis conceded defeat.

The ladies beamed and started to discuss the menu again. Walking away, he shook his head. He had just entered a madhouse, where not only the guests were eccentric, but the staff a tad temperamental, too.

He was surprised to see Francine back in the kitchen putting her pinafore back on. "Sorry," she muttered under her breath. "You just rubbed me up the wrong way, that's all."

"Oh. Where did you go?"

"Outside. I needed a breath of fresh air to cool down. Now then, where were we? You were telling me in so many words that all kitchens are the same?" She folded her arms across her ample bosom.

"Yes, I was. But on reflection, for today only, you can show me the ropes. I'm sorry it was very arrogant of me. I just felt a bit prickly because of what you did to me the other evening."

She raised her nicely shaped eyebrows. "And what did I do to you the other evening, Mr...?"

"O'Connell, Travis O'Connell." He let out a breath. "Well, you appeared to be stalking me, that's what."

“Sorry about that. It was a case of mistaken identity. Pass me those prawns now, will you?”

He opened the fridge door and found a Tupperware container. “Are these them?” He held the carton up for her to see.

“Yes. All I’ll tell you for now is that I was just doing my job.” *So he was right, she was a hooker.*

“I see, Miss Santini. And do you treat *all* your clients the same way?”

“Not usually, no. I’m usually much nicer than that.” She removed the lid from the box of prawns and mixed them with a pink sauce, then set them on a bed of lettuce.

For the first time, he noticed her hands. They were very delicate looking, her fingers elongated and her nails nicely manicured. He guessed she needed to look good for the line of business she found herself in.

“I am sorry about what happened though.” She handed him the remainder of the prawns to put back in the fridge. “You see, I don’t think I’ll be working there much longer. I make too many mistakes.”

Travis furrowed his brow. What kind of mistakes did she mean? “Can you elaborate a little?”

The pan of water started to bubble and she inserted the strands of spaghetti. “I’m not very good at my job. I usually mess things up and my boss isn’t too pleased with me.”

So, she has a pimp. Travis wondered how on earth a nice-looking girl from a decent family got herself into such a line of business. He swallowed. “So will you be seeing any more clients in the future and does your family know?”

“Yes and no. I need to see a few more clients so I can pay off my debts. My family has no idea. They would be absolutely mortified if they found out.”

“I see. Mum’s the word, then.”

“Yes, please.”

Travis narrowed his eyes. What now? She looked as though she could do with someone to confide in. "I was just thinking..."

"Go on."

"Well, aren't you afraid of all the dangers?"

"Oh yes, of course. But I always make sure that someone is trailing me to take photographs."

Travis blinked. "I don't know what to say." He rubbed his beard as if that would help him to make sense of the situation.

"Why do you look so shocked?"

"Well, it's not the kind of thing anyone I know does to earn money."

"I suppose not, but believe me it's all for a good cause. I don't harm the men and their wives always thank me for it."

Travis steadied himself on the counter. "I feel a bit light-headed. You mean these women take part in this ménage à trois? They like to watch their husbands make love with you?"

Fran burst into laughter. "You thought I was on the game, didn't you?"

He nodded his head, open-mouthed. "You're not?"

Fran shook her head. "No, definitely not. I'm a honey trapper."

"A honey what?"

"A honey trapper. I set up men whose partners think they might be cheating. Sometimes they are, sometimes not. So I either reassure the woman her partner is doing exactly what he says he is or I get proof he is chatting me up in a bar somewhere."

Travis smiled nervously. "I see."

"You look as if you don't quite get it..."

"I just think it seems a nasty business to be in. It's not morally right in my book, but each to his own."

"Precisely," she replied, wiping her hands on her pinafore.

* * *

“I just don’t get it, Marge.” Travis set down his fork. They were supposed to be enjoying a meal together in Marge’s caravan, while Simon took the kids out for the evening.

“What don’t you get?” Marge scraped the remains of chicken biriani out of its foil container.

“Why a girl like that would do a job like she does.”

Marge frowned. Travis wondered if it was because of the subject matter or because she had accidentally tipped some of the Indian meal on her best tablecloth.

“I think you’ll find that it’s not such a bad job as all that. Those honey trappers, as you call them, carry out a service. I bloody wish they’d had them years ago so I could have spied on Charlie. It might have saved me a lot of heartache in the end, when he ran off with that bimbo from the bingo hall.”

Oh dear, Travis had hit a raw nerve. Now she might go off on one of her speeches.

“I suppose you’re right,” he reluctantly agreed. “But what about when they get the wrong fella, like she did with me the other night?”

“Yes, it’s bound to have its downside. But you’ve come to no harm because of it, have you?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Suppose not.” Travis took a long swig of water. The curry seemed to get hotter by the minute.

“How did the reference go, by the way?”

“Mr. Santini seemed impressed. I just hope he leaves things as they are. If he ever found out what happened at my last job, he would show me the door.”

“Then make sure he never does.”

“How on earth do I do that?”

“Keep your nose clean, so he doesn’t dig around.”

“That shouldn’t be too much of a problem, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Sorry, nothing.” He pushed his plate across the table. He had a feeling that someone at the restaurant would love to see him come a cropper, and if that juicy bit of info fell into that person’s hands, he would literally make a meal of it. Suddenly, Travis wasn’t hungry any more.

Chapter Three

Fran picked up the phone and put it back down. Would Suzie want to speak to her again? It wasn't herself who was in the wrong here, but Suzie. When Fran had found out the devastating news, she'd hot-footed it around to Suzie's place and confronted her. Without Suzie saying a word, Fran knew it was true, as her friend's face had taken on a peach tint at the mention of Brad's name. Suzie had twisted her handkerchief in her hands and avoided eye contact.

Initially, Fran just sat there open-mouthed, unwillingly to believe her best friend of twenty years had done this to her, with her so-called boyfriend. The two people she had trusted most in the world had betrayed her. Suzie, the first friend she had made at St. Joseph's Primary school, when she came over to Wales with her family from Italy at the tender age of five. Fran could hardly speak a word of English back then. It was Suzie who had taken her by the hand and led her around the classroom of strangers. Suzie who had taught her the words she needed to know.

They had been through such a lot together: first day at school, first boyfriends, first kisses, the terrible teen years. Spotty faces and greasy hair days.

Fran took a deep breath and dialled, this time allowing the phone to ring, half hoping no one would answer.

"Hello," replied a defeated voice.

Suzie's mother. Fran had always got on well with the woman, but now it was going to be a bit awkward, wasn't it?

Fran took a deep breath and swallowed the hard lump threatening to choke her. "Hello, Mrs. Frampton, could I speak with Suzie please?" There, she'd managed to get the words out. For a split second, she almost dropped the receiver and slumped up against the wall.

"Fran, is that you?"

Fran paused, the receiver stuck to her sweating palms. "Yes, it's me."

Mrs. Frampton sounded surprised that Fran was ringing her daughter. "Okay. Now I don't want any trouble." Her voice hiked up a little higher, as if she was put on her guard.

"You won't get any from me. I just want to see how Suzie is."

A long silence. Oh dear, what was she thinking?

"I'll just go and get her." Mrs. Frampton's voice now had an excited quality to it. Good, she wanted Fran to talk to her daughter. "Just one thing though...she's been very upset lately...you know with Brad running off..."

"Don't worry. I understand *exactly* how it feels."

"Sorry, I was forgetting." Her voice took on an understanding tone.

Forgetting? That was something Fran would never do. The bastard had it coming. Maybe, at this very moment, he was luring some other unsuspecting girl for his own ends.

"Fran? Is it really you?" The trepidation in Suzie's voice was evident.

"Yes, it's me." Suddenly, Fran felt like a cold drink of water.

"But it's been so long. Why now?"

"I guess I was very hurt at the time, but when I heard today Brad had done the same thing to you, and you being pregnant and all, I just had to call."

"To rub it in, you mean?"

"No, of course not. I'm not like that." Fran felt the lump in her throat return.

"Sorry. I know you're not."

"I was just wondering if there was anything I can do for you?"

“I can’t think of anything at the moment and I wouldn’t blame you if you never spoke to me again...”

“Look, what’s done is done. I know all too well what a charmer Brad Simpson is. I was very hurt and angry at the time mind you, my fiancé and my best friend, but that’s all in the past. Do you fancy meeting up for a proper chat sometime?”

“I’d love to. It’s very generous of you.”

The telephone line went quiet. Then Fran realised from the muffled sound on the other side that Suzie had broken down in tears.

“Look, whatever happens in the future, Suzie, we are going to remain friends. We knew one another long before either of us ever set eyes on Brad Simpson. Come to the flat and I’ll see you tomorrow after I finish work. We’ll have tea around four p.m.”

Fran replaced the receiver and let out a long sigh, feeling so much better. She wiped away a tear with the back of her hand. How tragic. Now she felt sorry for Suzie and not herself anymore. After all, her friend was just as much a victim in all of this.

* * *

Travis watched Buster romp through the amber and russet leaves in the forest. It felt great to be outdoors rather than in a steamy kitchen, but he had to admit that he was enjoying his job tremendously. Antonio was a little annoying, but the other brother, Mario, was nice enough and seemed to accept him. Fran, on the other hand, was a bit of an enigma. A good Catholic girl who lured cheating men, it didn’t exactly match up. It was an oxymoron in his book. Yet, what was she really guilty of? Just assuring despondent women that either their partner was faithful, or not, as the case might be.

He’d have to remember to pick up some minced beef from the butcher on his way home. He had promised to cook Marge a chilli as a thank you for her great job reference. He toyed with inviting Fran around one evening for a meal, but thought she might be put off at the sight of the

caravan park. It was badly run down. Marge told him that originally it had been a tidy spot accommodating twenty caravans, neatly trimmed gardens and a toilet block. Unfortunately, the new landlord was a tight-fisted old thing and now only five of the caravans were occupied. The toilet block was falling apart and the rest of the site was like a scrap yard, as old cars, tyres and scrap metal filled every spare nook and cranny. One day he'd move to a better place, he just had to. Marge had been eligible for a council house years back, but for some reason she preferred to stay in the caravan—it just didn't make any sense at all.

Outside the butcher shop, Buster jumped up and sniffed the mincemeat in his master's pocket, his tail wagging in recognition.

"Sorry, old mate." Travis ruffled the fur on the top of his head. "This isn't for you. But if you behave yourself, I have a rather large bone at no extra charge from the very nice butcher." Travis waved to the butcher and Buster barked, giving his seal of approval.

* * *

Fran towelled herself dry and pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt. What she had liked most about having a best friend like Suzie was she could be herself. It didn't matter what time, night or day, Suzie called around or whether the flat was in a mess or as neat as a new pin.

A delicious aroma wafted from the oven. She had baked a batch of scones and a sponge cake for their tea. Inhaling the wonderful smell, she glanced at the clock. Only another half hour, time for the cakes to cool and to fill them with jam and cream, then Suzie would be here. Fran swallowed hard at the thought of seeing her friend with new life in her belly. New life created by Fran's ex-lover, Brad. *Brad the bastard.*

Distracting herself, she switched on the local radio channel. Some inane Welsh presenter was extolling the virtues of being single. What was so great about being on your own? There was no one to snuggle up to in the evening in front of the TV. No one to offer your last chocolate *Rolo*. Most of all, an empty side of the bed, reinforcing the fact she had been

well and truly dumped. “Will you shut up?” She tossed an oven glove at the radio, but missed, hitting a bag of open flour instead, spilling its contents over the work counter and floor. “Now look what you made me do.”

Fran was surprised at how her anger had taken her. No doubt about it—she had been used by Brad. It would have been tragic enough if Suzie had been the love of his life and the reason Fran had been dumped. It hurt even more to think Fran had been a stopgap for him while he moved on to the next female and then the next. Tears welled up. Why hadn’t she seen it coming? They say love is blind, but she must have been wearing very thick blinkers not to have realised what he was. Okay, it hadn’t upset her that much when his head turned as an attractive woman entered the pub or passed them in the street. After all, weren’t all men made that way? But she should have been suspicious when she caught him giving Suzie long, lingering looks. The feeling of intimacy between the two of them, the shared jokes, the way they went quiet when Fran entered the room.

She should have known.

Why had she been so trusting? And, most importantly of all, what made a long-time best buddy turn her back on her friend to run off with said friend’s fiancé?

She was about to find out.

* * *

“So, she’s a bit of a mysterious one, this Fran?” Marge spoke between forkfuls of chilli con carne. “Wow! That’s hot,” she announced, fanning her mouth. Travis handed her a tumbler of water. “Thanks.” Marge gratefully accepted the glass, knocking it back in one go, so Travis had to get her another.

“Yes, she is. I mean why would a good-looking, intelligent woman from a respectable background need to lure men?”

“To make plenty of money.” Marge laughed, baring her large teeth.

Travis nodded. "I guess you're right. Incidentally, she's rotten at her job."

"Maybe she just likes the challenge of catching cheating men out. Like I already told you, I wish I'd met her years ago when Charlie was doing the dirty on me. When you've been dumped upon, it gives you a different perspective of the opposite sex."

"Perhaps she might be a woman scorned, but it still doesn't make sense." Buster interrupted by letting out a whine under the table. "It doesn't either to you, does it old boy?" Travis scooped him up in his arms.

"Is Buster okay today, Travis?" Marge frowned, ruffling the dog's fur.

"Now, you come to mention it, he hasn't been himself since I gave him that bone from the butcher's this afternoon."

"It's just that..." Marge appeared to be in deep contemplation.

"What?"

"No, forget it."

"What have you to tell me, Marge?"

"I might be barking up the wrong tree here, excuse the pun, but Pru Fisher in the opposite caravan said she's sure someone poisoned her cat last week."

Travis frowned. "Monty, you mean?"

"Yes." Marge lowered her voice to barely a whisper, as if someone might be listening outside the caravan door, which was highly unlikely. She had an endearing trait of overdramatizing a situation. "She got the poor thing to the vet's just in the nick of time. If it had been any longer, poor Monty would have been out stiff dead." She held her hands apart as if producing a prize catch fish, instead of demonstrating a stiff, dead moggy.

Travis almost smiled at Marge's exaggeration. He couldn't imagine the vet using that particular turn of phrase at all. But a shiver ran the length of his spine as he imagined anything bad happening to Buster. "No, I'm sure Buster will be fine. He's just ate too much today, that's all."

“I just wanted to warn you, in case.”

Travis appreciated Marge’s concern, but in all honesty why would anyone hurt any of the pets on the site? It didn’t make sense. He reassured himself that Monty must have eaten something that disagreed with him. Yes, that’s probably what it was.

* * *

Fran checked out her appearance in the mirror before allowing Suzie into the flat.

“You’ve had it painted!” Suzie exclaimed before she had even removed her coat.

“Yes, I had to do something to cheer myself up.” That sounded bad, she knew, but it had been the only way she could cope with things at the time. Keeping busy at the flat and busy at work. Busy had been the magic word. It had helped, but sometimes she’d had to put her paintbrush down and slump to the floor in floods of tears. Once, she’d been in the middle of serving someone at the restaurant and had only just made it back to the kitchen, only then feeling safe to let the tears flow.

Suzie muttered something under her breath that sounded like an apology.

“Let me take your coat.” Fran ignored her comment. Suzie handed over a brown suede jacket, identical to the one Brad had bought Fran last Christmas. Maybe he gave all his girlfriends exactly the same gifts? Fran bit her lip, better to keep quiet about that one.

Suzie wore a longline T-shirt, skimming over her newly formed bump. So this was baby. An innocent in all of this. Fifty percent Brad Simpson incubating in there, inside Suzie. Half of his genetic material. How bizarre.

“Sit down,” Fran gestured. She had moved around the furniture since Suzie was last at the flat. Fleeting, she wondered how Suzie would feel sitting on that sofa. The one where six months ago she had sat nestling

into Brad, gazing into his eyes like a lovesick puppy? If Fran was honest, she had known then, but had been in complete denial, relegating all thoughts of betrayal to the back of her mind. One week later, it had felt like a bucket of cold water thrown in her face when someone informed her they had spotted the couple together, like a pair of in-love teenagers. Fran brought herself back to the present. “Tea? Coffee? Fruit juice?”

“I’d love a cup of tea. I get so tired these days.”

Don’t we all.

Fran filled the kettle and switched it on, then stared absently out of the window. *How could you do that to me?* She poured boiling water into the teapot. Finally, placing it on a tray with two mugs, a milk jug and a plate of scones, she imagined herself accidentally on purpose tipping the tray all over the girl. Then, Fran experienced a pang of guilt for the fact Suzie carried new life inside her. If only she weren’t pregnant, she could really let her know how she felt.

“So how do you feel?” Fran gave one of her stiff smiles as she carefully carried the tray into the living room and set it down on the coffee table. *Like I give a stuff.*

Suzie looked up and patted her stomach. “I’m not too bad now, thank you. In the early days I had a lot of sickness, but that’s passed me by. It’s just the exhaustion.” *Poor you.* “How are you, Fran?”

Fran seated herself opposite. “Me? I’m fine. As busy as ever.” Why did her reply sound more high-pitched than usual?

“Are you...are you going out with someone else now?”

“If you mean by that, have I got over Brad, then yes, I have.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“If we are being truthful here, what else can you expect, Suzie? To be betrayed by one’s boyfriend is bad enough, but to be betrayed by your best friend is the absolute pits.”

Suzie looked down at the floor and rubbed her swollen belly. She took a deep breath, then looked Fran in the eye. “I don’t know if I can ever put right the wrong I did to you, Fran. All I can do is apologize. I’m saying sorry to you. If it helps, the same thing happened to me, too, so perhaps

it's some kind of karma, the universe paying me back..." Her trembling voice trailed away.

"I guess so. But you have to understand that there's still a lot of anger towards you under the surface. Although, I have to admit it is nowhere near the anger I'm feeling towards *him*, right now."

"Me, too." Suzie flashed a little smile.

Fran returned the smile, this time it wasn't stiff, but a real one. "What are you going to do?"

"I might put the baby up for adoption."

Fran sat forward in surprise. "No, Suzie, please don't do that. You mustn't."

"I can't keep the baby. It will only be a reminder of my betrayal to you."

"Your hormones are all over the place at the moment. You don't know what you are saying. I won't hear of it. Perhaps Brad has done us both a favour. The baby is the innocent party and he or she needs its mother. I'll be around to support you."

Suzie wiped away a tear with the back of her hand, but looked relieved at the same time. Now Fran was feeling sorry for the girl. She had envisaged having a go at her, but that didn't seem fair.

"Thanks, Fran."

"All I ask is that you answer one question honestly."

Suzie nodded. "Okay, whatever you want to know. I owe you that much at least."

Fran swallowed. "Why Brad? Why him?"

Suzie wrung her hands. This was going to be difficult for her. "Because he made me feel special. He made me feel important. I've never had that with any man before. He told me he loved me a million times a day." Fran was beginning to get the picture. Suzie had never had any luck with men, so when one had come along like a white knight, she had fallen for the patter before he'd even dismounted from his horse.

“Funny that. He told me the same thing, too. How I was the only one for him. He’s probably doing the same thing right this moment to some other unsuspecting female.”

* * *

“C’mon, Buster, time for your nightly walk.” Buster remained firmly ensconced in his wicker basket, this was so unlike him. Travis walked towards his faithful friend and noticed his stomach was distended and he was foaming from the mouth. His brown eyes looked like two saucers, much larger than usual, exhibiting such a sad look, reminding him of the day he’s first found the dog abandoned. *Oh, no. Marge was right. Poisoning!*

Picking Buster up gently, he wrapped him in his dog blanket and dashed around to Marge’s caravan. “Marge, I need to get Buster to the vet quickly. Or he might die.”

Marge, dressed only in her winceyette nightie, nodded soberly and put on a raincoat and pair of red Wellingtons. She fished the car keys from an ashtray on the table and led Travis to her awaiting van. Handing Travis her mobile phone, she said, “You can phone the vet on the way to let them know we’re coming. Poisoned, as I suspected?”

“I think so. But who would do such a thing?”

Marge shook her head. “Who knows?”

The ride to the veterinary hospital seemed long. All the while Travis tried to comfort the dog, whose breathing had become decidedly laboured.

“Don’t worry,” Marge reassured him. “I know a shortcut that will take a good ten minutes off the journey and we shouldn’t go over too many bumps either.” That’s what he loved about Marge, she had such common sense. If only he had taken more notice of her earlier warning. As if she could read his mind, she added, “It’s not your fault, you know. When I informed you about the poisoning earlier, I didn’t really think it was that.

I thought perhaps Buster just had a mild stomach upset, but I mentioned it anyhow.”

Travis managed a weak smile as Marge pulled off the main road and into a smaller one. If anything should happen to Buster, he didn't know what he would do. He and Marge were the only true friends Travis had in the entire world.

It seemed to take an age to get there, but as soon as Marge brought the van to a halt, Travis disembarked and was hammering the door. It was out of normal hospital hours, but someone opened up, having been forewarned. A man in a short, white tunic, yawning and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, looked them up and down, unlocking the door from the inside.

“Marcus Bramble. Vet. This is...”

“Buster. I think he's been poisoned.”

“Let's take a look at you, old fella.” The vet patted Buster on the head. “If you can bring him over to the consulting room and put him on the table.”

The room was blindingly bright compared with the darkness that had fallen outside and, if anything, Buster looked much worse.

The vet tried to get the dog to stand on the table, but he was too weak and fell over. Then he looked in Buster's eyes, ears and mouth with a small pen torch. “Hmm, his gums are bleeding. Warfarin poisoning, I suspect.”

“Warfarin?” Travis had an uncle who had been on that for a heart condition.

“Yes. Most likely he's ingested some rat poison.”

“Sodding Goldfink,” Marge hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

“Pardon?” The vet looked bemused, as if Marge had just spoken a foreign language.

“Sorry for the French, Mr. Bramble, I think our lovely landlord might be responsible.”

“I’m afraid it’s quite a common sort of poisoning in pets. Some people use it without warning and then it’s all too late by the time the animal comes to us. Fortunately, in this case, you acted promptly.”

Marge gave Travis’s shoulder a reassuring pat.

“I just wish I’d heeded your advice earlier, Marge.”

“Not to worry. We’re here now and Buster is in the right place. That’s all that matters.”

* * *

After Suzie had gone home, Fran found herself in deep contemplation. The wounds would heal in time, no doubt, but she would never forget her friend’s betrayal and seriously doubted they could go on as they had done in the past. It must be a similar thing to how a partner feels when their other half has cheated. Honesty from now on would be best policy as far as she was concerned. No pretence, no cover-ups. If they were to salvage any sort of friendship that was uppermost.

As for Brad Simpson, he could burn in hell.

Chapter Four

Travis loosened the collar of his shirt. It sure got hot in the kitchen, especially when he was standing just two feet away from smouldering Fran Santini. He marvelled at the way things came so naturally to her. If anyone should have been in charge of the kitchen, it was her. It made him feel out of the loop today, the way she and her brothers ran about babbling in Italian, running rings around him, turning him into piggy-in-the-middle. His mind wasn't on the job. Once or twice, he could have sworn Antonio had said something derogatory about him, but maybe not. Maybe it was his overactive imagination.

Today, Fran was dressed in a low-cut, peach-coloured T-shirt with matching lace trim, a short above-the-knee-level black skirt, white apron and sensible black pumps. She wore no tights, preferring to sport a pair of sun-kissed bare legs. Of course, she would have looked even more sensational if she had been wearing the high heels she had on the night he first met her, when she had tried to set him up. Maybe if he had realised at the time what was going on, he would have let the charade carry on a little longer. He smiled at the thought of having her in his arms. That little madam was a melting pot of emotions and, oh, how he'd love to get hot and steamy with her. But for now, his daydreams would have to do. The only hot and steamy for the time being was working in the kitchen.

He gave himself a reality check by thinking of Buster. After giving the dog a vitamin K shot and some intravenous fluids, the vet suggested keeping him at the surgery for twenty-four hours, just in case. So when Travis knocked off early this evening he could go and pick the little fella up. That morning, Marge had laughed at his insistence in ringing the

veterinary hospital immediately, as soon as he had woken up from bed. He wondered how he would cope. After all, Buster was now in recuperation mode. Marge came to the rescue once again, by insisting on taking care of him while Travis was at work.

He needed to speak to Mr. Goldfink about the poisoning as soon as possible. But what could he say that wouldn't land Travis out on his ear? If he said the wrong thing, he might get asked to move on and who else would take him in with a pet? But no, it needed to be said. Otherwise other pets might succumb to the poison.

He owed it to himself and others on the site. Even the children could be at risk. He made up his mind to speak to Goldfink that evening.

* * *

The trouble with women is they believe a guy when he says he loves them. Fran sorted through her laundry basket, dropping a pile of whites into a smaller basket ready for the machine. How could she have been so foolish as to fall for a womanizing creep? Not only that, but she had loaned him the best part of her savings. As well as owing her almost ten thousand pounds, Brad Simpson also owed her something else, her dignity. She wanted it back, badly. Fat chance she had of recovering that money now. Unless...there was some way to make him pay. She thought she might have the perfect plan.

* * *

Travis carried Buster from the hospital in his best doggy blanket. "Crumbs. What have you got there?" Marge sat wide-eyed at the back of the van with the doors open. "Anyone would think you were bringing a newly born home from the hospital." She burst into laughter.

Travis managed a weak smile, but he didn't feel like laughing. His concern for Buster had been replaced by anger. If Goldfink were standing

here, he should want to punch his lights out for causing such suffering. “Thanks, Marge. I appreciate this.” Travis got into the back of the van and settled Buster on a large floor cushion. He tenderly stroked the poor, sleeping animal, all the while conscious of the fact it could so easily have been a different story.

Marge took her keys out of her jacket pocket, slammed shut the back doors of the van and headed for the driver’s seat. “Think nothing of it.” She climbed into the front. “You’ve done me many a favour. By the way, how are you getting on at the restaurant?” She paused before starting up the old van.

“I thought I was doing well, but today I got distracted. I don’t know if it was my concern for Buster or something else.”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you.” It was difficult having a conversation in the back of the van, so he raised his voice. “I said I was worried about Buster, but something else distracted me.”

The van ground to a halt and Marge turned around to look at him. “Travis O’Connell, are you telling me that Little Miss Honey Trap has you under her charms?”

Travis swallowed. “Well, I wouldn’t exactly say that.” At this rate he would never get Buster home. “But I have to admit to having a certain attraction for the girl.” Marge giggled and the van jerked as she started it up again. She was the salt of the earth, a good mother substitute at times. Gosh, what if she wanted him to bring Fran home to meet her? Now that was a thought.

* * *

“Are you sure you don’t know where he is?” Fran spoke to Suzie on the phone as she absently watched her second load of washing tumble around in the machine.

“I wish I did. The only thing I can tell you for sure is that he’s back. He’s been spotted several times with a tall, blonde woman on his arm.

Why? I would have thought, from our previous conversation, he was the last person on earth you would want contact with.”

Fran paused, wondering if she should tell Suzie the truth. Taking a breath, she said, “He owes me money. Quite a lot, actually. I loaned him money to buy a car.”

The phone line went quiet. “Suzie, are you still there?”

“Yes. I was just thinking.”

“What?”

“Well, when I was with him he splashed his money around, trying to impress me with fancy restaurants and flash nightclubs. He even offered to pay for me to go to Australia with him. Anyone would have thought we were David and Victoria Beckham, from the lifestyle we were leading.”

Fran could well imagine Brad would love to have the couple’s fame, as well as their fortune. She wondered what other extravagant purchase he might have carried out. “Was there any sign he had bought a new car?”

“No. He had the same car he’s always had.”

“Then what the bloody hell did he want my money for? Suzie, I have got to get it back.”

“But how?”

That was the million dollar question. How could she get the money back when she had no proof she’d loaned it to him in the first place?

Ten thousand pounds was a lot, all her savings, including the inheritance she had come into when her grandfather died. His hard-earned cash now being used to shower women with expensive gifts. If Granddad Giuseppe knew, he’d be spinning like a top in his grave. Since he was a young man, he had worked to build up his clientele at the village bakery in a small Italian town. Besides, she had another reason for wanting the money back. Financially, The Vine Tree was not doing as well as it could. Her father wanted to invest in a new kitchen and a banquet room to accommodate wedding guests and parties. He also intended to bake his own bread on the premises. His father Giuseppe had passed on his bread-making skills to his eldest son.

She could have invested her money in the family business, could have and should have. She had even told her father she would, but now, she didn't know what. Brad had faithfully promised to pay her back within the month. But a month stretched into another month, and then another, until finally, she realised she had a cat in hell's chance of recouping her losses.

A sudden knock startled her. "I have to go, Suzie. Someone's at the door. I'll ring you later. Meanwhile, keep your ear to the ground."

"I will. I'll let you know if I hear anything. Ciao."

"Bye bye."

Fran slid the bolt across the door and undid the chain lock, blinking at the sight in front of her. Travis stood there, holding a white box tied up with a pink ribbon. He bit his lower lip and handed her the box. "I know it's your day off and you're probably busy, but I couldn't resist buying you these."

Fran opened her mouth and closed it again. He was the last person she expected to see on her doorstep, as much as she liked him. "Hang on a moment..."

She closed the door, leaving it slightly ajar, snatching up a pair of white frilly panties that had somehow worked their way from the washing basket onto the floor, stuffing them behind a cushion on the sofa.

"You'd better come in," she beckoned. Fran glanced down the fire escape to reassure herself that Toni wasn't watching from the yard, where he was prone to take a short cigarette break several times daily.

"It's okay. I haven't sneaked out of the kitchen or anything, in case you are wondering. Your father told me I could knock off early as it's quiet." That wasn't her concern, more that Toni would disapprove of her taking Travis to her apartment.

"I'll just put the kettle on to boil, then." She made a mental note to retrieve the panties later and find a better hiding place for them.

Travis watched Fran clamber on a kitchen stool to get into a cupboard. Coming up behind her, she flinched as he put both hands on

the stool. "Here, let me help you. It's wobbling a bit." Nothing of course compared to the wobble in his underpants. Something was definitely standing to attention at the sight of Fran's long, black-stockinged legs in that short skirt. He tried to stop himself from looking up. It wasn't the gentlemanly thing to do. But then again, was he a gentleman?

"Here it is." Was he mistaken or did he detect a wobble in her voice as well?

She turned and made to come down, jerking forward. His reflexes worked swiftly and he caught her as she fell, her breasts pressing against his chest. This felt good, so good. As he lifted her down, he experienced a searing heat between them and didn't want the moment to end. Did she feel it as well? Once on terra firma, she looked up at him beneath heavily fringed lashes, her brown eyes questioning. Her coral lips parted and he could have sworn she held her breath for a moment. Did she want him to kiss her?

"It's just as well you were there." She smiled, pulling away. And the spell was broken. She passed him a fresh packet of coffee. Her well-manicured fingers felt soft to the touch. He imagined her lightly dragging them across the length of his chest and down to... *Stop it! You have got to stop thinking this way or you are going to drive yourself crazy.*

He watched her open the packet and scoop a couple of spoonfuls into the awaiting glass and chrome cafetiere. The delicious aroma of the coffee blend permeated his nostrils.

"It's Columbian," she explained as if she had read his thoughts. "Quite expensive."

"I am honoured."

"I guess you are. Please take a seat in the lounge. I'll be with you in a tick." She removed the fresh jam and cream donuts from the box, as he took a seat on the sofa. Then he watched her leave the room, mesmerized.

When he'd finally grounded himself, he tried his best to relax, but he wasn't in the mood to sit still. The sofa was comfy enough, but the cushion behind him felt hard. He moved it to one side and sat up. What

was that where the cushion had been? His fingers retrieved something white and lacy. He held it up. Was it what he suspected? A pair of panties? How often did she hide her panties behind the cushion on her sofa? He was about to press them to his face and inhale the scent of her when he heard her approaching, the heels of her shoes clacking on the wooden flooring. Hastily, he stuffed the panties in the first place that came to hand, the pocket of his combat jacket.

“Can you pour for me?” she asked.

“Er, what?”

“Can you pour the coffee, please?”

“Yes, sure.” He was distracted. It wasn’t every day he came across a pair of ladies panties right under his nose, as it were. Especially those belonging to someone as fanciable as Fran Santini. What was he going to do? He couldn’t leave them there; she might notice they had gone missing. She might think he was some kind of pervert or something.

He tried to concentrate on the job in hand. *Focus yourself.*

Fran looked at him intently. “You’re shaking, let me.”

Gratefully, he allowed her to take the coffee pot from his trembling hands and he watched as she sat close to him, pouring the steaming coffee into two black and gold cups.

“Here you are.” She handed him a cup.

The cup rattled in his saucer as he placed it down on the table. “Thanks.”

“Cake?”

He shook his head.

“Go on,” she urged. “You brought two. You obviously bought one for me and one for you.”

He had, but now his appetite had suddenly disappeared in a puff of steamy seduction. It might look odd though if he didn’t make some excuse. “I brought two as I knew a busy girl like yourself would have a good appetite.”

“You weren’t wrong there.” She grinned, took the cake from her plate and bit into it.

He couldn’t take his eyes from her mouth as she licked some stray cream from the corners. How he would love to go over there and lick the bits she had missed. It was lovely to be with a woman who didn’t mind what she ate. So many women had hang-ups about their weight these days. But this woman—she knew how to enjoy life.

Fran stopped what she was doing. Now she had become self-conscious. “Are you staring at me?”

“Sorry. It’s just that you have a little cream there.” He pointed to the corner of his own mouth.

“Oh.” She wiped her face.

“No, the other side.”

“Has it gone?”

He shook his head, went over and drew his index finger to her lips. They parted and, for a moment, he thought she was going to lick his finger. An image of her warm juices savouring him came to mind.

He let out a breath. “It has now,” he said, regretfully wiping away the swirl of cream with his finger and licking it. It tasted good. Not as good as she would taste, he guessed.

“Thanks. What sort of hostess am I? I haven’t taken your jacket yet. Go on, remove it and have that cake.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s warm in here.” She wasn’t about to accept no as an answer. This was a woman who liked to have her own way. She got up from her seat and started to tug at his jacket. It was no use; he would have to give in. He rose to his feet and allowed her to take it.

Fran stood transfixed, gazing at something. Her eyes widened as her panties fell from his pocket onto the floor.

“I can explain,” he said.

“Why is a pair of *my* panties in *your* jacket pocket?”

He looked her in the eye. Her brown eyes narrowed, her brow furrowed. She was angry and puzzled.

“I found them on the sofa.”

She threw her arms up in the air. “You found them on the sofa so you thought you would have to take them home with you!”

“Yes. I mean, no. I didn’t know what they were at first. I had them in my hand and I heard you come into the room. I thought it might look a bit odd, so I shoved them in the first place I could think of.”

“Hmm. I don’t know if I believe you or not.” She bent down, scooped them up and took them to the linen bin, dropping them in. Something she should have done in the first place, perhaps.

Okay, what harm had he done? She obviously wasn’t about to see it from his point of view. In any case, what normal woman left her panties on the sofa where anyone could find them?

“I think I’d better go.” He headed for the door. He had never felt so uncomfortable in all his life.

“Yes. I think that would be the better option.”

Remembering his jacket, he walked back to Fran and took it from her outstretched hand, then he tentatively made his way down the steps outside.

“Oh, Travis,” she called out after him.

“Yes?”

“I think you forgot this!”

He turned, instinctively throwing his arms out, as he saw the box with the remaining cake come hurtling as a missile towards him. He missed; he was never any good at playing *catch*. The box flew through the air and past him to splatter a red and white mess on the floor below. Crikey, he had well and truly blotted his copybook with that one.

Chapter Five

Fran couldn't believe the nerve of the bloke. Perhaps the reason he brought the cakes in the first place was to snoop around her apartment? It made her flesh crawl. Yet, before that incident she'd been getting on well with him. Hadn't she thought he'd been about to kiss her? Before the panties incident, of course. If Antonio had found out, he'd have frogmarched Travis down the fire escape before he had a chance to yell, "Tortellini!" He would have had more than a box of cakes flying at him—more like a pair of Toni's fists. In fact, if any of her family thought she was in any danger, they would immediately come to the rescue. Maybe not as fervently as Toni, but they would be by her side nevertheless.

Still, it had been a little ungrateful of her to have thrown the box at Travis like that. As soon as she'd done it, she'd regretted her actions. He had been so nice to her. It wasn't every day a man bought her fresh cream cakes. Too often, she let her impulses get the better of her.

She glanced at the clock. It was almost six p.m. Cripes, she was going to be late for work if she didn't hurry. She had another case this evening, on the other side of town. A middle-aged woman thought her husband was having it away with his secretary. He had been working late and using expensive aftershave for the past few weeks. *A sure sign if ever there was one. Then why didn't I notice a sign when it came to my own love life?*

Hastily, Fran finished her coffee and took the two cups over to the sink, pouring Travis's full cup down the drain. No time to waste on washing up. She ran into the bedroom, yanking skirts and skimpy tops out of cupboards and drawers. Now where was that dress? She had completely forgotten it had been torn the night she met Travis and

stumbled on the pavement. Cursing under her breath, she pulled out a black Lycra skirt and bustier. These would have to do. After dressing, she slid into her black, shiny stilettos, ran a brush through her hair, applied a gloss lipstick and a spray of perfume, picked up her bag and made for the door.

Pete, who worked at Peace of Mind as a driver and all around handyman, would be waiting down the road for her in his trusty Volvo. No way she was going to let him park in the lane outside. If any of her family saw her get into the car in the gear she was wearing, it wouldn't bear thinking about. In any case, once she had made enough money, namely ten grand, she could finish her job and no one need ever know. *Except for Travis, of course.* Her heart beat wildly beneath her bustier at the thought of his name.

He had enough info on her to blackmail her if he wanted to.

* * *

The club was quiet at this time of the evening and Fran glanced around self-consciously, appearing to be the only one alone. In the corner, a group of lads shot pool. Two couples sat opposite one another, the men drinking pints of beer and the women drinking white wine. She had already marked them off as married and on their weekly night out as couples.

Two old men sat by the bar beneath a haze of smoke, chatting to the barmaid. No sign of the middle-aged man she was meant to keep an eye on. She couldn't do this job much longer. Jobs like this one made her feel uncomfortable.

To take the edge off her frazzled nerves, she ordered a glass of vodka and lime with ice, and sat in the corner, a microphone firmly attached to the inside of her bustier. Funny, she could have sworn Pete's hands were shaking when he clipped it on for her earlier in the car.

She put her hand into her bag and extracted a gold compact; it would give her something to do. She applied powder to her nose and took it as

an opportunity to scan the reflection in the small mirror for anyone entering the club.

Nothing. Her glass was almost empty. Then she saw him out of the corner of her eye. A middle-aged man in a suit, smartly dressed, hair slicked back with Brylcreem, approached her table. For a moment, she thought he was going to sit next to her, but he took the table to her right and, glancing at his watch, shuffled about anxiously.

That couldn't have been him. He wasn't with anyone. But was he waiting for someone?

* * *

Buster barked and ran to greet his master, tail wagging. He was back to his normal self. There were signs Marge had been in the caravan as she promised to walk the little fella. Travis's eyes were drawn to a flowered casserole dish in the centre of the table and a note.

Travis,

I've left you a lamb stew. I've walked the legs off Buster, he seems okay. Goldfink has been around. He said he's sorry you couldn't find him the other night and he don't know 'nuffink' about no rat poison.

Marge

He smiled as he thought of Marge talking to Mr. Goldfink. That bloke was definitely up to something. Travis could have sworn he'd noticed the curtain twitch in Goldfink's bungalow the other evening when he'd gone to confront him, but in the event, there had been no answer. What Mr. G had planned, Travis hadn't a clue. He just knew it wasn't going to be very nice.

Travis removed his jacket, all the while thinking of *her* panties in the pocket. Now she thought goodness knows what. That he was a leech? A perv? A Casanova? Heaven forbid, he was none of those, just a guy who fancied her. What was so wrong with that? Hardly the crime of the century. Well, maybe it would be to Antonio.

Most worryingly, how was he going to face Fran tomorrow at work? He couldn't afford to put in his resignation. Things were awkward, that was for sure. In any case, what could he possibly say to make things better? He should have just left her panties where they were. If he hadn't picked them up, his visit might have gone a whole lot better.

He could have sworn, when he stopped her falling off that stool, she felt the same way he did. A searing heat had arisen, threatening to send his internal thermostat skyrocketing through the roof. If things had gone differently, he would have kissed her sweet lips there and then. He could have swept her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. She would have been a wanton woman, craving his body, he just knew it. But now he had gone and blown it. Maybe forever.

"It's all my fault," he spoke aloud to Buster. "You don't have that problem with the opposite sex, do you boy?"

Buster wagged his tail and cocked his head to one side with huge, doe-like brown eyes.

Travis's thoughts turned to tomorrow. What if Fran told her brothers? Or worse still, her father? It could place his job in jeopardy. Yet, it reassured him to know that he had something on her she wouldn't like any of them knowing—his trump card.

But why did he feel so bad for thinking that way? He wasn't the type of man who went around scoring points off others or manipulating them.

He knew in his heart of hearts, if she told them about what had happened at her apartment, then no way would he, could he, bring himself to tell her family about her other job.

* * *

"Pete..." Fran spoke into her mobile phone as she kicked open the cubicle doors in the ladies' room, to ensure they were unoccupied. "I think it would be best if you met me in the pub while I keep this bloke under surveillance. It probably looks a little strange, a woman on her own. Come as soon as you can. I'll pretend I'm waiting for you."

“Yeah, sure,” he answered in a drawl. She guessed he had fallen asleep on the job again and her call had disturbed him. She wasn’t going to let him off the hook. Her priority was her own personal safety. That was paramount in this job.

Returning to her table, she slowly sipped the vodka and lime on ice. The ice had started to melt. How many drinks would she need to keep up the pretence? She hoped Pete would pull his finger out and get to the pub, pronto.

Oh heck, the man at the next table was gazing at her now. Each time he caught her eye, she looked away. She shifted about in her seat uncomfortably. She didn’t particularly like being a woman on her own in a pub. It was a bit unusual, but her job called for it. Where the hell was Pete?

The man put his drink down, stood up and came over to her.

“Mind if I join you?” He straightened his tie and flashed a smile. If he was the intended target, then surely it was a good idea to let him sit next to her and get into conversation with him?

“Not at all.” She detected a slight vibrato to her own voice.

“What are you drinking?” He held out his hand for her glass.

She drained it and handed it to him. “Vodka and lime, but I’d prefer a cola.” She couldn’t afford to let her guard down.

Mr. Middle Age was having none of it. “Nonsense. Another vodka won’t harm you. I’ll get you a small one.”

She let out a heavy sigh as she watched him approach the bar. Pete should get here soon so he could watch her from a distance. Her only hope now was that he had his radio on so he could hear what was being transmitted.

The man returned with a pint of beer for himself and a large vodka and lime for her. What was his game? It looked more like a quadruple than a single shot.

“Thanks.” She accepted the drink, reassuring herself she could always take her time drinking it.

“So.” He sat down a little too close for comfort. “How come a pretty, young woman is drinking here alone?”

Fran cleared her throat. “To tell you the truth, I was waiting for a mate.”

His eyes narrowed for a second. “Male or female?”

“Oh, female.”

“That’s good.” He smirked. She felt his arm go around the back of her chair. Sitting forward, she gulped as she watched another middle-aged man enter with a curvaceous, young blonde. Damn, her instincts told her that was the man she should have been keeping an eye on. Now she had got herself cornered with some creep and there was no sign whatsoever of Pete.

* * *

Travis couldn’t get Fran out of his mind, no matter how hard he tried. He had to apologize to her soon, preferably before he left for work in the morning.

He dipped his hand into his shirt pocket for his mobile phone and tried the number she had scribbled down, when she had offered to help out with Buster. The number kept ringing and then went through to answer phone. Damn. He didn’t much feel like leaving a message. After all, what could he possibly say? “Sorry for confiscating your panties, it won’t happen again!” Or, “Fran, please let me make it up to you.” Neither sounded plausible. He switched his phone off and picked up the lead from the back of the door to take Buster for a walk.

It was good to see the dog back to his happy, healthy self. As they rounded the corner of the caravan park to take the path that led to the woods, Travis bumped slap bang into Mr. Goldfink.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” Travis said, squaring up to him.

Goldfink showed the whites of his eyes. Was it fear or surprise? “I...I...I’m sorry I don’t have any time right now. You’ll have to make an appointment.”

Travis spoke through gritted teeth. “An appointment? That’s totally ridiculous. I have a complaint to put to you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. I’d like to know what you think you are doing, putting down rat poison on the caravan site without informing the residents.”

Goldfink loosened his shirt collar and adjusted his tie. “I can assure you that I have not put down any poison. Nuffink at all.”

“Oh, but you have. One of the residents saw you sprinkling it early one morning last week.”

Goldfink stood open-mouthed, his neck deepening from a healthy pink to a raging crimson. “I haven’t got time for such accusations.”

“Haven’t you?” Travis blocked Goldfink’s path. “Well, how do you think poor old Buster feels?”

“Buster? Who is this Mister Buster? I don’t know him.”

“He’s right here at your feet, Mr. Goldfink, waiting to snap at your heels.” Buster let out a low growl. “You already killed one pet on the site and you almost killed him, too.”

“Your claims are out of this world. I would not stoop so low.”

“Hmm, a wise decision. I wouldn’t stoop too low either if I were you or Buster ‘ere will have you.”

Goldfink turned on his heel and walked off quickly towards his parked car.

Travis raised his voice. “And another thing, get ready for a visit from the health and safety inspector. The toilet block is a disgrace!” If Goldfink heard, he wasn’t showing it, but Travis noticed his hand shaking as he unlocked his car door.

“Good enough for him.” Travis smiled at Buster who sat there wagging his tail as if he had done something special for his master. “Good enough.”

* * *

Fran squirmed around in her seat. This man was an absolute pain. He was trying to get into her panties. He had already offered to take her for an Indian meal and then offered her coffee back at his pad. Yuck, she felt absolutely sick to the pit of her stomach. She looked across at the man with the blonde. He was recounting something, maybe a tale or some sort of joke, as she gazed at him adoringly, hanging onto his every word. There was no doubt in Fran's mind—they were an item—but she needed more proof.

“Are you listening to me?”

The letch had grabbed her by the wrist, forcing her to look into his eyes. Thick globules of perspiration formed on his forehead and upper lip. He had the build of a rugby player and could easily overpower someone with a small frame like herself.

“Do you mind? You're hurting me.” She grimaced, appealing to his better nature. Of course, she had no idea if he had one or not.

He loosened his grip and lowered his voice an octave, drawing up close, so she could smell his cheap aftershave. “Girls like you are a tease.” His tone had taken on a menacing quality. Where the heck was Pete?

Then he let go of her arm and carried on talking in a normal voice as if nothing had happened. “I was telling you about my car.”

“Oh?” She was going to have to be on her guard with this one.

“It does zero to one hundred in seventeen seconds.”

“Fascinating.” She stifled a yawn and massaged her sore wrist.

“Would you like a ride?”

Fran gulped. “I've just got to go to the ladies' room.” She grabbed her bag and rose to her feet.

“Just a moment, little lady.” A strong arm pulled her back down next to him. Yikes, was he going to keep her a prisoner or what? “Finish your drink first and then I'll get you another.”

Damn, he wasn't about to let her off the hook that easily. The ladies' room was directly opposite the bar, so he would see if she was trying to

sneak away. Besides, she wanted to stay a little longer to get the information she required from the middle-aged man opposite.

So far, there had been no hanky panky to speak of between the couple. All she needed was some sort of proof something was going on, like an intimate touch or a kiss. She needed this job. If she loused up this time, she was sure to be in big trouble with her boss, maybe even at the risk of losing her job.

Fran glanced at the man next to her, who still held her wrist firmly in his grip.

“You can let me go now. Stop it—please!” she hissed. What was it with this bloke? He was positively brutish and yet she feared offending him.

For a moment, he narrowed his eyes, then grinned widely, showing a vast expanse of teeth with the occasional gold filling. She should have guessed as much. It matched his jewellery. For all his money and so-called style, his aftershave failed to mask the faint odour of stale perspiration.

“Okay, keep your hair on. I just wanted you to drain your glass so I can get you another, that’s all.” He held out his spade-like hand.

She gave him a half smile, picked up her glass and downed it in one. *More like you want to get me inebriated, mate.* Picking up her bag, she flounced off towards the toilets.

“Pete, are you listening to this?” She spoke into her concealed mike, behind the door. No answer. “Pete, for goodness sake, where are you?” In desperation, she switched her mobile phone back on and rang his number, but there was no reply.

Then, quite suddenly, her phone rang.

“Fran, I’m phoning you to say I’m sorry about this afternoon.”

That wasn’t Pete’s voice, but she’d recognize that Irish lilt anywhere—Travis. Her heartbeat quickened.

She had been prepared to get angry with him again, to give him a piece of her mind, for the red mist to engulf her from the top of head to the soles of her feet. In ordinary circumstances, that would have

happened, but the relief at hearing his voice was immense. What she needed right now was help out of a tricky situation.

“Please leave the apologies for time being, Travis. I need you over here!”

“Pardon?”

“Look, I’m on a job in a pub across the other side of the town. It’s called The Dirty Duck—”

Damn, the line had gone dead. She cursed herself for not recharging the battery earlier. Had he understood her message? Did he know where The Dirty Duck was? And were there any other pubs with the same name in the city? She hoped not.

Perhaps, if Mr. Money Bags was still at the bar, she could sneak out behind his back while the coast was clear. Inching open the heavy toilet door, she sneaked a peek, but it was already too late, the bartender had handed the drinks over to him.

Her breaths came in swift, shallow bursts as she enclosed herself back in the ladies’ room and scanned for windows. There were plenty of them all right, but they were incredibly small and far too high up. She’d need to be a six-foot stick insect to clamber out of one of those.

She would have to go back into the pub and front it out, waiting for the opportunity for Mr. Big Shot to take off to the men’s room to relieve himself, after all that liquid he’d been downing.

Returning to her seat, she flinched when he patted her bottom as she sat down. This guy made her skin crawl; he was so creepy. She forced another smile and dropped her bag down beside her. Tears were near to the surface. The microphone obviously didn’t work; neither did her phone and with her luck, Travis, if he decided to come, would never find her anyway.

“Damn,” she muttered under her breath. The middle-aged man and his blonde were getting up to leave. How could she possibly go after them now with no Pete in pursuit or car to follow them? Not unless, she took a chance and took old Money Bags up on his offer of a ride in his car and that wasn’t a good idea.

* * *

Travis was puzzled. It just didn't make any sense. One moment she had been ticking him off about the panties incident and firing an edible missile at him, the next she wanted to meet him at a local pub for a drink. Only he hadn't quite caught which one before the line had gone dead. It was the Dirty something. Running around to the caravan next door, he knocked impatiently on the door.

"What's going on?" Marge yanked the door open, holding her youngest child, Kyle, in her arms.

"Do you know of any pubs around here with 'Dirty' in the title?"

Marge bit her lip, appearing to be deep in thought. "Let me see now, there used to be 'The Dirty Pirate' down by the docks, but I think they pulled that down years ago. Yes, I'm almost sure they did..."

"No, that wasn't it."

She frowned. "Why do you want to know, anyhow, and why the urgency?"

"Fran just ordered me over there and hung up."

"Oh, I see. Come in, I think I have a phone directory somewhere. Yes, here it is. Look under public houses." She handed him a large book.

He quickly leafed through its pages. *There's the Dirty Dozen, Dirty Dog. No, neither of those. How about The Dirty Duck? Yes, that rings a bell.*

"Marge, where's Sandstone Street?"

"Hmm. Let me see. Oh, I know it. You'll have to take the number forty-eight bus across the city and change to the number twenty-one at Bamford Bridge."

"That'll probably take ages. Can I borrow your van, please?" He didn't like to ask, but he had to find some way to redeem himself in Fran's eyes.

“Yeah, sure. You should have enough petrol.” She flung the keys at him.

“Thanks, Marge. You’re a gem.” He grabbed hold of her and kissed her cheek. Kyle let out a giggle and offered Travis his favourite toy, a black and white, cross-eyed woollen sheep. His chubby, little hands pushed it towards Travis.

“I’ll come and play with you tomorrow, Kyle,” Travis promised. “Perhaps Mummy would like to go out for the evening?” He looked at Marge; it was one way to pay her back for her kindness.

“Thanks, Travis. I could do with a night off from this lot.”

He kissed her again and left.

Within twenty minutes, he was on the approach to The Dirty Duck. The car park was half empty, but there seemed to be a commotion going on. Some man was grabbing hold of a woman and trying to kiss her forcefully. Not only that, but he was trying to put his hand up her skirt. He looked old enough to be her father. The way she struggled, it was obvious she didn’t want to be touched.

Travis swung the van into the car park, leaving the engine running, he leapt out.

“Here, mate. Let the lady alone.”

The bloke turned around, grinning. “This ain’t a lady and mind your own business. Now push off.”

Travis got a glimpse of the woman—chocolate eyes and ebony hair. It was Fran struggling with the bloke, her face crimson with frustration at being firmly in the man’s grip.

Only one thing for it. Travis charged at the man from behind, grabbed hold of one of his arms and held him in an arm lock.

“Let her go, buddy.”

But the man squeezed Fran even tighter. Travis brought his other arm around the man’s neck, throttling him, forcing him to let go of Fran, who stood bent over, hands on her knees, gasping for breath. Then

Travis pushed the man towards his own car and banged his head down on it.

“If I ever see you anywhere near my girlfriend...” Slam. His head went down again. “I will not be responsible...” Slam. “For my actions. Understood?”

The man nodded weakly and tried to speak. His voice sounded raspy. “I’m sorry. If I had known she had a boyfriend in the first place... She led me on.”

“It doesn’t matter whether she did or not. You assaulted the lady. Your attentions were unwelcome.” He released the man, who looked at Fran then Travis, muttered something under his breath and hurried to open his car door, then drove like a bat out of hell from the car park.

When he had gone, Travis walked towards Fran. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and for the first time he noticed she was crying. “If you hadn’t been here, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“Is that why you phoned me?”

“Yes. Pete let me down tonight.”

“Pete?” Did she have a boyfriend he knew nothing about?

“Pete is my driver. He’s supposed to maintain radio contact with me and come to my aid if necessary, only this time he didn’t.”

It was just as well Pete wasn’t here right now, because Travis would have grappled with him too. The lowlife scumbag.

“Let me take you home. You’ve had a nasty shock. You can see now why you shouldn’t be doing this job. If I hadn’t arrived, who knows what might have happened.”

She looked up at him through watery eyes. “You’re absolutely right,” she sniffed. “And I’m sorry if I misunderstood your motives earlier today at my flat.”

He smiled at her. When she looked vulnerable like that, it pulled at his heartstrings. He removed his jacket and draped it around her shoulders, keeping his arm around her to guide her to the van. He didn’t know what it was about the woman, but she brought out his protective

instincts. At least he had well and truly redeemed himself. He didn't intend to mess up again.

Chapter Six

Fran lay on the bed, snuggled under a patchwork duvet, thinking about the evening's events. Travis was right. Things could have got nasty for her if she had got in that man's car. She'd been so desperate to follow the couple she'd targeted that she had put her own welfare on the back burner. How stupid was that?

There was a tap on the door and Travis walked in holding a cup and saucer.

"I thought you could do with this." He handed her the tea and made his way to the door.

Funny, she hadn't noticed what a decent sort of bloke he was before. Sure, she liked him, fancied him even, but something else shone through this evening: a kind of trust in him she had never experienced before. Somehow she knew she would always feel safe in his company.

"Do I deserve this after the way I behaved towards you earlier this afternoon?"

He quirked a brow and gave a lopsided grin as he stood leaning up against the door jamb. "Sure you do." He drew closer and sat on the bed next to her. "I don't blame you for throwing the cake box at me after what I did." He patted her arm affectionately and she felt a stir of passion from deep within.

"No, you're too generous. I can see now that it was all a mistake."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. What bloke wouldn't have wanted to get hold of your panties?"

She was hot and hoped he hadn't notice her blush. Taking a sip of the strong tea, just how she liked it, she said, "Thanks. For this I mean."

“I took the liberty of adding a teaspoon of sugar for the shock.”

“Oh?” Now it was her turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Yes, my mother always said it was good for that. If any of the children fell over or got into any sort of scrape when we were growing up, Ma would take them into the house, clean them up, give them a good talking to and later pour a cup of tea. Strong, sweet tea with a plate of homemade biscuits was one of Ma’s cure-alls.”

“Sounds lovely.” She smiled, set her cup and saucer down, drew up her knees and hugged them to her. “Tell me more about your mother.”

“Ma lives on a smallholding in County Donegal with Freda and Bess.”

“Freda and Bess?”

“Freda’s a dairy cow and Bess is a horse.” He laughed. “She also has Ginny, Rosie and Rodney to keep her company. And before you ask, the first two are laying hens, Rodney is a rooster, Jack and Jill are geese. Oh, and she also keeps ducks, which she hasn’t named as yet.”

“Sounds idyllic.”

“It can be, but a lot of hard work. She’s not getting any younger.”

Fran took a sip of tea and placed the cup on the bedside cabinet. “You sound as if you worry about her?”

“Not worry, exactly. It’s more I’m concerned. She’s fiercely independent, mind you. It’s just now all the kids are grown and have moved out, it concerns me that something might happen to her.” He had a glazed look in his eyes when he spoke about the woman, almost as though he were some place else.

“Does she have a phone?”

“What? Er, no. She refuses to use any modern conveniences, doesn’t even own a television set, although she has an old radio. Her nearest neighbour lives a couple of miles away. She phones me when she feels like it, but mostly we communicate by good old pen and paper.”

Fran swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “If I were you, Travis, I would insist she gets herself a mobile phone. Better yet, buy one for her

yourself. Surely, you can afford to on the wages my father pays you?" She grinned.

"Money's not the issue now, since I have this job, but you are right. I could insist that she takes it."

"She'd hardly refuse a gift, would she?"

He scratched his goatee. "Who can tell, she might. She's a proud, independent old biddy."

Fran got to her feet and patted him on the shoulder. His concern for his mother was touching. Her own mother had once told her when choosing a man to check out how he treated his mother. She wished she had listened to that little nugget of advice. If only she had chosen someone like him and not Brad.

"Where are you going?" he asked, watching her put on her dressing gown and slippers. She had looked so hot and spicy in the slip she had worn in bed, it seemed a shame for her to cover up.

"I'm going to telephone Daphne at the Peace of Mind office to explain about this evening."

"While you're talking to her, why don't you put your notice in? There has to be a better way for you to earn money."

She smiled at him and ran her fingers through her tresses. "Of course I know you're right, but this job pays so well. It's a quick way for me to make money."

"So is prostitution," he said, sardonically.

"Now that's an idea." She gave him a wicked grin and a wink that sent his heart soaring. Someone like her would never do that sort of job, would she?

She bent over as he sat on the bed, her satin robe opening slightly to reveal a smooth expanse of bare flesh and cleavage. He swallowed. Her perfume was gorgeous. It reminded him of fresh flowers and sunshine and dew drops and... She was kissing the top of his head. He wanted her badly. He took her wrist and pulled her down on the bed next to him and

they lay staring at one another. She traced the line of his jaw with soft, delicate fingers. She was so close he could feel her chest rising and falling in rhythm with his own.

Closer still, he played with a lock of her hair and stared into the beautiful, chocolate whirlpool of her eyes, wanting to be drawn in by them, never caring if he came back up for air again. He longed to be consumed by this woman.

Tenderly, he drew her to him and brought his lips down on hers. Sweet, full and ready to open for him like the petals of a flower. If ever a woman had wanted him, it was now.

“Oh, Travis,” she murmured, her eyes closed.

His kisses became more intense as she writhed next to him. Then he was on top of her, loosening the tie on her dressing gown. He plundered her mouth with his tongue and felt her hips rise with every fierce, passionate kiss. He was becoming hard and primed for action. She wanted him, too, he knew that. But it was too soon. The last thing he wanted was to force things.

He pulled away and she opened her eyes, looked at him and blinked. They were no longer a whirlpool waiting to devour his very being, now they looked confused. Hurt even.

She sat up. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think we should,” he said. “Not yet anyway.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Look, it’s a difficult situation. I work with your brothers. I’m employed by your father. If things were to get out of hand it would make it difficult at the restaurant.”

She furrowed her brow. “But things needn’t be difficult, Travis. I promise. I’m not trying to make you commit to me or anything. For all I know it might just be a one-off. A release for both of us.”

He got to his feet. “Is that how you see me?” Now it was his turn to feel hurt. “Someone you can use when you feel like it? I don’t know what sort of men you’ve been seeing, Fran, but I ain’t that kind of bloke.”

“Sorry. You misunderstand me,” she muttered in barely a whisper.

He picked up his jacket and faced her. She was already wrapping her dressing gown tightly around her. What had he done? Now she was feeling unsafe again and it was all his fault. No, he had definitely done the right thing in cooling things down; she was too vulnerable right now.

Travis kissed her cheek. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.” He walked towards the door. Turning once more, he said, “Now, please, promise me you’ll hand your resignation in by tomorrow? Your job is just too dangerous.”

She gave a half smile and crawled under the covers.

As he left her bedroom, he cursed himself. Why couldn’t he just have taken what she had to offer? Most men would have been only too pleased to have their pleasure and leave with no strings attached. But then again, he wasn’t most men. It was then he realized how much he really cared for Fran Santini.

* * *

Fran awoke to the sound of the birds singing outside her bedroom window. A small shaft of light filtered in through the muslin curtains. For an instant, she had forgotten it all, the awful man last night and Travis going off into the night. In that instant she felt fine, fabulous in fact, until realization hit her like a brick. A cloud of gloom descended, threatening to engulf her very being. She had been down this road before, when Brad had deserted her. Maybe that’s why she felt so bad at being abandoned by Travis? Everyone who loved her left her in the end, Brad, Suzie and now Travis.

But that’s not true, is it? Travis’s intentions had been strictly honourable. He hadn’t wanted to take advantage of her. No, she couldn’t give in to this feeling. She had to get out of bed, jump in the shower, get dressed and put on her makeup. If she had time, she could have a decent breakfast. No real harm had been done to her. If she had slept

with Travis last night, things might have been awkward at work today so, in the end, it was all for the best.

As she towelled herself down after her shower, her phone rang. Suzie had some information about Brad. She'd discovered he was shackled up with an older woman on the other side of town. This woman was a friend of a friend of Suzie's, who let slip Brad's new love was beginning to doubt his fidelity.

"So, I was thinking," Suzie said. "Perhaps I could pass on a message for her to contact Peace of Mind where you work."

"You must be kidding." Fran almost dropped her bath towel on the floor. "I couldn't possibly trail him, he'd recognize me straightaway."

The line went silent for a moment. "Maybe not. But what if you were to pretend that you still liked him and set him up in one of your honey traps?"

"I don't know. I'm too closely involved. But I have to admit it does sound highly tempting and if there was some way for me to obtain justice, I would be only too happy to do it."

There was no way she could give her resignation in right now if she had the opportunity to get some revenge and her money back into the bargain, was there?

Chapter Seven

Travis buttered a thick slice of toast. Already running late for work, he felt better knowing that soon Fran's job would become a thing of the past. There would be time for romance later. Last night had been a close call. He shuddered to think she could have been raped by that brute. Visions of her battered body lying in an alleyway came to mind. The agency had let her down badly. That Pete bloke should have been minutes away to shield her from any harm. If he had been Pete, he wouldn't have let anyone harm a hair on that pretty little head of hers.

"Now, you be a good boy today for your Auntie Marge." Travis stooped to pat Buster's head. The dog looked up, his soft brown eyes full of resignation. Funny how he sensed when his master was going without him. Any other time and he would be up on all fours, furiously wagging his tail, whining until Travis attached his lead. He'd probably sleep for a couple of hours after Marge walked him. Oh to be a dog, where all you had to think about was your next meal or walk. Life was so uncomplicated for four-legged friends, wasn't it?

Marge was already striding towards Travis as he opened the caravan door. "Hi, Marge. I'll leave the door open for you. Can you lock up when you leave?"

"Don't I always?" She smiled. "How come you're so late this morning?"

"Don't ask. It's a long story. Remind me to tell you sometime." He didn't much fancy going into the ins and outs of how he had rescued a fair maiden last night and stayed at her place until she had fallen asleep. Fran had been given the impression he had already left her apartment. Instead, he had settled himself on the sofa in her living room for another

hour, silently returning to her bedroom later to watch the rise and fall of her chest. She had reminded him of the princess in one of his childhood storybooks, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Only he hadn't dared kiss her. If she had awakened, who knows what might have happened? He wouldn't have been able to resist a second time. After all, he was only human. But he liked the thought of rescuing her all the same.

He waved to Marge, grateful for her help with Buster. Then he hot-footed it out of the caravan site, jogging along Jackson Terrace where he took the number twenty-one bus to the other side of town. Sighing deeply, he ensconced himself in the only available seat on the lower deck. If he had been a little less rushed, arriving half an hour earlier as he normally did, he would have found the bus half empty. Instead, he had to suffer the indignity of having someone's wicker basket poke in his face as the bus jostled through traffic.

At least Fran would hand her notice in today and she could put the whole sorry episode behind her. He would have to think of some other way to help her raise the money. Maybe even he could loan her some. But that would be foolish. He needed the funds to get back to Ireland to check on his mother. Maybe Fran could apply for a part-time job elsewhere? It would take her longer to raise the money, but it shouldn't put her in jeopardy.

The bus lurched forward and the wicker basket slammed him in the face. At this rate, he would arrive at work looking as if he had gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxer. He couldn't wait to see Fran. He needed to check she was okay, not just from the incident last night, but because he had turned her down in the bedroom.

When he finally arrived at his destination, he pushed past a line of people who were standing in the aisle, relieved to find Mrs. Wicker Basket had a seat at the front of the bus.

He sprinted down the road and slowed as he rounded the corner leading him to The Vine Tree. Taking a deep breath, he opened the restaurant door.

“You’re late!” Antonio was already in the foyer. Had he been waiting, ready to pounce? This was so not what Travis needed—to get on the wrong side of Antonio today.

“I’m sorry. I’ll work an extra half hour this evening.” Travis looked him in the face, all the while captivated by the twitch in a muscle next to Antonio’s lip.

Antonio acted as if he hadn’t heard and continued to glare, straightening his shoulders. Travis loosened his collar. Was Antonio squaring up to him? He looked as though he wanted to punch his lights out. What was this guy’s problem? It was hardly the offence of the year, arriving late for work.

Travis let out a breath as Mr. Santini came over. “Ah, Travis, here you are at last. Was there a lot of traffic during the rush hour?”

Travis looked past Antonio and smiled at the middle-aged man. “I’m afraid there was. I was just explaining to Antonio how I will work to make up for it this evening.”

“No, don’t be silly. I wouldn’t hear of such a thing. We are all entitled to be a little late, once in a blue moon, although I should be annoyed if it was a daily occurrence.” The good humour in the man’s voice was evident.

Antonio let out a snort of disgust, turning his back on Travis, and headed off. Travis guessed Antonio didn’t like him because he had the job Antonio felt should have been his.

Travis followed him into the kitchen. In a little cloakroom just offside it, he changed into his black and white check trousers, white tunic and red bandana. He was dismayed that Fran wasn’t in her usual spot, chopping up vegetables or stock checking the food cabinets. Where on earth was she?

“Aren’t you going to make a start? You’ve wasted enough time already,” Antonio barked, throwing him a carton of fillet steak.

Travis slammed the package down on the counter. Antonio’s eyes widened. He obviously wasn’t expecting Travis to react like that. Well, from now on he would fight fire with fire.

“Yes, I am going to make a start. Yes, I am sorry I am late, and yes, I realize that I get up your nose because I got the job you wanted so much!”

Antonio swallowed. Mario froze and glanced over from where he was kneading a batch of dough. Was that apprehension? Surely, Mario was used to his brother’s outbursts?

“Just get on with preparing those steaks.” Antonio turned away.

“Don’t turn your back on me,” Travis said forcefully. Antonio turned around to face him. “Number one, I’ve been finding my feet here the past few days, but from now on I am the boss, understand?” Antonio stood slack-jawed, as if he could not believe what he was hearing. “Number two, when I give the orders, you take them. You do not question my motives if I am late. Only your father has the right to do that. And number three, where is Fran this morning?”

Antonio closed his mouth and opened it again, but this time his voice had lowered a couple of pitches. “She’s not coming in. She mentioned something about visiting a friend.”

At least she was all right. When Antonio left the kitchen, Mario came over to Travis’s side.

“I’m so glad you put my brother straight.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I learned a long time ago the only way to deal with him is to set some boundaries. He can’t help himself. He’s so protective of us all, especially Fran. But she sees his protectiveness as a form of control and I can’t say I blame her.”

Travis nodded. “It’s more than me taking a job here, isn’t it?”

“Fraid so. You see, Fran was engaged, but her fiancé left her for her best friend. So it was a double betrayal for her. Not only that, but he left her in the family way too, the friend I mean. Antonio got mad. Shortly afterwards, he found Brad, the bloke concerned, drinking in a pub down by the docks and knocked the living daylights out of him. Brad was so afraid that he left town the following day. Although, I hear he’s come back now.”

“Yeah, Fran did mention something the other day. Although, I suppose she prefers not to discuss it.”

Mario smiled sheepishly. “I guess you know my sister quite well already.”

How Travis yearned to confide in Mario about what Fran had been doing and what had happened to her last night. But she would hardly thank him for poking his nose into her business and that business would be well and truly over by tonight.

* * *

Fran parked up her scooter on the drive outside Suzie’s house. So she was about to meet Brad’s new bit of stuff. Funny thing was, a few months ago she would have been dead jealous at the thought of anyone else being with *her* Brad. But all she felt now was pity for the poor girl. Pity for her and anger towards Brad.

Suzie was already at the door as Fran walked up the path.

“Is she here?” Fran whispered.

Suzie nodded. “Don’t worry, she’s nice. In any other circumstances, I could see you and I being quite friendly with her. I’ve got the coffee on and some cakes Mother baked yesterday.”

Why did Fran feel she was a condemned man going to the gallows? With some trepidation, she followed Suzie into Mrs. Frampton’s chintz-decorated living room, conscious she was just as much on show as Brad’s new girlfriend.

“Sit down,” Suzie commanded. “Cassandra doesn’t bite.”

Fran did as ordered, glancing at the girl for the first time. She didn’t look at all how Fran had imagined. In fact, Cassandra didn’t appear to be Brad’s type at all. If there was one word to sum her up, that word was dowdy.

Cassandra looked up from the floor to meet Fran’s gaze. “Pleased to meet you.” She extended a hand. Fran had never seen a hand so long on

a woman before and guessed her height to be six foot plus. Though it was hard to tell as she was seated. She wondered if Cassandra had large feet to match. Cripes, hands and feet like man. The girl's khaki cardigan had obviously seen better days and her acrylic mismatched skirt was badly creased.

Stop judging the girl, Fran chided herself.

"Pleased to meet you, too." Fran took the girl's limp hand, giving it a good shake.

"I'll be back in a tick," Suzie interrupted. "Just going to get the coffee." Fran guessed she deliberately wanted to leave them alone to get down to business.

"So," Fran began. "You're Brad Simpson's new girlfriend?" The girl nodded and gave a half smile. "Well...I'm the original version, mark one."

Cassandra gulped. Fran experienced a swift pang of guilt for making the girl feel ill at ease. After all, it was hardly her fault, was it?

"I'm so sorry, perhaps I shouldn't have come." Cassandra rose to her feet.

"No, please sit down. You did the right thing. If my understanding is correct, you suspect he's cheating on you, too?"

"Yes." Cassandra looked down and fiddled with a large ring on her left hand.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, we got engaged last month."

"Can I see it, please?"

Cassandra reluctantly removed the ring and passed it to Fran. It felt quite light for a ring supposed to be a diamond cluster. It was probably no more than paste and glass, set into gold plating.

"I feel awful doing this," Cassandra said. "But I have to know for certain."

"I'm sure you do, and that's what I'm here for. Tell me, what sort of a relationship do you have with Brad?"

“Oh, he’s a perfect gentleman. He wants us to wait until we are married before, you know...”

So they hadn’t slept together. Fran smelt a rat. Cassandra was obviously not his type. If her theory proved correct, he didn’t even fancy the girl. From the moment he met Fran, he had pestered the life out of her to get her into the sack. So if he didn’t get engaged to Cassandra for love or sex, there was only one other motive—money.

“Tell me, Cassandra...” Fran leaned forward in her chair, looking the girl in the eye. “You don’t happen to have a large inheritance or something, do you?”

Cassandra’s hazel eyes widened as though she had never even thought of such a thing. “I do actually, but Brad doesn’t know that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, absolutely. I was left thirty thousand pounds in my grandmother’s will a few weeks ago, but I haven’t mentioned it to him.”

“Then could he have possibly found out some other way?”

Cassandra’s eyes glazed over and she looked up at the ceiling as though deep in reflection. “Well, there was something about it in the local paper, but I’m sure not many people read that, do they?”

“Hmm. I have a feeling our Brad Simpson is a bit of a confidence trickster.”

Cassandra stood. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean,” Fran said, also standing up, feeling intimidated by the girl’s stature, “is that he knew I had been left some money in my grandfather’s will and persuaded me to loan most of it to him. Do you detect a pattern here?”

Cassandra’s lower lip trembled. “I can’t believe that. He’s told me he loves me so many times.”

“Cassandra, in my experience, when a man says he loves you, unless he carries out the actions to go with it, then the words mean very little. He told me he loved me, too.”

“And me!” Suzie interrupted, bursting in through the door. Obviously she’d been eavesdropping.

Cassandra’s eyes clouded over and Fran feared she would burst into tears or else walk out of the room. But she did neither, just settled herself back on the sofa as if afraid the ground might swallow her up whole.

There was a long, awkward silence that seemed to last an eternity. Suzie finally asked, “Coffee, anyone?”

* * *

Fran unlocked the door to her apartment and flung herself down on the settee. She kicked off her shoes, made herself comfortable by rearranging the cushions behind her and closed her eyes, sighing deeply. Last night had been traumatic and this morning had been upsetting, too. The way Cassandra had talked about her relationship with Brad stirred up all those raw emotions Fran had experienced, when she first fell in love with him. Only now, she knew him for what he was, a cheat, a con man, a heartbreaker. Everything he had said and done with her, supposedly in the name of love, he had mirrored in his relationships with both Suzie and Cassandra.

Although Fran had been unceremoniously dumped by Brad, she’d drawn comfort from the fact he had once loved her. But had it all been an illusion, one that she had to bear some responsibility for? Why, oh why, hadn’t she seen it coming? Why had her instincts failed her? The whole situation made her question her relationships with men. What if she was wrong about Travis as well? Could she really trust him?

It was no use. She couldn’t possibly rest now. She heaved herself off the settee and walked towards the phone on the bureau to check her messages. Three in all. The first one from Daphne at the Peace of Mind, asking her to report in. Apparently, she should have done so last night. What a nerve, Pete had told them she had gone off and abandoned him.

Hmm, she'd give him a *piece of her mind* the next time she clapped eyes on him. It was he who had abandoned her.

The second message was from Travis. He sounded full of concern, asking her to contact him as soon as possible. The third message was from Travis again, forty-five minutes later, saying he hoped she had put her notice in at work. Well, for the time being she'd tell him she had. No point worrying him. For now she was going to remain right where she could nail Brad the bastard. Something all three women were keen to do. At first, Cassandra had sounded reluctant to believe what had happened to her, but when reality set in, she was all for it.

They had conspired like the three witches from Macbeth. On an evening when Brad was going out, Cassandra would inform Fran who would tail him, watching his every move and taking photographic evidence. When he went out another night, she would accidentally-on-purpose bump into him. It would be difficult, but she planned to make him fall in lust with her. Initially, she wouldn't mention anything about the money he owed her, in case she scared him off. But she intended to pretend she had inherited her parents' business and ask him if he wanted to be a partner. She would then ask him to invest a proportion of money and recoup what she was owed into the bargain. Only this time she wouldn't be all dewy-eyed and helpless, she would be a woman taking back control of her life.

It sounded all so easy, but of course it wouldn't be. If Brad were to approach any of her family about their "business arrangement", it would upset the apple cart. Antonio particularly disliked the way Brad had treated his sister.

She went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. It was practically bare, except for some salad and a large bottle of wine. She should have gone shopping. Turning her nose up at the thought of a droopy lettuce leaf and a stick of celery, she let out a sigh. She was pig sick of chopping up vegetables all day long at the restaurant. Salad was definitely not on her menu tonight. The cold bottle of wine would go down a treat though. She'd order a takeout pizza and drink the bottle all

by herself. One of the advantages of living alone—no one else to please, except for herself.

Pouring a large glass of Chardonnay, she glanced at her reflection in the chrome-topped cooker. A little peaky around the eyes, but was it any wonder after what she'd endured the past few months? She took a large gulp of wine, slowly relaxing as the amber nectar soothed her tortured mind. As soon as she'd sorted out the Brad business, she would hand her notice in to the agency and concentrate on the family business. Maybe invest some of her recovered money in it.

Slugging down the remains of her glass, she made her way to the bathroom and turned the power shower on. She needed to wash away the debris of the past day. She undressed and threw her clothing into the hamper in the corner, then got into the cubicle.

It felt so good as the hot, pulsating jets hit her body, massaging her tired torso and limbs with the expertise of an empathic lover. She reached for the shampoo and washed her long tresses, and in doing so managed to get shampoo in her eyes. Reaching for her towel slung over the glass partition, she heard someone call, "Hello!" Who was it? The voice was male. Had she forgotten to lock the door? The only men who had a key to her flat were her father and brothers, but this wasn't one of their voices.

The pizza. "Okay. I'm coming!" She hastily dried her face and wrapped the towel around her body. Her purse was usually on the bureau, but she didn't want to risk calling out for the delivery boy to take the money. If it was him. If it was anyone out to do her harm, they would hardly shout out to announce their arrival.

Gingerly, she peeped out from behind the bathroom door, her eyes still blurred from the shampoo. A young man of no more than eighteen stood in the hallway with a large, cardboard box. His eyes widened when he saw her and he quickly averted his gaze as he handed her the box. "Sorry. I did knock but you didn't answer and I could see the door was open..."

“That’s fine,” she reassured the timid-looking lad, although deep down she wasn’t fine about a stranger in her apartment.

“Large seafood pizza, nine pounds and ninety-nine pence, please,” he announced, as if to reiterate the reason for his visit.

Fran sidled awkwardly across the room, the box still under her arm. “I’ll just get my purse.” Annoyed with herself for not having locked the door and leaving wet drips all over the carpet, she padded over to the bureau, but her purse wasn’t there. Oh no, she’d left it at Suzie’s. She’d distinctly remembered picking up her scooter helmet but no purse.

The feeling of being watched intently washed over her and she spun around in horror. Now two men stood behind her. For a moment, she felt threatened as if the pizza boy had brought an accomplice with him, but when her sore eyes focused, she saw that, thankfully, the other man was Travis. What was he doing in her apartment?

Travis stepped forward. “Do you need any help?”

“No, thank you very much. How did you get in here anyway?”

“The front door was open. Look, you obviously can’t find your purse.” He delved into his trouser pocket and handed the lad a crisp ten-pound note. The boy took it with a look of distain. Travis dug into his pocket and handed him a fifty pence piece. “For your trouble,” he explained. The boy rolled his eyes and walked off.

“Thank you, but you didn’t need to do that. I would have found the money from somewhere.”

“Nonsense,” Travis replied, his eyes gentle, shining with compassion. She pulled the towel tightly around her, realising more might have been on show than she had intended. He stepped forward, so close she could almost sense the rhythm of his heartbeat. “It’s my pleasure.” For a fleeting second or two, she feared he was going to swipe the towel away from her damp, trembling, naked flesh.

“What have you come for?” She fought to regain her composure, still clutching her bath towel.

“I just came to check on you.”

“I tell you what, that pizza is too much for one person. So if you can wait a few moments for me to finish my shower and get dressed, we’ll share it, if you like?”

“I would like.”

She hadn’t noticed before how the creases at the corner of his eyes became more engrained when he was genuinely pleased. “I’ll pop it into the oven on a low heat until you’re ready.”

She smiled at him for the first time since he’d arrived. It would be nice to have some company after all. “Pour yourself a glass of wine,” she said as she headed for the shower.

* * *

A good twenty minutes later, she returned to the living room wearing a pair of sweat pants and T-shirt. Travis stood gazing out the window.

“A penny for them?” She wondered what was going through his mind.

“A penny? I don’t think they’re worth that much.”

What was the matter with him? He sounded down in the dumps. Wishing to redeem herself from her earlier behaviour when she had spoken abruptly to him, she said, “Look, obviously something’s on your mind. Come sit down on the sofa and I’ll dish up the pizza and pour us another glass of wine each.”

Fran carried over two plates and the warm box to the awaiting coffee table. Travis remained standing.

“Please sit down. You’re making the place look untidy, plus you’re making me feel edgy.” She let out a little laugh.

“Sorry.” He did as he was told. “I didn’t think how nervous I must have made you feel earlier when you were wrapped up in your towel and the pizza boy being here and all.”

“Thank goodness my brothers didn’t see that little scene. There would have been hell to pay!” She laughed again, only this time her laughter

was genuine, not fearful. She passed him a plate and served up a slice of pizza. "Watch, in case it's too hot."

"Yes, ma'am." He gave her a mock salute.

She took a sip of wine. "Now, what's on your mind?"

"I'm worried about my mother. I wrote to her a while ago, but there's been no reply."

"I thought you were getting her a mobile phone?"

"I have. I got it shipped today and I sent a letter explaining how to use it. So I hope she gets in touch soon."

Fran was touched by his concern for his mother. She couldn't help think the old biddy had made a rod for her own back by being too independent.

"I see what you mean. It's a tricky one."

"What would you do in my circumstances, Fran?"

She bit into her pizza, burning her mouth on the hot tomato and cheese topping, wishing she had heeded her earlier, cautionary advice. "Me? I don't know if I'm qualified to answer, Travis. I see my family on a regular basis and as much as I detest them being on my case all the time, at least I know where they are."

"I just wondered, what you would do if you were in my shoes?"

"Have you got enough money to take a trip out to Ireland?"

"Not really. Not unless I borrow it."

"What about your family? Your brothers and sisters? Couldn't they check?"

"Lacey's out of the country on her holiday. Tim and Daniel live a long way away."

"Neighbours? Oh, she doesn't have any close neighbours. Then the only thing you can do is to get in touch with the local police to see if they can check for you, until you can afford to go out there."

"I suppose you're right. Can I use your phone, please?"

"Be my guest."

Fran hated seeing Travis like this, all churned up inside with worry. Sometimes those fiercely independent old folk made it hard on others. It made her think of the elderly sisters who came into her restaurant.

It took an age for anyone to answer the phone. Travis sighed and muttered. "You won't believe how slow-paced everything is over there," he complained, shaking his head. "Police? I'd like to report a missing person. Yes. Meg O'Connell from Bailey Farm, south of Black Mountain. Yes, that's the one. How long has she been missing for? Sorry, I'm not sure. But I haven't been able to contact her for days. Have I been to the house? No, I can't. I'm living in Wales. Have I sent anyone around to check? Sorry, there's no one who can check on her at the moment. I'm concerned about her, she doesn't have a phone or anything. Yes, I would appreciate that." He replaced the receiver and rubbed his eyes.

"Any joy?"

Turning, he said, "The police station is only three miles away. They're going to send someone around and they've asked me to ring back in about an hour."

"Oh well, at least they're onto it."

"But what if they can't find her? Or worse still, find her collapsed on the floor? What then?"

"I'm sure it won't come to that." Fran hoped she sounded more positive than she felt.

Chapter Eight

It seemed an age before the hands on the clock moved to nine forty-five, exactly an hour since Travis had phoned the police.

“Have you any news about my mother, Meg O’Connell?” he asked, fearing the worse.

“Yes, sir. We have.” The police sergeant sounded a bit evasive. Oh no. She was dead, he knew it.

“Then, please, tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know how to tell you this...”

“For pity’s sake, spit it out.”

“Okay, but I don’t think you’re going to like this. We arrived at the property at exactly nine p.m., myself and constable—”

“Look, cut the crap, Sergeant. Was she there or not?”

“Yes.”

“Dead or alive?”

“Very much alive, sir.”

Travis let out a long sigh of relief. He put his hand over the phone’s mouthpiece and turned to Fran. “She’s alive!” He had another thought. He removed his hand. “Is she ill or injured?”

“No, she’s absolutely fine, more embarrassed at being disturbed, I’d say.”

“What?”

“If you leave me finish. When we arrived, the place was in darkness. We knocked and there was no answer, so the constable and I forced the back door. Then we rushed around the property calling out her name.

We heard some rustling and what sounded like a man's voice. As you can imagine, we thought she was being burgled or something. I, for one, imagined her tied up in the bedroom. Well, she was in a way." He let out a nervous chuckle. "You see, sir, she was entertaining a gentleman friend in the bedroom and was not pleased to see us."

"Oh, no." Travis almost dropped the receiver.

"But it's not as bad as it sounds, sir. They were only playing Scrabble in bed." The policeman spoke as if there was nothing wrong with it, his elderly mother in bed with a stranger. "Don't worry, sir, they were both perfectly happy. Turns out he's her husband."

"Husband? He died years ago. What's going on?"

The line went quiet, as though the sergeant were carefully choosing his words. "Your mother got married a couple of days back. She's on her honeymoon. That's why you haven't heard from her. Your mother and her new husband have shut themselves off from the outside world. They looked very contented and all. In fact, I told them we wouldn't be bothering them again, apologized and left."

His mother married? Why hadn't she bothered to tell him? "Who is he? The man she married?"

"Tom O'Brien. He owns a farm about four miles away."

"I can't say I've ever heard of him..." Travis's voice trailed off. He didn't know how he should feel at this news.

"Take it from me, he's a good sort," carried on the sergeant. "He moved into the area some three years back."

"Thank you for taking the time to check it all out for me," Travis stated flatly.

"No, problem, son. Any—"

Travis never heard the rest of the sergeant's sentence; he had put the phone down.

Fran stared at Travis's ashen face. What was going on?

"Well?" she prompted.

“It’s my mother, she’s...she’s...”

“She’s okay, isn’t she?” Now he had Fran worried. How awful, Travis stuck in the UK and his mother in some desperate plight in southern Ireland.

“Yes.” He scratched his head.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Then I don’t see what the problem is?”

For the first time since the phone call, Travis focused on Fran. “The problem is, she has got herself married.”

Fran got to her feet and embraced Travis. “That’s wonderful news.”

“Is it? I can’t see why.”

Was that a hint of pain she detected in his eyes? And if so, why should he be upset? His mother had lived on her own for quite some time now. Surely any son in his right mind should want her to be happy?

“Travis, what is it you’re not telling me?”

His lower lip trembled and he looked away. “It’s nothing. I’m just being silly.”

For a moment, she feared he’d burst into tears. Instead, he cleared his throat and picked up his jacket. “I’d better be getting back, I’ve taken up too much of your time.”

She wanted to sit him down and tell him he could talk to her; that she would understand whatever was troubling him. But she found herself saying, “As you wish. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

Travis shrugged, left her apartment and, without even a goodbye, walked off into the night.

It was no use explaining himself to Fran. He idly kicked an empty can of lager into the gutter, digging his hands deep into his jeans pockets. How could she understand what this felt like? Like a betrayal of sorts. He’d been very close to his father growing up, going to the local football match every weekend, fishing on Sundays, hill walking in winter.

A lump rose in his throat at the thought of his old man. Travis had been really happy that day, that awful fateful day. Miss Allen had sent

the class home early as they were breaking up for the Easter holidays. He and his mates had crowded into the local sweetshop to spend the rest of their dinner money and had idly kicked a football all the way home.

It wasn't until he got to the end of the road, he realized something was up. Dr. Dunblair's metallic silver Rover was parked there. He had seen it there twice before: once when his baby sister, Lacey, had been born and the other time when the same baby sister had a bad case of croup. The doctor only made important house visits. Mostly the folk from the village attended the clinic.

So with slight apprehension, Travis made his way along the lane, unlatched the large, wooden gate and trundled off to the back door and through the kitchen. Maybe his Ma was having another of those babies she was so fond of having. Or maybe Grandma Ellis's bad heart was playing up again. Pouring himself a glass of milk, he walked towards the parlour, but waited mid footstep and strained to overhear what was being said. He recognised the resonant tones of the doctor's deep voice.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. O'Connell, there's nothing further we can do for your husband. I could try to get him a place at the local hospital, but to all intents and purposes he would be happier, I know, if his last days were spent with you at home."

What had happened? Travis knew that his pa had got thinner lately, the way his sweaters hung off his shoulders and the way he'd taken to bulking himself out, wearing lots of layers of clothing underneath to beat the winter chill. He hadn't worked in the field for over a year. Instead, his mother and eldest brother, Daniel, had been up early to do the milking. Another change was the colour of his father's skin. Where once it had looked clear and he appeared rosy-cheeked, now his skin was tinged yellow. Reminding Travis of the colour of his baby sister when she'd had jaundice after she was born.

But until now, no one had told him anything. And they didn't either that day. Oh sure, they stopped talking when he walked into the room and Ma had asked if he was excited that it was the Easter holidays. But other than that, nothing else was said. She had followed the doctor to the door and they spoke in hushed tones. When he'd asked, after the doctor

had gone, why they had been talking so quietly, she'd told him it was because his father was upstairs sleeping. From that day on, his father remained in bed. By the time the holidays were over, he was lying cold in his coffin.

Travis choked back a tear as he thought of the years that followed. They had been tough ones, particularly for Ma who struggled to bring up her brood of children. It was just lucky that she made some income from the farm and that Daniel and Tim, the two eldest, both had jobs. Or who knows how they would have survived.

And then one summer, some three years later, he noticed something about Ma had changed. She no longer looked so world-weary. She had a spring in her step, as if about to dance a jig around the house. She wore lipstick, something he had never, ever seen her do when married to his father. Pa would not allow it. More often than not in the evenings, she'd be out at bingo, and Daniel or Tim would look after him. Not that he needed it at his age, but his mother had his best interests at heart, wanting him to keep out of mischief.

He got the impression the eldest children knew what was going on, but for some reason wouldn't tell either him or Lacey, his younger sister. Then one day, quite by accident, he found out. He had been given a different paper round by Mr. Donnelly, the local newsagent, and saw a strange red car parked down the lane as he arrived home. He noticed a man and woman inside, kissing. Sniggering to himself, he thought about telling Lacey when he got home. The couple pulled apart. He knew in a split second the woman was Ma. Not only was it Ma, but she looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

Not wanting to embarrass her or himself, he furiously cycled home. When she arrived behind him some quarter of an hour later, she sat him down at the well-scrubbed kitchen table and told him she had met a nice man who would be moving in and how did he feel about it?

What could he tell her? What did any fourteen-year-old child have the right to tell his mother? That he wished she wouldn't because he didn't want no stranger living with them and that no one, not anyone at all on God's green earth, could ever take the place of his da.

Instead, he nodded and gave her one of his best smiles, one of those ones that made his gums hurt. She ruffled his hair. “Good boy. I was hoping you would be happy about it, just as I am.” Then she handed him a chocolate biscuit and poured him a glass of milk and, for a short time, he felt that maybe things would turn out okay after all.

* * *

Fran was worried about Travis. She’d been chopping the same onion for ages.

“Anything the matter?” Mario stood in front of her. “You’ve been quiet and I notice you’ve had your eye on the kitchen door for the past twenty minutes.”

“Sorry.” She laid down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron. “I was just wondering why Travis hasn’t turned up yet this morning. Did he phone in and ask for time off?”

Mario shook his head. “I haven’t heard anything. In any case, it’s Monday, we’ll probably be quiet today, so we can manage without him.”

Fran sighed. “It’s not that. I’m worried about...”

“Anything I can help you with?”

Fran swallowed. Her lips felt dry. “He—”

The kitchen door swung open. Fran and Mario turned their heads, but it was only Antonio, white shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, carrying a large crate of tomatoes.

“What’s the matter with you pair? Do I have a dollop of spaghetti sauce on my nose or something?”

Mario wiped his hands on a tea towel. “It’s Fran. She’s worried about—”

Fran discreetly kicked Mario on the shin as Antonio had his back to them setting down the crate.

“Fran’s worried about what?” Antonio turned to face them.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Fran lied. No way was she giving Antonio any ammunition against Travis. He had plenty already. “I was just wondering whether we have enough fresh fish for lunchtime.”

Antonio furrowed his brow. “It’s not like you to worry over such trivialities, my dear.” He dipped his head to kiss his sister on her reddened cheek. “It’s fine. It’ll be quiet today and even if we get a last-minute coach party, we have some frozen cod and plaice left in the freezer.”

Whew, that had been a close call. She wiped her brow and poured a glass of cold water. If Travis didn’t show soon, she would go look for him. How had this guy got under her skin? She hadn’t allowed herself to feel this way since Brad. Indeed, should she feel this way? Was it wise to have feelings for someone she hardly knew? Yet, she couldn’t get him out of her mind.

The kitchen door swung open again and Papa stood there, hands on hips. Then he clapped his hands as he always did when he had something important to say. There was a deathly hush and he cleared his throat.

“It’s Travis.”

Oh no, what has happened to him?

“He won’t be in today.”

Where is he? In the hospital?

Antonio muttered something that sounded like, “Skiving Paddy,” under his breath, causing his father to glare at him. Fran knew how much Papa respected Travis.

She gulped and Mario said, “Where is he then?”

“He’s had to go away for a few days, that’s all I know. He asked to take his leave now and I agreed. It must have been important as he asked for an advance on his wages.”

Antonio slammed his fist down on the counter. “He hasn’t been here for five minutes and now he’s dictating when he should take his holidays and get paid. I say you should sack him now!” He addressed his father, who shook his head sadly.

“There’ll be none of that. I do the hiring and firing around here. I don’t think he’ll be jetting off to the Bahamas quite yet. It sounded as if it was family business.”

Fran swallowed and an “Oh,” slipped out.

“Do you know something about this?” Antonio asked, as his father made his way back into the restaurant.

“Me? No. I’m just a bit surprised like you are.” Her voice trembled.

“I wouldn’t say ‘surprised’ is the word I would have used.” Antonio shook his head. “More like shocked he could leave us in the lurch.”

Fran was about to jump in and defend Travis, but thought better of it. It wouldn’t do to give away his personal business to someone as fiery as Antonio. Travis wouldn’t thank her for it. So instead, she bit her tongue and went back to the job in hand, chopping up onions. She had other things on her mind besides Travis O’Connell.

* * *

Travis hauled himself and a large canvas holdall out of the old black cab and extracted his wallet from his back pocket. He handed the driver, who looked as weary worn as the cab, a crisp note. The driver shook his head and kept his grubby palm open.

Travis smiled inwardly. Some people never changed, especially when they were as canny as Jim Buchanan.

“Thank ye kindly.” He slipped the extra note into a small glass ashtray on the dashboard. “So you heard the news about your Ma?”

Oh no, has it got all the way around the village already? “And what news might that be?”

“That she had a large win on the bingo a few weeks ago. I expect that’s why you’re back then. All you young folk are the same.”

Travis let out a sigh of relief. So Jim didn’t know. It would be a good chance no one else would know either. Jim was a fount of all gossip in the village.

“What are you inferring?” Travis shot the man a scathing look.

“Nothing, lad. I didn’t mean anything. I was just having a wee joke with you, all right now?” Jim’s eyes became wide with terror, as if he feared he had overstepped the mark.

“And now I’m having one with you.” Travis laughed. In some ways it was good to be back in the old country again. As much as he loved Wales, this place would always be home to him.

Jim visibly relaxed. “Well, that’s okay then. Will I be seeing you around during your stay?”

“You might do. I may call into The Lamb one night and buy you a jar.” Travis shook the old man’s hand. He watched the cab weave its way down the lane and out of sight as it joined the main road to the village.

Just smelling the country air made him feel at home. Not that he didn’t have any country air in Wales, of course. Just that he needed to get quite a way out of the city centre to appreciate it.

He opened the dilapidated old gate. *I can mend that for Ma while I’m here.* He took a breath. *No, I can’t. She doesn’t need me now she has a new man in her life.*

He hoped to goodness this man would be nothing like her second husband. No one could be that unlucky, could they?

Painful memories of his mother’s battered and bruised body flashed through his mind like a magic lantern show. In an instant, he was a teenager again, fighting to protect the mother he adored and, instead, being thrown across the room by a sixteen-stone bully.

Thankfully, it had all come to a head. His stepfather had met a younger woman in the village and gone off of his own accord. But it hadn’t stopped Travis from sleeping with a baseball bat under his bed, just in case. It wasn’t until he had read “Fergal Ryan Found Dead on Beach in Mysterious Circumstances” in the local paper that he began to relax.

He had often wondered what had happened to the brute. Had his young concubine killed him by drugging his cocoa one night and then ordered some heavies to take his lifeless body out to sea? Secretly, he

liked to imagine she had. His mother, after reading the news, never mentioned Fergal Ryan's name again.

As he made his way up the path, there was little to indicate any change at the smallholding. The chicken, geese and ducks still scurried around in their pens, pecking at imaginary feed. Whilst, Bess, the old retired horse, stood chewing away in toothless wonder.

Travis shoved a rusty wheelbarrow out his way and was about to enter the back kitchen, when he stopped dead in his tracks, his hand hovering several inches from the doorknob. It didn't feel right to just barge in, so he knocked tentatively. Hearing hushed voices, he straightened up. Almost immediately, the door swung open.

"Travis, my boy!" His mother stood there with a welcoming smile. He was about to hug her, when he noticed the man standing in her shadow. He had a look of uncertainty on his face. His grey hair was smartly slicked back and he wore navy braces over his striped, collarless shirt.

Ma ushered Travis inside.

"This is Tom," she proudly announced. Gingerly, the man extended his hand and Travis shook it. If he had been expecting a limp handshake, he was mistaken. This man had the grip of one twenty years younger. The calluses on his hands, showed he wasn't afraid of hard work either. Travis estimated Tom to be in his mid seventies.

"Pleased to meet you, son." Warmth emitted from Tom's grey blue eyes.

Travis relaxed a little. This man was nothing like Fergal Ryan. Travis had expected to meet a huge beast and find his mother cowering in the corner again. But this time, it was comforting to see by the glances they both exchanged, how deeply they cared for one another.

"So this is the man who has stolen my mother's heart?"

Ma gazed at Travis wide-eyed, a little twitch forming at the edge of her mouth as it always did when she got nervous. "You know?"

"Aye. When I couldn't get a hold of you for days on end, I phoned the local cop shop."

Ma beamed. "So that's why the constable walked in on us. They said they'd received a phone call from a very worried relative, but they wouldn't say who. To be honest wid cha, I thought the call was from your Auntie Nellie in London. Now let's take a wee look at cha. My, how you've grown." She ruffled his hair and, to his horror, he felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"Don't be daft, Ma. I stopped growing a long time ago, unless you are referring to my waistline! I'm twenty-six, not six."

"For sure ya are, but you'll always be my little lad in me heart. Now, will you be having some tea with us? I've baked your favourites, scones to go with jam and cream."

Ma had said the magic words. All thoughts of his expanding waistline flew out of the window. He threw his holdall down into the corner and eagerly seated himself at the kitchen table.

* * *

Fran smoothed down the skirt of her grey, pinstriped suit and ran her tongue over her lips.

"He's coming," Suzie whispered from behind the curtains. She had been watching from the window for the best part of twenty minutes.

"Did he see you?"

Suzie frowned. "I don't think so."

"Good, go hide in the spare bedroom. I don't want him finding you here."

Suzie walked as quickly as her pregnant legs could carry her. When Fran was quite sure she was safely out of the way, she unlocked the door.

"Brad!" Fran smiled through gritted teeth. He was the last person on God's green earth that she wanted to see, but she needed to convey the impression he was the first.

Brad's knuckles turned white as he clung onto the wrought iron railings at the top of the steps. Did he fear that she might knock him down as some sort of revenge? Oh, she would love to see him fall, but first she had another plan for bringing him down a peg or two.

"I hear you have an offer for me that's too good to refuse. I can't believe how we ran into one another like that the other day." His eyes darted back and forth, as if she might have her two brothers ready to paste the living daylight out of him.

Yes, it had been more than pure coincidence, bumping into him in the middle of the high street. She'd been trailing him for days with her hidden camera, trying to catch him in the act with another woman. That would be all the proof Cassandra would need. Unfortunately, Fran had bumped into him earlier than anticipated when she'd followed him into a department store. Minutes later she had collided with him when he had changed his mind, on the point of leaving the store.

The first thought that had come to her was to arrange this "business meeting" with him. So here they were. On her territory.

Fran's heart skipped a beat. She feared all those old feelings would resurface, threatening to betray her once more. Instead, she took a deep breath, put on her best business manner. "Come in. I've been expecting you."

Tentatively, he followed into the sitting room.

"Sit down," she ordered. "I'm not going to bite." For the first time since she'd known him, she had the upper hand and it felt good.

He did as he was told, then loosened his tie. "What is this all about?"

"All in good time." A hint of a smile danced on her lips. "Now would you like a tea or coffee?"

"Er, no thanks. I'm a bit pushed for time." He wanted her to cut to the chase.

"Okay, then." She sat herself opposite, hiking her skirt up a couple of inches. "I have a business proposition for you."

"Business proposition?" He swallowed his Adam's apple.

“You heard me right,” she replied coolly, running a red-painted fingernail along the hem of her short skirt, all the while watching his eyes drinking in the scene before him.

She smiled inwardly as he loosened his necktie for the second time. She was obviously turning him on. Good—he still found her attractive. If she could make him fall for her, so much the better.

Brad found his voice. “So what kind of a proposition?”

“An investment.”

“An investment. But I don’t have any money to invest,” he protested.

“What about the ten grand you borrowed from me?”

He sat up straight. Now she not only had his undivided attention, she also had him by the balls.

“I don’t have the money right now.” His neck flushed as it always did when he got nervous. “But I’ll pay you back, honest I will.”

And pigs might fly.

“I’m not asking you to give it to me right away. I can wait a month. I assure you that you’ll double your investment, triple it even.”

A little smile flickered on his lips as a light bulb appeared to go on somewhere in the dark recesses of his brain. Brad was one of the most materialistic men she had ever had the misfortune to come across in her life. If there was a way to make money, he’d want in. On the other hand, if there was an easy way to lose it, too, he was also the man to do it. Now, if she could just get him to agree.

Of course, he’d spent every penny of the ten thousand on high living and women. He had no intention of paying it back, but if she could persuade him to take out a bank loan or something, she’d be laughing.

“But why would you want me to come in on a business deal with you Fran, after our, er, history?” Brad’s face showed a mixture of bewilderment and surprise.

“Brad, as far as I’m concerned, what’s done is done. I don’t think business and sentiment mix. I need you for your gift of the gab. You need me to help you make money.”

“Gift of the gab, I don’t understand?”

“Look, you’d be the first to admit, wouldn’t you, that you have a way with words?”

“I suppose it has been said,” he replied, relaxing back into the chair.

That was an understatement. He was the sort of bloke who could sell snow to an Eskimo. “And you used to be a salesman?”

“Yes. You know I worked for Allan and Martin Motors.”

“And you were very good at your job?”

“Yes, I was salesman of the year. Three years on the trot.” He was enjoying the flattery. She’d noticed that little spark of passion in his tone and the way his eyes lit up.

“Well, my father is expanding his business. He’s going to bring out his own home-baked Italian breads and pastries to sell to pubs, restaurants, etc. We’re going to need a smart investor, one who will then own a small part of the business. But as well as investing, he or she needs to be an excellent sales person. My father will own a major percentage of the business and myself, Mario and Antonio, the remainder. So it’s a win-win situation. No one loses out. We all have something to gain.” She hoped she sounded as confident as she needed to. If Brad so much as doubted the proposal, she could go whistle in the wind to get her money back from him.

Brad’s eyes clouded over at the mention of the Santini brothers. “I’m not too sure if that idea would work.”

“You’ve no need to worry. It’s all water under the bridge now. I’ve persuaded my brothers we need you in on this.”

“But Antonio, he—”

Fran cut Brad’s protestation in two, “I won’t have it. Don’t even go there. Okay, Antonio may have roughed you up a little last year, but he had his reasons.”

Brad lowered his gaze, as though thoroughly ashamed. The first time he had shown any sign of remorse since the whole sorry incident. “You’re right, I’m sorry. We’ll start a clean slate.”

Was he agreeing to her proposal? Would it really be that easy? The one thing that troubled her was, he might dupe some other unsuspecting female into loaning him the money for this and that wouldn't do at all.

Chapter Nine

Travis took a long hot, shower, then padded around his bedroom. Nothing much had changed. The rough stone walls were still whitewashed and the overhead, low rafters still painted black. It comforted him to see the bed was the one he remembered from childhood, with its iron bedstead painted black and gold. Where once the bed had been covered in a patchwork quilt made by his mother, now in its place lay a smart duvet set. The posters of Madonna and Man United were long since gone, replaced by a set of miniature paintings of wild flowers.

He dried himself in a large towel he'd packed in his holdall. Sitting on the bed, he extracted his phone from the pocket of his combat jacket and rang Marge. She took a long time to answer, she always did. Some child or another demanded her attention.

"The Addams family residence," someone mumbled, quite matter-of-factly.

"Pardon?" He rechecked the number on his phone's screen. No, it was correct. "Marge, is that you?"

"Yes, of course it's me." In the distance, he heard a squeal of temper.

"Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"Would there ever have been a good one?" She chuckled.

"I suppose not. Just ringing to see how Buster is coming along."

"He's fine. Simon's only this moment brought him back from a long walk and will feed him shortly."

"Is he eating okay?"

“Yes, his appetite has picked up nicely since the poisoning. That reminds me, Travis, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Oh no, was there anything wrong with the dog that she hadn’t yet mentioned?

“I need to tell you this straightaway. Mr. Goldfink has sent letters around the caravans today. He’s giving us a month’s notice to quit.”

“The old git!” Travis slammed his fist down on the pillow. “I knew he was up to something. I had a feeling in my water. Can he do that to us?”

There was a long pause. “Fraid so, he’s adamant he can. He says he was only looking after the land for his brother and as we have no rent books or formal agreement, he can turf us off anytime he damn well likes.”

Travis pondered the situation. “Don’t we have squatters’ rights or something like that?”

“I suppose we might do, but the site is run down, is it going to be worth the hassle?”

“Guess not. So what are you going to do?”

“I’ve already been over to see the housing officer at the council offices and he’s told me unofficially if I can declare the kids and myself homeless, they’ll have to give us a place. Here, you could try that yourself.”

“Suppose I could, but I won’t bother. It’s about time I got a tidy place for me and Buster. I’m working now.”

“Yeah, of course you are.”

In the background, Travis heard the sounds of breaking glass and a child’s high-pitched wail.

“Guess I’d better leave you to your brood, Marge.”

“Okey-dokey. Chelsey’s just smashed a milk bottle, so I’d better go and clean up the mess before any of the kids get hurt. Let me know when you’re coming back so I can arrange to give you Buster.”

“Don’t worry, Marge. I won’t be away all that long. I just want to reassure myself of something.”

He guessed Marge would wonder what the hell he was talking about. At the moment his priority was to check that his mother was perfectly safe and happy with her new husband. He had to admit that so far was so good.

* * *

Whether Fran had convinced Brad to come onboard as a partner in the new family business was anyone's guess. Wiping the beads of perspiration forming above her upper lip, she took a deep breath as he deliberated. Didn't he just say he had another appointment to go to? Why was he putting her through such torment?

She cleared her throat. "I'm going to need to know as soon as possible if you will be joining us or not," she stated firmly.

"What's the rush?" he asked, for the first time gazing intently into her eyes, causing her to shift uncomfortably.

"Er...my father wants to get this business up and running. To be honest with you, I think he has someone else in mind." She wondered if he would swallow that line.

Brad sat up in the armchair. Now she had his attention. But what if it backfired? What if he decided it would be better to let someone else get involved?

"Oh, okay," he said softly. "Well, I've made my decision..."

She looked into his eyes, trying to sense what his answer would be, but all she saw was a glint of mischief. Was he playing with her, toying with her emotions? It wouldn't be the first time.

"All right." She let out a resigned sigh. "I just thought to give you first option because you are such a great salesman." She sprang to her feet to show him the door.

"Hey, now hang on." He remained in his chair. "I didn't say I wouldn't agree to it."

"You didn't, did you? So that must mean..."

“Yes. I’ve decided to join you.”

Fran held out her hand and shook his. It was an odd sensation and for a split second she almost felt sorry for Brad, until she thought about what he had done to her and her pregnant friend in the adjacent room.

“Welcome aboard.” She smiled inwardly. “Now, I’m sure, as I haven’t taken up too much of your time, you can stay for a cup of coffee?”

Brad nodded, a huge smile lit up his face. Now she had well and truly set the bait. If only she could be sure he was going to take it.

* * *

Travis was about to put his mobile down on the bedside cabinet when he toyed with the idea of phoning Fran. He had been feeling exceedingly guilty about walking out on her the other evening, without any explanation. The truth was he could not handle his emotions sometimes, especially when it came to his mother. Hearing the news of her marriage, he had felt like a helpless child again. But now he had everything in perspective. He need not feel that way ever again. After all, everything so far suggested his mother was happy with Tom. He cared for her. He was unlikely to send her reeling with blows to the face so that she encountered every wall in the cottage, was he?

Travis picked up his mobile and dialled.

Fran’s telephone rang for what seemed an age. He was about to give up, telling himself that she must be working the evening shift at the restaurant, when someone answered.

“Fran Santini’s phone.” It was a husky sounding, male voice. Odd. It didn’t sound like either of Fran’s brothers.

“Is Fran available, please?” Travis asked cautiously.

A long pause before the disembodied voice answered, “Sorry, she’s busy at the moment.”

Travis sensed the guy was being awkward. Maybe he didn’t want another man to speak to Fran. “When will she be available?”

“How about sometime next year?” The man laughed and the line went dead.

Who the heck was that? Travis dreaded to think Fran was still working for the honey trap agency. He had warned her about putting herself into danger. It surprised him he felt a little jealous about the man. Was he a client? Or a boyfriend he knew nothing about? It was none of his business, anyhow, and who could blame her if she had taken up with another man, the way he had rebuffed her that night he had come to her rescue. The night they had almost made love, until he had gone quite cold on her.

Whoever the man was, he didn't want Travis to get through to Fran and that concerned him.

* * *

“Who was on the phone?” Fran brought in a tray with two coffee mugs, a basin of sugar, a milk jug and a plate of chocolate chip cookies to keep Brad sweet.

“Oh, no one in particular.” Was that a little smirk she detected on his face?

Why didn't she believe him? Gut instinct, maybe? Or how about going by past experience. A leopard hardly changed its spots, did it?

“Who was it, then?” she challenged.

“Er, just one of those tele callers who call at awkward times like when you're having your supper.” He gave a hollow laugh.

“Tele callers?”

“You know, trying to sell you something.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Why didn't you call me to answer then?”

“Did you want to buy double glazing?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

“No, of course not.” She began to remember his controlling ways. Changing tack, she said, “Come on, let's have that coffee before it gets cold.”

As she poured the milk into the cups, he looked into her eyes, causing her hand to tremble. Though this time, she reacted, not from feelings of want, more of fear, trepidation and a little excitement that she was going to set him up.

“Thanks.” His hand brushed against hers as he took the cup. “I really am sorry you know.” She sensed a hint of sincerity in his voice.

“For what?” Deep down, she knew.

“For what I did to you.” He lowered his voice. “The truth was I fell in lust with your friend, Suzie. She kept giving me the come on and I’m a man. There’s only so much flesh and blood can stand...”

Any feelings she had that he might be sincere quickly evaporated. She’d known Suzie a long time, a lot longer than Brad. No way Suzie would have ever given Brad the come on.

Thinking on her feet and knowing Suzie was listening in the other room, she asked, “And what do you intend to do about the baby?”

He shrugged and, raising his voice, said, “I can’t be certain it’s mine.”

How could it not be his? Suzie was very naïve, the last person who would sleep around. To her credit, she’d been in love with Brad.

“So, you don’t intend to support your child?”

“Why should I?”

“There is such thing as DNA you know. Suzie could ask you to take a test.”

The colour drained from Brad’s face. It was quite evident he hadn’t even considered it as an option.

“Do you think she would?” He undid his shirt collar.

“How would I know, Brad? We’re hardly bosom buddies these days after you and she...”

“Yeah, I was forgetting.”

Forgetting? Was this man for real? He had busted up the best friendship she’d ever had and got her friend pregnant into the bargain.

“Anyhow.” She regained her composure. “We’re here to discuss business and nothing else.”

“That’s a shame.” He smiled, reaching out to touch her hand, which she quickly withdrew.

“So I need that financial investment from you ASAP.”

“The ten grand you mean?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” she said in an exasperated tone.

“I’ll get on to the bank this afternoon.”

“See you do or the deal is off.” She picked up her coffee cup and took a sip, then offered him a chocolate chip cookie, which he firmly declined. He was probably keeping an eye on his firm, trim figure. Brad Simpson, ever the narcissist.

He remained silent. Then picked up his spoon, stirred his coffee and appeared in a trancelike state for several moments.

“Are you going to drink that?” she snapped.

“Of course I am.”

“It’s not poisoned, you know.”

“I know. Although I couldn’t blame you if it was. I wanted to ask you if...I mean when all this is sorted out, if you would consider perhaps, that is, I mean, if you would consider coming back out with me sometime?”

He visibly held his breath. What should she say? Should she play along? If she did, she was more likely to get her money back.

“I might.” Getting to her feet, she said, “It’s best you go now. I have to get ready for work this evening.”

“Oh.” Obviously, it was the last thing he expected, to be turfed out of her apartment. But she had to bear in mind Suzie’s feelings in the little room next door. Hark at her! Now she was worrying about a woman who had betrayed her. Yet, deep down she should be thankful to Suzie for being the catalyst. Otherwise, Fran would not have discovered Brad’s cheating ways until they were well and truly hitched. That thought caused a shiver to run the length of her spine.

* * *

“You can come out now,” Fran called to Suzie after Brad walked down the fire escape to his awaiting silver Mercedes parked in the lane below.

“Thank goodness.” Suzie emerged red-faced from the small bedroom. “I was beginning to feel like an oven-ready turkey.”

“Sorry, it is a little hot in there. It’s next to the boiler.” Fran gently took her friend’s arm, ushering her to sit in an armchair.

“How did it go?”

“Not too bad. The good news is, I think I’ve got him convinced he should invest in ‘the business’.”

“And the bad news?” Suzie furrowed her brow and swept back a strand of her shoulder-length hair from her perspiration-soaked face.

“The bad news is he doesn’t want anything to do with the baby.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Suzie wrung her hands.

“Suppose I half realised it, but it sounded a little harsh hearing him say the words. Why don’t you try to get him to take a DNA test?”

Suzie let out a sigh. “No. What would the purpose be? I don’t want him in my life and definitely not in the baby’s either.”

Fran shrugged. “I suppose you know best, but at least it’s an option. I just hate to think of him cavorting around in a Mercedes, living the high life, when you’re deluged in an avalanche of nappies, night feeds and night times of little or no sleep.”

Suzie gave a little laugh. “When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound a barrel of laughs, does it?”

“No. I’m just thinking about the practicalities. Why should that rat be allowed to get away scot-free?”

“What are you referring to? My pregnancy or your ten grand loan?”

“Both. It would be great if we both got something out of this.”

Suzie gave a resigned shrug. “For you, maybe, that might be true. I wouldn’t like to lose that amount of money, especially if it were left to me in my grandfather’s will. But for me and Junior”—she patted her swollen stomach—“it would be in our best interests if we had no more to do with

Brad Simpson. He wouldn't make a good father. I have this vision of my child, a few years from now, sitting at the window waiting for his or her father to arrive to take him or her out for the day. Then being bitterly disappointed when he doesn't show up. I couldn't put my child through that. Brad is not the most reliable of men."

"When you put it like that I have to agree with you."

Fran gazed out of the window as she drew the blinds, wondering if Travis would turn out to be as unreliable as Brad.

* * *

"So, what do you think of him?" Ma asked Travis as he sat at the kitchen table, relishing a plateful of Irish bacon, sausages, eggs, mushrooms and homegrown tomatoes.

"Who?" He felt slightly irked at having to stop eating mid-forkful. It was ages since he'd experienced his mother's cooking and it tasted so good.

"Tom, of course. I presume you're here to check him out?"

Travis said nothing. Instead, picking up a hunk of soda bread, he mopped up the remainder of his fried egg on his plate.

"Travis, I'm talking to you." Ma folded her arms.

Finally, Travis looked up and shrugged. "How do you expect me to feel after what you went through with the brute?"

Ma shuddered and turned away to go back to washing dishes.

"Now who's not answering?" he said softly, aware he'd upset her. He went over to where she stood at the sink.

"I'm sorry, Travis. I'm so sorry for bringing that man into our home. It left an awful mark on us. I let you all down." She faced him with tears in her eyes.

"Ma, it wasn't your fault. You thought you had a second chance at happiness. I wished I'd been old enough and big enough to have

protected you from his fists.” Travis opened his arms and hugged her close.

“You’ve no need to worry this time, lad.” She pulled away to wipe her tears on the hem of her apron. “Tom is not like that at all. He cares for me. He really cares.”

“Well, if that’s good enough for you, Ma, then that’s good enough for me. I’ll tell you what. How about I take you both out for a meal tonight so I can get to know him a little better?”

His mother smiled and he knew in his heart of hearts all would be well. He’d book a flight home tomorrow. He needed to make new living arrangements. But most of all, he wanted to get back because he missed Fran.

Chapter Ten

Fran arrived for work only moments before her shift started. Hearing raised voices, she hurried towards the kitchen. Her father was speaking furiously in Italian and throwing his arms in the air. When he saw Fran, he stopped mid-flow and looked at her evasively.

“What are you doing here?” His manner quite brusque, most unlike him.

Fran glared at her brothers, searching for a clue to what was going on. Mario shook his head, but Antonio had a strange gleam in his eyes.

“I work here, don’t I?” she snapped at her father. “I’ve just turned up for my shift.”

“I forgot. You’ve come at a bad time. Go back to your apartment before the trouble starts. And believe me, it will start soon.”

What trouble? Why does he want me out of the way?

“It’s probably best you aren’t here,” Mario said in a hushed voice.

“No, I’d let her stay.” Antonio stood, arms folded, body resting against the kitchen counter.

Toni has something up his sleeve, that much is evident by his whole demeanour. He’s about to unleash a whole can of worms.

Before her father or anyone else had a chance to explain, she heard a loud rapping at the front door of the restaurant.

“It’s them. They’re here.” Antonio positively beamed.

“Who? Why?” Fran was totally flummoxed. “You’ll tell me won’t you, Mario?”

Mario gazed at the floor.

“Please?”

Mario forced himself to make eye contact with her. “Well, you’re about to find out and you’re not going to like it.”

Hearing strange voices, Fran followed Antonio to where her father was already talking to two uniformed police officers.

“Not here. Please come inside,” her father said. “It’s not good for business, people seeing you on the doorstep. Did you have to park that police car right outside my door?”

The younger of the two officers shrugged. The older, larger officer, who had introduced himself as the sergeant, said, “Sorry, sir, we had no choice. It was either that or park a few streets away. We just haven’t got the time.”

Fran noticed the colour had washed away from her father’s face and beads of perspiration formed on his forehead.

“Papa, take the officers to the table in the corner alcove and I’ll make some coffee.”

The younger officer winked at Fran. She turned away in disgust. “Two sugars in mine, darlin’,” he shouted after her. She was about to reply when the older officer reprimanded him.

What could be going on? She badly wanted to stay, but was concerned about her father getting worked up. He suffered from high blood pressure, which he took pills for, so it had been a good idea for her to suggest he sit down.

In the kitchen, she was all fingers and thumbs. Might this have something to do with Brad Simpson? Had Brad told the police the family was about to set him up? Conning him out of his savings or something? Perhaps she shouldn’t have pulled that stunt yesterday, asking him to invest.

She placed a cafetiere of coffee, milk, sugar and three cups and saucers on a tray, and took it into the restaurant, all the while watching her father gesticulate wildly, unaware of her approach.

“I tell you, I have no trouble with him and will not believe it!” he shouted and then became breathless. Fran hated to see him worked up.

Antonio had joined them and interrupted, "And I'll tell *you* that I warned you he was no good from the beginning."

Who were they talking about? It couldn't have been old Mr. Jackson who sometimes washed the dishes and cleared the tables, could it? No, he was a very moral man and so kind.

It dawned on her, that's why her father didn't want her here. This had something to do with Travis, but what?

Trembling from head to foot, she set the tray on the table and poured the coffees. Her father gestured her to go away. "If this has something to do with Travis, I want to hear it." She straightened up, in a pose of defiance.

"Who told you it was to do with him?" Papa looked at her. He touched his chest and winced.

"Are you all right?" She became fearful her father's blood pressure might shoot through the roof. "Do you want your pills?"

"Pills? Pills? What good are they? I stopped taking them ages ago. No, I'm fine."

"Then tell me what this is all about."

The older policeman looked at her. "You are correct, Miss Santini, this is about Travis O'Connell." He invited her to sit down. "What do you know about him?"

"Obviously, I don't know too much as he joined us relatively recently, but what I do know is—"

"He's a scumbag Irish tosser," Antonio blurted out venomously.

Fran taken aback, glared at her brother and continued, "What I know is that he's a very nice man. Honest and trustworthy. Why? Has something happened to him?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Nothing has happened to him as far as we know. It happened to someone else."

"Someone else?" Fran furrowed her brow.

"He used to work for a Mr. Rousakis, a Greek restaurant owner."

"Yes, he mentioned that once. So?"

“It seems,” said the sergeant, “Mr. O’Connell was caught red-handed with his hands in the till. He’s a thief. He’d been stealing from the Rousakis family for months.”

Fran closed her mouth. All of a sudden she was getting a great, big migraine. This could not be possible. Travis didn’t strike her as a thief. “What evidence do you have?”

“Mr. Rousakis has been trailing him for weeks and watched him coming here to work. He spoke on the quiet with your brother, Antonio.”

“I bet he did,” Fran muttered.

“What was that?” The officer looked at her questioningly.

“Nothing. I bet my brother was only too glad to oblige.” She kicked Antonio on the shin under the table.

Antonio winced, but gloated to himself as the officer carried on.

The sergeant took a slug of coffee, then set down his cup. “It seems he stole from his boss because he’s got a little drug habit that requires feeding.”

“Drug habit?” If Fran had been drinking coffee with the rest of them she would have spluttered it all over the police officer. A thief and a drug user, she couldn’t believe it. She would have seen some sign by now. That first night she’d encountered him at the pub, he had been rolling something into a cigarette, but only tobacco, surely? Reflecting on the times he visited her at the flat, he hadn’t stolen anything. Well, maybe once he almost stole her panties, but he had explained all of that. Her face grew hot. The words red-handed ran through her brain.

“Yes, Miss Santini. Mr. Rousakis claims he found evidence of Travis’s drug taking at the restaurant. He used to hide silver wraps all over the place, tablets too. He even found used syringes in one of the toilet cisterns. I need to bring Mr. O’Connell in for questioning as soon as possible, because if Mr. Rousakis is correct, he has embezzled more than eight thousand pounds from him.”

Speechless for a moment, Fran tried to absorb the facts. “What do you think about this, Papa?” she implored the old man.

Her father had sat quietly while she had talked to the sergeant. His colour had now gone from a pale, washed-out look to a faint shade of grey. She didn't like the look of him at all.

"Papa? Papa? Are you all right?"

Mr. Santini groaned and fell face down on the table.

"Quick, Antonio! Hold his head back, loosen his collar!" Fran shouted urgently. Both policemen were now on their feet.

The sergeant got out his radio. "I'll call for an ambulance," he said authoritatively.

If she should lose her father, she didn't know what she would do. She had been a daddy's girl from as far back as she could remember.

"Sit him up. I think he's having a heart attack!" Mario yelled as he ran in from the kitchen where he had been keeping an eye on things since the police arrived. Thankfully, it was too early for any diners at the restaurant.

Fran clenched her teeth. Antonio had started all of this. If anything happened to her father, she knew who to blame.

* * *

Travis found Marge and Buster waiting for him when he got out of the taxi. He paid the driver and bent down to ruffle Buster's fur.

"Have you been a good boy for your Auntie Marge?" he teased, which was more of a question to Marge than the dog.

"Are you expecting him to answer you, Travis? Now I really know you've gone barmy."

Travis laughed as he held out his hand to offer Buster a doggie treat he'd bought for him from Ireland.

"Seriously, how's he been? No trouble I hope?"

"None whatsoever, unless you count cocking his leg up for a leak on my furniture, trouble."

"Oh, sorry about that. He was probably marking his territory again."

Marge handed over Buster's lead. "Anyhow, I've left you some dinner in your caravan. But if you prefer, you can join me and my brood for the evening. We're having faggots and peas."

Much as he loved Marge's cooking, all he longed for now was a peaceful night indoors, in front of his portable TV with Buster and whatever meal Marge had left for him.

He made his apologies. "Get Simon to babysit for you tomorrow evening. I'll pick up a takeaway curry and some cans of lager and we'll discuss the Goldfink business."

"Okey-dokey. I'll look forward to that. The meal I mean, not talking about that old git." She turned to go back into her caravan where Travis guessed bedlam was awaiting.

His caravan was nice and warm when he got inside. Good old Marge, she must have put the heating on earlier. Settling down Buster with a bowl of dog food, he got a can of lager from the freezer box. She'd thought of everything, cooling his cans and all. Her hubby must have been mad to have left her for some baby-faced bimbo.

He switched on the TV while his casserole heated up in the microwave. Good, he was just in time for the afternoon play. Kicking off his shoes, he lay down on the upholstery and took a long swig from the can. It felt good to be home now he had reassured himself about his mother's new relationship.

The meal the night before had gone very well. He'd eventually thawed out towards Tom and promised he'd go back to visit a few days after Christmas. Now, he really wanted to see Fran. He owed her some sort of explanation as to why he'd suddenly gone AWOL without a word of warning.

He was about to dig out his mobile phone and dial her number when he heard voices approaching outside the caravan door. Male voices. What on earth was going on? Was this something to do with Goldfink and the eviction? Were they about to turf him out?

A loud rap on the door got him to his feet. He was a bit dubious whether or not to open it. If he kept quiet perhaps they'd think he was out and go away.

"Open the door. We know you're in there!" boomed a loud voice.

Damn. They must have heard the television.

Before he had a chance to say something, another voice shouted, "Open up at once. It's the police."

Oh yeah. Pull the other one. It has bells on it. They are no more the police than I am Prince Charles. This is Goldfink's way of getting me off the site.

"Sorry, I ain't opening the door," he called out to them. A pity, but he couldn't tell who these men were no matter how hard he tried to look out the window. They must have been standing near the side door and the bedroom with frosted glass.

"We have a warrant," a Glaswegian voice yelled.

"Let me see it then," Travis demanded. "I'll open the window and you can slip it through."

He heard the men muttering and then the Scotsman said, "Okay, I'll drop it through and don't try doing anything to it, we can always get another. In any case, we'd be well within our rights to break the door down."

Travis gulped. These men meant business. Opening the window a fraction, he gazed out through the heavy lace curtain. At least he would see the face of the person who posted it, but they wouldn't be able to see him.

The man was large and burly. He wore a smart suit and tie. He didn't look like an associate of Goldfink's.

"Okay, let me see it." Travis hoped the man wouldn't detect the quaver in his voice.

As the paper fluttered onto the table, he picked it up, read it and swallowed. It was a warrant, all right. It looked authentic. What the hell did the police want him for and why would they need a warrant?

“Hang on. I’ll be right with you.” He quickly located his mobile and rang Marge next door.

“Do us a favour,” he whispered. “Look out your window and let me know who is outside my caravan.”

“What’s going on?” Marge sounded totally flummoxed.

“Some men are demanding I open the door. They posted a warrant through. Let me know, do they look like police?”

“Okay, I got you.” The line went quiet. Then Marge said, “Yep, there are two plain-clothed men by the look of it and two in uniform.”

“Damn.”

“Travis, what on earth have you done?”

The truth was he just didn’t know.

* * *

Fran sat by her father’s bed, holding his ice-cold hand in her own. A young nurse picked up a jug of water from the bedside cabinet. Pouring it into a glass, she said, “Here, Mr. Santini, try a couple of sips.”

The old man shook his head.

“Now, I’m going to be tough on you.” She smiled. Fran thought she didn’t look the type of person who could get tough on anyone. “If you don’t take enough fluids, doctor says you’re going to have to be fed intravenously.”

Papa raised his head off the pillow. “Huh?”

Fran leaned over and touched his cool brow. “The nurse means if you aren’t drinking, they’ll have to put you on a drip.”

Papa’s brow furrowed and he opened his eyes and nodded.

“Here you are. Your daughter can give it to you.” She handed the tumbler to Fran. “I’ll help you to sit him up.”

Fran noted she was wearing a badge that said Staff Nurse Malone, embossed in gold letters. They sat Papa forward, rearranging his pillows and backrest.

“Nurse,” Fran whispered when her father had drunk his fill and they’d settled him back down to sleep. “Is it possible for me to speak with someone about my father’s condition?”

The nurse smiled sympathetically. “No problem.” She tucked the counterpane under the mattress. “I’ll see if Doctor Osgood has finished his ward round.” Staff Nurse Malone walked off quickly in the direction of the nurse’s station.

Fran sat for several minutes watching the rise and fall of her father’s chest. If anything should ever happen to him, she didn’t know what she’d do. Papa was one of the most decent men she’d ever known. Mario hadn’t come with them, although he’d badly wanted to. Papa had told him to “take charge and remain at the restaurant”. Antonio had rushed home to tell their mother the news and escort her to the hospital. Fran had to have something positive to tell Mamma before she arrived—she needed to find out what the prognosis was first.

Fran glanced up as she heard approaching footsteps. The grey-haired doctor looked as if he badly needed to sleep, judging by the dark rings under his eyes and his slightly dishevelled appearance. She guessed he might have been on-call all night before starting his day shift. Nevertheless, she had to ask some important questions before he disappeared. She watched as he walked through a door behind the nurse’s station.

“Miss Santini, if you come into the ward sister’s office, Doctor Osgood will speak with you,” Nurse Malone advised. Fran smiled and followed the nurse.

The doctor introduced himself.

“Would you both like a coffee?” Nurse Malone stood at the door in expectation. Fran nodded.

“Yes, please,” Doctor Osgood answered. “I could do with a shot of caffeine after the night I’ve had. Three emergencies all within the space of an hour.”

The nurse picked up two cups from the shelf and walked off, closing the door behind her.

Fran sat down on a hard-backed chair opposite the doctor.

“What do you want to know?” The doctor relaxed back into his more comfortable looking chair, blinking from tiredness, she assumed.

“Is my father in any immediate danger, Doctor?”

Leaning forward, the doctor said gravely, “At the moment, we are not sure if your father has suffered a heart attack or not. We’re going to attach him to a monitor and take blood samples. Could something have upset him just before he took ill?”

“He owns a restaurant and wants to make the business more viable as it’s losing money. We also had the police arrive asking questions about an employee.”

There was a knock at the door and Nurse Malone entered with the coffees.

Doctor Osgood looked into her eyes. “We won’t know for around forty-eight hours if your father will be out of danger.”

He carried on looking at her as if to gauge her response.

Fran felt light-headed. The office walls seemed to close in on her, the feeling was almost suffocating. Was this the doctor’s nice way of telling her that Papa might die?

“Are you all right, Miss Santini?”

Fran took a deep breath to compose herself. She had to be strong for her father and her family.

“Yes, just very concerned about my father.”

“It’s only natural.” The doctor handed her a cup of coffee.

“Do you think I could stay until he’s out of danger?”

The doctor set down his cup and saucer, “I think you should take it in turns. It would be no good if one of you wore yourself out. It can be quite draining.” She knew in her heart he was referring to her. “When your family turns up, stay for a while and then go home and get some rest. Trust me, you’ll be much more able to cope with the situation.”

Fran nodded. It wasn’t very often she came across such an understanding doctor.

* * *

With some trepidation, Travis opened the door to his caravan.

Trembling from top to toe, he stood defiant. This had to be one massive mistake, surely? “I don’t know why you want me. I haven’t done anything.”

The large, burly officer said, “We’re going to search your caravan.”

“What for?”

The officer didn’t answer, just gave a grunt as if Travis should know what they were after.

“Police Constable Welland will take you over to the car while we carry out the search.”

“But you can’t do that,” Travis protested.

“Leave him alone, you bullies,” cried out a voice behind them. It was Marge with a very large baseball bat in her hand.

“Now, madam, put that away at once,” the burly officer growled. “Or we’ll have to arrest you, too.”

“What do you want to arrest him for? He’s done nothing.”

“Lady, if you would like to help out, kindly get that mutt out of our way.” Buster was nipping the officer’s heels.

Marge stifled a laugh and picked Buster up. “Poor baby,” she soothed the distressed dog, who was trying to scramble out of her arms and get back at the police officer’s feet.

“Do as they say, Marge,” Travis said, with a tone of resignation. He would hate it if she got detained as well.

“Okay, Travis, I’ll take Buster in for you. Watch they don’t duff you up. I’ve seen those cop movies, once they get you alone in a room at the police station, who knows what those brutes might do.”

Travis didn’t reply as he allowed the three officers inside, while the young baby-faced police constable escorted him to the unmarked car.

“Ere, what’s going on?” Travis asked.

The officer looked over his shoulder as if afraid of being overheard. "Drugs," he whispered.

"Hey, this must be some mistake. I don't do any drugs."

"Look, just leave them to do their jobs and then we'll see."

The officer opened the car door and Travis sat in silence for a few moments. The young officer played about with the car radio, glove compartment and dashboard as if he were a young child sat in his father's new car.

"How long have you been in the job?" Travis looked at the young officer in amazement.

The officer looked over his shoulder again. "Six months."

"You mean you're a probationer?"

The officer's face went the colour of beetroot, but he didn't answer.

Travis stared out of the car window, which was misting up on the inside. He badly needed to get in touch with Fran. If anyone could vouch for his good behaviour, it was her.

"What'll happen to me now?" Travis glared at the officer who twiddled about with his police radio.

"If they find drugs, you'll be taken down to the station and charged."

"Well, I can assure you they won't," Travis said vehemently.

The officer rolled his eyes. "If not, you will still be taken in for questioning. Allegations have been made."

Travis sat up. "Allegations? By whom?"

"I'm not at liberty to say at this point, sir."

Travis decided to sit in silence for the rest of his enforced captivity, until he heard the sound of approaching footsteps on gravel.

The Scottish plain-clothed police officer opened the car door.

"Clean as a whistle," he told both Travis and the other officer.

"Good. I could have saved you a lot of work." Travis tried to get out of the car.

“Not so quickly, laddie.” The Scotsman blocked his path. “You’ve got to accompany us to the police station. This isn’t over by a long chalk. There are still questions that need answering.”

“I’ve already told him that, sir,” the young officer said with a crafty smirk on his face.

Travis glared at him, the cheeky upstart. He was young enough to be his baby brother. Sensing his hostility, the officer turned away.

Travis heard the burly officer say, “Come on, boys. Let’s get this one in the can.”

He needed Fran more than ever. As the car drove out of the caravan site, he turned and his last vision was of Marge with a troubled look upon her face, holding Buster in her arms.

* * *

Fran got back to her apartment at three p.m. and put the kettle on, checking her phone messages. Nothing from Travis. As much as she wanted to believe the story about his drug taking wasn’t true, there could be something in it. Perhaps that’s why he went off to Ireland, if that’s indeed where he was, so he could flee the country.

The only message was from Brad, assuring her he’d been to the bank and was good for the ten-thousand-pound loan.

Sighing deeply, she wished she’d never started all of this. It was a bad time to get involved in anything dodgy that might upset her father and the rest of the family. Although she hadn’t resigned from her job at the Peace of Mind, they hadn’t assigned any more jobs to her. That was all she needed right now, for her family to discover her little secret. Whether Travis was guilty or innocent, he was correct about one thing: she should pack the job in.

Sipping a cup of herbal tea, she thought back to the night Travis had been her knight in shining armour and she knew deep within he was innocent. He had gone out of his way to find her and bring her home

safely. A man who would do that was no drug addict or thief. She needed to warn him about the police as soon as possible.

Chapter Eleven

Dawn was breaking as Travis returned to his caravan. All he needed now was his bed. It had been a long twenty-four hours. No sooner had he arrived back from Ireland than he had been accosted by four police officers accusing him of embezzlement and drug taking.

In the event, they couldn't hold him at the station as he had gone in on a voluntary basis. Where was the evidence anyway? At least he understood now it was his old employer, Mr. Rousakis, who had reported him. Without a doubt, his druggie, thieving son had put the idea into his father's head to deflect the spotlight off himself. Well, one day the truth would out.

As he turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door, he gasped. He had forgotten the place would be like a bombsite after the police searched it. They were hardly likely to clear up after themselves. Even yesterday's uneaten casserole appeared to have been examined in great detail. Blobs of gravy, vegetables and meat lay strewn on the table. Pity, he really fancied getting stuck into that. Scooping up the worst of the remains, he brought a damp cloth from the sink to wipe over the table, then picked up all the sofa cushions, ornaments and clothing, and put everything away. It took the best part of an hour before things looked back to normal. Luckily, there hadn't been any real damage, only to his pride. Now a quarter to seven, he decided to have a couple of hour's kip, then go around and retrieve Buster from Marge.

It seemed as though he had only been asleep for five minutes when his mobile phone rang.

"Hello," he said sleepily, hoping it wasn't the police again.

“Travis, it’s Fran. Where the heck have you been? I called around looking for you last night.”

He sat bolt upright in bed. The alarm clock said 12:15. Had he really slept for that length of time? “Fran, it’s so good to hear your voice. I’m afraid I was rather caught up last night.”

“At the police station?” *How on earth does Fran know about that?* “They came to the restaurant looking for you.”

“Before you ask, I ain’t no druggie or thief, Fran.”

Fran sighed. “Don’t you think I already know that? I was angry with you at first because of my father.”

“Huh?” *What is she talking about?*

“Two uniformed bobbies turned up at the restaurant yesterday to speak to my father about you. I’m afraid he got rather het up and er...now...um...he’s...”

“What, Fran? Spit it out.”

There was a sharp intake of breath before she said, “He’s in the hospital.”

The phone almost dropped from Travis’s grasp. “What do you mean?”

“He took ill at the restaurant with chest pains, almost blacked out. An ambulance was called and that’s where he is now, attached to a heart monitor.” The line went quiet.

“Fran, that’s awful. Are *you* all right?”

“Yes, I am.” She sounded as if she was trying her best not to cry. “But we won’t know for sure until tomorrow if Papa’s suffered a heart attack.”

Travis wished she were here next to him, so he could hold her in his arms and comfort her. “Do you want me to come around to see you?”

“No. You’d better not. Antonio is gunning for you. He thinks this is all your fault.”

“My fault, but how?”

“He believes it’s true about you being a druggie.”

“He’s never liked me, your brother, let’s face it.”

“Mario does though,” she said, as if that was a huge consolation. Maybe it was to have someone on his side.

“Fran, I don’t care what your brother or anyone else thinks, I’m coming around to see you and I want to visit your father at the hospital.”

“Oh, okay.” She sounded a little surprised. What did she take him for, some sort of a coward? He wasn’t the kind of guy to run away from trouble. If the finger hadn’t pointed so strongly at him at the Greek restaurant, he would never have left. Only he had been set up by Demetri, Mr. Rousakis’s son. A fat wad of twenty-pound notes and a wrap of heroin had been discovered in Travis’s jacket pocket, so he’d been dismissed under a black cloud. Knowing there was no way he could disprove it, he had decided it best to walk away and hope Mr. Rousakis, who was really a good sort, would find out the truth in the end. Which begged the question, what was happening now for the police to have gone to the Santini’s restaurant in the first place?

* * *

Tentatively, Fran entered her father’s cubicle. The old man stirred, his eyes flicking open.

“It’s okay, Papa. It’s only me. How are you feeling today?”

“Ah, Fran.” He brightened a little and tried to sit. “Not too bad at all.”

“Here let me help you.” She propped him up with pillows, poured him a fresh glass of orange squash, and placing a straw inside, handed it to him.

He smiled, taking the glass in his gnarled hand. “Don’t drink too quickly,” she advised.

“Don’t think I’ll be knocking any pints of beer back just yet.” He chuckled.

“Pa...”

“I know that voice...when you want something. You were just the same when you were a little girl.”

“I was just wondering if Travis could come to see you?”

“Travis?” Her father screwed up his face and for a split second, she wondered if he had lost his memory or something. “That squash leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. What were you saying?”

“Travis. Your head chef at the restaurant.”

“I know who he is, *cara mia*. I was just wondering why he should want to see me.”

Fran bent over and kissed her father’s bald head. “Because he cares about you, Papa.”

“But I thought the police were on his tail?”

Fran felt herself colouring up. “They were. They are. His caravan got searched yesterday—for drugs.”

Her father furrowed his brow. “And did they find any?”

“No. Clean as a whistle.”

“Well, I knew that. Travis is no more a drug taker and a thief, than I am.”

Fran relaxed. “So you had faith in him all along?”

“Of course I did. I mean I do, otherwise I wouldn’t have employed him in the first place, would I?”

“Suppose not.”

“And believe me, I’m a good judge of character. So where is he? I expect you have him waiting outside in the corridor or something.”

“You know me too well, Papa.”

“Well, go and get him then. We need to talk.”

“One more thing, Papa. Do you think what happened to you is a result of all this bother?”

“My heart you mean?”

Fran nodded.

“No, not at all. I’ve been having twinges for months. I didn’t tell anyone about them.”

“Not even Mamma?”

“Especially not Mamma. Now go bring him in before he takes root out there.”

* * *

Fran sat bored to tears in the café, glancing at her watch for what must have been the twentieth time. *He’s late. He’s always late come to think of it. What if he has cottoned on and brought the police with him?*

Stirring her cappuccino, she sighed deeply, wishing she’d never laid eyes on him.

Yet, this had to be done, like it or not, for her own sake, her family’s sake and most of all in memory of her grandpa, Giuseppe Santini. It had been his hard-earned money Brad squandered on wine, women and song. The very thought made her clench her teeth, wanting to hit out in frustration.

She glanced up to see the café door opening. It wasn’t him. He wasn’t going to show, was he?

With a heavy heart, she breathed in deeply. She would finish her coffee, seeing as how she had paid for it, and chalk this one down to experience. After a few moments, she picked up her bag and was about to go pay at the desk when the door opened again. It was him—Brad. He sported a ruddy, breathless appearance, cocking a smile that would once have torn at her heartstrings—but not now, not anymore.

“Sorry, Fran. My car broke down. I had to run across town to get here. Please stay. I’ll get you another coffee.” He extracted a leather wallet from his trouser pocket.

To refuse might cause him to become suspicious. He had almost succeeded in making her feel sorry for him.

She shot him a defiant glance, then nodded, sitting back down as he went up to order.

When he returned after a couple of minutes, he sat opposite her.

“Have you got it?” She held out an open palm.

“Got what? Oh, the money.”

“Yes, what did you think I meant?”

He frowned. Oh dear, she shouldn’t upset him until he had handed it over.

“Yes.” He tentatively patted the top pocket of his expensive designer Armani suit. “It’s all here, every penny.”

“Cash?”

“Yes, that’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

She had better be careful. Otherwise, he might cotton on. Brad wasn’t stupid, not by a long chalk.

Before they had a chance to engage in any more conversation, or for her to even get a whiff of the money, the café door swung open again. A familiar voice called out.

“Yoo-hoo, Fran!” Oh no, it was Daphne from the Peace of Mind. The last person Fran needed to see. If Brad should find out she worked as a part-time honey trapper he would surely guess she was setting him up.

Brad scowled as if he detested the way they were being interrupted. “Who on earth is that eccentric-looking old biddy?” he whispered across the table.

“Oh, she’s a regular customer at The Vine Tree,” Fran lied, waving back and hoping upon hope Daphne would leave it at that.

“Don’t look now, but she’s coming over.” Brad shielded his eyes as if that would somehow ward off Daphne.

Fran gulped, momentarily distracted as the waitress brought their coffees.

“Fran, I haven’t seen you for ages.” Daphne had a bell in every tooth. The whole café could probably hear.

“Yes, I know. I’ll give you a ring some time,” Fran said abruptly, hoping it would be enough to satisfy Daphne’s curiosity.

“So what have *you* been doing with yourself?”

“Oh this and that.” Fran stirred her coffee and glanced across at Brad as if to say, *Can’t you see we want to be alone?* Unfortunately, Daphne

had never been the sharpest tool in the box and wasn't one for tact in her job as a Peace of Mind receptionist, either.

For a moment, it looked as though she was about to join them at the table uninvited, until an elderly, stooped man came through the door. He raised his walking stick to catch their attention.

"My father." Daphne waved at him. "Sorry, I have to go. He's incontinent, you see." Fran watched Brad stifle a giggle. "It's my day to look after Daddy. Give me that phone call when you get a chance."

Much to Fran's relief, she left their table to join her father.

"Are all your customers at the restaurant like her?" Brad laughed.

"Er, no, not all. Just some." Which was true when she thought back to the Usherwood sisters and their monthly treat at The Vine Tree.

Impatience at being interrupted was getting the better of her. *Just hand over the money, please!*

Brad sipped at his coffee, insisting on trying to catch her gaze, but each time he gave her a long, lingering look, she averted her eyes. She was going to have to play *the game* if she wanted to reel in this big fish.

"Fran," Brad began. "I am sorry about what happened between us. And if I could turn back the hands of time, I would. You meant, still mean, the whole world to me." He reached for her hand, which she quickly withdrew. "I know you're angry with me, but I just wondered if you and I could go out sometime?"

He sat there, waiting for her to reply. The silence was deafening. What could she say? That she could no more go out with him than she would on a date with Jack the Ripper? No, that was hardly fair. Whatever he had done, he hadn't slit her gizzard and removed her insides. Well, maybe that was a fair analogy. He had ripped out her heart and now it was back inside of her, mending nicely, thank you very much.

"Fran?"

She lifted her eyes. Now she was in a quandary. He looked and sounded sincere. If she refused him, he might hang onto the money. But if she said yes, then maybe she'd be the winner.

“Yes.” She forced the offending word past her lips as though it might choke her.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’ll come out with you one evening.”

Brad’s eyes lit up and, for a split second, she thought he was going to leap on his seat and do a silly dance like Tom Cruise had done on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

She drained the last of her coffee. “I can’t stay any longer, I’m afraid, I have to get to work.” She waited expectantly for him to give her the money.

He pulled it out of his top pocket and looked thoughtfully at the buff-coloured envelope. “I’ll tell you what,” he teased. “Half now and half when you next meet me. How does that sound?”

Of course, there has to be a catch. “But that’s blackmail.”

“Exactly.” He quirked a smile and handed her the envelope.

“I thought you were giving me half.” She breathed a sigh of relief.

“It is half—five thousand. You’ll get the other half when we meet up next.”

The penny dropped. “So, you had no intentions of giving me the full amount today?”

“None whatsoever. And don’t forget, I’ll expect a little interest for each deposit I make.” His hand crept up her skirt. She pushed it away.

“No need to be so coy, sweetheart. We were engaged, remember? I’ll have you creaming your panties when we next meet.”

You obnoxious, slimy bastard. What did I ever see in you?

It was too late to back down if she wanted the money. Too late—the ball was already in motion.

* * *

Travis turned up the collar of his combat jacket as he walked down the road in the direction of town. The weather was getting colder and

turning blustery. He could do with a new winter coat, if he had the money. He had blown what little he had on the trip to see his mother. Still, it had been worth every penny to reassure himself she was fine living with Tom O'Brien.

Facing a bitter wind, he was about to cross the road, when he spied a familiar figure leaving the Copper Kettle Café.

“Fran!” he shouted, but before he had a chance to catch up, he realised she was in the company of a sharp-dressed, suited man. Who on earth was he? Not a client from the honey trap agency, surely? After all, she had promised him. Whoever the man was, he appeared to be totally at ease with her as they walked down the street. He put up a large, colourful golf umbrella for her to walk under and draped his free arm around her shoulders.

Travis gritted his teeth. Then it came back to him, the man on the phone when he rang from Ireland. He had been quick to dismiss Travis and wouldn't allow him to talk with Fran. Perhaps she had got herself a boyfriend after the way he had rejected her? It served him right. He had missed the boat. Instead of shopping, he decided to pop into the Sailor's Arms for a pint of Guinness.

Chapter Twelve

Fran had got herself in deep water. She shouldn't go ahead with this charade. She was leaving herself wide open, emotionally and physically. Brad had made it perfectly clear he intended getting back with her. But why? Maybe he could see the pound signs flashing before his eyes? Or maybe he was being genuine, regretting what he had lost.

Picking up the phone, she rang Suzie, explaining the predicament.

"Fran, you have to be careful." Suzie let out a long sigh. "Do you think this is worth it? You've been given half of your money back. I'd just take it and leave him out of your life forever. He's no proof he gave you money, there's no contract or solicitors involved, so cut it and run."

Fran chewed her bottom lip. "Suppose you're right. But it's oh-so-tempting to try to get all of it back. It would go a long way to regaining my dignity and I want to do this for my family."

"Hmm. I can understand your motives, I can. But promise me that you won't do anything foolish?"

"Such as?"

"Leaving yourself alone with him?"

"I'll tell you what, if I invite him around here, I'll let you hide in the bedroom again. So if it goes wrong, you can fetch my brothers from the restaurant."

"Okay," Suzie reluctantly agreed. "Just let me know when and I'll be there. How's your father, by the way?"

Fran swallowed, feeling a pang of guilt. Her father hadn't occupied her thoughts as much as he should have done. "He seems to be on the

mend, thanks. I'm popping over to the hospital tomorrow morning. The test results should be back by then."

"Oh, I hope it's good news."

"Me, too." Fran put the phone down, hoping that all would be well with her father.

* * *

Travis inserted his key in the lock of his caravan. That was odd, it wouldn't turn a centimetre. He tried again, same result. Maybe the weather had caused the lock to freeze?

He glanced across at Marge's caravan, all in darkness. It was quite late. The family was probably in bed. What was he going to do? The caravan site was dimly lit. In the darkness, he stumbled over and went crashing to the floor. Something wet and warm nudged his face. Buster had come to find his master. What was he doing outside? Then it dawned on Travis, he had fallen over his own belongings. Goldfink must have changed the lock and thrown his things and Buster out onto the street. How callous could one man be? Travis patted the dog. "Don't worry, old boy. I'm here now."

He gulped. Then what about Marge? As he got closer to her caravan he could see there was something different about it. The curtains were wide open. Peering in, it was obvious no one was there. They'd all gone. His heart sank.

No job, no home and now no Fran. What a mess. He toyed with the idea of turning up with Buster at Fran's place. After all, she had told him anytime he needed a roof over his head, to go there. But how could he? She was probably wining and dining Mr. Sharp Dressed Man.

He was about to consider sleeping on a park bench when a vehicle pulled up. Oh no, not Goldfink to turf him off the site. That was all he needed.

"Travis, quick." Marge's voice was a welcome intrusion. "We were all evicted by the heavies this afternoon. I've got somewhere for me and the kids to stay on a temporary basis. The council helped us out."

“That’s great, Marge.” He sounded a bit flat.

“Well, are you coming?”

“Where?”

“With me, of course. Simon is babysitting the kids. I came to find you and Buster. I tried to take him with me this afternoon, but he got scared and ran off. You can kip down on the floor. The house they’ve given me is a bit run down, but it’ll do for now. It’s a positive palace compared with my old caravan.”

Marge was his guardian angel. He should have known she wouldn’t let him down. Never had done, never would do.

“Well, there’s nothing to keep me here.” He hoisted Buster and his baggage into the back of the van. He slammed the doors and sat in front with Marge. “Nothing at all.” The caravan site was not the only thing he referred to. It just about summed everything up.

* * *

Fran was shown into Dr. Osgood’s office by a very efficient-looking nurse and asked to sit down and wait. She wondered what he was about to tell her, whether it would be good news or bad.

This could have major implications for her father’s health and the business. If her father needed to retire, the business might go to the wall. Antonio was too headstrong to run it and Mario too wrapped up in his own family. It needed someone who knew the business inside and out to make a success of it. The only person she could think of was her old man.

Fran glanced up as the doctor entered. She couldn’t detect a thing from his face. He looked neither happy nor grim. So what was it to be?

“It’s nice to see you again, Miss Santini.” He took a seat opposite her.

Come on, Doc. Please get on with it.

Opening up a buff-coloured file, he leafed through it. Perhaps he didn’t know himself yet.

“Well, we’ve only just received the results and looking at them, I can safely say that your father did not have a heart attack.”

Fran raised her eyebrows.

“You look somewhat surprised,” he carried on.

Fran gulped. “Yes, I am a little. The chest pains, his high blood pressure...”

“It sounded as if it was a heart attack, admittedly, but since hospitalisation we have your father on his blood pressure medication, which has kept it nicely in check. So when he leaves here, providing he sticks with it and makes a few lifestyle changes, all should be well.”

Fran leaned forward. “What exactly was wrong with him, Doctor?”

“I suspect a simple case of angina.”

Fran let out a little gasp. “But that’s serious, isn’t it?”

“Not if he takes the prescribed medicine and makes the changes I mentioned.”

“What exactly are we talking about here?”

“He needs to avoid stress. From what I understand, he works a seventy-hour week at the restaurant?”

“I suppose he does. We start some mornings as early as nine a.m. and can be open until gone midnight. Of course, he doesn’t work all that time as we cover for him. Sometimes he takes a couple of hours off here or there, but he drives himself hard, Doctor.”

The doctor leaned forward in his chair and steeped his fingers. “Well, that will have to stop. When you think about the hours he puts in, he works almost twice as long as the national average.”

Fran had never thought of it that way. Papa’s restaurant was his life. He lived and breathed The Vine Tree. It was in his mind, his soul and his lifeblood. How was she going to break it to him?

“I’ve arranged for him to be discharged within the next hour or so, as long as he has transport. I’ve written out a prescription you can pick up at the pharmacy on the first floor.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I can arrange for one of my brothers to give him a lift home and I’ll pick up his medication.”

“He’ll also have to visit our outpatients’ department in a couple of weeks for a follow-up. I’ll arrange a home visit from his local district nurse to check he’s coping okay. Meanwhile, I suggest you arrange adequate cover at the restaurant so he doesn’t get stressed.”

Fran could see the sense of that. She would need to have a word with her father and brothers about Travis coming back. It would lighten the load. She had her doubts about Antonio. But surely, he’d understand the necessity?

* * *

Travis woke. A thin shaft of sunlight filtered in through the window. The heavy drapes were covered in bright purple concentric circles, as though they were a throwback to the seventies. Where was he? He blinked to bring his eyes into focus. He lay on wooden floor boards, some old coats draped over him. Of course, he had gone back with Marge last night. In the background, he heard children’s voices and a dog barking. He got up slowly, went to the window and pulled back the drapes to see Simon and the other children playing with Buster in the garden. It was nice to watch Buster in a place with a proper garden for once.

The smell of bacon cooking permeated the air. Marge was singing. He pulled on his jeans and sweatshirt and walked barefoot down the stairs.

Rubbing his eyes, he said, “Thanks for letting me kip here last night, Marge.”

“Think nothing of it, Travis. You would have done the same for me. Now, how do you fancy some eggs and bacon?”

“I could murder them.” He rubbed his empty stomach. He hadn’t eaten since before he’d seen Fran leaving the café with the sharp-dressed bloke yesterday. At the time, he got so wound up he’d drunk too much Guinness at the Sailor’s Arms.

Settling himself at the kitchen table, he pushed the dirty plates out of the way and took his tobacco tin from his sweatshirt pocket.

“Er, no smoking in here please, Travis,” Marge declared forcefully. “I want to make this a smoke-free zone because of the children.”

“Sorry, Marge. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You can have one outside when the children come in after breakfast.” She turned her attention back to the frying pan. “What are you going to do about getting yourself somewhere to live?”

“I don’t know. You warned me about Goldfink, but I thought he would give us more notice than that.”

“Speaking of which, I got my own back on the old geezer before I left the site.” She giggled.

“You did?”

She nodded as she flipped over a couple of fried eggs sizzling away in the pan. “I paid an old friend of mine to tip a lorry load of manure all over his front doorstep.”

Travis’s mouth popped open. “I wish I’d been around to see that.”

“Well, I was and I took a picture of it, too.” She handed Travis a glossy Polaroid of Goldfink standing knee-deep in horseshit.

“It’s where he belongs,” Travis said ruefully. “Especially after what he did to Buster and turfing us out of the site like that. He evicted us before the month’s notice was up.”

“Why don’t you get around to the local council like I did and declare yourself homeless?” Marge laid a hand on his shoulder.

“I could, but I doubt if I would get a place as quick as you, Marge. You’ve obviously got special circumstances with the kids. Knowing my luck, I’d probably get thrown in a hostel with all the other down-and-outs.”

“Don’t exaggerate, Travis.” Marge placed the plate of bacon, eggs and beans in front of him. “You’re feeling sorry for yourself, aren’t you?”

He was, although it was more to do with Fran and her new boyfriend, than being evicted from his caravan. Marge had a knack of hitting the nail right on the head.

“Sorry.” He fell silent as he tucked into his breakfast, mulling things over as to what he should do next.

* * *

Fran had to call on Travis to tell him he could have his old job back. Her father and brothers had talked last night and even Antonio could see the sense of it, even if he insisted it would be temporary.

Walking to the caravan site, she was in for a surprise when she found the gates all locked up, secured with a large chain and padlock. What had gone on here? Travis had mentioned he was having problems with his landlord.

She pulled her mobile phone out of her handbag and dialled his number, only to get through to his answer phone. She left a message saying she needed to see him and please could he pop over to her apartment, when he had a chance.

Feeling better, she headed home. As she walked through the yard and up the steps to her apartment, she heard someone call her name. Thinking it was Travis, she turned with a big grin, only to realise it was Brad. Her heart sank.

“Wow, you look pleased to see me.” He grinned back as he gestured towards his silver, gleaming Mercedes as if it were a prize trophy. If she had married him, that’s all she would have been, too, a prize, a trophy wife.

She held her smile. It wouldn’t do to look as though he was unwelcome, even if he was.

“Aren’t you going to ask me up? I have another down payment for you.” He leaned against the car door.

She held her breath, then let it out again. She had been warned by Suzie not to allow him over the doorstep without letting her know. “Come

up!” she yelled down. “I’ll put the kettle on.” She’d ring Suzie using her mobile phone. It would be the ideal opportunity while she made coffee in the kitchen. Suzie had said she would be in all day.

Fran inserted her key in the lock. Was there time for her to change into something a little more prim and proper? She didn’t want to give him the come on, but her skirt was a little shorter than she liked in his presence, her blouse a little too low-cut.

Instantly, he was up behind her in the kitchen, invading her personal space.

“Go and sit down in the living room and I’ll bring the coffee through,” she ordered.

He did as he was told and then shouted from the living room, “Don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“I won’t.” She laughed when inwardly she felt like crying. A little voice told her she shouldn’t need to do this to recover *her money*. It was ludicrous really. She hunted around the worktops for the phone, but it was nowhere to be found. If she used the landline in the lounge, he would hear her. Worrying in case he came back into the kitchen, she realised there was little she could do about warning anyone he was at her apartment.

Her hands shook as she spooned the coffee into the awaiting mugs. She didn’t know why, but for some reason, she felt much more anxious now than any other time she had been in his presence.

She shivered, then headed off towards the living room with the tray.

Brad gazed at her, his eyes drinking her in, obviously liking what he saw. He let out a low whistle, which she chose to ignore, and extracted an envelope from his jacket pocket.

“The final five thousand?” She stood in wide-eyed expectation.

“Ah, no. Make it five hundred pounds.” It dawned on her, he was playing games, toying with her emotions. A couple of hundred here and there, it could take weeks to pay her off and, all the while, he was working on wearing down her resistance. She needed to get him out of her apartment—fast.

They drank their coffee in uneasy silence. Every so often Brad looked her up and down with lustful eyes as she adjusted her skirt so it covered as much of her thighs as possible.

Finally, he put his cup down. "Come on, let's get the show on the road. You fancy me as much as I fancy you, babe. There's a double bed going begging in the next room. We could give that a real rockin'."

The bile rose in her throat. She had genuinely been in love with him, but through rose-tinted spectacles. In hindsight, she realised they had never made love at all. It had just been sexual gratification on his part. All the while he had been bonking his brains out elsewhere. It made her sick to the stomach.

"I have to go to work shortly." She bit her bottom lip. Okay, it was a white lie, but one that could get her out of serious bother.

"How soon?" His eyes glinted mischievously.

"About fifteen minutes."

"Great, that'll just give us enough time to rock the Kasbah."

"I think you'd better leave, right now."

He stood up and, for an instant, she thought he was about to go. Instead, he made his way over to her and sat down.

"Like it rough, do you?" he sneered.

She shook her head. "Please leave at once!" She trembled at the nearness of him.

"Not until I get something for my little down payment. You women are all the same."

He trailed his fingers over her neck and towards the collar of her blouse. Recoiling in fear, she tried to push him away, but he was stronger and somehow she became mute, the words just wouldn't come.

His hand crept down towards her buttons. Undoing them one at a time, he let out a low groaning noise. Forcefully, he ripped open her blouse and gazed in awe at her breasts encased in a white lacy bra.

She feared he was about to rape her and didn't know what to do. The phone started to ring and she hoped Brad would allow her to answer, but he said, "Leave it."

Greedily, he made a forceful grab for her breasts and pushed her bra up to release them from their confines.

Then he lowered his head and sucked hard on one of her nipples, pulling her hand to his groin and placing it over his erection.

From somewhere she found her voice again as, with all the strength she could muster, she pushed him off. "Get out now or I'll fetch my brothers. If they hear me call out, they'll be up here in a flash."

"Will they now?" He smirked. "That's odd considering the restaurant is closed."

Closed? How could that be? Then she remembered their meeting last night. It had been decided that for two afternoons per week, the restaurant would close between two-thirty and six to lighten her father's load. They had chosen a Monday and a Thursday, the quietest days of the week.

She struggled to think what day it was. Thursday, the time five-fifteen, a good forty-five minutes before the restaurant opened again. So even if she screamed, no one would come to her aid.

Fran backed away, her heart pounding in her ears, mouth dry. If he was going to take her it would have to be by force. Never again would he own her soul.

Her fear appeared to be some sort of an aphrodisiac for him as he licked his lips and lunged forward, grabbing her. She tried to yank free, twisting in the confines of his arms so she looked away from him. He dropped both his hands to her breasts, squeezing them sadistically. She pulled away and ran towards her bedroom. The door had a bolt, so she could lock herself in.

Within moments he caught up with her and rugby-tackled her to the floor. She grazed the side of her face on the edge of the small coffee table. As he lay on top, she felt the quickness of his breath and feared what he would do next, feeling like a small gazelle caught in the jaws of a lion.

“Now for some fun,” he declared.

She brought up her knee to meet with his groin and winded him.

“You bitch!” He clutched his manhood, obviously in a great deal of discomfort.

Not quite hard enough.

“Fran,” she heard a voice call out.

Travis!

She tried to answer but Brad brought his hand over her mouth, whispering in her ear. “You make one noise, do you hear, and you’re dead meat.” She nodded.

“Fran.” The voice was getting nearer. The door to the living room swung open. She feared Travis might not see her as they were wedged behind the sofa.

With all her might, she brought her legs up and kneed Brad in his groin again, causing him to recoil in pain. This time she had really hit the target. He let out a long groan and, immediately, Travis was at her side.

Travis could not believe his eyes. Fran lay on the floor, blouse and brassiere undone, exposing part of her bosom, her denim skirt hitched up around her waist. What was happening? Had he walked in on a scene of passion, an unwelcome intruder? But instinct told him something was wrong, the way the guy was doubled up on the floor.

“Fran? Are you okay?” Travis knelt beside her.

Fran appeared to have difficulty breathing, so he held her in his arms. “Has this man been bothering you?”

“You could say that.” She shivered uncontrollably.

“Take slow, deep breaths. I’ll be right back.” Travis gritted his teeth and stood.

The bloke struggled to get to his feet and Travis stepped forward, lunging at him. The intruder had an awkward smirk on his face. Holding up his hands as if under arrest, he said quite calmly, “Look, mate, you’ve

got it wrong. We were just about to have a bit of nookie before you came crashing in, when the lady backed off and changed her mind. That's a woman's prerogative, right? I got it wrong. I'll go now." He dusted down his suit, wincing as he did so.

Travis glared. "That isn't what it looked like to me. And I am definitely not your *mate*."

Turning to Fran, Travis said, "Tell me what happened."

Fran adjusted her clothing, then wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. "He just turned up here a few minutes since, unexpectedly. He owes me money. I didn't want to let him in, but I wanted to get the money back. Then he started trying it on with me, touching me up. Travis, he pulled me to the floor. I think he was about to take me forcibly."

"Ha!" the man in the suit sneered. "More like the other way round, I should say."

"I don't think so. Fran has a nasty cut on the side of her face. How do you explain that?"

The man began to retreat towards the door just as Travis pulled back his arm and punched him in the jaw. "Maybe that should go some way to redressing the balance. And there's plenty more where that came from, *mate*. Now piss off before I call the police." Travis marched him out of the door. Then held him by the scruff of his neck over the top step of the balcony.

"Okay. Okay. I get the picture. You want Miss Hot Arse all to yourself. You won't get any bother from me."

Travis released his grip and gave him a swift kick up his backside.

There had been a strong element of truth in what the bloke said, of course there was. Travis did want her all to himself.

He stood and watched the man slowly descend the wrought iron staircase. Straightening his shoulders in defiance at the bottom, he marched away, rubbing his rear end. When he was safely out of Travis's reach, he turned and shouted, "She won't want you, *mate*. She needs a

hot stud like me to satisfy her.” He bolted in the direction of his car, starting it up before Travis could get within an inch of him again.

Travis returned to Fran in the living room. She was trembling from top to toe. He settled himself on the sofa next to her. “Haven’t we been here before?” he murmured in her ear.

“You mean the man that night in the pub car park? When you rescued me?”

He nodded. “How many times am I going to have to do this? You need to finish at the Peace of Mind, to give me *my* peace of mind back.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“I know,” she conceded. “But this was nothing to do with the agency. It was Brad, my ex-fiancé.”

“Ah.” It kind of made sense. “I remember now, he duped you out of ten thousand pounds?”

“Yep. I just wanted to get it back.”

He cuddled her. “Surely there are easier ways? A small claims court, for instance.”

“Yes, but I didn’t have the evidence. I managed to get five thousand back. I met him at the café the other day.”

“I know.”

“You do? Were you tailing us or something?”

“Not at all. I just saw you leaving and tried to call after you. I was jealous as hell.”

“Were you now?”

He drew closer and blew in her ear.

“Please don’t do that,” she groaned. “It does something to me.”

“Does it now?” He carried on blowing.

“Travis, stop.”

“Do you really want me to?”

“Er no, not really, if I am honest with you.” She flushed a deep shade of peach as he drew even closer.

He watched her lick her bottom lip and then he bent over and brought his lips crashing down on hers for a kiss that seemed to go on and on. He had never in all of his years experienced a kiss like this one.

She tasted so sweet, as if he was licking a sugar-coated lollipop, only sweeter and more satisfying.

She gasped as he plundered her mouth.

“Oh, Fran. I’ve wanted to kiss you for such a long time.”

He watched as she closed her eyes, appearing to drink in the pleasure of what she had just experienced, to savour every waking moment.

Her eyes flickered open. “What was stopping you?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. I felt we were getting close at one point, that night I rescued you from the horrible bloke in the car park, but I didn’t want to take advantage of your vulnerability. And if I am being honest again...”

“What?”

“I don’t want to do the same thing right now, even though I want you so badly.”

Fran cupped his face in her hands and ran her thumb across his beard. “Travis, you would not be taking advantage in any way. I have wanted to be with you for so long, too. Now if you hadn’t turned up, then I would have been taken advantage of, yet again, by Brad Simpson. But you...you could never take advantage of me.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, narrowing his gaze.

“I just am, that’s all. Call it a gut reaction, if you like, but I just *know*.”

He cuddled her, inhaling her soft perfume. It smelt of vanilla and white roses and fresh rain... He scooped her petite frame up and carried her towards the bedroom. If she didn’t want this, too, then she would put up a fight, as she had with Brad Simpson. But no, she was totally relaxed in his arms, encircling his neck with her embrace.

Travis kicked the door open and they both fell down laughing on her bed. The sheets felt silky smooth. *Do I dare undress her?*

But he needn't have worried as she guided his hands to her blouse. Slowly but surely, he undid each mother-of-pearl tiny button to reveal the swell of her breasts beneath their lacy encumbrance.

Fran gasped as her blouse fell from her shoulders and Travis unhitched her brassiere, tossing it to the floor. A feeling of release swept over her. Yet she did not feel vulnerable, more that she was psyched up emotionally, mentally and physically for just such a moment. The half-light from the coloured lights strung upon the headboard made Fran feel relaxed.

Travis frowned and threw his hands in mid-air, slightly altering the mood. "I'm sorry. I don't have anything with me. How silly of me."

She furrowed her brow in puzzlement. "Oh, I see what you mean. You're not to blame. Neither of us expected this to happen today. Don't worry. I have several in the drawer." Then she felt her face heat up. "Don't get the wrong idea—I'm not a hussy or anything."

Travis let out a little laugh. "I never thought you were." He unclipped the slide at the back of her head so her hair fell loose onto her shoulders.

"I just kept a few from when I was engaged to Brad." She bit her lip and for a moment he appeared so absorbed at the very sight of her, he had totally forgotten about the condoms.

She opened the bedside cabinet to get one and ripped open its wrapper with her teeth.

Travis tore off his T-shirt and jeans and allowed Fran to remove his boxer shorts. She sheathed him slowly as he let out a little moan.

"Oh, Fran," he murmured. He hiked up her denim skirt and removed her gossamer-like silk panties as she waited for him on the edge of the bed.

Travis moved towards her and she experienced a tingle of sensation, working its way up from her toes to settle in the part of her that desired

him most. "I so want to please you," he said as he entered her slowly, filling her up inside as he moved rhythmically back and fore.

She gasped as she couldn't believe this was really happening, didn't want to believe it for fear it was only her own imagination at work. Surely it would all end much too soon and she would find herself waking up from a wonderful dream that hadn't really happened?

Then she would go back to her day-to-day life, realizing she could never have the man she really wanted. But this was real life wasn't it? She was here, right now, in the moment. And she wanted that moment to go on and on.

In her mind, she pictured a wave ebbing softly at the edge of the sea. It picked up speed, getting faster and more urgent as her breaths increased, until the imaginary wave became a huge tidal wave crashing onto the shore.

A ripple of ecstasy shot through her body and she convulsed over and over. She shouted out something, but whatever it was, when she had let herself go, hadn't bothered Travis. He seemed to like what he saw and heard, this new Fran finally obtaining her release.

"Now...it's...my...turn..." he gasped as he shuddered on top of her, closing his eyes.

They stayed that way until Travis finally withdrew from her.

"Fran, my beautiful Fran," he murmured. She gazed at him as he lay there with a little smile on his face. Eventually they both drifted off to sleep in one another's arms.

"Fran!" She heard the knocking and the shouting and for a split second thought Travis was at her door. Sitting bolt upright, relieved to find he was still by her side, she watched as he rubbed his eyes and also sat up.

"Who on earth is that? Brad again?" he questioned.

But Fran already knew. "It's Antonio. He can't find you here. Go hide in the bathroom and I'll get rid of him."

Travis picked up his clothes and padded down the hallway. As he left, she was amused to see a tattoo of a dolphin on his bare buttock. In

normal circumstances, she would have stifled a giggle or two, but this was Antonio with a note of urgency to his voice as he called her name again.

“Okay. Okay. I’m coming,” she said crossly. She slipped into her dressing gown and slippers. “Where’s the fire?”

Unbolting the door, she saw Antonio standing there, breathless. “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Fran. Don’t play games with me. Where is Travis? I know he’s here.”

She shrugged and allowed her brother to pass her in the hallway. “Please don’t do anything rash.”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I have some good news. Go and get him.”

Travis must have heard, because he was already dressed in his jeans, but no T-shirt, standing in the bathroom doorway. Fran’s heart sank. Now Antonio would put two and two together and realise they had slept together.

Antonio glanced down at Travis’s bare feet, but Travis didn’t flinch. He stood cool as a cucumber.

“Well?” He squared up to Antonio. Fran felt her heart flutter, the way Travis challenged him, when Brad had acted in a cowardly fashion.

“Your old boss—” Antonio began.

“Yes, I know what you’re going to say. He’s still after me because he thinks I embezzled funds from his restaurant. Turn the record over.”

“No, that’s just it. He has been to visit my father and the police to apologize and now he wants to see you.”

“See me?”

“Because it was his son who stole the money to keep up with his heroin habit.”

“I could have told you that myself.” Travis felt angry that no one had listened to him.

“That’s not all. His son was found last night with a needle and syringe sticking out of his arm. He nearly died. The old man was in tears

when he spoke to my father. He wants to see you, Travis. He needs to apologise.”

“Yeah, well the old man I can forgive, I can quite see how he might think that of me. But you, Antonio, you’ve always doubted me from day one.”

Antonio said nothing, just stood there with a blank look on his face until Fran poked him in the ribs.

“What? Oh yes, I am sorry.”

Fran coughed. This was the first time in many years she had heard her brother apologise to anyone, let alone Travis.

Antonio extended his hand. “Will you accept my apology?”

Travis stroked his chin and for an instant Fran feared he was going to reject Antonio’s apology, until he cleared his throat. “Okay. But if I return to the restaurant you have to realise I’m in charge.”

“Of course. It goes without saying.” Antonio winked behind Travis’s back at Fran. “And as it looks as if you and my sister are, er, how shall we say, an item. You’d better take care of her.”

“No, problem. That goes without saying, too.”

Both men awkwardly shook hands.

As Antonio left, Fran hugged Travis, a bubble of excitement building in her chest. “You know, I think we can solve your housing problem.”

“Oh yes.” He quirked an eyebrow in her direction. “And how do we do that?”

“You can move in here with me until we find somewhere a little bigger with a garden for Buster and Merlin.”

He smiled down at her and she took his hand. “That’s fantastic!”

“Time for round two,” she said mischievously.

“Round two,” he repeated as he followed her into the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

Epilogue

“Nice to see *he* got his comeuppance in the end,” Suzie announced as she unfolded a copy of the local newspaper. “Look at the headline.”

Con Man Caught in the Act.

“What’s it say?” Fran peered over her friend’s shoulder.

Suzie read aloud. “Bradley Angus Simpson was caught out by a honey-trapping female police officer this week as he tried to con her out of her imaginary inheritance.

“The officer had been tipped off by some local women that Simpson had been scanning the obituary columns and will notices to find out who had been left large sums of money by the deceased.

“Scruple less Simpson would then wheedle his way into the affections of the woman in question, sometimes even getting engaged so he could lay his hands on the money.

“The female police officer worked undercover to place an advert in the local paper, using an alias to suggest she had been left fifty thousand pounds by a fictitious late uncle. Sure enough, within a couple of weeks, Simpson had contacted her, arranging a series of dates.

“He was caught out by the sting operation when the police woman accompanied him to the bank with a view to handing over her money to him. Simpson was immediately arrested and taken in for questioning. When caught, a source informs us, Simpson held up his hands and said, ‘It’s a fair cop!’

“Sentencing will take place at the end of the month.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Fran let out a long sigh. “It’s drawn a line across the past for me.”

“Not quite for me though.” Suzie appeared pensive.

“At least he left you with something good out of all of this.” Fran smiled at the bonny baby girl lying in the carrycot.

“Yeah, in a way she was the best present Brad ever gave me.”

A light tap on the door diverted Fran’s attention. She watched Travis enter with a tray.

“I thought you ladies could do with a cup of coffee.” He laid the tray down on the coffee table.

“Thanks.” Fran turned back to her friend as Travis left the room.

“Wow. You’ve got him well-trained.”

“Not at all. We both share the housework. I even do a little more than my fair share now my father has Travis running the bakery side of the business.”

“Oh yes. How is that all going?”

“Really good. I only got half of my money back from Brad, of course, which is better than nothing, but Travis’s old boss, Mr. Rousakis, loaned us the rest. He felt guilty after falsely accusing him. He’s one of our biggest customers. We’re already building up quite a reputation.”

“Yes. That must have been tough for Travis, especially after all the stick he got from your brother.”

“It didn’t seem to put him off though, did it?” Fran grinned. “I just want to ask one favour of you, Suzie.”

“Oh?”

“How do you fancy being my maid of honour next month?”

“Fran, you’re not...”

“Yes, we’re getting married. Neither of us wants a big affair, just family and close friends. Travis has already chosen his best man, or should I say woman. He said, for him, it would have to be Marge, who used to live in the caravan next door to him. She’s been an absolute brick.”

“Wow. Everything is going too fast. You don’t let the grass grow, do you?”

Fran laughed. Then she picked up the crying baby to let Suzie finish her coffee. All of a sudden she was feeling extremely broody.

“We’ll have to go now, anyhow, Fran.” Suzie set down her cup and stood. “It’s time for Kelsey’s weigh-in at the health centre. I wonder what she’ll weigh this month.”

Fran helped her friend to the car and, after placing Kelsey securely in her car seat, both friends hugged one another.

Watching Suzie drive away, Fran had a tear in her eye at the thought of the way their friendship could have ended over a man.

She turned to find Travis in front of her.

“Have you been looking at me all this time?” She smiled and wiped away the tear.

“Yep. Come here, you.” He embraced her. “I’m only going to marry you on one condition, mind.”

“And what might that be, kind sir?”

“That you give up your job at the Peace of Mind.” He chuckled.

“It’s as good as done.” She was probably the worst honey trapper in Wales, no scrap that, in the United Kingdom, the world, the universe.

“Good.” He brought his lips down on hers. She was so glad she had baited the wrong guy that night in the pub. So very glad.

They paused at the apartment door to kiss again. Buster was waiting to greet them.

Bending down, Fran scooped the little dog up in her arms. “Yes, it’s lucky for both of you I was a hopeless honey trapper.”

“What was that?” Travis looked at Fran and the dog.

“Oh, just a little secret between Buster and myself.” Fran laughed as Buster wagged his tail in excitement.

And Fran knew she was happy Travis had taken the bait, hook, line and sinker.

About the Author

Lynette Rees lives in South Wales. She has had many articles and stories published, both online and in print. Some of her publications include: Ocean Magazine, Vibrant Life [US]; Horizon Magazine, Suite 101 [Canada]; Living Now [Australia]; Writers' Forum and Carillon Magazine [United Kingdom]. When Lynette is not writing, she works as a counsellor for a local cancer charity. To learn more about Lynette Rees, please visit <http://silverlady00.tripod.com>. Send an email to Lynette at craftyscribe@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Lynette!

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/LynetteRees>

Did you ever want to live a different life? Or actually have a life?

Ellie's Dream

© 2007 Margaret Wilson

The last thing Ellie Newman expected to see was her husband wrapped in the arms of a blonde. Talk about a wake-up call.

With her son almost grown, her job a bore and a husband whose hobbies don't include her, she is ready for a change.

Out of the blue, Ellie gets a chance to live another life when she goes to New York City for the summer to escape her problems. She gets a job of sorts, pet-sitting for her friend's cousin.

She loves New York. The parks, the food, the museums, the clubs all beckon. The only annoyance is Seth, the beast who unexpectedly shares the apartment.

Seth wants her to leave. Women are trouble and he needs to focus on his music. But she is hard to ignore, especially after they discover a mutual love of jazz. Ellie is up for a fling. After all, who can resist such a bad boy?

Ellie's Dream is about finding your heart, finding your passion and letting go.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Ellie's Dream*:

Seth and Marshall pushed their way through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor. They looked around for Ellie and Jamie. Marshall spotted them and pointed them out to Seth. Their bright red heads made them stand out in the crowd. As the couples moved, Seth caught glimpses of Ellie's milky white thighs playing peek-a-boo with that ridiculous excuse for a dress. Then he noticed Jamie's hands firmly gripped her sweet little bottom. And worse, Ellie hung on to his ass for dear life. Their hips moved together like a well-oiled machine.

“I had no idea Ellie danced so well,” Marshall shouted in Seth’s ear. “They look amazing together.”

Just then the song ended and Jamie dipped Ellie back, her long white arm arched over her head as one shapely leg wrapped itself around Jamie’s hip. Jamie ran his lips down Ellie’s neck, over her chest and stopped at her waist. Seth’s hands clenched. Jamie righted Ellie and caressed the leg still wrapped around his hip.

“What’s the matter?” Marshall shook Seth’s arm. “You look like you’re ready to explode.”

“It’s hot in here,” Seth said through clenched teeth. Jesus, Jamie still had his hand on Ellie’s ass. Seth wanted to punch him out, gay or not. He was hot and hard. All he wanted to do was throw Ellie over his shoulder and get her out of here. Get her alone, rip that dress off and see what lay underneath. He shook his head to clear it and took a deep breath.

As they returned to the table, Ellie saw Marshall at the edge of the dance floor. She pointed him out to Jamie. “I think he came to see you.” Then she noticed Seth behind Marshall. “Do you think they’re checking up on us?”

“Looks like it. Seth seems quite smitten.” Jamie steered her toward the two men. “This could be our lucky night.”

“Maybe for you. I’ve been talking you up to Marshall.” Ellie clutched Jamie’s arm. “He really likes you.”

“He doesn’t even know me,” Jamie shot back.

Ellie whispered in his ear. “He could get to know you.”

“What’s up?” Ellie asked. They stopped in front of Marshall and Seth.

“We wanted to get out of the apartment, get a drink.” Marshall held up a bottle of water.

“I love Latin music,” Seth added.

“But it’s not live,” Ellie protested. She pointed to the DJ. “I thought you’d prefer live music?”

“Did you see us dance?” Jamie put his arm around Ellie. “Ellie is a terrific partner.” He placed his hands on her hips. “She really moves these.”

Ellie wiggled her hips. “I need to find the ladies room. Get me some water, Jamie?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you back here.” Jamie kissed Ellie’s cheek.

When Ellie left the ladies room a few minutes later, Seth was standing outside the door with a bottle of water in his hand.

“Thanks.” Ellie took the water. “Where is everybody?”

“They seemed to have a lot to say to each other, so I left them alone.” Seth pointed to a dark corner where Ellie could barely see her friends. They were huddled together, heads close.

“It looks like I’ve been dumped,” Ellie said with a smile.

They made their way to the edge of the dance floor. Ellie sipped her water and looked around. The club was getting very crowded. A tall man with dark hair appeared at Ellie’s side and asked her to dance.

“My wife is taking a break right now.” Seth drew Ellie to his side. “Thanks for asking.”

The man held up his hands and moved away.

“Wife,” Ellie sputtered. She shook off Seth’s arm. “I don’t need a chaperone.”

“He’s a creep and that dress of yours is bound to give him the wrong idea.” Seth drew her close again. “It’s giving me a lot of ideas.” His fingers brushed her thighs.

“It’s the perfect dress for salsa.” Ellie pushed his hands away.

“So let’s dance.” Seth held out his arms.

“You can dance?” Ellie looked at him uncertainly.

“I was raised by a gay Hispanic musician who hung out with drag queens.” He looked her up and down. “You may not be able to keep up with me.”

“I bet I can.” Ellie put her empty bottle on a table and grabbed his hands. “Ready?”

Dancing with Seth was very different than dancing with Jamie or even Sergio. It was sexual, very physical, with Seth completely in command. After a minor test of wills, Ellie gave in and let Seth take charge. His body was strong and fluid and he stared into her eyes as they moved to the frenetic beat. Ellie had the time of her life. After two energetic mambos, the DJ slowed the tempo down to a samba. Seth pulled Ellie close.

“Maybe we should sit this one out,” Ellie whispered.

“Not a chance. This is the most sensual music there is.” He dipped Ellie.

Ellie sighed and let Seth take over again. She remembered the dance classes she and Patti took together because their husbands were too busy. She tried to show Charlie the steps but he never seemed able to spare the time. She wanted to call Patti and describe the club and how much fun she was having.

She was startled out of her daydream when Seth kissed her neck, sending a shiver right down to her toes. She pushed away from him.

“You have to stop this.” Ellie fought to catch her breath. “I like you, but we can’t be lovers. I’m married.”

Without a word, he led her off the dance floor to a dark corner. He pressed her against the wall and braced his hands on either side of her.

“If you were my wife, I would come after you wherever you tried to hide. I’d take you home and do whatever it took to make you want to stay.” He lowered his eyes and looked at her body. “And I’d take you dancing so other men could see how lucky I was, but then I’d have to take you home early because I’d need to make love to you.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “But that’s just me.” He started to back off.

“One more thing.” He lowered his mouth and kissed her deeply, passionately, using his lips and tongue to excite her. He broke away leaving Ellie’s head spinning. “I’d kiss you like that every day, so it’s clear where you belong.” With that he grabbed her hand and marched her over to the table where Jamie and Marshall sat.

“See that Ellie gets home safely,” Seth said to the two men.

When an explosion rocks the Devlin Group, two agents must risk everything to save them all.

On the Edge

© 2007 Shannon Stacey

Tony Casavetti emerges from an undercover assignment only to be summoned to NYC by Charlotte, the Devlin Group's executive administrator. When he arrives, he finds out she may be ruthlessly efficient, but his assumption about her being matronly was dead wrong.

Charlotte Rhames has it all—looks, wealth and the respect she craved. But an attack on the Devlin Group throws her back into the pit of sex, money, and murder she'd crawled out of.

With Tony's life at stake, how far is she willing to fall?

Book 2 of the Devlin Group series

Enjoy the following excerpt for *On the Edge*:

Charlotte turned and walked back to the car. She put a little extra swing in her stride, knowing the man's eyes would follow her ass like it was a hypnotist's watch.

So this was Tony Casavetti in the flesh—lean, tan and nicely muscular flesh. Despite having a starring role in many of her XXX mental movies, his file photo did *not* do justice to the man himself.

He was tall—just the right height to dance with while wearing killer stilettos. Well-broken-in jeans hugged a really fine ass, and even more broken-in leather boots and jacket gave him a decidedly bad-ass cowboy look.

Charlotte had a lifelong *thing* for bad-ass cowboys. The world could keep Tom Cruise and Orlando Bloom. She'd take her Sam Elliott, Clint Eastwood, James Arness.

She'd play Miss Kitty to Tony Casavetti's Marshall Dillon any day.

And the thing about Tony was his delicious physique wasn't even the best part of him. She'd been on the comm system with him during the good times and the downright horrific, and she liked the man he was. Decent, intense, smart. He wasn't as coolly detached as Alex Rossi and Gallagher when an operation got interesting. Tony's emotions fueled his temper and he tended to go balls-to-the-wall toward his objective.

In the eight years she'd known Tony, she'd come to see him as the complete package. And now she finally had the opportunity to maybe take him home and unwrap him.

After popping the Mustang's trunk, she stepped back to let him dump his suitcase. He dropped the carry-on bag next to it, then stripped off the leather jacket. Charlotte admired the smooth rippling of his biceps as Tony unzipped the suitcase and removed a lockbox. He pulled a key from his pocket and a moment later was strapping on a holster. Unfortunately, his next step was slipping the jacket back on.

Tony closed the trunk and rolled his shoulders. "Much better."

Once they were buckled in and navigating through the city as slowly as she could get away with without being obvious, Charlotte glanced over at her passenger's rugged profile. It was no accident she'd been free to meet Tony Casavetti's plane.

She'd been waiting a long time to spend a few minutes with this agent, and the tall, dark and silent thing wasn't cutting it. "How was your flight?"

"Commercial."

"Sorry, but we've only got the one jet. We did spring for first class, though."

"I'd have felt better about the extra helping of shitty peanuts if I'd been armed." There was a relaxed, almost amused tone in his voice that she found encouraging.

"That's one of the key bullet points of new and improved Homeland Security—not giving shitty peanuts to armed airline passengers."

He laughed—a husky baritone—and Charlotte realized it was the first time she'd heard it. She'd heard Tony's calm, slightly southern-accented voice give status reports. She'd heard him hissing live surveillance into the comm, and screaming orders into it when the shit really hit the fan. But she'd never heard him laugh. She wanted to hear it more often.

“We would have given you a weapon, you know,” she said.

He shook his head. “I prefer my own.”

“A Smith & Wesson M&P .40's not exactly a unique piece.”

“Like I said, I prefer my own. And she's the best when it comes to ambidextrous firing.”

Charlotte mentally scanned the info sheets she had on Tony. “You're right-handed.”

Through the corner of her eye, she saw his sharp look. “Anything you don't know?”

“Sweetheart, I even know you had your wisdom teeth out when you were seventeen and had a bad reaction to Demerol. There's very little about you...uh—*all* of you guys—I don't know.”

“You don't know why I shoot the S&W M&P .40.”

“True. So why don't you tell me?”

“When I was ten, I jumped into a really bad brawl. Kid managed to break two of the fingers on my right hand and I was screwed—couldn't hit a damn thing with my left. Bastard beat the living shit out of me. There was no way I was letting that happen again.”

“So you actually trained yourself to be ambidextrous?”

“Yeah. It's a secret, though.”

She grinned at him. “I'm pretty good at keeping secrets. Although, on the grand scale of secrets I keep, that's not a very juicy one.”

“Not to you, but the guys in the black hats not knowing I can kill them as well with my left hand as my right could save my ass someday. Hell, it *has* saved my ass.” He paused, then said, “So you know *everything*, huh?”

His tone had changed, and Charlotte had an idea of what he was thinking. Childhood hadn't been particularly kind to Tony Casavetti, and young adulthood wasn't much better. "The lives of the Devlin Group agents are open books to me. But *only* to me."

Tony only looked out the window, and she didn't press the issue. It wasn't an easy thing having a person know every nook and cranny of your past, as Alex Rossi knew hers.

But Tony's...she couldn't imagine suffering through what the court transcript attached to his psych file had detailed. A hard-ass Texas judge looking down at an *eleven*-year-old Tony and asking, "Well, son, how does it feel to know you're such a worthless pile of refuse, ain't nobody in the whole world who wants you?"

Charlotte forced herself to stop squeezing the life out of the steering wheel. This visit—the DG meeting being the exception—was supposed to be about her fulfilling an ongoing little fantasy. Flirtation, fun, and—hopefully—a weekend of smoking hot sex. Getting to know Tony Casavetti a little better. Or a *lot* better.

"So what's this little shindig about?" the star of said fantasy asked after a few minutes.

"Just an announcement we only want to make once, with the opportunity to hash any resulting issues out face to face."

"Sounds interesting." Tony turned to face her, one eyebrow raised. "The Group isn't downsizing, is it? Because unemployment forms don't have check boxes for my particular occupational skills."

It was her turn to laugh. "No. Nothing like that."

"Good. And thanks for having my back when the Chavez job went to shit. Thought I was heading for a pine box that time. And there at the end..."

The thought made Charlotte shudder. She was no stranger to violence, but she hated being reminded of how often the agents found themselves—or *put* themselves—in the line of fire. Especially the "core" of the Group—Alex Rossi, Gallagher, Carmen Olivera, Grace Nolan before

she left the Group. And Tony Casavetti. She *really* didn't like when Tony was in the line of fire.

"The girl he took as a hostage? Her name is Rosa, and she's been reunited with her family in Mexico. I just thought you might like to know."

He closed his eyes for a moment, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. She forced her attention back to the road. "That makes it all worthwhile," he said.

"I'm glad we happened to be on open comm when it went bad." She felt his gaze on her, but resisted the urge to turn and meet it. Let him look.

"You know, you don't look anything like I expected you to."

"Let me guess," she said. "Stout. Gray hair. Clipboard?"

"Metal ruler, actually."

"Too Catholic school," Charlotte replied, then shot him a sexy smile. He missed it, since his focus was on her legs. "I'm not a very parochial kind of girl."

Tony's eyes returned to her face and he gave a sexy smile of his own. "Maybe not, but I bet you'd look hot as hell in the skirt and knee socks."

Was he hitting on her? Flirting to be polite? During down time they tended to be flirtatious over the comm, but she wasn't sure how he'd react in person. She'd been told her looks could be intimidating.

She didn't care—he was in her sights for a very limited time and she intended to make the most of it. "Hmm...I have a cute little schoolgirl outfit left over from a Halloween party a few years back. I'll model it for you after the meeting."

There. The ball was in Casavetti's court, and she waited to see how he'd play it. Laugh it off? Launch into a lecture on how sex would undermine their professional relationship? Throw himself out of a moving vehicle?

"A naughty schoolgirl, huh?" Tony said in a low voice. "I'll have to remember to wear a belt."

And dammit, just when things were getting good and hot, they pulled up to her townhouse. A townhouse currently containing fourteen agents and seven support personnel, none of whom factored into her personal plans for Tony Casavetti.

She calculated quickly in her head. Meeting in a half-hour. Should take an hour or so, then more mingling and what-not. A meal. If she were lucky, in about four hours she'd be playing giddy-up with her favorite cowboy.

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