

Dedicated to:

My sister for all her hard work
on the book's website

And to:

My parents for all their
help with translating the
wedding rites into French.

CHAPTER 1

The shelf shook precariously beneath me. There was the ominous grating as the screw slowly edged its way out of the wall. My long red legs, which draped over the edge of the shelf, started to quiver and I found myself gripping onto the shelf with my wings. But I wasn't really frightened. No! No! No!

"Could you please stop that Little Toff? I know what you're doing," I patronisingly called down to him.

Over the brim of my shelf the cute toffee coloured face of the mischievous little bear appeared. Beaming at me with his most innocent look, Little Toff protested. "What? What was I doing?" But the innocence of his look was broken by the mischievous twitching of his furry little ears. We both knew what he had been trying to do and I wasn't going to waste my precious relaxing time by clambering down from my shelf to point out that one side of the shelf was only a few more turns away from swinging downwards and depositing me on the shelf below. The first time that this had occurred had been vaguely amusing, at least for Little Toff and the giggling bears below and even I had begrudgingly appreciated the funny side but now, seven times later, it had become a little tedious.

Sighing I looked out across the bedroom with its hideously pink walls, pink carpet and pink eiderdown with pictures of bears on, covering the bed which was pushed right underneath the double glazed window. This was the room of bear mad 12 year old Lucy Partridge, who at present was taking a weeks holiday with her 14 year old brother and mother and father in the South of France. I suspected

that during this time I would have to endure an uncountable number of Little Toff's "hilarious" pranks.

Surprisingly Lucy had neglected to take any of her beloved bears on holiday with her, possibly due to a lack of her space in her parent's suitcases. It had always puzzled me why someone who adored bears as much as she did had purchased a ventriloquist crow with bright orange fur, but purchased me she had. And for a while I had been centre of attention and she had played and played with me. Then after a while the novelty had predictably worn off and I had been relegated to the top shelf of her bedroom. At first I hadn't minded; after having someone's hand constantly up my rear I needed with a rest. And even now as I lay dormant on the top shelf, hardly ever played with, I didn't really mind as I enjoyed watching the activities of Lucy's bedroom unfold below me.

You see what Lucy doesn't realise is that every time the house is deserted her bears come to life. And they take over the house and its surroundings; watching TV, bouncing on the bed, sunbathing (when sunny) on the roof that the window of Lucy's bedroom opens out onto and playing various sports in the garden. The latter has to be undertaken very carefully so as to avoid giving the Partridge's neighbours a shock as they look out of their windows. Indeed the Partridge's first holiday, a number of years ago, had been very embarrassing. As one unfortunate bear had made his way downstairs he had unwittingly being picked up by the burglar alarm sensor and the burglar alarm had been triggered. Having received a call from one of their neighbours the Partridge's had returned home immediately and still to this day were

unaware of what had set off their alarm. But after searching the house the bears had successfully found the code to the burglar alarm in the back of Lucy's diary and were now able to turn off the alarm during the Partridge's holidays, being careful to remember to switch it back on before their return. One year they had returned home bewildered as to how the alarm had managed to turn itself off.

So the bears' lives unfolded before me but although enjoying watching the entertaining soap I never allowed myself to involve myself in their lives. This wasn't really a problem; apart from Little Toff not many of the bears bothered with me. Although, this said, a few bears did occasionally mount the chest of drawers below and climb up the shelves to reach me, in order to ask the advice of a wise old crow. And although I would provide it with them I refused to comment on any of the activities I had seen or heard, for I saw what happened when a bear's back was turned and to enlighten them to this would be extremely unfair.

Little Toff now made the daring leap from the shelf below me, onto the bed, before springing off that, through the open window landing on the slanting tiled roof. Rolling down this I saw him disappear over the edge, hearing his yell of delight as he slid down the drainpipe onto the patio below. A few moments later I could see him sprinting into the middle of the lawn where his brother Big Toff was balancing a tennis ball pointlessly on his head. Little Toff, cheekily jumped up and knocked the ball off his brother's head and a playful scrap ensued.

Although Big Toff's fur was the same texture and colour as his brother he was taller by a few inches and he had a much more sensible nature about him and

lacked his mischievous and cheeky streak. He also was a lot more intelligent than his brother due to the fact that he had been bothered to turn up to Santa's lessons.

Santa was a respectable bear who held classes, mostly in Mr Partridge's study, for bears who wanted to learn. He covered a range of topics including Maths, French, German, English, IT (making use of the computer in Mr Partridge's study) and Woodwork (an activity that had wrecked havoc in Mr Partridge's garage). Why bears needed to learn foreign languages, considering few of them would ever venture beyond the house, had often puzzled me. Santa, just under a foot in height (an average size for a bear), was a white polar bear with skilful black paws - also acted as a vicar whenever any bears had wanted to be joined in matrimony. Due to his white coat he had worn a black collar instead of the vicar's traditional black coat with a white collar. Santa's wife Penny, an unusually small bear with short, frizzy orange fur, was a kind, loving bear who occasionally helped her husband with his classes but spent most of her time caring for their baby bear George. George, a black and white polar bear, was only a few months old and a few inches tall. I often wondered why his fur had no hints of orange but the bears and myself have never pretended to understand Science and that was why the subject was absent from the list that Santa taught.

Raised voices now drifted into the bedroom from the landing and I turned my head so as to catch every word.

"It's no good denying it Corny. I saw you!"

"Milly, I did not I tell you."

Milly and Corny, the parents of Little and Big Toff, now drifted into the bedroom, deep in a row, gesticulating wildly with their paws. Milly was a tall, lanky bear with legs and arms seemingly too long for the rest of his body. His face was a loveable one although he was a bear who preferred to resolve problems with his paws and he had been involved in many a scrap. Corny, a soft purple bear, had a much calmer nature than her husband but she too possessed a fiery personality and rows like the one taking place now, were often explosive. One of their rows had presented the bears with a major problem. In her anger, at some forgotten triviality, Corny had swung at Milly with one of Mr Partridge's slippers. Unfortunately the slipper had shot across the living room smashing one of Mrs Partridge's best ornaments. How one of her China pigs had spontaneously smashed to pieces was something that still puzzled Mrs Partridge to this day.

Many of Corny and Milly's arguments aroused from the frequent discovery that one of them had been cheating on the other and I suspected that this was the cause of their present row.

"Corny, I saw you squeeze Santa's *derriere*." Santa's lessons had been paying off!

"My paw brushed against his buttocks as we passed him in the landing; nothing more."

"Then why didn't he flinch. If someone's paw brushed against my bottom I'd have gone..." Milly now demonstrated how he would have reacted, by clutching his rear and leaping in the air with the shout of "Whoa!"

Staring at him in disbelief, Corny dryly replied, "Yes, well that's just you dear." Corny now marched out of room; her point made. Why she had bothered

to come into the room just to leave it intrigued me slightly, but then again, I had always viewed Corny as a drama queen.

Milly stood there, reflectively for a few moments before turning and following Corny out of the room. I sympathised with Milly. It was understandable that he was going to be suspicious considering Corny's uncountable number of affairs, the most notable 6 years ago...

My train of thought was broken, as I heard the sounds of an altercation on the landing. Through the din Milly's voice boomed. "Bring it on you little..." followed by an expletive.

"Get your paws off me," retorted the pompous voice of Metro. Metro was a snobbish, golden bear (really he was yellow but he preferred to be called golden) who walked around with his hard, brown nose placed firmly in the air. Although being a foot tall he was rather a coward and his plea to Milly had, to my ears, sounded rather girlish.

After the trading of a few more insults Metro strutted into the room with his arm protectively around his son Lenny. I allowed a wry smile to crease my yellow beak. It was ironic that just as I had been thinking of Lenny he should enter the room.

Lenny, a small, "golden", gentle bear, was very complicated. Seven years ago Corny had begun a secret affair with Metro and had consequently got pregnant with Lenny. Milly had foolishly believed the baby to be his and Metro, who had realised otherwise, had left the house without any explanation. This had caused distress for Lucy who had turned the house upside down trying to find him, before in the end giving up. Corny's pregnancy and Lenny's birth had caused yet more bewilderment for poor Lucy who

was puzzled by Corny's bulging stomach only for it to suddenly vanish and a new bear, who Lucy couldn't remember having previously, to appear. The fact that Lenny was "golden" should have given them a clue, but as none of the bears understood science Lenny had been brought up as the brother of Big Toff and Little Toff, who had been born two years earlier. And then, a year ago, a mysterious figure had appeared at the window and Metro had entered pronouncing:

"I am here to see my son."

When it became apparent that he was referring to Lenny, all hell broke loose. There were a number of punch ups and slanging matches and Milly and Corny consequently split up. Metro's entrance had deliberately been dramatic and although he claimed not to have returned to cause trouble I seriously doubted that. Metro, by nature, was a stirrer and there was nothing he liked more than a good row; as long as he wasn't on the receiving end. The only person who had been pleased to see Metro was Lucy, who couldn't believe that she hadn't looked for him on the shelf where he had always sat. Even Lenny was not pleased to see him as he had liked the family he had and Metro's reappearance caused him to be disowned by Milly.

Though after a while Milly forgave Corny and in an emotionally moving ceremony they had renewed their wedding vows. This had been the last wedding to take place and I yearned for another one, as they were normally very moving and occasionally the source of a good bit of drama. "Stop the wedding!" was something that had been shouted all too frequently.

Anyway although Milly and Corny had made up, Milly had refused to take Lenny back and he now stayed with his father. However, he remained good friends with Big Toff and Little Toff, his half brothers. Milly and Metro kept their distance, although it was inevitable that occasionally they would have to pass each other and normally that involved a little altercation like the one that had just taken place. It seemed that as they passed each other, neither Metro nor Milly could resist the temptation to cough a rude word under their breath. These incidents strained the friendship between Lenny and his two half brothers as Big Toff and Little Toff always sided with Milly and Lenny always sided with Metro, who he now respected and loved dearly.

Metro led Lenny over to the bed which they mounted together. They then bounced off this and onto the window sill and they made their way out onto the roof.

"Can I go and play with Big Toff and Little Toff, Daddy?"

"If you must. But be careful; you're just seen what their father's like. I'm just going to bask in the sunshine so I'll be able to keep an eye on you."

As Metro lay down on the roof, putting on a pair of Mr Partridge's sunglasses (which were ridiculously too big for him) which he had been carrying in his left paw, Lenny bounded down the roof and slid down the drainpipe before running over to his friends. Why Metro wanted to tan his already "golden" fur was really beyond me.

My head turned as a floorboard creaked and Mickey furtively crept into the bedroom. Mickey, a thickset bear with bright brown, grizzly fur and a tough looking face was Milly's brother. Despite his

tough looking exterior, inside he was a kind, caring family bear. Looking nervously around him he called up to me in hushed voice. "Chris. Chris."

"What?" I asked.

"I need a word."

Almost before his sentence was complete the shrill voice of his wife Jean sounded from the landing. "Oh there you are dear!"

Mickey leapt nervously into the air. "Flaming Nora, Jean. You scared the stuffing out of me."

"I'm sorry," she replied, moving into the room. In her arms she cradled their youngest son Tommy. Jean's warm, bubbly persona made her a brilliant caring mother to their three children. To reflect her personality she was a soft, squeezable bear and one of Lucy's favourites. Because she was well loved her light brown, fur was discoloured and worn in patches. Jean was the exact opposite to her husband; as she was warm and loving on the outside but strong and resilient on the inside.

"What are you doing," she inquired.

Hesitantly Mickey murmured, "Oh nothing much." Hastily changing the subject he asked after his second son, Harry. Harry, another of Lucy's favourites, was a shy, polite bear. His grey-brown fur was threadbare in places due to constant attention by Lucy. He was rather a weak bear and did not get involved in fights because of this and the fact he had no temper. His quiet, gentle aroma unfortunately meant that he was overlooked by most of the bears.

"Oh he's downstairs, watching the TV. I'm going outside for a bit of sunbathing. Coming?"

Put on the spot Mickey stammered, "Err... no I'll go down and spend some time with Harry. Don't want him feeling left out."

“Alright dear.”

Mickey backed out of them room into the landing as Jean made her way up the bed and out of the window onto the roof. As Jean settled Tommy on the roof and plonked herself down next to Metro, I noticed Mickey’s head poke around and door and his eyes flit up to the window to check Jean wasn’t watching him. Convinced that she wasn’t he made his way up the dressing table and the shelves below me to the top shelf. Once there he glanced out of the window just to be sure that Jean wasn’t watching him. I looked too and we both saw that she was in conversation with Metro; I guessed that it was probably highly intellectual like discussing the works of Shakespeare. But Jean wouldn’t mind as she was a very intelligent bear. I had once attempted to read a Shakespearian play from Mr Partridge’s study but there were too many “thees”, “mees” and “wees” for my liking.

My curiosity was now aroused. What was it that Mickey wished to confide in me, for all bears knew that they could rely on me for secrecy, but didn’t want Jean to know about?

CHAPTER 2

"I think Jean's having an affair."

I sighed. Unfortunately affairs happened all too frequently among the bears and I had anticipated something rather more exciting than an affair.

"Who with?" I asked, in a disinterested tone.

"Well that's what I was hoping you could tell me."

"I never comment on anything I've seen or heard. You should know that by now."

Mickey pounced. "So you have seen something?"

"That's not what I said," I wisely replied.

"Sometimes you're such a ..." rude word.

Ignoring the insult I asked, "What makes you think she's having an affair?"

"Well there's nothing I can put my finger on. She just seems more cheerful." Some bears will moan about anything! They moan when their wives are grumpy, they moan when they're cheerful, they moan when they're normal. Ahhh!

"Is that a bad thing?" I asked sarcastically.

"Well it just seems a false cheerfulness as if she's trying to disguise what she's really feeling inside. And she goes for long walks in the garden at night. I think that's when she's meeting him. Now maybe I'm just being cynical but when you've walked round the garden one night what's the flipping point of walking round it the next night. It isn't going to have changed." He was being cynical but in my cynical old age I agreed with his philosophy.

"What should I do? Please help; you're my last resort." Flattery will get you everywhere, I thought to myself!

"Well I suppose you ask her."

"Ask her?" Why did bears seem to find it difficult to talk to their wives? "Oh yes sure. How's Tommy this morning? What's on the TV? Oh and are you having an affair?"

"Okay then," I replied, a little riled, "follow her on her walks around the garden."

This suggestion seemed to unnerve him. Well that was fair enough, I thought. It was quite a daunting prospect; following your wife around the garden, knowing they might be meeting a lover but worried that you might look silly when it just turns out that they're picking daisy and admiring the pansies. "But it's dark at night and I'm scared of the dark." I sighed. For all his macho exterior he was just another softie like Metro; who was, at present, probably explaining his theory of evolution to Jean.

"Well watch her from inside then."

"But she might disappear into the bushes and I wouldn't be able to see what's doing."

"Well if she does I think you'd have a pretty good idea."

Mickey appeared visibly shocked by this comment. "I do trust my wife Chris. I'm almost positive that she isn't having an affair." Then what have you come to me for you silly little... My thought trailed off.

The stairs creaked and a few moments later discernible voices could be heard on the landing.

"Well at least the weather's been jolly good of late."

"It's Chester," Mickey mouthed at me, as if he needed to bother. That posh, irritating voice, that made him sound as if he'd scoffed the whole of the plum bowl, would be recognisable from any distance. "Don't let him see me."

Chester was Mickey and Jean's eldest son. He was very intellectual and had very strict principals. Once

he had an opinion about something there was no swaying him. His faded, knobbly, yellow fur and floppy arms and legs made him look rather weak but really he was a very strong minded bear. This was not helped by his height; he was only about seven inches tall.

I lifted my droopy wing, covered in scraggly orange hair, and Mickey dived under it.

There was high pitched laughter from the landing. "‘Jolly good of late’. Oh Chester. You do crack me up."

This was Catherine; Chester’s girlfriend. She was a rather obese, brown and white bear with a bubbly personality. I had often wondered how they had managed to stay together for so long because Catherine was so down to earth and, unlike Chester, liked to call a spade a spade, instead of a gardening implement. I think the main attraction was that Catherine was, surprisingly, a fan of classical music (among other things) and had often “treated” the bears to a rendition of certain operatic pieces on dull days when they had been a little bored and restless. Unfortunately her singing hadn’t always improved the situation...

"Catherine, you shouldn’t mock poor Chester." This was the voice of Catherine’s friend Samantha. She was a tall, blue bear with exceptionally hard and strong legs. For a female bear she was unusually thick set and strong; mentally and physically. Like Catherine she was down to earth and she wasn’t one to mince her words. Many rows in the past had erupted because Samantha had spoken her mind.

"I wasn’t," Catherine protested.

"Jolly good," Samantha replied and hysterical laughter followed.

"Oh don't tease Samantha," John admonished her. John was Samantha's husband and although appearing a muscular and hardened bear; he was pink. This had always amused me. You would expect that the female bear would be pink and the male bear would be blue but with John and Samantha it was the other way round. This probably summed them up quite well because if bears wore clothes then it would be Samantha who wore the trousers in that marriage! Mentally John was very weak and he allowed himself to be dominated by his wife; much to the dismay of his father Pete. Pete was a very small, floppy bear with hideously bright pink fur. In his old age he had become very cynical and he disapproved strongly of his son's marriage to Samantha who he didn't think was worthy of his 'wonderful' John. To Pete the sun shone out of every hole in John's stitching. Regrettably there had been a few little incidents between Pete and Samantha. Understatement. There had been a number of rows, slanging matches and punch ups; in fact the only time they had seen eye to eye was when she smacked him in the mouth. The main cause of their arguments was that Pete didn't believe Samantha to be a fit mother to her and John's two year old son Toby, who was doted on by his grandfather and consequently Samantha refused to let Pete see Toby. Recently Samantha and Pete had both made an effort to stay out of the other's way and there hadn't been an incident for a number of weeks. Unfortunately this meant that one was due...

Chester and Catherine strolled into the room, paw in paw and Samantha and Jon entered a few steps behind them. They were not holding paws and Samantha was cradling baby Toby. He had frizzy brown fur; how he managed this considering his

parents were blue and pink often amused me. He was a rather podgy baby, something Pete had once blamed on Samantha's rather rounded figure. Strangely he had walked with a limp for a while after that comment.

"Where's your delightful father today?" inquired Chester. Not a good question.

"Do you mean his old wrinkly?" asked Samantha.

Chester was made rather uncomfortable by the question; not wanting to refer to Pete as an old wrinkly but lost for another way of describing him.

John saved him embarrassment. "He's downstairs watching a western."

Samantha muttered something about "one old bore watching another old bore" but I couldn't quite catch the whole sentence.

"Really Samantha," John chastised, "not in front of Toby."

Chester now mounted the bed in his sophisticated manner before leaning down and helping Catherine up.

"Ooh isn't he a gentleman," Catherine commented to Samantha whilst Chester looked shyly away.

"There's no chance of my John doing that," Samantha replied, attempting to drop a hint.

Responding to the "subtle" hint John took Toby off Samantha and awkwardly mounted the bed with his son. Once at the top he handed Toby to Catherine and then set about helping Samantha up. Sadly John lacked Chester's graceful and debonair movements and he also had Samantha. Her chunky legs were not suited to skipping gracefully up the side of the bed.

After several minutes, the recurring shout of "Pull" and the assistance of Jean and Metro (who had abandoned their sun bathing in order to see what all

the shouting was about), Chester, Catherine and even baby Toby; Samantha was up.

Once there she joked that; "I don't really fancy sunbathing now," much to the exhausted laughter of the other bears.

The little group of bears made their way out onto the roof and set themselves up for an afternoon of sunbathing. The relationships between the members of the group were rather complicated. Samantha loved John dearly although constantly bossing him about, viewed Chester as a snob, Metro as a "pompous Drama Queen" but was best friends with Catherine and Jean. I often thought it strange that someone so outspoken and rude should have so many friends. Catherine felt sorry for John who did everything Samantha told him to do, was best friends with Catherine and a good friend of Jean, adored Chester although teasing the posh way he spoke and was amused by Metro's pretentious manner. Jean loved Chester as she did her other sons, was friends with Samantha - although disapproving of her rude and aggressive side - and Catherine although a little dubious about her relationship with her son, thought Metro was a highly intellectual and interesting bear and, from what I had seen, I think that she quite admired John's rugged exterior and timid interior. Chester loved Catherine, in the old fashioned sense of the word, looked down his nose at his mother's rowdy friend Samantha and her husband John but doted upon his darling mother and considered Metro his intellectual equal. I think that Metro viewed Chester in the same way, whilst admiring the delicate beauty of Chester's mother's mind, thought Catherine wasn't worthy of Chester and looked down upon John and Samantha who he considered slobs. Tommy

and Toby were too young to know what was going on but they did seem to be yawning every time Chester or Metro spoke.

Now I bet you're thinking I'm pretty sad to have observed all this, well maybe I am, but there isn't anything else to do up here.

"Have they gone?"

The voice, which sounded familiar, seemed close at hand. And then I realised that it literally was and remembered Mickey.

As I never commented on anything I saw, I simply lifted my wing. "What does that mean?" he asked curiously.

"It means I never comment on anything I see or hear."

"Oh you're a strange one, you," he murmured as he came out from under my wing, glancing nervously about.

Seeing that Jean and Chester were safely sunbathing out on the roof he clambered down the shelves, leapt off the dressing table and bounded out of the room without a word of thanks. Some bears had no manners!

I turned my attention back to the sunbathing bears, who were now deep in conversation.

"So how's Mickey?" Samantha was asking Jean. "It's ages since I've spoken to him."

"He's fine; I think." Jean paused before continuing. "Well actually he's been behaving rather oddly. He seems a little on edge."

"Mother!" Chester expostulated. "One shouldn't discuss one's private wonderings with any Tom, Dick or Henry."

"Oi, I'm not just any old Tom, Dick or Harry," Samantha told him, whilst awkwardly wriggling about so as to scratch her bottom.

"That's a matter of opinion," Chester muttered quietly.

Ignoring her itch Samantha jumped up and accusingly shouted; "What did you say?"

John also rose and placed a restraining hand on his wife's shoulder. "Now, now Samantha. It's too nice a day to be arguing."

"John's right," Jean told her. "You're causing a scene in front of the children."

Annoyed that everyone had conspired against her Samantha shook her husband's hand away but did relent and lie back down on the tiles. As she did she quietly commented to Catherine:

"You're got a right stuck-up git there."

Catherine started to giggle uncontrollably at this, prompting Chester to inquire, "Is there anything the matter, Catherine, darling?"

"Nothing," she giggled childishly. "Just a little wind."

"Really Catherine. One should keep those sort of details to one's self."

"And the wind, preferably," joked Samantha. Catherine burst out laughing and the two friends rolled about in hysterical laughter. As the roof was a sloping one, they were unwittingly rolling away from the group and were becoming precariously close to rolling off the roof and onto the patio below.

With a sigh, John rose and chased after the two bears. Disgusted Chester turned his attentions to his younger brother and tickled him playfully on the stomach. Tommy giggled happily.

With all this activity it had become increasingly difficult to overhear the private conversation that had started between Jean and Metro. Not that I would ever dream of listening in to a private conversation, but sometimes, it was unavoidable.

The odd words drifted up to me. "Mickey..." "you're sure..." "how could..." "well you said..." "more careful..." Well that made a lot of sense! Fed up of trying to piece together fragments of sentences I turned my attention to the drama at the bottom of the roof.

John had managed to tug a dizzy Samantha away from the edge but Catherine had proved more difficult. Her leg had got stuck in the guttering at the bottom of the roof. John had pulled but her leg had refused to budge.

Intrigued by Catherine's shouts of "Harder, harder" and "Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Chester had picked up his gurgling brother and had moved down the roof to see what all the fuss was about.

Suddenly Catherine's leg was free but John had been exerting such a force he toppled backwards and she landed on top of him; ending up in quite a compromising position.

"Ooh John," Catherine teased him playfully but being underneath his wife's best friend made him understandably uncomfortable and he slid out from under her; not an easy task considering her weight but he managed it quite straightforwardly- as if he was used to it. Naughty! Really, some of the thoughts that crossed my mind, I don't know where they come from! John was bound to be good at sneaking out from under heavy bears. He was married to Samantha.

Luckily for John, Samantha had been dizzily walking about in a trance and had not seen Catherine on top of her husband but Chester had. He stood there, unimpressed, with his hands on his hips.

John now helped a giddy Catherine to her feet and led her towards her waiting boyfriend. "Ooh, doesn't he have a strong grip," she called to Samantha.

"Catherine, behave yourself," Chester sternly instructed her.

Samantha, who had just fallen flat on her face, shouted back, "I know. He might be a bear, but sometimes he's a real tiger." Too much information! She then set about mimicking the growl of a tiger and she and Catherine laughed.

"Samantha!" John silenced her, embarrassed about having details of their private life sung from the rooftop. Tugging her off the floor he guided back to the sunbathing group before plonking her back onto the roof.

From the garden below, where Little Toff, Big Toff and Lenny were having a kick-about with a tennis ball (a proper football had proved too big in the past as one unfortunate bear had been knocked unconscious), Big Toff shouted up to John, "John you little devil!"

As Little Toff, Big Toff and Lenny laughed, John reprimanded Samantha. "Look what you've done now!"

"Oh stop moaning, you winger!"

I now heard the sound of pawsteps padding along the roof towards the group of sunbathing bears. Also hearing this Jean turned her head and called out, "Santa! Penny! Come and join us."

Santa and Penny, who was cradling her baby son George in her paws, now came into my view.

Jean jumped up and gave Penny a little hug. "It's much too nice a day to be stuck indoors," Penny told her. "Santa wanted to sit in front of the TV with baby George but I told him we ought to get outside, soak up the sun. It seems you've all had the same idea, eh?"

Chester, Metro and John had, like Jean, risen and they now shook Santa's hand. I know these greetings were just customary displays of politeness but it wasn't as if they'd just come back from a world cruise. They'd more than likely only seen them the day before!

Penny and Jean had finished their hug and Samantha and Catherine got unsteadily up, still a little disorientated after rolling down the roof and hugged Penny too. What funny traditions the bears had! As a crow, I don't think I'll ever understand them.

The curtseys over, they settled themselves down with the other bears trying to find the best position for sunbathing. Flipping heck! I thought. The sun was a massive thing; millions of times bigger than the Earth, did it really matter where you sat on a roof ten metres by three.

I looked at the eleven bears, with sceptical crow's eyes, all waiting for the sun to frazzle their fur. How silly they all were!

Now silence reigned. As concentration was required in order to get a good tan! The sad thing was that they would probably stay there for the whole afternoon, without talking and without moving. All that could be heard was the happy shouts of the three bears playing on the lawn.

Suddenly the game was halted as Big Toff turned his attention to the back door of the house. "Will you play with us Dad?"

Milly's voice could be heard saying, "Oh course I will. You can't keep me away from a good kick-about."

Milly's lanky figure could now be seen bounding over to his two sons and their friend; his ex-son. "What are the teams then?" he asked them.

"I'll go with you," Little Toff instructed.

"Okay sonny, let's kick some furry rear."

Then the four bears each picked up a stick from the lawn and two were poked into the lawn at each end of the garden as goals. Milly and Little Toff then put their heads together to discuss team tactics and Lenny and Big Toff did likewise.

"Now are we ready to start?" asked Milly, eager to begin. Although a grown bear he was a big kid inside.

Unfortunately for him Metro, who had been nodding off, had woken at the sound of Milly talking to his precious Lenny. Scrambling to his wearisome feet (the sun had made him a little drowsy) he shouted down to his son:

"Lenny, what have I told you about playing with the traitor?"

Dropping the tennis ball in a dramatic fashion Milly turned and shouted up at him, "What did you say?"

Metro turned away, sticking his nose into the air.

"Right." Rubbing his hands together Milly marched towards the drainpipe that led up to the roof.

"Daddy, where are you going?" Little Toff called after him.

"I'm just going to have a little chat with Metro." A little chat? Who was he kidding?

"Oh alright then." How gullible was he?

Satisfied with Milly's explanation Little Toff passed the ball to Big Toff and a little game began.

I found myself wriggling with nervous excitement on my shelf as the sound of Milly's paws climbing the drain pipe drew ever closer. I knew we were in for a good old fashioned punch up. Unfortunately for them, the sunbathing bears were going to miss out on the spectacle as they were all asleep.

Milly's head and arms appeared over the top of the roof as he tried to paw his way up. I noticed that Metro's fur had started to shiver.

"I assure you that violence is not called for."

Milly, who had now climbed onto the roof and was marching towards Metro purposefully, shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Really?" Lashing out with his right paw he punched Metro on his nose, knocking him back onto the tiles. "That's a shame."

Metro jumped up, brushing imaginary dirt off his rear. "Now look what you've done. You've dirtied my bottom." Well they're only the same tiles you've been lying on all afternoon, you hypercritical wotsit.

Seeing the punch the three bears below cried out and dashed towards the drainpipe; desperate to intervene.

"Well I don't like being called a traitor," Milly told him. "I still play with Lenny, for goodness sake and all I did was turn away a bear who wasn't my son."

"Well I still think it's despicable."

"Right!" Anger almost visibly boiled through Milly's stuffing and he pounced on Metro, knocking him back onto the tiles once again. Fur flew as they scuffled on the roof tiles.

There were desperate cries of "Get off him," and "Leave him Dad," as Little Toff, Big Toff and Lenny

sprinted up the roof towards the kafuffle. Milly bellowed expletives at Metro while battering his paws against his fur and through the din Metro could be heard screeching girlishly. Due to all this noise the sunbathing bears, curious as to what was happening, began to stir, just as the three bears who had sprinted up the roof in a over dramatic superhero fashion, yanked Milly away from Metro; who was flapping his arms and legs wildly as if trying to shoo away a wasp.

Dusting himself down, Metro gingerly stood up, testing that his soft legs would still hold his weight, whilst peering down his nose at Milly who was struggling violently with his two sons and one ex-son.

"I don't know how you have the stitching to talk!" Milly bawled at him. "You abandoned your own fur and stuffing. He didn't know who his real Dad was for six years. You cleared off and let him be brought up by strangers."

"Well you're certainly strange," Metro quietly uttered under his breath, but loudly enough for Milly to hear.

Milly made another lunge at him but was restrained by Big Toff, Little Toff and Lenny who had joined hands in order to make a restraining circle around him. "You're not fit to look after an ant, let alone a bear!"

"Just leave him Dad," Big Toff told him sternly. "He's not worth it." What a role reversal, I thought. The son having to restrain his Dad.

"That's my Dad you're talking about," Lenny argued.

"Some Dad," Big Toff retorted.

Meanwhile Jean had now risen and after glancing blankly about, at first puzzled by the events in front

of her, she moved over to Metro and whispered softly in his ear, "Don't provoke him. Just walk away."

Metro now turned to face her and I saw, like Jean did, that tears had started to run from Metro's eyes, soaking into his fur as they dripped down his body.

"It's... just what he said..." he blubbered, before running past Jean into the bedroom, climbing down onto the bed before jumping onto the carpet and rushing blindly onto the landing; clutching his sobbing face which was emitting curious noises. Oh how dramatic! Did he think he was auditioning for a soap or something? (Not that I watch the soaps, I never move from my shelf, but I have heard bears discussing the atrocious acting and whether so and so will get together with so and so and who shot so and so).

Back on the roof, Milly had changed his role from instigator to referee. Big Toff and Lenny had gone for each other and Milly was now grabbing onto Big Toff who was trying to wriggle free whilst growling at Lenny. Little Toff was restraining the latter who was desperately trying to get a chunk of his "friend's" fur.

By now all the sunbathers had awoken, except Tommy and Toby who were cutely lying on the tiles in a deep sleep.

Chester, disgusted by the melee, was tutting under his breath and muttering about "the youth of today", choosing to ignore the fact that he too was only fairly young.

His mother nodded her agreement before excusing herself explaining that she felt she ought to go after Metro as "he was very upset." My beak!

Santa and Penny, very much the good Samaritans as always, had gone over to the debacle and were trying to placate the fighting friends. Whilst John,

Samantha and Catherine unhelpfully chanted; "Fight! Fight! Fight!" until Chester intervened.

"Really Catherine I don't think you ought to participate in those sorts of activities."

"Oh shut up." But her reply had been playful and she did indeed stop chanting. Ah. It was love.

However John and Samantha who - if Santa and Penny were the St. Bernards - were much more German Shepherds, continued to chant until they looked round and rather embarrassedly realised they were on their own and stopped; but not before one last chant of "Fight!"

As the scuffle began to simmer down, Big Toff and Lenny had been soothed by the reasonable and neutral words of Santa and Penny, I turned my attention back to the scene on the landing. Jean was doing her best to cheer up Metro but unfortunately as Metro had stormed onto the landing they were both out of my viewpoint and due to the commotion on the roof I could only catch fragments of their conversation. Why did Metro and Jean's conversations always seem to be done secretly?

"Now, now, don't cry..." "... but he called me a bad father." "... mean it. He was just a bit..." "No. No... I've made a mess of everything." "It's alright. You haven't. But if it's upsetting you... if you want." "No. No. I couldn't bear..." Was that meant to be a pun? Unfortunately I couldn't hear clearly what he couldn't bear and as I tried to decipher the babble of noise I noticed that Jean and Metro had now come back into the bedroom and I hastily glanced away; feigning an interest in a dirty mark on the ceiling.

Metro had wiped away his tears and he looked more cheerful but the tears that had soaked into his fur still glistened in the sunlight which filtered

through the window. Suddenly the sunlight was blocked and the shadow of John stood in the frame of the open window.

"You've cheered him up a bit I see."

"Oh yes. Jean's a real angel."

John stepped off the window sill and onto the bed, looking nervously over his shoulder to see whether his wife was watching. She wasn't and he hesitantly asked Metro:

"May I have a few words with Jean; in private please?"

"Oh be my guest." He turned to Jean and thanked her for her kindness before giving her a formal peck on the cheek. Then he went back onto the roof where Round 2 of the boxing match between Lenny and Big Toff was just starting. It was 6-8 to Big Toff after the first round as I had tapped the shelf with my wing every time a point had been scored. How sad am I!

"Well? What do you want?" Jean asked of John, climbing down off the bed and moving towards the landing.

"I just can't go on anymore. The lying and deceiving is getting too much..." His voice trailed away as they disappeared onto the landing. Although the bears hardly ever bothered with me they must subconsciously have remembered that I was there as Jean had moved instinctively towards the landing, both times that privacy had been called for. I was slightly offended by this as everything I saw and heard I kept to myself. Discretion was my middle name; along with a few others...

This time no odd words floated out to me and bored with trying to decipher the low purr of voices I turned back to the roof where the match was now

level at 9-9 (I had been keeping an eye on the match whilst watching events in the room).

Unfortunately the fight came to a premature end when Metro, after seeing what was happening between Lenny and Big Toff dashed over to the fight and pulled a wild Lenny away from a battered Big Toff. Big Toff had then screamed and made a lunge for the pair before being restrained by his “responsible” father who had started it all.

“I told you not to get involved with that family; they mean trouble,” Metro told his son as he ushered him towards the sunbathers. “You just stay here with Daddy.”

Milly, who had calmed down slightly, did not react to Metro’s antagonistic comments and instead moved his son away from them saying that they didn’t want to be near the pair of “yellow idiots.”

“But he’s my friend.”

Sitting down on the tiles Milly cast his long arm around his son’s shoulders and thrust him close to his warm fur. “It’s alright Big Toff. It’s alright. You don’t need him. You’ve got me, Little Toff and Mummy. We’re all the family you need.”

Big Toff smiled and cuddled close to his Daddy. Little Toff, who was standing a few feet away from the pair, turned to Milly and asked in his cutest voice:

“Is football still on?”

CHAPTER 3

Night had come. The sun had fallen behind the trees and now the only light in the room were the pink glows from Lucy's bedside lamp with its pink shade and the main light which dangled from the ceiling; also with a pink shade. But outside it was very different.

The night sky was clear so the moon and its surrounding stars twinkled in the sky giving the roof top a whitish glow; as if it was lit by a spotlight. All but two of the bears had left the roof and had gone downstairs to watch the TV. I could hear the rather noisy theme tune of a programme blasting through the floor beneath me. I just kept praying that the neighbours wouldn't hear or the next thing we'd know the Partridge's would be back home after receiving a phone call saying a burglar had got in to their house and was watching TV with the volume full blast.

Catherine and Chester sat on the tiles, holding hands and staring up at the night sky. Ah! How romantic!

"This is blooming nice, isn't it?" Catherine blurted out.

"It is indeed very peaceful and romantic, yes."

Chester hesitated, was about to speak but Catherine, oblivious to this, jumped in first.

"It's warm for this time of night, isn't it? You'd expect it to be a bit nippy."

Chester was dismissive. "Well it is summer, darling." I could see that he desperately wanted to change the subject to something far more serious. "Catherine?"

"I'm here."

"May I ask you something?"

"Fire away."

Chester's paw felt inside the window and fumbled about behind the vase of flowers on the window sill.

"What are you doing Chester?"

Chester remained silent but he now found what he was looking for and his paw brought out a ring. (Well I say a ring it was a strip of cardboard folded over and glued together with a ball of silver foil stuck on top of it). The foil glittered mysteriously in the moonlight as Chester took Catherine's paw in his and fitted the ring onto it. Catherine stood still in bewilderment.

Chester dropped onto his knee and asked. "Will you marry me?" I felt a tingle through my body. What a lovely moment!

Catherine, so shocked by it all, flopped back onto the roof. Chester rushed to her side.

"Catherine are you alright?"

"Yes," she answered opening her eyes.

"Oh good."

"No not that. Yes I'll marry you."

Oh yes! Another wedding was on the cards! I loved a good wedding. I felt a warm sensation running through my wings. Chester and Catherine were made for each other. Well... maybe not. But they do say opposites attract!

It was now Chester's turn to be emotional. "You will?" he asked, tears of joy running down his fur.

Getting up off the tiles she replied; "Of course I will you silly beggar."

They laughed with joy and ran forward and hugged each other. I saw Catherine's face over Chester's shoulder and even she had now shed a tear. I had never seen Catherine cry before; she had always

appeared so tough and unemotional but every bear had a soft side and it had been a lovely moment.

After a few minutes they let go of one another and Chester spoke. "We must get everyone together and tell them the good news."

"If you insist, Chester dearest."

Without another word, Chester bounded into the bedroom, leapt off the windowsill and jumped off the bed. He bounded over to the door and met Pete, who was moping about in the entrance to the bedroom.

"You seem happy, Chester."

"Well I've just had a bit of marvellous news. I'm going to make an announcement in here in about 15 minutes. Where is everyone? I want everyone to be here."

"They're all downstairs watching TV."

"How come you're up here then? I know how much you love a good western."

"That's the flipping point. There's a corker of a western on Channel 4 and I wanted to see that but oh no! Samantha and everyone else wanted to see some silly murder mystery. So I was out voted."

It interested me how Pete always saw Samantha as the ring leader of everything. I mean fair enough, most of the time she probably was but from what he'd just said she wasn't the only one who'd wanted to see the murder mystery.

I sighed as I realised that I'd have to put up with hearing them going on about the murder mystery for days afterwards as the bears never seemed to understand them and there was always an argument about who had actually done it. It intrigued me why the bears liked whodunits so much because they could never actually understand who had done it. Just another peculiarity of the bears.

“Thanks. I’ll go and tell them now.”

“They’re not going to be pleased. They won’t want to leave the programme. They don’t like not knowing who did it.” Joke. That happened every episode.

“Well they have no choice. It’s very important.”

Suddenly I had a bad feeling about this gathering. Putting all the bears in one room meant that the bears who normally tried to avoid or ignore one another, wouldn’t be able to and with all the tensions and differences between them that could only mean one thing. Trouble.

CHAPTER 4

Unfortunately I was right.

Chester had come back into the room with all the bears traipsing reluctantly behind him. They were all moaning about having to miss their murder mystery programme.

"Blooming typical," Samantha moaned. "I understood tonight's."

"Yes but it had only just started," John told her.

"This had better be good," Mickey warned Chester.

"Oh it is father. It is."

"Ooa Chester. Don't keep us on tenterhooks," Jean instructed him.

"I just want everyone to be here first mother. I don't want anyone to miss out on the marvellous news." There was no chance of that. Gossip spread like wildfire round the bedroom. If he'd just told one person everyone would have known by the end of the day.

Milly and Corny entered the room, Milly's voice booming out over everyone else's. "It was just getting good and all."

"There'll be repeats," Corny reassured him.

"Yeah, but repeats aren't the same."

"But tonight wasn't the first time it had been shown. In the TV guide on the coffee table there was a paragraph summing up the episode and underneath it there was a big R."

"That might have meant... rubbish."

"Then what do you want to see it for," Corny argued. This retort silenced Milly who couldn't think of anything to say. A novelty!

All the bears had now piled into the room, still tutting and moaning and under Chester's instructions

had seated themselves on the carpet. Chester then made his way up onto the bed where Catherine was already standing. She had inconspicuously (if that was possible of Catherine) placed her left arm behind her back so no-one would see her ring until after Chester's announcement.

Chester called for quiet and then when everyone was silent he told them; "Catherine and I have an announcement to make."

"I think we've established that," Milly shouted out. "Can you hurry up with it please?"

"Catherine and I are getting married."

There was a few moments quiet in which even loudmouths like Samantha and Milly were stunned into silence. And then the cheers and celebrations began. Metro was the first to climb up the bed, to shake Chester's hand and to congratulate him. Penny and Santa followed. Penny hugged Catherine and became very emotional, whilst Santa shook Chester's hand.

Mickey, Jean and Harry stood still; contemplating this information about their beloved Chester. Tommy, who was sleeping in Jean's arms, suddenly burst out crying. Oh so he knew what was happening then. After considering it for a few minutes they too climbed up the bed and went over to Chester.

He was then embraced by his father who congratulated him. "Good on you Chester. You'll be as happy as you deserve to be." Tears had started to flow down his face and he let go of Chester to wipe them away. Jean then ran over to her son, already crying and her arms wide open. Was Catherine really that bad? Everyone was crying. Even Harry, who had stood back, not liking to intrude had a few tears dripping from his eyes.

"Oh Chester," Jean cried. "I waited for this moment for years and years. I've always wanted you to be happy."

As Chester hugged his mother, the tears of each of them running down the other's back, Samantha was giving her friend Catherine a hug, also.

"Don't get letting him change you," she whispered in Catherine's ear. "I don't want you coming out with phrases like "Absolutely spiffing" and "Jolly good."

Catherine giggled before reassuring Samantha that she wouldn't. They then released each other and wiped their tears away. John, who had been standing behind the pair holding Toby, now handed Toby back to Samantha, congratulated Catherine and then hugged her.

"Oi. Not too close." Samantha warned them.

Meanwhile Chester had gone over to his Harry, who he didn't want to feel left out and knew he was too shy to come forward himself.

"Congratulations Chester. I'm really proud of you." They shook hands; symbolic of how close they weren't. And then Harry turned away; not wanting Chester to see the tears in his eyes.

Having congratulated Chester, Jean then moved over to Catherine, who was now showing her ring off to Penny and Samantha. Seeing Jean, Catherine excused herself and went to hug Jean. As she hugged I could just about hear Jean mutter in Catherine's ear:

"You look after him."

"I won't let him do anything I wouldn't do."

I could see that Jean wasn't entirely reassured by this.

Suddenly Chester clapped his hands together and called for quiet once more.

"To celebrate my engagement to Catherine there will now be a little party, which, like the wedding, you are all invited."

A huge cheer went up and Chester leapt off the bed, dashed across the floor, ran up the dressing table and pressed 'Play' on the Lucy's CD player which sat on the floor next to the dressing table.

Music began to play and all the bears on the floor began to jig to the music; their missed programme forgotten. To create the proper disco effect, Chester jumped from the dressing table and flicked the light switch on the wall off, so they were just dancing in the pink glow of Lucy's bedside lamp.

Chester joined in with the partying, temporarily forgetting his usual pompous air. The bears on the bed climbed down and also began to dance.

Luckily the music wasn't too loud and bears could still talk to one another as they danced but I struggled to hear what they were saying; what with the music and the fact that they were all talking at once.

Santa moved over to Chester and I think he asked him when the wedding was going to be. Chester replied, "We haven't decided yet. I only proposed twenty minutes ago."

"You want to have it in the next week," Santa suggested. "If you leave it until the Partridges return home then it'll be difficult to actually plan it in advance as you won't know when they're going out and how long they'll be gone for."

I thought back to Milly and Corny's wedding where everyone had jumped at the slightest noise, worried that the Partridge's had returned and the mad dash to clear everything away when they did return.

"That's a very good idea. Thank you." Chester then moved away, towards his fiancée. "Catherine! Catherine!" he called to her. "Santa's just come up with them most marvellous suggestion..."

Purely by chance Lenny and Big Toff had come to dance by one another. At first there was awkwardness as they both purposely avoided making eye contact. After a few minutes of looking away from each other they both relented and looked hard into the other's eyes. And then the hard stare softened and they smiled sweetly, before running forward and giving the other one a big bear hug.

"I'm sorry," Big Toff blubbered; tears in his eyes.

"Me too," spluttered Lenny, his tears running down Big Toff's back.

"Let's never fall out because of our parents again."

"Agreed."

They let go of each other and shook hands in a very grown up fashion. This had happened hundreds of times before. Their parents had argued or scrapped (usually the latter) they had sided with their parents and had fallen out. Afterwards they had made up, like they were doing now and had vowed never to fall out again. So unfortunately I didn't think this would be their last fall out, but I feared that there would be a fall out that would split them for good.

"Before they get back on holiday?" Catherine's voice boomed out above the music. "But what about all the preparing? We'll never be able to organise everything in under a week. I don't want some naff little ceremony, thrown together at the last minute."

"It won't be Catherine darling," Chester reassured her. "It'll be the best wedding this house has ever seen. It just means a lot of hard work between now and..." the music drowned him out.

"Well..." Catherine was still unsure. "If we've got any chance we'll have to start making decisions now, like who's going to be best bear and bridesmaids and things like that."

"Well that's easy." Chester turned dramatically to Metro. "Metro, would you do me the honour of being best bear?"

"Me?" he asked incredulous. Well who else is called Metro, you clown!

"Yes."

Metro stood stock still for a few seconds; awestruck, before replying. "I'd love to. Thank you." Chester and Metro shook hands.

"There's no time for that," Catherine interrupted the formalities. "You need to be thinking about your speech," she told him ushering him away.

"But the party..." he argued.

"There'll be another one after the wedding. Hurry up."

Metro was about to retort but instead turned on his heel and headed for the landing. But before he reached the landing Lenny had dashed up behind him and tugged his arm.

"Daddy, Daddy. Do I have to stay here now? They've made the announcement."

"No I don't suppose you do but where is it you want to go?"

"I'm going to go and play with Big Toff on the PlayStation."

"Big Toff? Now what have I told you about playing with riff raff." Milly's ears pricked up. "You saw what happened earlier."

Milly, who had been standing with Corny, marched purposefully towards Metro, shouting above the music:

"What did you just call us?"

Seeing what was happening Corny shouted after her husband:

"Milly don't get causing trouble!"

"Oh so you know when you're being talked about," Metro replied patronisingly.

"Right!" Milly charged forward at Metro but Mickey and John who had been dancing near to Metro spotted the danger, grabbed Milly and dragged him kicking and screaming away

"Milly," Corny admonished him, by shouting across the room. "This is meant to be a party."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry." He stopped struggling and Mickey and John loosened their grip on him.

But Mickey wasn't about to let his brother go just yet. Instead he growled in his ear, (just audible above the music) "This is my son's engagement party; your nephew's. One more sign of trouble and you'll be out on the landing. Understand?"

"Yes. Sorry."

Mickey and John released him and an embarrassed Milly danced back to his wife, who was shaking her head at him. "You always have to go and make a scene, don't you?"

Meanwhile Catherine, who had seemed oblivious to the ructions just a few feet away from her, was in hyper organising mode. She turned to Penny.

"Right you can be a bridesmaid."

Penny suddenly became a little emotional (no that wasn't quite fair, she'd been emotional since the announcement). "Really?" she asked.

"Yes."

Crying, Penny spread out her arms and ran towards Catherine to hug her. But Catherine held out her paw to block her. "No time for that."

Penny turned away; a little dejected.

"Samantha, you can be one as well," Catherine instructed.

"Oh I'd love to." Samantha also went to hug her but Catherine pushed her away, saying:

"Let's not waste time."

"Sorry for breathing you little madam," muttered Samantha. Though the music was loud so the last word was debatable, but you get the gist.

"Jean, would you like to be the final bridesmaid?"

"Yes love to." After seeing that Catherine didn't have time for hugs Jean turned away and moved back to where Mickey was dancing. But this time Catherine had her arms wide open and murmured under her breath something along the lines of:

"Up yours you little snoot!"

By now Metro had left the room and was out of sight on the landing; presumably thinking up his best bear speech. I was already looking forward to that. Knowing Metro it probably wouldn't be intentionally funny but his pompousness would make it hilarious. Big Toff and Lenny had made the most of this and had nipped out of the bedroom window, probably with the intention of climbing down the drainpipe and entering the playroom (where the PlayStation was situated) via the patio door. That way they would be unobserved by Metro who was sitting on the landing.

The CD in the CD Player changed track and I instantly recognised it as the catchy one that I liked (the name always escaped me). But just as the tune was getting going a loud screaming interrupted the music. Typical. I noticed that George, who was being cradled by Santa, had suddenly burst out crying. Santa gently rocked him backwards and forwards

and murmured soothing sounds but it was no good. And then to make matters worse, Tommy and Toby, who had been sleeping in the corner, inspired by George suddenly burst out screaming as well. It was like a flipping choir!

As Jean and Samantha rushed over to their crying babies while their husbands continued dancing to the drowned out music, Santa called to Penny:

"I'm going to take him outside." Well thank God for that! "I don't think he likes the music." You can't hear the blooming music!

"Okay then."

So Santa went onto the roof with George and Samantha and Jean tried to cradle their young ones back to sleep. And not long after the crying subsided - just as the track ended. Typical!

Though I wasn't the only one the noise was getting to. Milly had suddenly clutched his head; complaining of a headache.

"It's all this rowdy music," he told Corny. "I'm just going onto the landing for a bit of peace."

Corny murmured her consent and he went onto the landing. I thought it a little suspicious how suddenly his headache had come on.

Meanwhile Jean had managed to lull Tommy to sleep but Toby was bawling louder than ever. Samantha, who was rocking Toby backwards and forwards like there was no tomorrow whilst making cooing noises, desperately looked around for her husband John, who appeared to have vanished.

"How come he always clears off when I need him?"

Pete, her troublesome father-in-law, just happened to be dancing near a foot away.

"Having trouble coping on your own?"

Samantha pretended that she hadn't heard and instead continued cooing louder. But Pete wasn't finished.

"I've always said you weren't a fit mother. You rely on my poor John too much."

Samantha had tried to ignore him. She had tried to keep her cool. Unfortunately it had only lasted for 7 seconds. Laying the screaming Toby on the floor her heavy legs stormed over the carpet towards Pete.

"Right you old wrinkly! You've been asking for this!" she shouted threateningly at him, raising her paw ready to strike.

Luckily Jean, who had just been making her way back to her hubby Mickey after settling Tommy, spotted the impending violence and she grabbed Samantha's raised left arm in restraint. Samantha halted for a moment, unsure why her arm wouldn't move, then when she realised that Jean was restraining her she lashed out with her free arm.

Jean screamed as she was knocked back onto the carpet. Hearing the scream, Mickey, playing the hero, dived across the room and flattened his wife's attacker onto the carpet.

Penny who had been near to Jean dashed over to her to make sure she was alright. All the bears, who had been madly dancing trying to impress one another, started to gather around Jean once they realised that she had been hit.

Pete walked over to Samantha, who had started to wriggle under Mickey's grip whilst shouting "Let me go", and spoke down to her in a patronising tone.

"That's what you get when you lose your temper." Then he strutted away; a sly smile on his face.

Samantha growled and shouted after him, "I'm going to get you!" before trying to look up at Mickey and demanding, "Let me go!"

"Not until you've calmed down. I'm not going to have bears assaulting my wife like that. Especially bears who are suppose to be her friends."

"I'll calm down when I haven't got some moron sitting on top of me."

Jean, still clutching her face, had, under Penny's guidance and comforting paw, tried to sit up. Her concerned sons Chester and Harry were at her side. They had had to struggle to get close to her as all the bears had crowded around her; all except Little Toff that was, who still continued to strut his funky stuff in the centre of the makeshift dance floor.

Harry had thrust his cute face close to his mother's and asked in his low voice:

"Are you alright Mummy?"

"I'm fine dear," she reassured him, placing her soft arm around his shoulders.

"That woman is a maniac," commented Chester.

"Oh she's alright really," argued Jean. "She just has a slight temper problem." A *slight* temper problem? My orange fur!

Samantha's protests had subsided to hushed curses, which I was unable to hear because of the music, and Mickey relented and released her. She jumped up and brushed herself down, trying to restore her pride at being restrained that easily.

But Mickey wasn't finished yet. He pointed his paw in her face. "Anymore trouble from you and I'll recommend to Catherine that she doesn't have you as one of her bridesmaids." What I wanted to know was who had hired Mickey as the security guard for the party?

His warning delivered, Mickey hurried over to his still horizontal wife. Luckily he didn't look back so he missed the face that Samantha made at him.

A few minutes later Jean had been helped to her feet and the party could continue. Although the music still droned on a certain peace had been re-established as Toby had stopped crying and Catherine, who had been monotonously blabbering on about the wedding had temporarily vanished.

It had intrigued me why everyone had been so keen to help Jean to her feet and had been so quick to offer her a helping paw. It wasn't as if she'd hurt her leg! She'd been whacked in the face for Flip's sake! Those bears just never ceased to amaze me.

But now she was up Mickey, Chester and Harry had stuck to her like magnets, determined that nothing else should happen to her. But apparently it was making her a little claustrophobic. "I'm just going outside for a walk. On my own," she added.

"Be carefully Mummy," Harry pathetically called after her.

Jean turned back, shouted over the music that she would and then disappeared out of the window. Once she had, I saw that Mickey had turned to look up at me. This was the moment he was going to follow his wife. Mickey then broke off his stare and started to climb up the bed.

I took this time to wonder who Jean was having an affair with. Although I hadn't said it to Mickey I had suspected as well that she had been having an affair but I wasn't sure who with. Maybe my powers of observation were slipping in my old age. Milly, Metro, Santa, John were all out of the room so it could be any of them. Big Toff and Lenny were also absent

from the room, but surely not? All would be revealed in a few minutes.

I also considered whether Mickey and Jean's marriage would survive this discovery. Jean had cheated on Mickey once before, with his brother Milly of all bears. That had naturally caused quite a lot of heartache. Chester and Harry, who had both been a lot younger then, were in tears and so had Big Toff, Little Toff and Lenny (who had still been Milly's son at that point) when they had found out. Milly and Corny's marriage had only just survived and so had Mickey and Jean's. There had been a lot of tension between the two brothers, which had lasted for a long time afterwards and Jean had promised that it would never happen again. I'm not sure if that was referring to having an affair or just having an affair with Milly! If the former then she had apparently broken that promise. Though she might have broken the promise which ever way you looked at it if the affair was with Milly. But surely they wouldn't both be that stupid again?

The moment of truth was nearly with us as Mickey's paws gripped the window sill and hauled his body up. He stood and looked out of the window...

What could he see?

"Father, could you spare a moment please?" Chester called up to him.

"Not right now son. I'm in the middle of something important," replied Mickey pushing his face against the glass and peering out into the darkness.

Chester was a little puzzled. "But Father you're looking out of window. I need to discuss your speech with you."

"Yeah I'll do it later."

"No now father please. Catherine's getting a little agitated. She wants all the speeches done before we go to bed tonight."

With a sigh Mickey turned away from the window. "Oh alright I'm coming."

Mickey was destined not to find out who Jean was meeting in the garden. For the moment anyhow...

CHAPTER 5

Everyone had returned. Everyone except Metro and Lenny and Big Toff (so maybe everyone wasn't quite correct). Metro was presumably still composing his speech whilst Big Toff and Lenny were presumably still playing on the PlayStation.

Jean had returned some twenty minutes ago and had been a little curious as to her husband's questions about what she had been doing in the garden.

"There really isn't that much one can do in the garden, Mickey. I just took a little walk around and admired the flower beds." Well as long as she wasn't jumping into them there wasn't a problem. "The shrubbery is so colourful at this time of year."

Mickey pretended to be satisfied by this explanation but his little glance up at me told me that he wasn't.

The second CD was coming to an end. In fact so was the party. It had been going on for a good while and the bears had become tiresome. The first CD had been lively but the tracks on the second were a lot slower and lacked tempo. This reflected the mood of the bears quite well although for the bears who were determined to dance right until the end, it made it more difficult to keep going to slow songs. But most of the bears were now either lying on the floor or slumped up against the wall or the door of Lucy's wardrobe.

I couldn't resist a smile as I saw Little Toff still sliding madly about the dance floor; shaking his furry bottom about. Catherine had kept going as well. Going and going and going in fact. Dancing had been abandoned a while back in favour of sitting in a

corner with Samantha and Penny boring the stuffing out of them about the impending wedding.

Once Jean had returned from her walk it hadn't taken long before she had called her over in order to have her complete set of bridesmaids with her.

"Now tomorrow we'll need to raid the wardrobes and discuss what we're all going to wear. And we'll need to draw up a seating plan for the wedding. I mean we need to keep certain bears apart. Milly and Metro are a no no. In fact finding anyone who wants to sit next to Metro might be difficult. Oh but I'm being silly." You said it! "He's the best bear, isn't he? So he'll sit next to Chester." And so it went on. Penny, Jean and Samantha didn't try to interrupt her they just let her drone on; nodding or murmuring agreement at suitable points.

Chester, meanwhile, was sitting up against the wardrobe door next to Mickey discussing his speech.

"'I'm very proud of you' is just so common," Chester informed his father. "Catherine wants this to be a wedding no-one will ever forget so we want it to be different to other weddings."

"So what do you want me to say?"

"Well that's up to you."

"It doesn't sound as if it is," muttered Mickey but Chester didn't hear.

"Just be creative," Chester added.

"How about 'I couldn't have hoped for him to have married a nicer bear'?"

"It's so clichéd Father." Chester glanced at the clock on Lucy's bedside cabinet. "Where has Metro got to?"

Just at that moment, Metro strutted into the room waving a piece of tatty paper.

"Oh Metro there you are," Chester greeted him. "How's your speech coming along?"

"Shall I read it to you?"

"Oh yes please do. That would be spiffing."

Metro gave a little nervous cough before reading from the bit of scrap paper in his paw. "Female bears and male bears. Male bears and female bears. We are gathered here today to celebrate the marriage of Chester and Catherine."

Chester interrupted. "Metro you're the best bear not the vicar."

"Yes I know it's just the opening."

"Alright. Go on."

"No that's all I've done."

"All you've done? You've been gone over an hour."

"Well it's very difficult to know how to phrase things. And I don't like pressure."

"Three lines in an hour and a half isn't what I'd call pressure!"

"Well when one is trying one's hardest I think it's a bit much to criticise one."

Chester realised that he didn't want to lose his best bear on the first day and relented. "Yes I'm sorry I shouldn't have snapped. But we do need a substantial speech by the end of next week."

"And you'll have one."

Back on the dance floor Milly and Corny were smooching to the slow romantic track that was playing. Ah! Who said romance was dead?

"Corny, I'm sorry about before. I should never have accused you of having an affair with Santa."

"And so you should be. I know I haven't always been faithful but I thought we'd put that behind us. And I'm not the only one who's cheated and I've managed to trust you again. But if you can't trust me then how can we go on? I can't have what I've done in the past influencing the way you treat me now. If I

did that with you then I'd never let you near Jean for fear that you might stray again. I can't have you thinking every time my paw brushes against a bear's backside that I'm having an affair just because I've cheated in the past." God, that needed a deep breath!

"So you're planning on touching other bear's bottoms?"

Corny returned his question with a stern look.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Milly hastily apologised. "Of course your paw will brush against a bottom every now an then." Under his breath I could just about hear him mutter, "I can make the most of this. Where's Jean gone?"

Luckily Corny didn't hear. And although the current track was quieter than the tracks at the start of the party, I wouldn't have heard him either if it hadn't been for my super refined hearing. Not that I'm boasting or anything!

"I was just being very silly Corny dear." Milly added; "Santa just isn't the type to have to have an affair."

I saw Milly cringe as soon as the words had left his mouth. It hadn't come out quite how he'd wanted it to. Corny turned on him with a fiery expression.

"Oh so I'm enough of a slapper to have a fling but Saint Santa isn't?"

"Corny. Corny. That came out all wrong."

Corny broke free of her husband, who had had his arms around her shoulders as they had glided around the dance floor (well carpet to be more precise).

"No that's the problem Milly. It didn't. You said exactly what you felt."

"Corny come back!" he called after her as she stormed away. After mounting the bed and climbing onto the windowsill she stomped out onto the roof.

Dejectedly Milly plopped himself down in the middle of the floor. Ah, that was a shame. With such a graceful, paw perfect quickstep, they should have at least kept dancing until the end of the track!

A pair of dancers tripped up Milly who was sitting in an awkward position and he shouted at them; waving his paws madly. I would hate to repeat his exact words but although they were a pair of dancers it was a pair of something else that Milly referred to them as.

He wasn't really angry at the innocent dancing bears but he was taking out his anger, at himself for what he had said to Corny, on them.

Laughing and giggling Lenny and Big Toff now returned.

Metro, who was still in a animated discussion with Chester about his best bear speech (they had been discussing whether 'Corny's' had an apostrophe, which seemed really silly to me as his speech was going to be spoken not read- but that's the bears for you), now turned and saw his son.

"I thought I specifically indicated that you weren't to play with *him*."

Luckily Milly didn't seem to have noticed the venom with which Metro had put into his last word; he was concentrating too hard on being miserable. If he had heard then we would have been in for a hell of a fight as Milly wasn't in a mood to be messed with. Metro could have ended up being on the end of his anger, just like the dancers had.

"There's nothing wrong with him Daddy. He's my only friend," pleaded Lenny; a tear in his eye.

"Very well but ask my permission next time." Yes but he had and you'd told him where to get off!

Big Toff had now moved away from his friend and had gone over towards his father. "Are you alright Dad?"

"Yeah I'm fine."

"Well you don't look it."

"Oh that's a charming way to speak to your old Dad." Big Toff didn't reply and Milly began fidgeting with the fur on his leg, before relenting. "Oh if you must know I've had a minor difference of opinion with your mother. I've spent 14 years trying to understand Corny but I'm still no closer." Now you might be wondering how they can have been married for 15 years when Lucy was only 11. Well the truth was that Milly and Corny had originally belonged to Lucy's mother but when Lucy had been about four she had taken a shine to them and claimed them as hers. This was the case with lots of the bears so some of Lucy's bears had married and given birth before she was born. This was why some of the bear's children (Chester and Big Toff for example) were older than Lucy.

"Anyway you should know what I'm talking about. You should have found yourself a female bear friend by now. When I was your age I'd already been engaged three times and had I don't know how many practises." Milly's attention was caught by something on the other side of the dance floor. "I mean look at Lenny."

Across the dance floor, Lenny had been asked to dance by a young female bear - who was possibly attractive, but I'm a crow so I don't know what turns bears on (I don't think I want to either!) - and he certainly hadn't said no! Now they glided romantically about the floor; their faces close.

Big Toff was hesitant. "Well actually Daddy there is someone who's caught my eye."

"Go for it son. There isn't no use in standing around. It's better to say, 'I tried but she didn't want to know rather than 'I thought about it but some swine nipped in first.'"

"Yes but Daddy, there's a minor complication."

"That makes no difference. If you're really keen then no obstacle is too big."

"She's married to your brother!" Big Toff blurted out.

Milly sat very still trying to take this in. Then after a long pause he asked, flabbergasted:

"Jean?"

"Well how many brothers have you got?" Surely it was more a case of how many wives did he have, but ignore my little cynicism (ooh hark at me!).

"Right, well you know what I said before? Well wipe that. This obstacle is slightly too big."

"But don't you think I should let her know how I'm feeling. See how she reacts."

Milly was emphatic in his response. "No. No. No. No." Alright steady on. "You should just keep this under your fur. You don't want to go embarrassing yourself."

"But you said it was best to ask and..."

"I know what I said. But well... that doesn't really apply to your married forty year old aunty!"

"But Daddy have you seen her curves?"

"Yes. Yes. I've seen her curves," he remarked, probably remembering his 'encounters' with Jean. "But if you told her how you felt you'd be asking her to cheat on Mickey. And I know she would never do that."

"But she had an affair with you."

"That's why she wouldn't have an affair with you. She's learnt her lesson. She knows the heartache it would cause. That and the fact that you're far too young for her."

"But..."

"Just forget it. Find someone your own age. Jean is a faithful woman now. Don't embarrass yourself son, it wouldn't do anyone any good."

Dejected Big Toff rose and moped away, his head drooped miserably forward.

"What's the matter with him?"

Milly and I turned simultaneously to see that Corny had come back in from the roof and had jumped down off the window sill.

"Oh it's just women trouble," Milly dismissed it, keen to change the subject. "Corny I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"No. I'm sorry. I overreacted."

"No it's my fault. I shouldn't have made you out to be some sort of tart. I'm no angel."

"But I shouldn't have gone off on one."

"No but you were justified."

"No of course I wasn't."

"Let's not fall out again Corny."

"No let's not."

Corny jumped off the bed and into her husband's open arms. He spun her round saying, "I love you Corny. I love you."

What a last few minutes it had been for Milly! He had fallen out with his wife, become depressed and had a bust up with some dancers, learnt that his son fancied his sister-in-law and then made up with his wife. But unbeknownst to him, worse was yet to come...

CHAPTER 6

It was the next day; the early morning sun penetrated through the window and bleached the pink eiderdown. Milly sat next to me on my shelf; fiddling awkwardly with his fur. He had been sitting there for a good few minutes now and I was hoping that he would get on with it. I didn't think he was so stupid as to think that I didn't know what he'd come about so I didn't know why he was hesitating about telling me.

"I think you probably heard what Big Toff told me last night."

"I never comment on anything I have seen or heard so you'd better tell me."

"But you'll still have heard it."

"Yes but that's different," I argued.

"But..."

I interrupted, realising that he had a point. "Just get on with it."

"Big Toff fancies his Auntie Jean," he blurted out before looking expectantly at me. What was I meant to say? "He doesn't!" "Well I never!" It wasn't as if I didn't already know.

"What should I do?"

"What can you do?"

"Oh well thanks for the advice."

"Since when did I become a therapist?"

"Well other bears come up here and you help them."

"I cannot discuss those private conversations but I can tell you that all I do is give them the benefit of my expertise."

"Well go on then," prompted Milly impatiently.

"You want my opinion?"

"God it's like searching on the Internet. Yes I want your opinion."

"Tell Jean."

"Tell her what? That her nephew wants a bit of naughtiness while Mickey isn't looking?"

"Well that's what's bothering you isn't it?"

"Only slightly. Yes of course it is but the point of coming to you was to try to avoid the embarrassment of bears finding out. Especially Jean. So what do you do? Tell me to tell her. Why may I ask?"

"So she can let him down gently."

"But..." "But..." Milly tried desperately to think of an argument to my suggestion but there wasn't one. Some bears were never satisfied with the words of a genius (me that is).

After a few minutes lame reasons began to pour out of Milly's mouth. "But I'd feel such a fool." "Jean would feel insulted." As he droned on I turned my attentions to the activities on the bedroom floor.

Catherine and Penny were madly rummaging about in the wardrobe, searching for suitable items for the wedding. Samantha and Jean, who had been helping them, now found themselves outside the door, taking a breather from Catherine's ranting.

"It's a wedding not the Royal Ascot," she could be heard telling Penny from inside the cupboard.

Samantha turned nervously to Jean, not knowing how to broach the subject. "Jean? I haven't had chance to speak to you since yesterday's regrettable incident." It was unlike Samantha to be so sophisticated.

"You mean when you whacked me in the face?"

"Yes. Well I'd just like you to know that I'm really sorry and I wouldn't like it to come between our friendship."

Jean looked at her with gentle, loving eyes. "Oh Samantha. I know you only did it in the heat of the moment. Come here." Samantha ran forward and Jean embraced her; quite difficult when you considered Samantha's extra inches and pounds.

However bold and brash Samantha always appeared to be, the relief on her face showed that she did have a compassionate side and she did hold her friendships in high regard. Most of the time.

"But I don't think it's me you should be apologising to."

Abruptly Samantha let go of Jean; as if she had suddenly become electronically charged.

"I'm not apologising to him."

"You were vile to him Samantha. You tried to punch him."

"Next time I won't just try."

"Oh there you go again. You don't learn, do you?" Jean almost shouted at her.

"He just gets me so annoyed. Didn't you hear the things he said to me? He called me an unfit mother. Said I rely too much on his darling Johnny. That'll be the day. I'm the one who's always looking after Toby. John's always bogged off somewhere, doing something more important. Just lately he's never around. He just vanishes and doesn't return for hours. So how dare his old wrinkly say that I rely on John?" Samantha's out burst had caused tears to start streaming down her fur. "How... dare... he?" she blubbered.

Jean placed a comforting hand on her friend and they sat themselves down against the wardrobe, ready for a stuffing-to-stuffing. I loved these moments. I knew we were in for some tear jerking stuff.

From inside the wardrobe Catherine's voice called out. "Catherine! Jean! I need you to come and make a choice on my veil." Absolutely typical! She couldn't have chosen a worse moment if she'd wanted to. Now I was going to be deprived my stuffing-to-stuffing. And I couldn't see the point of Catherine asking for Jean and Samantha's opinion anyway. All morning she'd be asking for opinions on wedding 'necessities' but once receiving them had overruled them saying:

"But don't you think this one's much better. I think this one has a lot of advantages..." Well why on earth did you ask them then?

"Just give us a few minutes." Oh good so the tear jerker was back on.

Catherine's head poked out of the wardrobe. "Why what's happening?" Maybe not then.

Jean waved her away. "It's alright Catherine. Samantha's just a little upset, that's all."

"Oh no. She didn't think I should have had the daisy instead of the agapanthus did she?"

"No it's not that."

"Oh. Did she prefer the blue veil to the..."

"Catherine please! It's nothing to do with your outfit."

"I know what it's about. This is because she doesn't want to sit next to Metro. I just thought that my chief bridesmaid should sit next to..."

"Catherine it's nothing to do with your wedding," Jean sternly told her. "Now will you go back in your cupboard?"

Catherine shrunk back into the cupboard calling to Penny, "Do you like my agapanthus? I think Samantha's gone off it."

Suddenly I realised Milly was speaking to me. "So what do you think?" I'd forgotten about him!

“Can’t you see I’m trying to be nosy?”

I turned back to Jean and Samantha. Milly, curious to see what I found so interesting, followed suit. Luckily Jean and Samantha were oblivious to the two pairs of prying eyes on the top shelf and continued their conversation.

“You must have been bottling up all this frustration for some time?” suggested Jean.

“Yeah, I suppose I have. I mean I’ve shouted at him and hit him before now but it doesn’t really help because he always seems to win. John always sides with him and Pete can keep on with his little digs. It’s just so hurtful. I may not be an angel (you’re telling us?) but Toby is my world and when Pete comes along and says I’m not fit to look after him...” She dabbed at her wet eyes with her paws.

“It’s alright. It’s alright,” Jean reassured her.

“He’s just such a horrible bear.”

“I’m afraid I can’t comment because I’ve never had very much to do with him. But whenever I’ve spoken to him he’s always seemed very pleasant.”

“That’s just a front to hide the nastiness underneath his fur. What’s worse than the things he says is that no-one believes me. I’ve given up telling John because he just used to dismiss it saying that his ‘saintly’ father would never do that. My...” bottom. That’s what she said. Honest. Oh alright then, it’s almost what she said. “I don’t know why they can’t see through him. His wife divorced him. Twice! And I don’t know how he dare criticise my parenting skills. For the first 15 years of his life John thought his Dad was some bear called Barry. And even when he came back in his life he didn’t stay around for long. When he came to our wedding ten years ago it was the first time John had seen him in seven years. He was only

meant to stay for two nights before coming back home and he's still here. He didn't like me from the moment he set eyes on me and so he thought he'd better stay around to keep an eye on me. I don't know why I ever agreed to let John invite him."

Jean had wisely not interrupted and had allowed Samantha to unburden herself; but now she spoke. "Maybe he was guilty about not being around for John when he was younger and wanted to makeup for it by being around now. And maybe because he'd let John down he wanted to make sure that he wasn't let down again, by you. Or maybe because he cares so dearly for the son he abandoned, no-one, in his eyes, is good enough for his John. That's probably why he doesn't like you. But he might be more agreeable if you let him have Toby every now and then."

"He doesn't give a damn about Toby."

"I don't think that's fair. I think he wants to be around for his grandson like he wasn't around for his son. And if John supervises he can't do any harm, can he?"

Jean was starting to sound more and more like Trisha. Not that I watch Trisha! No, no! But occasionally I hear her programme booming through the floorboards from the lounge below.

"Well I suppose not but that would be like accepting he's won."

"Not if you show that you hold all the aces. If he's vile to you then he doesn't see Toby. As simple as that."

"I suppose you're right. I should let him see Toby. But on my terms though."

"Of course," smiled Jean, hopeful that she had resolved the long running tensions between Samantha and Pete. But I thought that the smile was

premature. This was Samantha and Pete we were talking about.

"Hi Jean. Hi Samantha," called Santa cheerfully as he strolled into the bedroom.

"Hi Santa," called back Jean and Samantha.

"Where you off to?" asked Jean. How nosy!

"Oh I'm just going for a walk in the garden," replied Santa.

"Where's George?" asked Jean.

"Oh Pete kindly offered to look after him for me." Samantha's ears pricked up. "He said I could do with a rest and that it wouldn't be any trouble because he was already looking after Toby."

Samantha jumped up. "I told John not to let the old dodderer anywhere near him."

"Samantha," Jean warned, "remember what I said."

"I will. When I'm knocking his lights out!"

Jean sighed as Samantha stormed purposefully out of the room.

"I haven't caused any trouble, have I?" asked a concerned Santa.

"No. No," reassured Jean. "It's not your fault."

After saying goodbyes to Jean, Santa made his way out onto the roof. Jean was left standing by the wardrobe; despairing of Samantha.

Suddenly Milly was speaking. "I'll do it. I'll tell Jean." You little hypocrite, I thought as Milly climbed down off the shelves and jumped off the dressing table; without a word of thanks I might add.

His long legs bounded over the carpet towards Jean. "Jean. Jean. There's something rather awkward I need to discuss with you."

"Fire away Milly."

Suddenly Catherine re-emerged from the wardrobe. "Jean, Samantha are you coming back

in...?" Looking round she saw that Samantha was nowhere to be seen. "Where's Samantha gone?"

"She's gone to sort out a personal problem downstairs. And I'll be coming in a minute, before you ask."

Catherine disappeared back into the wardrobe muttering:

"You wouldn't think it was too much to ask. I am getting married next week. Surely personal problems can wait for goodness sake."

"Anyway," began Jean, ignoring Catherine's mutterings, "there was something you needed to say."

"Yes. I won't mess about. I'll just get straight to the point. No point in trying to dress it up or skirting the issue. Might as well just come straight out with it."

"Well go on then."

"Big Toff fancies you."

There was a moment's silence and then Jean burst out laughing. "Is this a wind up?"

"No. No. It's the truth," Milly gravely informed her.

"Oh dear," she laughed. "It seems that he takes after you then."

This made Milly rather awkward. "Well that's all in the past."

"Yes of course it is. But I don't see why you're telling me."

"Well I thought maybe you could let him down gently. He seems to think he's got a chance, you see? I told him that you'd never betray Mickey again but he wasn't having it. He might listen to you though."

Jean seemed a little nervy. Was this the moment that she admitted to having betrayed Mickey again? "Alright... I'll do it." No was the answer to my

question then. "If it makes you happy." I think I know what would make him happy, but we won't go there.

"Thanks Jean." And with that Milly left the room, with a definite spring in his step. He thought that his problem had been solved. But his problems were only just beginning.

On his way out of the room he almost collided with John who was dragging Samantha behind him. "Don't you ever do that to my Dad again Samantha."

"I told you not to give him Toby."

"It was no excuse."

"Well before you did that I was going to consider letting him have more access to Toby."

"Oh course you were."

"Well you can ask Jean if you don't believe me."

John turned to Jean. "Was she?"

"Well she said she was, yes?"

"Okay fair enough but I knew you were busy and I needed to do something so I thought you'd prefer him being with family than just any old bear."

"You've always got something to do," Samantha protested.

But before John could reply, the wardrobe door creaked open and Catherine poked her head out. "Oh there you are Samantha. I need you to come and have a look at this."

"I'll talk to you later," Samantha told John before following the eager Catherine into the cupboard. Talk? Shouldn't that have been argue?

John sighed.

"John may I have a word with you?" asked Jean.

"Yes, of course."

"Jean, are you coming?" called an impatient Catherine, who wanted to be able to dismiss the

opinions of all her bridesmaids before making a decision.

"Yes just a few minutes."

"You keep saying that!" argued the voice of the wardrobe.

Jean turned back to John. "Ignore her. It's important. I've just been speaking to Samantha."

John looked horrified. "You haven't told her have you?" Told her what, I wondered.

"No, no it's nothing to do with that. I think you need to have a word with your father. Apparently he's being saying lots of nasty things to Samantha."

"You should have seen what she just did to him now. She pounced on top of him." Ooh saucy! "I had to drag her off. And who told you that anyway? Samantha?"

"Yes."

"Oh it's all in her head."

"I don't think so actually. You should have seen her just now. She was in tears."

"Really?"

"Yes really. I told her that if she offered Pete a bit more access he'd be more reasonable, but that it had to be on Samantha's terms so she didn't feel that he had won. That's why she was so annoyed now. You went behind her back and gave Toby to your father. She wants to be the one pulling the strings."

"Oh I had no idea."

"Well you wouldn't, would you? Where is it you're going? I know you're not meeting up with her. She's been with me all morning." John was having an affair! With either Penny or Catherine! Well I didn't see that one coming.

"Ssh. Someone might hear." Someone had heard. Me! "I've just been gathering my thoughts. It's a heck of a burden to be carrying on your shoulders."

"Then finish it."

"Oh you're a fine one to talk. You've had affairs before and you didn't finish them until they were found out."

"I had one silly affair and it was finished before Mickey found out about it."

The wardrobe door swung open. "Come on Jean," pleaded Catherine.

"Oh I'm coming," Jean sighed, turned and went past Catherine into the cupboard.

Before turning to follow her Catherine mouthed to John, "Eight o'clock. On the roof." And with that she was gone.

I couldn't believe it. I hadn't thought for one moment that John's mystery bear was Catherine. Though then again I only found out that he had a mystery bear two minutes ago. And I suppose it was no more ridiculous than it being Penny but I had thought that Catherine really cared for Chester. Maybe she did. Why else would she have accepted his proposal? Maybe she thought that she could have both of them. So many bears convinced themselves that they could have a dependable, but essentially boring partner and a bit of steamy fun on the side. But it never worked. Either the bit of fun demanded to be more than a bit of fun and that they left their partner or the dependable partner found out about the bit of fun. Confused? Anyway I couldn't see why John was risking his son and his wife for a fling with Catherine. It wasn't as if you could accuse Samantha of being boring. Maybe he was sick of the way she was treating

his father, I don't know. But what I did know was that it could only end in tears.

CHAPTER 7

John had left. Santa was aimlessly walking up and down the garden. And the babble of noise from the wardrobe was indecipherable so I used the time to ponder who Jean's mystery bear was.

From Milly and Jean's conversation earlier, it seemed unlikely that they had rekindled their old passion; unless of course they knew I was listening. And of course Milly did because he had just been speaking to me but somehow I didn't think so. From John and Jean's conversation I didn't think it was John. He already had two bears on the go (that had been enough of a surprise- I really couldn't see him having three on the go) and Jean would hardly have been advising him what to do about his affair with Catherine if they had been having an affair themselves. And from what they had said it didn't seem as if John knew that Jean was cheating on Mickey.

So if it wasn't Milly or John then who was it? Big Toff? No somehow I thought not. If he had been having a secret relationship with Jean I don't think he would have admitted fancying her to Milly. So who then? Santa? - who was presently moping about the garden, waiting for Catherine to release Penny from whatever mayhem was going on in the cupboard. Doubtful. Metro? Possible, but could anyone really fancy that pretentious so and so? Lenny? Jean had laughed at the idea of Big Toff fancying her and Lenny was even younger.

Suddenly I was aware that Big Toff was creeping cautiously into the room. Then in a low voice he called out nervously:

"Aunty Jean." No response. "Aunty Jean."

"Did you hear something?" asked Penny's voice from within the cupboard.

"Ignore it," demanded Catherine. "Now which do you think is better?"

"Aunty Jean," called Big Toff, a little louder this time.

"I'm in here."

"Now where do you think you're going," demanded Catherine.

"I'll just be a few minutes."

"This is just getting silly."

The wardrobe opened and Jean came out. "Oh hi Big Toff."

"Daddy said that you wanted to speak to me," Big Toff told her eagerly.

"Yes there's something I need to tell you." Jean was being a real Agony Aunt today; sorting out other bears' problems. But I couldn't help feeling that she'd be better sorting out her own life first.

"Don't bother. I know what you're going to say."

"You do. Oh that makes things a lot easier."

"It know," he whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" asked Jean.

"Well we don't want anyone to know about this, do we?"

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?" Big Toff strode forward, thrust his arm around Jean and planted a kiss right on her mouth.

I covered my face with my wing.

"Ouch!" cried Big Toff.

I let my wing drop back onto the shelf. Jean had pushed Big Toff away. "What the heck did you do that for Big Toff?"

"Aunty Jean I love you. I love you."

"Yes Milly said something to that effect. I asked you here so I could tell you that you're far too young and I would never betray Mickey again. Not for you to snog my fur off!"

"Whoops. I think I may have misread the signals."

"Big Toff there were no signals to misread. I love Mickey."

"But every time you looked at me you smiled."

"Because you're my nephew. I'm just being friendly. Nothing more. And do you snog every bear who smiles at you?"

"No. I'm sorry. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Oh yes. I'm going to publicise the fact that I've been snogged by my nephew."

"You are?"

"Don't be silly. But I think it's best for both of us if you stay away from me."

"Okay I'm sorry."

Big Toff turned away, his head lowered dejectedly and slowly trudged to the door. Jean stared after him for a few moments before re-entering the cupboard where Catherine's high pitched voice could be heard making some 'important' point.

"Hi Big Toff," Chester could be heard saying from the landing.

Big Toff didn't reply. "Well how rude!" exclaimed Chester pouncing into the room.

"Well he's a very rude young bear," commented Metro, following Chester into the room.

Chester flung down a scrap of blank paper and a pencil onto the carpet. "Right we need to discuss your speech. You're obviously having trouble."

"Where's my old speech?"

"Well... I disposed of it. I thought it better that we started from scratch."

"Oh but I'd written some more," protested Metro.
"I was really getting into a flow."

"What had you written?"

Metro cleared his throat. "Ahem. 'I'm sure you'll all agree that they make a lovely couple.'" Metro wiped a tear from his eye. "It brings a tear to my eye just saying it."

"Quite, but we were hoping for something a little more original."

Metro thought about this for a few moments. "I know then. I'll say you make a terrible couple and it won't last."

"Metro have you ever been a best bear before?"
Come on Chester, what do you think?

"Well I can't recall it at present no. I'll have to have a look through my chronicles downstairs, but I'm pretty definite that it's a no."

"Right. Would it be easier if I wrote it and you just read it?"

"And I could add my own touches along the way?"

"I think I should discourage that, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh alright then. You'd best crack on." He began edging towards the door. "I'll leave you to it."

"No, no. I want you to see me write it so you can familiarise yourself with it. We don't want a best bear who doesn't know his speech."

"No that would never do."

Chester sat down and began writing and Metro peered over his shoulder. At certain intervals Metro emitted a low laugh and commented:

"Oh yes very good. Very clever. Why didn't I think of that?"

After several painful minutes of these annoyingly pointless comments and the monotonous scratching

of the pencil on the paper, my boredom was broken. Mickey, with a pen between his legs, entered the room with a piece of paper in his hand.

"Chester! Chester! How do you spell intercourse?"

"Pardon father."

"Intercourse. It's for my speech!"

"Goodness father, what sort of things are you saying?"

"Oh I don't want to spoil it. I want it to be a surprise."

"Father, if you mention intercourse at my wedding I think it will be a surprise."

"Can you just tell me how I spell it?"

"But father..." began Chester.

Metro butted in. "I-N-T-E-R. New word. C-A-U-S-E."

"No! No! No!" exclaimed Chester. "It's all one word."

Oh why were the bears such sticklers for detail? (amongst other things!) No-one was going to read it. Though with the mockery Chester writing his best bear's speech made of everything, I'm surprised that they didn't just pass the speeches round and say, 'This is the best bear's speech: it is grammatically correct. I'm afraid Mickey doesn't have a speech because we couldn't spell intercourse, but you can read what he's done so far.'"

Mickey sat on the floor with his pencil poised over the paper. "So how do I spell it?"

Chester spelt it out to him. "I-N-T-E-R-C-O-U-R-S-E."

Mickey finished writing this out just as Metro twigged what had been said. "No. That's wrong. I'm sure it's C-A-U-S-E."

Mickey sighed and crossed out Chester's version of intercourse (sounds dodgy) and began writing out Metro's version of intercourse.

"No father. It's definitely I-N-T-E-R-C-O-U-R-S-E."

"Oh for goodness sake," exclaimed Mickey, crossing out Metro's version and replacing it with Chester's. I think Santa needed to do some spelling lessons with the bears, before teaching them foreign languages.

Chester then turned back to "Metro's" speech. "Now where was I?" he asked himself. Who was expected to answer that? Though some invisible bear apparently did and he continued writing.

"I'm sure intercourse is spelt..." began Metro.

"Metro!" warned Chester, giving his best bear a stern glance.

"Chester is that you?" a voice called from the cupboard.

Recognising Catherine's voice, Chester turned around and called, "Yes that's me darling."

"Oh I thought I heard your voice. Just wait a minute. I've got something to show you."

The noise of a frantic scurrying and rummaging was audible from within the cupboard. "Who's nicked my agapanthus?"

I had heard Catherine mention her agapanthus earlier and was a little curious as to what this was. I had previously thought it to be a plant but considering that it wasn't the sort of thing that a bear would have in a bouquet then I must have been mistaken.

"Not me," was Penny's innocent reply.

"I put it down here," Jean told her. More rummaging noises followed.

"Which idiot put it down here?" demanded Catherine. "It's lost a petal." So I had been right. But what did Catherine want with it?

"Not me," protested Jean. "I put it over there." Oh does it really matter?

"I think it was me," admitted Samantha.

"Oh it's alright. It's just the one petal and I'll probably be able to glue it back on." Glue it? Is it me or can you not just glue petals back on?

"Will you do me up at the back?" Catherine went on to ask.

Then there were more rummaging noises, followed by Catherine's voice. "Chester, I'm ready now."

Chester put down his pencil and stood up, as if royalty were about to enter the room. Metro followed suit and so did Mickey but not before putting down his pencil and itching the fur on his bottom. Oh how dignified!

The wardrobe door swung open and Catherine stepped out.

Oh my God, I thought. What does she think she looks like? On her head was one of Mrs Partridge's best crochet mats. It covered her face and was tied to her head with a bit of string making her look like a Shepard. Round her body was wrapped Mrs Partridge's white silk scarf. A knot at the back held it up but not all of the scarf was wrapped around her. A length of it, about two feet long, trailed behind her and Penny and Jean held it off the floor. How stupid was that? It wasn't as if the carpet was dirty. This had happened at previous weddings in the past, it was obviously another of the bear's stupid traditions, but I had never seen it done at a trying-on-session before. Though this was Catherine we were talking about! Tucked down the front of the 'dress' was a prosthetic purple agapanthus; presumably borrowed from one of Mrs Partridge's arrangements, and in her paws was a bouquet of prosthetic flowers (tied together with a

piece of string) of which I was unaware of the names. And finally on her walking paws were a pair of Lucy's white ballet shoes. Although Lucy had small feet the shoes were too big for Catherine's rounded paws and she had difficulty walking in them.

"Well what do you think?"

Chester was momentarily lost for words. "Err... you look a million pounds Catherine darling." I think the expression was 'a million dollars' but I'm not one to be finicky.

"Thank you."

"You look lovely Catherine," Mickey told her.

"Thank you."

Everyone turned to Metro, awaiting his opinion. "Why have you got a holey tea towel on your head?" he asked.

I think the search for a new best bear was on!

CHAPTER 8

Next, something very unusual happened. I had dozed off. Now I'm not one to make excuses but Catherine's droning on was enough to send anyone to sleep.

When I awoke I had no idea how long had been asleep for - well you don't, do you? I stretched my wings and emitted a loud yawn. To anyone down below it probably sounded like an aeroplane landing. But I looked and there were no bears down below.

The room was deserted.

And then I heard it. From the cupboard came a low grunting noise. It was not a noise I was familiar with. I considered whether Catherine could have been searching through the cupboard for clothes for the wedding. But I remembered that before I had nodded off Catherine, Samantha and Penny had gone downstairs for a break and so Catherine could show off her wedding outfit. But then again I didn't know how long I had been asleep for so it was possible that they had come back. But if it was Catherine and co what on earth were they doing?

I turned my head as Santa stepped in through the window.

"It's a lovely day out there," he called up to me.

"If you're suggesting that I should get up off by bottom and walk round the dirty garden, mixing with the wildlife, please don't. I'm perfectly happy sitting here thank you."

Santa shrugged his shoulders and climbed down onto the bed. Maybe my reply had been a little tetchy but I did so hate falling asleep and missing events. I think the drowsy sun filtering through the window was partly to blame but it wasn't fair to take it out on

Santa. I mean he was probably the most decent bear there was.

"Santa," I called out to him. Santa, who had just been about to climb down from the bed, turned around.

"Yes Chris?"

I paused. Did I really want to swallow my pride? "I'm... I'm..." I stuttered. "... sorry," I coughed, attempting to obliterate the word.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

I saw a wry smile on Santa's mouth as he climbed down from the bed. The swine had heard alright.

Santa leapt down onto the floor. As his paws landed on the carpet, Milly strolled into the room.

"Oh hi there Milly," greeted Santa cheerfully.

"Oh Santa. How are you doing?"

"Fine. I've just been taking a relaxing walk in the garden. Yourself?"

"Not too bad I suppose." He sighed. "Catherine wants me to find two silly handkerchiefs from the wardrobe so me and Mickey can wear them on our heads at the wedding. I said 'We'll look like flaming sailors,' but once she's got a bee in her bonnet, there's no stopping her. She wants us to be synchronised. I told her that's the wrong word but she weren't having none of it. I said, 'If you want us to be synchronised we'll start practising our walk like the people at the end of The Bill.'" The Bill? It rang a bell. I suppose it was just another tacky programme on the TV. "Anyway I'll see you later." It was amazing how he had managed to go into all that detail when Santa had only asked him how he was.

"Yes, see you." And with that Santa left the room.

Milly then moved over to the wardrobe door, continuing to mutter under his breath about "the stupid blooming handkerchiefs." He then eased his paw underneath the wardrobe door and tugged it open.

The words; "Oh yes. Yes. Yes. Yes," drifted out of the cupboard.

"Oh flaming flip!" muttered a shocked Milly, letting the wardrobe door crack back into place. Inside the wardrobe Jean had been on top of another bear, who I hadn't been able to identify from up here on my shelf, and well... they had been doing something they shouldn't have been.

"Hi there Milly," greeted Mickey, strolling into the room.

"Ah!" cried Milly, leaping in the air.

"Oh sorry. Did I startle you?"

"Well just a little."

"Have you got the handkerchiefs?"

"Well... err... no. Not as such," replied Milly, trying desperately to think on his paws.

"Oh it's alright, I'll get them," replied a curious Mickey, moving towards the wardrobe door.

"No. No. No," cried Milly, running in front of Mickey and blocking his path by stretching out his long arms.

"Milly are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. It's just I've already been in there and... I let one drop, so I'd leave it for a bit."

"You've already been in there?"

"Err... yes. Yes. But I... couldn't find them." Milly was getting desperate.

"Oh I know where they are. I'll get them," Mickey told him trying to edge past his brother.

"But it stinks," replied Milly, continuing to block him.

"Oh it's alright. It's nothing I haven't smelt before."

"But... but... but..." Milly could think of no more excuse and he desperately glanced up at me. "What can I do?" he mouthed at me.

Trying to help him I pretended to faint and flopped out on the shelf. Liking the idea Milly grabbed his head and told his brother:

"I feel a little faint," before pretending to pass out. He collapsed onto the carpet and Mickey rushed to his side.

As he did so the wardrobe door creaked open and Metro slipped out! Metro! Jean was having an affair with Metro! What was she thinking of? I suppose that she must have been charmed by intellectual skills. Well what he had of them!

Metro - keeping his eye on Mickey who was presently leaning over his unconscious brother asking, "Can you hear me Milly?" - crept towards the door and disappeared onto the landing.

Milly stirred and mumbled, "The kettle's on the roof." I had never had Milly down as an actor, (other things maybe, but not an actor) but he was doing a remarkable job.

The wardrobe door creaked open once more and Jean slipped out. But this time Mickey heard the creak and turned round.

"Jean?"

Jean jumped nervously.

"Right, what's been going on?" demanded Mickey. He turned to Milly. "You can stop pretending now."

"Oh alright then."

"You dirty, two timing, swine of a brother. You promised you'd never go with Jean again. You liar!"

spat Mickey viciously. Oh dear! Mickey had got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

"But... what...?" stammered Milly.

Mickey grabbed his brother by the neck and hauled him off the floor. "You cheating scoundrel!"

"Let me explain," spluttered a choking Milly.

"I don't want to hear your excuses." Mickey slammed his paw into Milly's stomach causing him to cry out in pain.

"Mickey! NO!" cried a horrified Jean.

"Stay out this you tart!" ordered Mickey madly, waving a warning paw at his wife.

"Jean. Tell him!" pleaded a crying Milly, who was struggling under Mickey's grip. But Jean remained silent, instead giving Milly a 'I'm sorry' look.

"Just shut up!" Mickey barked at Milly. "Shut up!" He then flung poor Milly onto the floor, pounced on top of him and drummed his paws against him.

"Mickey! Stop! Stop!"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"Mickey, leave him!" cried Jean, running forward.

But Mickey sensed her coming and lashed out with his arm catching her firmly in the face. Jean screamed in pain as she was knocked back onto the carpet. Mickey continued to beat his brother who didn't have the energy to fight back.

Suddenly Santa, who must have heard the screams, sprinted into the room like a hero. "Mickey get off him!"

Mickey pretended not to hear and continued beating Milly. So Santa lunged himself across the room on top of Mickey. This sudden force knocked Mickey off Milly and onto the floor. Santa quickly stood up and dragged a mad, growling Mickey away from his brother, who he continued to shout abuse at.

And then suddenly all the bears, Corny, Little Toff, Big Toff, Lenny, Chester, Harry and more, streamed into the room. It was funny that whenever a fight broke out the rest of the bears were never far behind.

"Ah Milly!" screamed Corny as she saw her husband lying in agony on the carpet. She rushed to his side and asked, "Oh Milly are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he murmured. "Mickey went mad," he added, trying to explain what had happened to him.

Meanwhile Chester and Harry rushed over to their unconscious mother but, for the time being, seemed not to have seen their father who was currently grappling with Santa. But John, who had now entered the room, had seen them and rushed straight over to Santa to help him control the abusive Mickey.

Big Toff and Little Toff, meanwhile, rushed straight over to their father but Lenny, now no longer a member of their family, hung back not wanting to intrude on a private family moment.

Now although most of the bears were by now present in the room I might add that Metro was, unsurprisingly, nowhere in sight!

Little Toff knelt down and cast his little arm around his father. "It's alright son. I'm alright," Milly told him weakly.

"Who did this Daddy?"

Milly was about to speak but Corny jumped in first. "It was your blinking Uncle Mickey! He went psycho apparently."

"I don't know why you're bothering with the lying little..."

"Language father!" shouted Chester, suddenly seeing a struggling Mickey.

"I was only going to say scoundrel."

"If you say so father, but what on earth have you been doing? Attacking Jean and Milly like this."

Jean began to come round and realised that Mickey was about to announce her affair in front of the children. I think this might have had something to do with why she suddenly had come round.

"You don't know what's been happening Chester. Your mother and Uncle Milly..."

A fully recovered Jean jumped up and pleaded. "Mickey no! Not in front of the children!"

"You should have thought about before you started an affair with Milly!"

All the bears gasped before the room fell into a shocked silence. Corny turned a fierce expression on her husband.

"Milly you promised me. You promised you would never do that again."

Milly struggled to his feet to make a point to his wife. "I haven't Corny. I promise."

But Corny wasn't listening. "I don't know how you had the cheek to accuse me of having an affair of Santa!" This latest revelation caused ripples around the room.

"Me?" exclaimed a bewildered Santa.

"Corny, there's been a misunderstanding..."

"You two timing lying..." The last word was obliterated by the sound of Corny's paw slapping Milly in the face and knocking him backwards onto the carpet.

Chester turned to his mother. "Mother, how could you? Don't you realise what sort of name you're getting for yourself?"

"Chester I'm so sorry," was all she could think of to say. She then spread out her arms to try to hug him

but he turned on his heel and marched back over to a waiting Catherine; tears in his eyes.

Jean turned to Harry, who had sat himself down on the floor in shock, put his head in his hands and was now sobbing into them.

"Harry, you know I'll always love you, however many mistakes I make," Jean told him putting out her arm and touching him on his shoulder. But without speaking he pushed her paw away, jumped up and ran towards Mickey. But when he saw that he was still under the guard of John and Santa he turned and ran towards Chester. The poor little bear didn't know who to turn to.

Big Toff was now standing over Milly. Bending down he whispered quietly but accusingly to him:

"That's why you tried to put me off Jean isn't it? So you could have her all to yourself? What sort of a father are you? Well I'll tell you something, you're not mine any more."

"Big Toff..." protested Milly, but Big Toff wasn't listening. Instead he grabbed Milly by the neck, thrust him off the ground and then punched him right on the nose, knocking him back onto the carpet. Poor Milly! He was going up and down more times than a yo-yo.

Corny had slowly moved away from Milly and now she purposefully strode towards Jean. "I thought... huh... I thought we were friends. How silly could I be?"

"Corny, I'm so..." but she didn't finish her sentence. Corny lashed out and slapped her across her face. Unlike Milly, Jean managed to keep her balance but she did not retaliate. After casting Jean one last dirty look, Corny marched over to the corner of the room where Big Toff had run off to.

Mickey had now stopped struggling and he asked John and Santa; "Will you let me go now?"

"Where do you want to go?" inquired Santa.

"I just want to be with Chester and Harry. They don't deserve any of this. And then we need to go and get Tommy from downstairs; I left him on his own. I'm not going to cause any trouble," he added.

"Just see that you don't," threatened John.

The more peaceful Mickey paced over to where Chester was hugging Harry, but he couldn't resist sneering at Jean who looked helplessly at him.

Meanwhile Little Toff was crouching by Milly's side, who was lying out on the carpet; tears running down his face. "It's alright Daddy. I still love you."

Milly managed a smile and ruffled the fur on his son's head. "You're a diamond, Little Toff, you really are."

Little Toff now leaned forward and hugged his injured and abandoned Daddy. This is a touching and emotional moment and I hate to admit it but I found a tear trickling from my eye.

Drying my eyes with my wing I viewed the sorry scene in front of me. A tearful, battered Milly was clinging onto the only member of his family not to disown him; Mickey had his arms around his two sons comforting them with the meaningless words, "Everything will be alright"; the solitary figure of Jean stood looking aimlessly at the ceiling, trying to come to terms with what had happened; a distraught Big Toff was sitting sobbing in the corner of the room and Corny had her hand on his shoulder.

All this heartache had stemmed from one stupid affair, Milly's desire to prevent his brother from finding out the truth and Jean's brutal callousness in

protecting her lover whilst letting Milly lose
everything. Oh what a mess!

CHAPTER 9

After a few minutes of hugging Milly released Little Toff and asked his son for a paw. Little Toff provided it and Milly was successfully dragged off the floor.

Just at that moment Metro strutted cheerfully into the room, apparently oblivious to what had just gone on.

Looking around baffled he asked, "What's been happening here then?"

At the sound of Metro's voice Jean looked away; afraid that a bear might see the awkwardness on her face.

But Jean wasn't the only bear to react upon hearing Metro's voice. Anger boiled through Milly's stuffing as he turned to see Metro in the doorway. He turned to Little Toff.

"Little Toff, just excuse me for a few moments." Then he shouted madly at Metro, "I'm going to get you, you slimy little marriage breaker."

Seeing Milly come running towards him, madly waving his paws, Metro did the brave and macho thing. He legged it! Milly chased him out onto the landing, all the while shouting after him.

Realising that trouble was brewing (I wonder what gave them that idea) the bears dashed after Milly to get a glimpse of the action. It was like a vacuum as all the bears were sucked out of the room. Tempers got a little frayed as everyone tried to push through the door at once and some bears started tripping over one another.

But eventually they were all gone. All except Jean. She stood reflectively in the middle of the room. She knew that this whole mess was her fault and only she

could make it partly right and stop an innocent (well at least in this instance) bear from losing his family. I wondered what was stopping her from telling the truth. Why did she prefer that Milly got punished for what Metro had done?

I think I was about to find out. She looked up at me and made her way over to the dressing table.

A few minutes later she was sitting next to me on my shelf, with tears streaming down her fur.

"I know what I've done is wrong."

"Then put it right."

"But I don't want to cause more heartache."

"So it's better that Milly loses his family and Metro, the guilty one, gets away with it."

"Mickey jumped to the wrong conclusions. I didn't want to put him right. It was convenient for him to believe it was Milly."

"Oh yeah. Convenient for whom? You still lose your family. And so does innocent Milly?"

"Innocent Milly? He's had affairs in the past and he's got away with them. No-one's ever found out about them. This is his just desserts."

"Really Jean I didn't think you were that callous."

"I didn't plan any of this, Mickey just jumped to the wrong conclusions and I didn't put him right; that's all."

"That's all? Do you know why Mickey jumped to those conclusions?"

Jean was thoughtful. In the silence I could hear a torrent of thumping and screaming emanating from downstairs. Milly had obviously caught up with Metro. I could hear Milly's loud aggressive voice shouting "I'm going to knock the living stuffing out of you!" and Metro's high pitched voice pleading

with him. "Milly! Milly! Please get off me. You're hurting my fur!"

"Because Milly tried to stop Mickey going in the cupboard," Jean eventually replied, uncertain as to the relevance of this.

"And why did he do that? Because he cared enough about you to want to protect you. And this is the way you repay him." I shook my head, visibly showing my disgust. "Go on," I shouted at Jean. "Get off my shelf!"

"Chris..." she pleaded.

"Go on. Clear off. You disgust me!"

Jean moved to the edge of the shelf; about to leave.

"Why should Metro get away with this?" I called after her. "You're going to take your punishment. Why shouldn't he? It took two of you to do whatever it was you did. He's no less to blame."

Jean stared back at my orange fur; thoughtful. I could clearly see the confusion, the uncertainty in her eyes. I admitted to myself that she was in a difficult position. If she had told Mickey the truth from the moment he saw her creeping out of the cupboard then there would have been no trouble. But now Metro thought he had got away with it, she would now be betraying him by telling Mickey the truth.

"I'm sorry," she mouthed.

And with that she was gone.

But the words were being directed at the wrong person. Jean had done nothing to me. Alright I was disgusted with her; I had always thought her to be kind and decent but it was Mickey and Milly who deserved to hear those words.

CHAPTER 10

Jean had left the room and for a good few minutes the room was empty. Downstairs the fight had apparently subsided and silence reigned.

And then Catherine burst into the room; Samantha and Penny a few steps behind her. Catherine was still wearing her full wedding outfit but the agapanthus tucked into her 'dress' had tilted to one side and looked rather ridiculous.

"Right then. I've got my dress now," announced Catherine, "so we'll have to sort out what you're wearing now." Oh no! We were in for an afternoon of wedding talk. Now don't get me wrong I love a good wedding but God, Catherine does go on a bit! Though after the recent emotional drama, I suppose I could do with something a bit more light hearted.

"Now I'm keen that my bridesmaids are colour coordinated."

"Colour coordinated?" queried Samantha.

"Yes, what's wrong with that?"

"Look at us. I'm blue she's orange. How on earth are you going to colour coordinate that?"

"I thought maybe if you both wore something yellow..."

"Yellow?" interrupted Samantha. "If we both wore something yellow we'd look like an advert for Smarties."

Penny tried to suppress a laugh.

"Something amusing you?" asked Catherine.

"No, no. Carry on."

"Right. We haven't got time to muck around. It's bad enough that I haven't got all my bridesmaids present. I don't know why Jean couldn't come along. . I mean what sort of excuse is; 'My husband's left me?'

Doesn't she realise the urgency? It is her son's wedding, after all."

"She's been through a lot," protested Samantha.

"She's been having a bit on the side with Metro, that's all." You could rely on Catherine to put things in bog standard terms. "Now the old man has found out and she's in a bit of a state." Sympathetic as ever!

"I admit she's been stupid but she does need a bit of time on her own to sort things out."

"What is there sort out? Mickey's finished with her, Chester and Harry have disowned her and Tommy doesn't know if it's Sunday or Monday."

"I suppose. But she isn't here is she so there's no good going on about it."

But Catherine wasn't listening. "I saw her just now. I asked her if she was coming but..."

"You asked her if she was coming!" exclaimed Penny.

"Yeah. But she just blanked me."

"I'm not surprised," muttered Penny.

"Bears these days," sympathised Samantha. "They're just so rude."

"I know," agreed Catherine. "That's the one thing that really gets up my nose. Rudeness. I can put up with swearing (we hadn't noticed) and violence (you don't say!). Even sex in small doses (too much information!). But not rudeness. You know when I'm watching a film on the box and they give all these warnings; contains strong language throughout, some scenes viewers may find disturbing and scenes of a sexual nature, I say to Chester; 'What about rudeness?'" Yes we wouldn't want him feeling left out!

"Oh I know," sympathised Samantha. "Now John's dad is the worst one out." Here we go! "He's just so

rude. The things he says to me behind John's back. But when John's there he's as nice as anything. Well as nice as a crinkly old slime ball like that can be."

"Anyway," interrupted Catherine, "we haven't got time to stand around nattering."

"But..." protested Samantha.

But Catherine was in a flow. "Right, now then. We need to discuss the bridesmaids' colours. Now I think yellow and I'll tell you why I think yellow..." She was off. And another pointless and inevitable discussion followed.

Big Toff paced quickly into the room. I think he was trying to shake off Lenny who was tagging on behind him.

"Look Big Toff, it's not fair. Your Dad is taking his frustrations out on my Dad. He hadn't done anything to him."

"No but he has in the past."

"He can't keep dredging that up every time it suits him. Why can't he just let the past be the past?"

"I don't know. But don't have a moan at me. He's nothing to do with me anymore. He can't keep betraying my Mum like that. As far as I'm concerned I don't have a Dad."

Lenny is silent; regretting that he shouted at his friend, forgetting that he was upset. "I'm sorry." Lenny desperately tries to think of something else to say but can't.

Big Toff goes over to the duvet, draping off the bed; about to climb up it.

"My Dad would never have an affair," Lenny told him brightly, thinking this would cheer him up. Oh yeah, it's sure to!

Big Toff spun around; angered. "Oh your Dad's perfect, isn't he?" bawled Little Toff.

At hearing the raised voices the wedding gang stopped their discussions and turned round.

"It's not as if he had an affair with my mother and abandoned you for the first six years of your life."

"Ooh," murmured Samantha to Catherine. "Scandalous."

"I think we might be in a minor altercation," commented Catherine sarcastically.

"You're starting to sound like Chester already," teased Samantha.

"I most certainly am not!" protested Catherine. Samantha giggled uncontrollably. Most things Samantha did were uncontrollable.

Anyway, back to the main entertainment. After Big Toff's rather unkind comment about Lenny's father, Lenny had marched over to him and given him a vicious push. "Well at least my Dad hasn't had a fling with every female bear in the house," shouted Lenny, tears blurring his eyes.

Big Toff punched him on the nose. Lenny, after regaining his balance, returned this with a right hook. Big Toff then lashed out at Lenny, who lunged at his friend with a mad, high pitched scream and Round 3 of the fight was on.

"Wahey!" shouted Catherine. "Get in there!"

"Go on! Take him out Lenny!" instructed Samantha noisily.

"Oh you don't want him surely? When I've married Chester, Big Toff will be almost family." Almost family? Well only if you call marrying his Dad's brother's son almost family. "Come on Big Toff. Get stuck in there!" she called.

Penny got to her feet. "Catherine, Samantha. Remember where you are!" Catherine and Samantha both turned puzzled looks on her and she hastily sat

back down as she realised how stupid what she'd just said was.

Suddenly Lenny was knocked backwards and Big Toff pounced onto of him; beating him with his paws. Fur began to fly and Samantha asked Catherine:

"Do you think we ought to stop it? It's getting a little bit violent."

"No don't stop it now. Big Toff's winning."

"Oh alright then. Come on Lenny get off your backside and knock his lights out!"

If Lenny heard he didn't respond to this 'helpful' instruction and a fretful Penny asked:

"Are you sure we shouldn't ask Big Toff to get off him? Lenny might be hurt." You don't say! "I don't think he's moving." Of course he isn't moving. He's got a 100g bear on top of him!"

"Oh I suppose we could," replied Catherine. "Big Toff's won by a good few points now." How callous is that; thinking about the non existent match over a bear's safety? Some bears, eh? And it was eleven points to be precise!

Penny leapt off the ground and bounded over to the fight; as if she had needed permission before she could get involved. Catherine managed to drag herself off the floor and proceeded to plod after Penny. But for Samantha it wasn't as easy. She had crossed her solid legs and now they seemed to have locked into a position.

"Catherine help! I've cramped up. I can't move."

Catherine sighed and went back to help her friend. Penny, meanwhile, had rushed over to the flying paws and meekly pulled Big Toff away from a sobbing Lenny.

"Big Toff, look at him he's crying."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But he started it." No, I don't think he did actually but there we are.

"Don't ever do anything like that again," Penny sternly ordered of Big Toff.

"I won't, I won't," promised Big Toff, who was now shaking as he realised what he had done. The adrenalin rush when he had battered his friend had gone and now he just felt silly and immature; which I suppose he was really.

Penny then rushed over to Lenny's side and quietly asked him, "Can you hear me Lenny?"

"Yes," he faintly replied.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere."

Hearing this, a quivering Big Toff appeared to feel a little queasy and passed out, collapsing against the bed. But no-one appeared to take any notice of him. Not that there was really anyone to take any notice of him. Penny was tending to Lenny, Lenny was in agony and in the background Catherine was dragging Samantha, still with her legs in a crossed position, towards the action.

Just at that moment Metro strutted into the room, his nose in the air. A look of shocked puzzlement passed over his face. Well that was only to be expected when you considered the scene he was faced with.

Catherine was dragging a Buddha like bear across the room, Penny was crouching over his injured son and Big Toff was slumped up against the bed.

"Lenny!" he shrieked at such a high pitch I don't think my ears will ever be the same again! "Lenny are you alright?" he asked, running over to his unconscious son.

There was no reply.

"What happened to him?" he asked Penny.

"Well... there was a little scuffle between him and Big Toff."

"Right." Metro turned on Big Toff. "What have you done to my son?"

Big Toff didn't reply; unsurprisingly. Well he was unconscious!

"Are you ignoring me?" demanded Metro.

Penny looked towards Big Toff. "I think he's unconscious."

"Unconscious?" expostulated Metro (ooh listen to me!) as if that wasn't allowed. "He'll be unconscious when I've finished with him," he told Penny, marching towards the slumped figure of Big Toff.

But Penny was alert to the danger. Springing up she blocked Metro's path. "Metro we've had enough violence today to last us forever. Let's not have any more. Your son needs you."

And right on cue a disorientated Lenny sat bolt upright and shouted, "Daddy," before lying back down again.

Metro and Penny dashed to his side.

Meanwhile, in the background, Catherine was still trying to help Samantha get to her feet. Presently she was clutching Samantha's paws and appeared to be about to tug her. Considering Samantha's weight that was some mean feat!

"Pull!" shouted Samantha and Catherine pulled. Samantha was jerked forward but her legs rushed to unfasten and all Catherine succeeded in doing was hoisting her off the floor.

"Ahhh! Put me down," screeched Samantha.

Catherine let her go and she bumped down onto the ground.

"Ahhh! Not like that you..."

"Lenny can you hear me?" asked Metro anxiously, but Lenny had drifted back into unconsciousness.

Penny was in full nurse mode. "Right. We need to get him downstairs. Santa will know what to do. Help me carry him."

Metro took hold of his son's legs while Penny gently took hold of his head and Lenny was carried out of the room. I half expected to hear the Casualty theme tune.

Anyway, just at that moment Big Toff came to and, seeing his friend being carted away, he bounded after them. From the landing I could here him ask, "Is he going to be alright?"

Metro's pompous voice replied. "You've got a cheek coming anywhere near him after what you're done."

"Mr Metro I'm very sorry..." The voices drifted away. Shame! It was just getting interesting.

"Now how are you going to get me up?" demanded Samantha.

"It's pointless now; the drama is over."

"Oh so I'll just stay here for ever and ever and ever."

"Oh you do so exaggerate."

Samantha laughed. "You do realise you're sounding more and more like Chester."

"I am not, I tell you."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" asked an irate voice for the doorway.

We all turned and saw Chester standing there with his arm around Harry who still had tears running down his fur.

"Whoops-a-daisy," Samantha muttered to Catherine.

"Of course not," Catherine reassured him running towards him with open arms.

"Oi don't leave me," Samantha called after her.

Chester briefly let go of to give his fiancée a half hearted hug.

"What was going on out there just now?" he asked of Catherine.

"Oh Lenny and Big Toff had a bit of a fight about this Milly business. Lenny got quite badly hurt I think." As she told him this I could faintly hear Metro shrieking; "Coming through. Coming through," as Lenny was obviously carted towards help. Well Santa at least.

Having mentioned Milly this appeared to remind Catherine of something she ought to say to Chester. "Oh by the way I'm very sorry about your mother."

"She's not ill."

"No but she's been playing away, hasn't she?" At the mention of this Harry burst into tears.

"Ooh, have I put my foot in it?" inquired Catherine.

Chester didn't respond, but instead thrust his arm around his sobbing brother. "There, there," he murmured comfortingly.

But Catherine was not perturbed and asked; "When he's finished will you let me sort your suit out for the wedding?" Oh very tactful!

"Catherine I know there's an urgency for the wedding preparations but there's a time and a place for everything and this is neither."

Samantha, in her locked position could only hear Catherine and Chester's conversation and couldn't see them, but as the conversation got more interesting she tried to turn around to see what was going on. But unfortunately she was unable to do this and instead toppled onto her back; her crossed legs in the

air. She screamed but Catherine, Chester and Harry all ignored her.

For a few moments Catherine had been stumped for a reply to Chester's admonishment but now one came to her. "Well my mother always used to say, 'If you don't ask for nothing then you 'ain't gonna get nothing.'"

"That I can imagine but there we are."

This comment about her mother angered Catherine and she replied; "Well what's your mother's saying? If he's male he'll do?"

Hearing this Harry began crying more ferociously and Chester shepherded him out of the room without another word to Catherine.

"I'm sorry Chester," she shouted after him, rushing out onto the landing, "I didn't mean it." But it was no use. A few seconds later the stairs gently creaked as Chester and Harry made their way downstairs.

A slightly downhearted Catherine made her way back into the room.

"You did that well," commented a horizontal Samantha.

"One more comment like that and I won't help you up," threatened Catherine grumpily.

"Fine don't help me," bluffed a defiant Samantha.

"I won't."

Catherine turned to go but, with a cheeky smile; her good nature restored, she realised that it would be funnier to let Samantha think she'd gone but actually to stay.

A few seconds passed before Samantha hesitantly and gently called out:

"Catherine? Catherine are you there? I didn't mean it. I was only joking. I need you to help me up.

Catherine? Catherine! This isn't funny now! Help! Help! Catherine, help!"

All the while a silently chuckling Catherine was creeping stealthily up behind her friend.

"Catherine! Catherine! I could be here all night. All tomorrow! For ever! Catherine! Help! Are you there? Oh Catherine stop messing about and get your bottom back in here."

By this time Catherine had got within ten centimetres of Samantha. She was crouching really low so that if Samantha tilted her head back she wouldn't see her.

Catherine smirked and then, taking a deep breath first, she bellowed at the top of her voice:

"BOO!"

Startled, Samantha sprung up, her legs quickly uncrossing with surprise. Landing on her paws she spun round and seeing Catherine she shouted playfully:

"You little scoundrel!"

But Catherine probably didn't hear; she was too busy laughing.

"You..." but Samantha couldn't think of another word suitable before nine o'clock.

When her laughter had subsided Catherine tuned back into wedding organising mode. "Right come on then. Let's sort your clobber out seeing as though no-one else is interested in something as unimportant as my wedding."

Catherine strode over to the cupboard but Samantha stood still; thoughtful.

"Catherine?" she asked gingerly.

"Yes. What is it?" she asked as she tugged the wardrobe door open.

"Don't you think that making up with Chester is more important? I mean there's no point in planning for a wedding that might not be on."

"Oh of course it's on. Chester will come round."

"How can you be so sure? You did basically call his mother a slapper."

"Oh he'll have heard worse."

Samantha shook her head. "Catherine, you do love him don't you? You're not just messing him about?"

Catherine lifted her arm in the air and pushed her wrist, complete with ring, towards Samantha's face. "I wouldn't have accepted this if I didn't love him, would I?"

"Well just as long as you do."

"Of course I do. Really Samantha," she tutted. "What sort of bear do you think I am?"

CHAPTER 11

The big hand of the clock on Lucy's bedside table jerked underneath the twelve. It was eight o'clock.

I turned my head towards the bedroom door and sure enough, a secretive and slightly nervy Catherine crept stealthily into the room. In the end I looked away. It was painful to watch as each step took a number of painstaking seconds. I know she didn't want to be caught but this was taking the wee wee. She shined expertly up the duvet, (huh, just yesterday she had needed Chester's helping paw!) waddled across the bed (being careful not to make it creak as this would be heard downstairs) and climbed out onto the roof.

And then exactly a minute later John's head poked around the door frame. How silly! If there had been a bear in the room I think they might have found this behaviour rather curious! But there wasn't and he made his way up to the window.

Outside it was a starless, cloudy night but it was incredibly hot and humid. I kept wafting my face with my wing to try and cool myself down but I had a feeling that things were about to get a whole lot hotter!

John strolled out onto the roof top and Catherine turned round.

"Oh John you came," she exclaimed, spreading out her arms and running towards him.

"Of course I did," he replied as she jumped up into his arms and he caught her and spun her round. Flip! He must have been strengthening the stuffing in his arms; Catherine was certainly no feather.

But I was glad that he didn't drop her as this would have ruined the romantic feel to the moment

somewhat. It was like a scene from a lovey dovey film. Not that I watch films but I've heard bears talking about them. Yes! Ear wiggling *is* all I do all day.

Replacing Catherine on the tiles they preceded to... well I think you can guess what they preceded to do and I looked away to give them a little privacy. And because I had no particular desire to watch John snogging Catherine's face off. Sorry, I know it's not a nice image!

And then shock horror! Chester strolled into the room and climbed up the bed. He was going onto the roof!

Now as I might have mentioned, I pride myself on never involving myself in the bears' business. But Chester was going onto the roof and was going to discover Catherine in... a rather intimate clinch, shall we say? And I think I could safely say the wedding would be off. Secretly I had been rather looking forward to the extravagant, wedding of the year that Catherine had been planning. But I never interfere...

"Good evening Chester," I called to him in my loudest, boldest voice.

This took him a little by surprise, I didn't usually wish the bears good evening (it had always seemed so silly to me), but after his initial bewilderment he looked up and replied:

"Oh... good evening Chris."

Out of the corner of my eye there was a flash of pink and brown as Catherine and John scurried along the roof.

Meanwhile Chester had climbed onto the window sill and made his way onto the roof. I held my breath as he looked up and down the roof. Had Catherine and John had time to nip in through Lucy's brother's

window or to climb down from the roof? Chester was looking left along the roof; the way Catherine and John had gone. Had something caught his attention?

Apparently not; as he spun round and made his way back into the bedroom.

Now that I had broken the ice Chester had formed the false impression that it was alright to talk to me. "Chris," he called up to my shelf, "you haven't seen Catherine anywhere have you? I want to apologise to her."

Apologise to her? It was Catherine who should have been apologising after what she'd said about Jean. Poor old Chester was too nice for his own good. Now I felt really guilty that I had helped Catherine to deceive him. And just so I could have the enjoyment of a wedding! How could it be enjoyable now that I knew the truth? Should I use this opportunity to put a stop to it; to tell Chester the truth?

"I'm afraid I haven't Chester. Sorry." Little did he realise that I wasn't apologising for not knowing where she was.

"Oh it's alright Chris. I can't imagine where she's got to though." Try the next room, under the duvet!

After a few seconds consideration as to where she might have gone, Chester left the room. I heard his paws padding down the stairs and then there was silence. Time for me to ponder what on earth I'd done. Though I knew full well what I'd done and without telling Chester the truth there was nothing I could do to put it right; and that would be breaking one of my strictest rules. But then again, hadn't I already broken one of my strictest rules?

A tile on the roof creaked. Looking, I saw that the roof was empty. But after a few seconds of staring hard into the darkness I saw a pink ear jutting out

round the edge of the window frame. Slowly it was followed by the rest of John's face and then in a flash it was gone.

"It's alright Catherine, it's clear."

I heard a mumbled reply and then a few seconds later John and Catherine peered round the edge of the window frame. And then in a flash they were gone.

This was getting silly!

"Catherine, there's no-one there I tell you."

Moments later a cautious John tiptoed across the tiles and slithered through the window into the room.

In a hushed voice he called, "Come on Catherine." I think all this was more suspicious than if they'd just strolled in paw in paw. A few moments later Catherine was in the room and by an unspoken consensus plonked themselves down on the edge of the window sill.

"It's always going to be like this, isn't it?" asked John regretfully.

"We knew that when we started it. We agreed it wasn't going to be anything heavy; just a bit of fun."

"But you're marrying Chester. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Well you're already married to Samantha!" Good point.

"Okay, but it just feels as if you want him more than me."

"Yes I love Chester. You're just a bit of fun. I was dating Chester when we first started this affair and you agreed that we wouldn't have to make a choice. I'm not going to ask you to choose between Samantha and me."

"I'm not asking you to choose I'm just saying that once you've married Chester I'm hardly going to see you."

"Well that's just the way it's got to be. If we start getting heavy then we might get found out. And think about all the heartache that would cause. You'd lose Samantha and Toby. And I'd lose Samantha and all and she's by best friend. The only reason I'm happy about this is because it's just a bit of fun and we're not in love or anything silly like that." For a moment John looked as if he might interrupt but then thought better of it. "Otherwise I'd feel guilty about marrying Chester. But I don't because I love him and I want to marry him and I want to have a massive big wedding that every bear will remember for ever." Deary me she'd need a deep breath after that rant!

Feigning a smile John told her, "That's fine. I understand."

"Good," beamed Catherine, but it was only when she had turned away to climb down onto the bed that John's face displayed his true heartbroken feelings.

Catherine, oblivious to this, scrambled down to the floor and disappeared into 'her' wardrobe to sort out more clothes for the wedding. The door closed behind her and loud clattering and rummaging followed from inside the cupboard. What on earth did she do in there?

Just at that moment a chirpy Samantha skipped into the room. Not literally; Samantha isn't what you'd call the athletic type, but you know what I mean!

"John there you are!"

Hearing his wife's voice he came out of his sulky trance, jumped up and went down to her. Spreading out his arms he ran across the carpet towards her. If only she knew the last time he'd done that! But thanks to me she may never find out about that.

Samantha pushed him away. "Alright. Alright. Less of that. What's got into you?"

Pecking her on the cheek he replied, "I'm just pleased to see you, that's all." And the rest! He was feeling as guilty as Flip for having an affair with her best mate and wanted to make up for it.

"Right, well some dreary film has just started on the telly so I thought I'd come and find you and sort out that little disagreement we had this morning."

"About me giving Toby to my Dad without your permission?"

"Yes."

"Where is Toby by the way?"

"He's with Pete."

There was a moment's stunned silence as John took this in. "My Dad?"

"Yes."

"But you said..."

"I know what I said. But me and him have never really seen eye to eye; not that I'd want to mind but I just thought that if I didn't stop him seeing Toby then he might be slightly more civil to me. Jean suggested it this morning but when you gave Toby to him without asking I was going to dismiss the idea without even giving it a chance but I've been thinking and it wasn't Pete's fault. He was just doing a favour for you while you went off somewhere. Where did you go by the way?"

"Oh... I just needed some time on my own." I did actually think that he was telling the truth as Catherine had been in the wardrobe all morning so unless he has three female bears on the go he hadn't been cheating on Samantha this morning. But somehow I didn't think so. For John to have two female bears was only just credible. He wasn't exactly

a heart-throb. More of an eye-throb! Anyway he probably did need some time on his own to try and take stock of his life.

"Right, well we can use him more often. When we've got something on we'll just dump Toby on your Dad. He doesn't do anything except watch TV all day. But he must understand that it's on my terms. For example he mustn't watch the telly when he's got Toby if there's a rude programme on. We don't want Toby getting ideas." Flip, he's only two! Though I suppose you never knew with the bears.

"And this was all Jean's idea?" inquired John.

"Yep."

"I'll have to thank her; Dad will be well chuffed. After today's revelations at least it proves that she does have some sense." You can talk!

"Just carry on, don't mind me." Jean was standing in the doorway. Whoops-a-daisy!

"Jean... I didn't... I'm very... sorry," stuttered John. But Jean ignored the apology (if you could call it that) and went and sat down against the wall; probably like John this morning, gathering her thoughts.

Samantha whispered to John; "I know she's my friend and all that but she's been a bit of a cow really. Having an affair's bad enough but with her husband's brother. It's the ultimate betrayal that; having an affair with someone close to your partner. Isn't it?"

"Absolutely," agreed John, gulping guiltily.

"Anyway, back to your Dad." From behind her back Samantha produced a piece of folded up paper and started unfolding it. "Now I've drawn up a rota of when he can have him. I've tried to give him at least one slot every day. But he's got two on

Wednesday because that's when Catherine gives me a massage. And he'll have to have him all day on Catherine's wedding day because me and you will be needed there. And Catherine won't want a baby at her wedding. They're prone to burst into tears at any moment." You don't say! "And I don't think Pete will want to go so it won't be a problem. But I haven't put that on the rota because they haven't decided on a day yet and it will only be a one off." Unless Catherine decides to get married every week! Though the way she's going...

As Samantha droned on about the terms and conditions I turned away, not wishing to hear about the strict regulations attached to the serious event of giving Toby to his granddad (and why she was telling John about them was beyond me!), just as Milly edged his way nervously through the door. I think after the earlier incidents he was a bit frightened about how bears would react to him; not that he'd done anything wrong but they weren't aware of that. But he needn't have worried. Samantha and John were too concerned with debating about who could have Toby for the twenty minutes on a Thursday that remained unaccounted for, as John usually went for a jog while Samantha played poker with Catherine, Jean and anyone else willing to gamble with Lucy's brother's marbles (sounds a little rude!), but Samantha had just remembered that Pete normally watched Coronation Street. Samantha was saying that she didn't think Pete would be willing to miss it but that she felt "Corrie" wasn't suitable for a two year old's ears. Personally I felt that he'd hear worse listening to his Mummy speaking to his Daddy.

Milly trudged over to Jean. Seeing him approaching she looked awkwardly away.

I had always seen Milly as a bubbly, friendly and loveable rogue but just now all his zest seemed to have drained from him and his fur looked a little grey. Maybe that was just a trick of the light.

"Can't you even bear to look at me now?"

"I've nothing to say."

"Don't you think I at least deserve an explanation?"

"About what? We had an affair as simple as that."

Nodding to a debating Samantha and John behind him, he told her, "Oh they're not listening so let's just talk openly."

"Look, I have no explanation. It was just a heat of the moment instinct to protect Metro."

"Well it isn't heat of the moment no more, so tell the truth."

"Look Milly, Metro's a wimp. You saw what Mickey did to you. (I think he did more than saw!) Metro just couldn't handle that."

"Oh well I'm very sorry for him. I'll just take his punishment for him shall I?"

"Milly..."

"No you said it yourself Jean. He's a wimp. Don't you think you could do better than a wimp? What's he got that Mickey hasn't?"

"Don't question my feelings for Metro."

"Oh well I'm sorry. It's not as if I deserve any answers. It's not as if I'm losing Corny and Big Toff for your stupid relationship."

"Oh come on. Don't come the innocent victim with me. You've had affairs before."

"And me and Corny have always worked it out."

"But what about the one's Corny doesn't know about?"

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare try to tell me that you did this so I would get my comeuppance for silly

little flings in the past. You were looking out for yourself."

"How can you say that? I've lost my family too. I was looking out for Metro; the bear I love."

"What about Mickey? Don't you love him?"

Jean sighed. "Oh Milly this is getting us nowhere."

"Oh you can't even spare me the time of day now!" He paused before trying a more gentle tack. "Look can't you just tell Corny the truth. Don't tell Mickey if you don't want him to batter Metro but just let Corny know. Let me have my wife and children back even if I can't have my brother. Corny wouldn't tell Mickey and everyone would just think she'd forgiven me. Please," pleaded Mickey.

Jean was silent, contemplating this. "Look I'm sorry Milly I can't. She'd tell Mickey."

"She wouldn't."

Jean laughed a rather dry, ironic laugh. "Oh Milly. You don't know do you? Oh course she would. She's always been very close to Mickey. Very close if you catch my drift."

"They're having an affair?" asked a shocked Milly in an incredulous tone.

"Not since I found out about it a few years ago."

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"I forgave Mickey for it and told Corny that I wasn't going to tell you but told her that she should. She evidently hasn't."

Chester entered the room. Seeing Milly and Jean sitting next to each against the wall he shook his head and tutted. "Oh I might have guessed I'd find you together. You don't waste time do you?"

Jean rose. "Chester..." she pleaded.

"I don't want to hear it Jean."

"How dare you call me that? I'm not Jean, I'm you're mother."

"Not any more you're not." With a snort Chester placed his nose in the air and marched over to Samantha and John.

Milly now rose too. He was confused and hurt by his new knowledge. The strain of today had got to him and a tear rolled down his face. "Why didn't Corny tell me, Jean?"

"I don't know; you'd have to ask her."

"But I can't. Thanks to you she won't speak to me."

"Oh I don't know. You think you know a bear and then they surprise you."

"Well you're proof of that."

Chester, meanwhile, had asked Samantha and John where Catherine was. John had told him that she was in the wardrobe and Chester had moved over to it and knocked politely (but unnecessarily I felt) on the door. She walked round without clothes on all the time (they all did- even I don't wear clothes. Sorry if that's put you off your tea) so there was nothing we hadn't all seen before! In fact special occasions like weddings were the only time bears wore clothes, which was probably why they are called bears.

Jean sighed. "Look Milly you're better off without her."

"Don't you dare tell me I'm better off without her. So she had an affair with my brother. I've had an affair with you. It's the same thing. She's forgiven me, so why shouldn't I forgive her? Fair enough I'd have liked to have known about it but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore. If she takes me back then I wouldn't care about the past, only the future. And for your information the only person I would be better off without is you. Everyone would. No one wants

you round here so why don't you just clear off?" Wiping tears from his eyes Milly stormed out of the room.

Chester, still waiting for Catherine to answer the door (all that could be heard from inside the wardrobe was a rustling), called to his mother mockingly; "Lover's tiff?"

Jean ignored the comment and headed for the door. Chester called after her. "He was right you know. No one wants you round here."

After standing still for a moment to take in her son's rejection, a crying Jean scurried from the room.

Then Catherine emerged from the darkness of the wardrobe, oblivious as to what had just gone on. "Oh hiya Chester. About this morning..."

"No don't apologise, it was all my fault. I shouldn't have refused to help you with the wedding, I know how much getting it just perfect means to you."

"I weren't going to apologise but I'm glad we've sorted that out. I am sorry about what I said about your mother but that wasn't an apology." You could have fooled me!

Chester smiled and then said, "So what can I do to help?"

"Well we need to sort out what you're going to wear. I've been sorting out the candidates. But first we need to discuss more important matters like what day it's going to be on."

"How about Friday? The day before the Partridge's get back."

"Well... I know this is tempting fate and I'm sure everything will go without a hitch but just to be on the safe side I thought we should have had it on Friday so if, heaven forbid, something went wrong we could still have the wedding before the Partridge's

return." Then why did you bother to ask him, I wondered?

"Oh well Friday it is then."

"Oh right. I'll start typing up the invitations on the computer tomorrow. We don't want any naff rubbish. And we'll need to start drawing up a seating plan as well. We don't want our wedding erupting into a slanging match. After today's events there are a few definite no nos."

"I quite agree. But there's something you've forgotten about. I haven't got a best bear."

"Oh yeah. Well who do you want?"

"I was perfectly happy with Metro."

"Well he's out of the running after the comment he made about my tiara."

"Who else is there?" asked Chester.

"Erm... I'm sure Milly would do a really funny speech..." Catherine stops herself as she sees Chester's glare. "Oh yeah, sorry. I didn't think."

"I don't want anything to do with him. I certainly don't want him as my best bear."

"No of course you don't. Sorry I didn't think." That makes a change!

"It's alright," he reassured her, touching her affectionately on her arm.

"Anyway, I suppose you could ask your Dad to do it."

"Oh don't know if he'll feel like it after today's bombshell."

"It might cheer him up a bit. Being asked to be your son's best man must be a real honour."

"Mm yes... But it's not the norm to have your father as your best man."

"But I want this wedding to be unique so that's just what we need."

"Yes... but there's unique and there's darn right strange. No, I know who I can have who needs cheering up. I'll be back in a few minutes." And with that Chester rushed out of the room.

Catherine was a little taken aback by this but then called pathetically after him; "What about sorting your suit...?" The words drained away and she disappeared downhearted into her cupboard.

Samantha and John were left in the middle of the room; Samantha was just finishing explaining the rota to John.

"... so he hands Toby back at nineteen hundred hours, just in time for Emmerdale. If he's late, and this goes for any point, then the contract is terminated. Understand?"

"Yes... but I think it's my Dad you should be telling not me." Exactly what I've been saying! Isn't it?

"I know that," Samantha replied as if that was just obvious. "We'll go down and tell him now." I bet he'll be over the moon. Samantha started folding up her bit of paper as if to signify that the discussion was over.

Just at that moment Pete appeared in the doorway with a crying Toby in his hands. "Oi Samantha. Will you have him off me? He's being a real nuisance. There's this cracker of a film on."

Now I'm not quite sure how to describe Samantha's reaction to this, but imagine that you've just swallowed a grapefruit and at the same time you've got a bit of wind! She lifted the folded up rota in front of her and grabbed it with her paws; about to rip it.

"No, don't Samantha," pleaded John.

"Whoopsy," remarked Samantha as the rota ripped in two.

"What was that?" asked an oblivious Pete, over the noise of Toby's persistent crying. "Was it important?"

CHAPTER 12

Ten minutes had passed since the symbolic ripping up of that piece of paper. The room was now empty as Samantha had hastily taken Toby away from Pete, but not before calling him an “irresponsible old slime ball.” He had then gone back to watch his film and John and Samantha had gone to try and rid Toby of what Samantha called, “Pete’s slimy stink.” So I allowed my eyes to wander across the rooftop and onto the darkened garden below.

Suddenly a shape appeared over the end of the rooftop. I froze. Was this the hand of a burglar, mistakenly thinking the house to be empty?

No, it was only a bear. I so wished they wouldn’t do that to me. I had already started planning how I was going to knock him out without him realising I was only a soft toy.

The shadowy figure had climbed onto the roof and I had correctly recognised the shape of a bear. They moved over the rooftop and into the light from the bedroom.

It was Big Toff. What a let down! I thought it was going to be some long lost bear making a dramatic return like Metro had done one year ago.

Disappointed by this I cast my attention back to the room, just in time to see Metro shepherding Tutankhamun into the room. Well I say Tutankhamun, really it was Lenny but as he was wrapped in bandages from head to foot he looked like a Pharaoh. And just to make him look more ridiculous his bandaged arms were out at his sides, making him look like a cross between a Mummy and a scarecrow. But don’t worry; nothing scares me.

Maybe excluding Samantha first thing in the morning...

Anyway back to it. "There, there Lenny," encouraged his father. "Take it nice and gentle."

Big Toff climbed in through the window. Oh dear; I had the feeling we were in for a little bit of a ding dong!

Lenny said something but the bandages muffled it so I couldn't quite hear what it was. It sounded like:

"Up yours Daddy!" but I'm sure it wasn't!

"No I don't think we should go up on the bed. It'll be too straining for you."

Big Toff climbed down onto the bed.

"But I want to," mumbled Lenny. "I want to go onto the roof."

"Don't be silly sonny. You don't want to walk before you can run." I think he might have got that the wrong way round but it's not my fault if crows are more intelligent than bears.

"I'm alright, you" muffle muffle.

"Pardon Lenny? I didn't quite catch that?" Oh yeah! Sure you didn't.

The springs in the bed creaked as Big Toff made his way across it.

"Shall we go back downstairs and you can go out in the garden? Stare up at the beautiful night sky. Soak up the moonlight." Oh how poetic.

"I want to go on the roof," shouted Lenny through his bandages. Alright. Alright. We heard you.

Big Toff climbed over the edge of the bed.

Three.

"Well I'm sorry you just can't Lenny. And we know whose fault it is."

Two.

"Your so called friend."

Sensing the presence of a bear at the top of the bed Metro looked up.

One.

"You..."

And Metro was off!

"You've got a cheek even showing your face around here. Look at what you've done to my poor innocent Lenny. He wants nothing more to do with so just clear off. And if I see you within five feet of him then... I'll... I'll... well there'll be no telling what I'll do."

"Metro, I just want to apologise," pleaded Big Toff clambering down off the bed.

"Well he doesn't want to hear it."

"Just give us five minutes," piped up Lenny from within the bandages.

But Metro was having none of it. "Lenny there's nothing to be said to this... this..." keep it clean, "this thug!"

"Yes there is Daddy," the muffled voice told Metro. "Just give us a few minutes and then he can keep away for ever and ever and ever." Okay, don't over do it.

"I don't know," was the hesitant reply.

"Please Daddy," begged Lenny.

"Oh go on then. I'll just be out on the landing. If you need anything then just give me a shout."

"I will," promised Lenny. "I'll come out to you when we've finished."

"Right. But if you're not out in five minutes I'll be coming in with the posy from downstairs," Metro warned Big Toff, pointing a threatening paw at him. The posy from downstairs? Samantha, John, Pete, and Santa? I bet he was quaking in his boots!

Metro made his way out of the room. Big Toff called after him:

"Thank you Metro."

Metro held up a paw. "Don't speak to me," he ordered and waddled dramatically out of the room.

He was gone. Big Toff turned to face the bandages.

"Lenny I'm really so..."

Lenny also held up his hand. A trait he had inherited from his father no doubt. "Save it. I've heard it before. You've heard it before. We've both heard it before. But what does it mean if it means nothing." I'm sure there was logic in there somewhere; well maybe not!

"Then what is it you want to say?"

"I don't know but certainly not sorry. I suppose that I just had a desire that our friendship shouldn't end with me lying on the floor and you battering me into next week. However our friendship is going to end."

"But..." Big Toff began to protest.

"It has to Big Toff. What sort of friendship is it where all we do is fight and argue?"

"But think of all the fun we had when we were brothers."

"Yes but that's the problem Big Toff. We're not brothers no more. Whenever our families have a conflict; and let's face it that's most of the time, we always side with our family. There's nothing wrong with that but it just drives a wedge between us. I suppose if one day you're Dad could stop taking everything out on my Dad, then maybe we could go back to the way things were."

"But he isn't my Dad any more. I've disowned him. After what happened to day I'd never side with him again. So we can still be friends?" he asked hopefully.

"No because in a few days you'll forgive him and we'd just end up fighting again and it would just go on and on like it has been for ages."

"But I'm not going to forgive him."

"You will."

"I won't."

"Will."

"Won't."

"Will."

"Won't."

"Look we've started arguing again."

"This isn't an argument it's just a discussion."

"It is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Big Toff we've started again."

"We haven't."

"Have."

"Haven't."

"Oh this is pointless. I thought that we could end our friendship amicably but obviously not. You're being so childish. If anyone was watching they wouldn't know that you are the oldest." I think you're forgetting someone is watching.

"Okay, okay. Let's end it amicably."

"Right."

"What do we do to end it?"

"Let's just shake paws." Lenny held out his bandaged paw.

"Lenny do you remember when we last had to shake paws?"

"No."

"It was when we were still brothers. We were playing football and I scored a goal and you said I

hadn't. We ended up having a fight in the flower bed and got completely covered in mud and Daddy... I mean Milly found us and made us shake hands." The two bears laughed at the memory. Actually I recalled the incident as well. If I remembered correctly although Milly had been very laid back about it all and had simply made them shake hands, Corny had been far from pleased when she had seen the mucky pair. And come to think of it Santa had been none too pleased when he realised that his three foot tall thingee had been snapped in the brawl. Sorry, that sounds a little rude! When I say thingee I mean the long name of a plant that I can't remember.

"It was wide though," Lenny insisted after he had stopped laughing.

"Wasn't."

"Don't start again. Just shake my paw and have it done with. Or Daddy will be sending in his possey."

After a moment's hesitation Big Toff shook his ex-brother and now ex-friend's paw; tears running down his face. This was probably the same for Lenny but with all his bandages it was impossible to tell. It was a very tender moment and very emotional. Not that I shed a tear! No! No! I didn't let myself get involved in the bear's affairs (and there were enough of them!). Though saying that there had been that incident earlier...

Anyway, moving on; Big Toff and Lenny let go of the other's paw; signifying the end of their friendship. Ah! How sad!

And without another word Lenny turned and went out onto the landing to his expecting father.

"Oh you've finished, have you?" Metro could be heard saying from the landing.

"Yes Daddy."

“Right well make sure you stay away from him now. He’s trouble. The whole family’s...”

Their voices drifted away. Big Toff was left in an eerie silence with tears streaming down his face. After standing there for a few moments he wiped them away and made his way back onto the roof to contemplate what had been a roller coaster of a day. He had admitted to fancying his Aunty to his father, had then admitted it to his Aunty, had been knocked back by his Aunty, then discovered (or thought he had discovered) that his father was having an affair with his Aunty, had disowned his father, beat up his best friend and then ended his friendship with his best friend. Poor bear!

CHAPTER 13

Two voices sounded on the landing.

One was pompous and confident. "Oh course you can do it. It's just a speech."

The other was quiet and timid. "But I'll be too... too nervous."

"Nonsense," declared Chester marching into the room with his nose in the air. He went directly over to the wardrobe door and rapped loudly on it with his paw.

Turning, he called, "Come on. I want Catherine to see you."

The door was flung open.

"Yes? Oh Chester it's you."

"Yes darling it's me. And I've brought you a present."

Catherine was excited. "Ooa I love presents."

"I've got us a new best bear."

"Oh... oh Chester that's marvellous. Not quite what I was expecting but marvellous anyway." Catherine ran out of her cupboard and gave her fiancé a big bear hug.

"Who is it?"

Chester turned and saw that his 'present' was still out on the landing. "Come on," he called a little impatiently.

Nervously, Harry poked his head around the edge of the door and edged his way timidly into the room.

"Yeah come on," called Catherine. "There's no need to be shy..." Catherine had turned around and had seen a tense Harry in the doorway, nervously fidgeting with his fur. "Harry?"

"Yeeesss?" he replied uncertainly.

Chester proudly announced; "Harry's my new best bear."

Catherine stared hard at the quivering bear in the doorway and I could almost see images of his speech at her wedding passing over her disapproving face. From the expression on her face I could tell that she wasn't about to start skipping around the room shouting; "Hallelujah."

Giving a slightly hysterical laugh Catherine turned to Chester. "May I have a private word in private with you please, just over here in private?" Catherine asked, casting her arm around Chester's shoulders and gently guiding him over to the end of the room. "Just a moment Harry, I just need a quick private word, in private with Chester, over here." Oh dear! The signs were there. Catherine was starting to get herself worked up. I had noticed in the past that she always muddled her words up when she got worked up.

"Oh course Catherine. Be with you a tick tock Harry."

Catherine guided Chester down by the side and the bed before she started to talk to him in hushed whispers. "I'm not having him as best bear."

"No, I am."

"But you're not. Look at him. He's almost wetting himself just standing there."

Chester poked his head around the edge of the bed and saw that a quivering Harry was standing there rooted to the spot, looking as if the slightest sound would make him spring in the air.

"He's just a little nervous."

"A little nervous? If he's quivering when he's only surrounded by four walls imagine what he'd be like surrounded by all the bears at our wedding."

"Oh they'll like a little bit of raw emotion."

"Raw emotion? I don't care if it's raw, fresh or mouldy this is my wedding and I'm not having the best bear's speech made by someone who can't stutter without talking, is scared of their own shadow and can't say goose to a boo." Oh dear, she really got in a mix of a bit! That's what happens when she gets herself worked up. If she's not careful she'll have a stuffing attack before she's fifty.

"Oh but Catherine," protested Chester. "It'd be a real honour for him. And he needs cheering up after today's events."

"Yes but I want this to be the wedding of the year; one that everyone will remember forever and ever and for all the right reasons."

"And it will be but just let Harry has his moment."

Catherine scratched her head; considering this.

"I'll write the speech for him and I'll give him some lessons in self-confidence. Please?"

Catherine pondered this for a few moments with a stern expression on her face. Then her face creased into a smile. "Oh go on then."

"Oh thank you. Thank you." Chester grabbed Catherine and spun her round in his arms.

Laughing Catherine told him; "But only on one condition."

Fearing that she would want to arrive in a hot air balloon he put her down with a bump. "What?" he asked apprehensively.

"I want you to get me fit before Thursday." Thursday? It was Monday today. Did she think he was some sort of miracle worker?

Pleasantly surprised Chester replied, "What for darling?"

"Well I know you'll deny it but I've acquired a few too many pounds and I don't want to be a fat bride. We saw at Corny's wedding that that just isn't fashionable!" Ooa! She'd better hope Corny didn't get to hear about that one or there'd be more fur flying before dusk.

"Oh Catherine. I love you just the way you are."

"Oh I know. I know," she replied. "But it wouldn't do me any arm to get into shape. I mean I'm not going to appear on the front cover of 'The Teddy Bear Collection' looking like this."

"Oh Catherine I don't agree but if you want me to help you stay fit and healthy then I have no option but to oblige."

"Oh Chester," she shrieked running forward and kissing him on the cheek.

"No time for that," he replied running around the corner of the bed and over to a waiting Harry. Chester's sudden appearance made his brother jump a little bit.

"Harry I have the most delightful news. You're going to be my best bear."

Harry didn't look jubilant. In fact there are many words to describe how he looked but jubilant wasn't one of them. "I know you've already told me that. And I've said... I've said no."

"Nonsense. I'm going to teach you how to do it." Chester paused. "Not that I've ever done it before but we'll get Santa to help. And he must have heard tons of speeches in his years of being a vicar." So many I'd almost say that he'd be bored with them.

"Well... as long as I don't let you down," a bashful Harry told his brother.

"Oh course you won't," dismissed Chester hugging his brother. "You're going to make *Father* proud."

Both Harry and I couldn't fail to notice the emphasis on the word *Father* (And neither can you because I've put it in italics). "And Me and Tommy. And Catherine obviously." No pressure then.

I felt sorry for poor Chester. He had two days to make Catherine thin and Harry confident. And to think that most bears sit on a shop shelf all day!

Though Chester was probably just grateful that Catherine's demand hadn't been too extreme. But it was funny that I should have mentioned a hot air balloon...

CHAPTER 14

Catherine had dragged Chester into the wardrobe; just to sort out his suit (don't get any ideas!) and Harry had gone back downstairs. But the room wasn't empty.

Samantha, John and Pete had returned. With a vengeance.

Samantha had waddled into the room, the two pieces of ripped rota in her paws, John a few steps behind her, carrying Toby. Pete had followed them in a few seconds later.

"Look Samantha," he pleaded. "I only want to see Toby."

"No you don't. I let you have him and you said he was a nuisance. I'm not going to give him to someone who's more interested in watching films than his welfare."

"I was just annoyed that you've never let me have him but the one time you give him to me there's a belter of a film on."

"Well if you're not prepared to make sacrifices..." threatened Samantha, not finishing her sentence.

"Oh I am. I am."

John tried to persuade her in his father's favour, "Samantha you could at least let him have him on a trial period."

Samantha pondered this in silence. "No. It's too late now. Anyway, I've ripped up the rota."

"Oh it's nothing a bit of sticky tape won't solve," Pete pleaded.

"Right, but only on a trial period. John you'll be a witness to this. It's just a trial period."

"Yes absolutely," John agreed. I'd have loved to have seen John disagree!

"Right. Peter you must understand..."

"My name's Pete," he interrupted.

Samantha smiled. "The rota is in two pieces. It can easily go into more."

"Peter's fine."

"Good. Now then Peter. You must understand that I'm not doing this because I'm a nice, generous person."

"I was never in any doubt," muttered Pete inaudibly.

Samantha continued. "But because you've been pretty vile towards me and it's been suggested by Jean..."

"Jean!" exclaimed Pete. "You've been taking advice from that two timing tart. Says it all don't it?" Pete then went silent as he saw Samantha's grip tighten on the two bits of rota. "But I'm sure she gives out sound advice," he added hastily. I thought, though I might have been mistaken, that he also muttered something else along the lines of, "on how to nick other bear's husbands," but if he did Samantha was none the wiser.

"Yes she does." Maybe she did hear! "Anyway as I was saying, you've been pretty vile towards me..."

"Yes I have," Pete interrupted, "and I'm very sorry." It's never too late for a bit of boot licking!

"You have?" exclaimed John astounded.

"It'll stop as of now," his father promised.

"Too right it will. And to think I defended you. I told Samantha that she must have been imagining it. That my father would never say things like that. Would never call her a..."

Pete interrupted. "There's no need to dwell on that now. Not with Toby present."

"Oh so you don't want him to hear the things you've been saying about his mother."

"John, I'm very sorry..."

"Oh save it. I'm absolutely disgusted with you Dad and a weak little apology isn't going to change that. And it's not me you should be apologising to."

Pete turned to a Samantha, who was smirking like mad and looked very pleased with herself. "Sorry," he coughed.

"Oh Dad it's laughable. It's sounds about as sincere as... as... something very insincere."

"Look I only said she wasn't fit to look after Toby."

"Only?"

Samantha was now smiling gleefully and holding back the urge to burst out laughing as Pete dug himself into a deeper hole.

"Well it's the truth. She's not a fit mother."

"Oh you've done it now!" shouted John stamping his foot on the floor. At this Toby burst into tears. "Oh look what you've done now!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!" John then started rocking Toby to and fro whilst muttering soothing words in his ear.

"Oh give him here," Samantha instructed and John obediently handed him over.

John then turned his attentions back to his 'naughty' father. Sorry, it's just the irony tickled me. Shouldn't the father be telling off his child?

"Dad, Samantha is my wife of your son, the father of your grandchild. Can't you at least respect her for that?"

"Respect her for what? Walking down the aisle in a posh frock and getting pregnant? Oh someone give her a medal."

"I've brought him up you old dodder!" Samantha shouted, suddenly angered.

"No you 'ain't. My John's brought him up while you've sat on your backside."

"Oh you..." Words escaped her so she turned to John. "This is the way he speaks to me when you're not around."

"Mm. I'm beginning to see what he's really like."

"John I just want the best for Toby!"

"And you're gonna get the best for him by insulting his mother?" bellowed John accusingly.

The wardrobe door opened and Catherine poked her head out. "What's all the shouting? We're trying to have a friendly discussion in here about whether Chester should wear a hat. Do you think he should wear a hat Samantha?"

"Shove your hat!" Samantha thrust Toby into Catherine's paws. "Here take him!"

Samantha then turned and marched towards Pete; with an angry expression on her face. Here we go again, I thought.

"Samantha," called Catherine, "is this the wrong time to measure you for your bridesmaid's dress?"

Samantha ignored the almost rhetorical question. Don't ask me what one of them is!

"I love Toby more than you've ever loved anyone bar yourself," Samantha shouted at Pete. "I try and give you a chance to bury the thingee and you throw it back in my face."

"Well you never said you were going to start making wild accusations about what I've said to you," growled Pete. "It's all lies John." Considering he'd already admitted to him, he really did sound quite senile.

This tipped Samantha over the edge. She charged forward raising her paw, ready to strike. But John saw her coming and grabbed her arm.

"No Samantha!"

"She's a very violent bear John. Surely you can see what she's like now?"

"What's going on?" asked Chester, also poking his head around the wardrobe door.

"She has a very short fuse," accused Pete, as John led Samantha to one side.

"Let me go John," cried Samantha.

"No Samantha. I'm not going to let you do it."

"Good for him," whispered Chester to Catherine.

"Because this one's all mine!" shrieked John, letting go of Samantha, running forward and thumping his father right on the nose.

Chester clamped his hand over his shocked mouth but Catherine just cheered. Did she think it was panto or something? Don't ask me how I know about panto! I'll give you a clue; I didn't hear about it from the bears. Oh dear, it made me flush just thinking of the moment the man with his hand up my rear forgot his lines...

"You've been asking for that one!" John growled at his father who was lying groggily on his back. Samantha was beaming and even little Toby had given a little giggle.

Samantha ran over to John and hugged him. "Oh John, you're my hero."

John pushed her away. "Don't be silly," he told her dismissively. "Where's Toby?" he asked, changing the subject.

Samantha pointed at Catherine. "Over there."

I couldn't help but see the discomfiture on John's face as he saw that it was Catherine who was holding

his son. Nervously he padded over to her, fidgeting with his ear as he went.

"Can... can I have Toby back please?"

"Course you can," replied Catherine cheerfully, handing the bear to his father. As John took Toby from her there was a moment when their fur touched and they stood frozen for a moment as they looked longingly into the other's eyes.

Breaking the moment John thanked her and turned back towards Samantha. Catherine also turned and went back into the wardrobe with Chester; who had been oblivious to the moment of tenderness between the two lovers. But now they had returned to their respective partners. That was the way it would always be. Or would it? The moment had affected John more deeply than it had Catherine but she too had been touched. She had handed John his child but I'm sure that John hadn't been able to stop himself thinking about starting a family with Catherine. I wondered whether the thought had crossed Catherine's mind.

Meanwhile Samantha had gone over to Pete and leaned over him.

"Now then, I was telling you about the rota!"

CHAPTER 15

I woke early on Tuesday morning. Mainly thanks to some of my wild brother's outside, who had thought it necessary to squawk loudly at 5.30 in the morning. Didn't they have any consideration? Not all of us fly around all night. Some of us need our sleep. They were most probably jealous because I had a nice, comfy shelf to sleep on whereas they had to fly around to find a shaky branch to perch on.

Anyway I had been surprised to find that I had not been the first one to wake up. A sleepy Metro and a bandaged Lenny were sitting slumped against the wardrobe door in an eerie silence. This was the case because usually the bears slept on the shelves beneath me, where Lucy put them, except for the lucky ones who got to go in her bed, but when the Partridges were away on holiday the bears slept all around the house. Judging from the lack of snoring beneath me I guessed that there was just the three of us in the room.

They sat there in silence for over an hour; maybe because they didn't want to wake any sleeping bears but as I didn't think there were any other bears in the room this would have been rather silly. Unless I had made a mistake but this was unthinkable!

"Daddy?"

"Yes Lenny," yawned Metro.

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Go on."

"But you've got to promise not to take offence."

"Sounds ominous but I promise."

"Well it's something Big Toff's mentioned..."

"What have I told you about listening to what that bear says? He's trouble."

"I know that now but it just set me thinking. Why did you abandon me for the first six years of my life?"

Lenny didn't bother beating about the bush he just went straight in with the question and it took Metro a little by surprise as if that was something he shouldn't have asked.

"Oh Lenny, it's too early in the morning to be answering that sort of question."

But Lenny was not put off. "Just tell me," he replied simply.

Metro sighed. "Oh if you must know I was frightened that someone would discover that I was your father so I thought it was best if I left."

"So that's why you returned six years later and announced that you'd come to see your son?" Lenny asked cheekily.

"Things had changed."

"No. Things changed when you did that."

"I wanted to see you so I came back. That was one of the reasons I left in the first place. I couldn't bear to see you and not be able to admit who I was. And I thought that how I would naturally have behaved around you would have given away the fact that you were my son; that and the fact that you're the same colour as me. You see I was frightened of what Milly would do to me if he found out I was your father and not him. But after six years I didn't care anymore and I came back to see you."

"Where did you stay?"

"Oh here and there. I know bears all over the borough."

"Were you alright?"

"I was fine," replied Metro reminiscently. "I was absolutely fine."

Just at the moment when Metro desperately wanted to change the subject the conversation was interrupted in a way he wouldn't have been expecting.

There was a loud creaking noise and the door they were leaning against swung open and Chester and Catherine alighted from the depths of the wardrobe; stretching the arms above their heads and yawning loudly.

"Catherine we must have been in there all night."

"We must have nodded off when we were discussing your suit." I could see that that would be a little boring!

"How disagreeable!" exclaimed Chester.

Now they saw Metro and Lenny, who had both been cast aside by the opening of the door, getting to their feet. Because of the restrictions of his bandages Lenny had to be helped to his feet by Metro. Metro had first, however, brushed himself down because of all the dirt on the floor! Oh yeah!

"What a silly place to sit," muttered Catherine under her breath.

Chester, who hadn't heard this, was determined to apologise. "Oh Metro, we didn't see you there."

"We gathered that. Have you hurt yourself Lenny?"

"No I'm alright Daddy."

"Oh I'm really sorry," apologised Chester once more. "And Lenny was in bandages already, poor chap. Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh I feel really bad now. Don't you Catherine?"

"Distracted," she replied sarcastically.

"Yes... well as a way of apologising, you're both coming to our wedding aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well you can both have front row seats." He made it sound like the theatre. If only he knew what Metro had been getting up to with his mother...

"Oh that's extremely generous of you."

Catherine butted in. "You could almost say far too generous."

"Pardon Catherine?"

"Well you see Chester I've already drawn up the seating plan for the wedding."

"No you haven't," argued Chester. "That was one of your many jobs for today."

Catherine glared at Chester. "Was it? Oh yes so it was... What I meant to say was that I've drawn the seating plan for the wedding in my head. I know exactly what's going onto the computer later today."

"Yes but you could make a few alterations. Surely?"

"No. 'Fraid not. But I'd planned that Metro and Lenny would be fairly near the front so that's not too bad."

"No but Catherine, that isn't good enough," persisted Chester. "We owe them something."

"No we don't. They were sitting in front of a door for goodness sake. What do they expect? I'm not seating with my meddling arrangements for them clowns." She was really getting very worked up about her wedding. I know she wanted it to be 'just so' but she needed to calm down a bit.

"Catherine it'd just be a nice gesture. And I've let you have your own way on everything else but on this I'm putting my foot down."

Catherine glared at him for a few moments and then stamped her foot childishly on the floor. "Fine. Why don't you go the whole hog and sit them in the

aisle? I'll get them some nice comfy cushions as well." And with that Catherine stormed into the wardrobe, slamming the door behind her.

"Just ignore her," Chester instructed Metro and Lenny. "You can have front row seats."

"Well if you're sure it's no trouble."

CHAPTER 16

Chester, after assuring Metro it was no trouble, he returned to the wardrobe, no doubt to try and soothe a riled Catherine.

When he had first re-entered the wardrobe, voices had rung out. "Do you want me to try on my suit?"

"Oh do whatever you flipping like. You do anyway! And if you're so bothered then you can do the seating plan. Have them all sitting in the landing if you want! See if I care."

"Catherine you're overreacting!"

"Yes because you've started meddling with me..."

"Catherine calm down. I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry."

After this the voices dropped to a level which I was unable to hear from my shelf. I wondered whether Metro and Lenny, who were sitting up against a stretch of wall near the wardrobe (but out of the way of the unpredictable door that had caused it all), could still hear. Probably not, as now they started talking again.

"I hope we haven't caused Catherine and Chester to have a disagreement."

Lenny murmured his agreement but didn't seem interested. "Daddy?"

"Yes Lenny."

"I'm sorry for asking you those questions before."

"Don't be silly. I'm glad we've cleared it all up."

"Mm. I was just worried that you didn't love me, that's all. I thought if you loved me then you'd have never have gone but you've explained it all now."

"Of course I love you," Metro reassured his son, squeezing his shoulder, "or I wouldn't have come back would I?"

"No, of course you wouldn't. I'm glad it's sorted out." There was a pause. "Daddy?"

"What now Lenny?" asked Metro, tensing a little; worried what awkward questions Lenny was going to ask now.

"Can you stop that please?"

"Stop what?"

"Touching my shoulder."

"Why?"

"It flipping hurts."

Metro obliged and they both laughed and rubbed their shoulders together; a sign of affection.

Suddenly there was wail of delight from the garden. Someone was at it again! I thought. But turning I saw that the noise had come from something as innocent as a kick about. Milly and Little Toff were kicking a tennis ball about on the lawn. I was a little surprised as I had never seen either of them as early risers and I was also a little worried as they might wake the neighbours; who, if woken, would subsequently get an eyeful! But that was not my concern. I did wonder though how long they had been playing for. Surely they couldn't have been there long or I would have seen them as I never miss anything!

The ball bobbed monotonously back and forth between the two bears. Watching this repetitive action I was dismayed to find myself nodding o...

Not wishing to go back to sleep I turned back to Metro and Lenny only to find that Lenny had nodded off; his head cutely leaning on Metro's shoulder and that Metro had also dropped off and was snoring loudly and dramatically. Could he do nothing quietly?

The door to the wardrobe was opening. Catherine stepped out.

"Metro I want to see what you think of Chester's outfit..." She now noticed that both Metro and Lenny were sound asleep. "Charming!" she muttered before calling into the cupboard:

"Come on Chester. The parade's off. Pinky and Perky are having a kip."

A few seconds later Chester stepped out of the wardrobe with the air of royalty. He was wearing velvet trousers and a matching velvet jacket. I had seen this outfit before. Penny had specially made it for Milly for his remarriage to Corny. Because it had originally been designed for Milly it was a few sizes too big for Chester making him look a little ridiculous. Though this wasn't the only thing making him look ridiculous. Around his neck was tied a pink ribbon, underneath his jacket he wore a pink T-Shirt (who Penny had originally made that for I have no idea - I doubt they'd want to admit to it now!) and sticking out of his trousers was a big (no! no!) prosthetic rose!

I think there were few giveaway signs that Catherine had been behind this outfit.

Desperate for an audience to show off her invention to, Catherine noticed me sitting innocently on my shelf and called up to me.

"Don't worry Chris; I know exactly what you're thinking?" You do? "That outfit just isn't complete." No, that's not quite the phrase that floated into my mind when I looked at protruding rose and floral pink T-Shirt! "But fear not. The hat is still to come."

The hat? Now that I couldn't wait to see.

"Catherine, you don't think it's a little OTT?" asked an unsure Chester.

"Nonsense. It's extravagant and lavish whilst been understated and tasteful."

Tasteful? I'd like to see her idea of tasteless.

Catherine rambled on. "Don't worry, you'll love it when it's finished Chester. You can't start judging it before it's complete. It's like saying a book's no good before you've read the ending. The pink hat with white dots and a pinstripe will complement it nicely."

A pink hat with white dots? I have to see that. It sounded like something from a Mr Blobby tea party! (Don't ask how I know about him - I think it's adequate to say that in my shop days I was unfortunate enough to sit on the same shelf as a stuffed one!)

I could see that Chester wasn't reassured. Well would you be if you knew were going to walk down the aisle looking like you're taking part in a camp advert for weed killer? And incidentally that rose has got to hurt!

"Now then Chester. We haven't got time to stand about discussing your suit. We've spent enough time on that already and we're just going round and round in circles. We'll discuss it when it's complete. And it's not going to be completed if you don't go and find Penny and let her measure you up. I've already given her strict instructions on the design so she'll be able to get started. And I'll come with you because I need to get all my bridesmaids together as we haven't sorted out what they're wearing yet. I'll let Penny measure you up now but you'll have to wait until later before she can start making it." I bet Chester was distraught. "And I need to find out Samantha and your mother. I know it's a bit early in the morning but it is urgent."

A stunned Chester gawped at Catherine. "My mother?"

"Yeah. She's one of my bridesmaids. Do you think she'll be up yet?"

Chester ignored the question. "You're still having Jean as your bridesmaid after all she's done?"

Catherine was hesitant as if this was a trick question. "Err... yes?... Why?"

"Catherine, I don't want to even have to see her, let alone have her at my wedding."

"Well I can't stop that. Everyone's invited remember? There're a few bears I wouldn't want there if I had the choice but I don't. We've invited everyone and that's that."

"But you don't have to have her as your bridesmaid do you?"

"But I've asked her now. What reason do I give for not having her? Oh I'm sorry there was a secret clause to you being my bridesmaid. You weren't allowed to have any affairs. You've now broken this clause you didn't know about and so are no longer my bridesmaid. Goodbye."

"Yes but it just goes without saying that when you have a husband and three children you don't have affairs."

"I know you're hurt but it's not a reason not to have her as my bridesmaid. Samantha's had affairs before, so are you saying that I shouldn't have her as my bridesmaid."

Chester was incredulous. "Samantha's had affairs? I didn't know that."

Catherine looked embarrassedly away. "No well I shouldn't have said that. You see it isn't widely known that she had an affair. When I say widely known I mean John doesn't know."

"John doesn't know?" a shocked Chester asked.

"Moving on. If I don't have your mother as my bridesmaid then I'll only have the two and that'll make me look as if I haven't got any friends. Bears will be nudging each other and saying, "Look she's only got the two. She can't have many friends if she's just got the *two* bridesmaids."

"Okay. Okay. Fair enough. But will you stop calling her my mother. She lost that title when she had an affair with Uncle Milly."

"Right. I'm glad we've got that sorted. Let's go and find them." They began to move out of the room. "I've got a lot to do today. After I've kitted me bridesmaids out I've got to type up the invitations and the seating plan on the computer."

And with that they disappeared into the corridor. I could still hear what they were saying but I don't think you'd be interested in Catherine's ramblings.

Suddenly there was a thudding on the roof. A persistent thudding.

Milly and Little Toff had finished and were making their way up the rooftop bouncing the tennis ball on the roof as they went. I noticed that the ball was splattered with mud and hoped that they were not going to bring it inside and dirty Lucy's bedspread. But that was not my concern.

"I'm so glad you decided to stand by me Little Toff," Milly was saying to his son.

"I'm not going to disown my Daddy, just because of a silly affair. Even if Big Toff is prepared to."

Milly stopped walking. "Look Little Toff I think it's great that you've decided to stand by even though you think I've cheated on your mother. But I'd much prefer it if you were standing by because you believed me when I say that I haven't had an affair with Jean."

"But Mickey..."

"Mickey was mistaken. I tried to stop him going in the wardrobe because I knew Jean was in there with Metro. So when Jean came out the wardrobe and I'd tried to stop him going in he put one and one together and made three."

Little Toff scratched his head with his paw as he considered this; his cute face crinkled with confusion. "Oh alright then." He began walking towards the open window bouncing the ball.

Milly hadn't expected a reply so quickly and stood there for a few moments with surprise, before finally striding Little Toff.

"Little Toff, wait up!"

Little Toff stepped inside onto the windowsill and then turned around to wait for Milly.

"Little Toff, now that you believe me there's something I want you to do for me," began Milly stepping inside. "Now your mum being the silly billy she is won't believe me. So I was wondering if you could have a little word with Corny and see if you can make her see that's it's all been a big misunderstanding."

"Why don't you tell her? It'd be better coming from you."

"I know but she won't listen to anything I say. She won't speak to me. But she'll listen to you."

"Oh alright I'll have a go."

"Oh you're a star," beamed Milly, ruffling the fur on Little Toff's head. It was nice to see Milly happier and more full of hope than he had been yesterday, when his world had collapsed around him.

And then he heard the snoring.

Within ten seconds he was down on the carpet marching towards Metro and Lenny; Little Toff just a

few steps behind him. This translated into at least two metres, however, because of the size of Milly's large strides compared with Little Toff's titchy ones.

"Wakey, wakey!" he bellowed at the sleeping pair.

Metro and Lenny stirred suddenly but did not wake up. Milly went over to Metro and kicked his legs.

Screeching like a female bear he jumped up off the ground; yawning. "What's happening? What's going on?" And then he saw Milly.

"Morning," Milly beamed at him. "It looks like another lovely day."

Metro was a little confused. "Yes it does rather seem like that."

Milly scowled. "For you maybe, you two timing, treacherous scumbag. It's not looking so rosy for me. You might be able to have a little rendezvous with your floozy but I'm lucky if Corny will even look at me. And it's all thanks to you!"

A sleepy Lenny was now awake but he couldn't get up because of his bandages.

"Daddy what's going on?" he asked.

"Lenny I really have now idea. Don't concern yourself with it. Just you go back to sleep."

Little Toff, who was standing at his father's shoulder (not that he came up to his shoulder!) looking like his bodyguard, butted in. "Hasn't your Daddy told you what he's been up to? I think we should enlighten him. Don't you Daddy?"

"Mm. I think you're right."

"No," snapped Metro. "No. No. I won't have you dragging my son into your vicious rumours."

"Don't want him to know what you've been up to, eh?" growled Milly, grabbing Metro by the neck.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," croaked Metro.

"I think you do," piped up Little Toff.

"Let go of him," pleaded an immobile Lenny.

"Lenny, don't get involved."

"Daddy what have you done?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"Now then. Now then," admonished Milly. "Don't you want to be truthful with your son?"

"I won't have you involving him in this. He's already been through enough after what your nutter of a son did to him."

"Little Toff?"

"Me?"

"No. Big Toff. What have you got to say about that?" spluttered Metro gasping for breath.

"Only that you'll be in for the same if you don't start telling everyone the truth. Starting with Corny." Milly flung Metro onto the floor and Milly and Little Toff strutted threateningly towards him; menacingly looking down at him.

Metro, taking in deep breaths after his shortage of air, was a quivering wreck, cowering against the wall. "Please. Please don't hurt me."

"What the hell is going on?"

Everyone turned at the sound of Corny's voice to see her standing in the doorway with Big Toff.

"Corny I can explain," Milly told her, rushing towards her.

"I don't want to hear your explanations about this or your affair. I'm sure they're very impressive but I don't have time for fairy tales."

"But they're not fairy..."

"Milly, I said no." Then she called to Little Toff. "Come on Little Toff. The Teletubbies are starting soon. You like them."

"Coming."

"And don't get bringing that mucky ball with you."

"Yes Mummy," he answered cheerfully, casting the ball aside. It landed on Lucy's pink carpet leaving an unexplainable mucky mark. And then it bounced and left another unexplainable mark. And another. I couldn't bear to watch.

Little Toff darted over to his mother and brother. Metro was picking himself up off the floor and brushing himself down!

Little Toff told Corny eagerly:

"It wasn't Daddy who had an affair with Jean. It was all a misunderstanding. Really it was Metro. We were just about to get a confession out of him."

"I could see what you were just about to do. Your Daddy seems to think it's acceptable to use that sort of violence."

"Your husband is a very violent and unpleasant man," added Metro.

"You keep out of this," snapped Corny pointing her paw warningly.

Metro jumped back; startled and collided with the wardrobe door. That door didn't like him!

"Corny I just wanted you to know the truth," Milly tried to explain.

"No. The truth is you've had an affair and you're not bear enough to admit it."

"But Corny I haven't.

"Milly you're wasting your breath. Now I want you to stay away from Little Toff. It seems he's been silly enough to believe you but I won't have you involving

him in going round beating up bears like some sort of gangsters!"

"Innocent bears!" added Metro but everyone ignored him.

"But Daddy's telling the truth," insisted Little Toff, displaying his cutest face.

"No he isn't Little Toff. Get that idea out of your head!" she ordered. "You're too naïve to understand." It was ironic that although he was naïve and young and innocent (well maybe not!) he was the only one willing to accept the truth. Though maybe he wasn't believing it because he thought it was true; but because he wanted it to be true but nevertheless it was the truth. "Now come along."

Corny grasped hold of Little Toff's paw and lead him out of the room to go and watch the Teletubbies.

But Big Toff lingered in the door way and made eye contact with his father. They stared at each other in silence for an eerie ten seconds before Big Toff broke the silence.

"I didn't think you'd sink that low. You know Little Toff will believe anything you say so you've got him to do your dirty work for you. Filling his mind with lies."

"But they're not lies."

"Oh please. This isn't a whodunit. We know it was you who had the affair with Aunty Jean. Why can't you just admit it? Why make up these silly tales?"

"Doesn't that tell you something? For me to persist with this doesn't it tell you that it's the truth? When I've had affairs before I haven't denied them, I've just apologised and said I'd never do it again. Why would I now suddenly start to deny them?"

"Because you knew this one would be the final straw. You knew Mum would never let you sweet talk her into taking you back."

Milly could think of no response to this. "But Big Toff it wasn't me. It was him over there," accused Milly pointing his paw at Metro. It was funny that Big Toff should mention a whodunit as that was very like the moment when there was the grand revealing of the murderer.

"Big Toff I can assure you I don't know what he's..." began Metro.

"Shut up!" ordered Milly and Big Toff simultaneously.

Big Toff lowered his voice. "And you had to choose the only female bear I've ever loved."

"You didn't love her. You don't even know what love means."

"Don't I?" He paused. "Did you? Love her I mean?"

"Once. A long time ago. But this time I'm innocent."

"So what if you are? This is justice for all the ones Mum didn't find out about."

"Corny knows about all my..." Milly stopped himself and smiled. "Okay maybe she doesn't but this time I'm innocent."

"Enough said," commented Big Toff dryly, before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

Milly was left standing in the centre of the room to contemplate where he stood now (I don't mean in the middle of the room; that would just be silly!). A wry smile appeared on his face, for some strange reason he must have believed that he was starting to win Big Toff round. Then he made a rather rude sign at Metro and Lenny and strutted out of the room. It was nice to

see the spring back in his step, but surely he must realise he had a long way to go before he made Corny and Big Toff believe him?

Metro moved over to Lenny, who was still wriggling about on the floor; trying to get up, and lowered himself back onto the floor.

"It's alright Lenny. It's alright. The silly billys have gone now."

A tear trickled down Lenny's face.

Metro hugged him close to his chest. "Oh did they frighten you? Nasty little..."

"No it's not that. It's just... just seeing Big Toff made me realise that we're not friends any more and made me think of all the fun times we had together." Ah! How soppy!

"Try not to think about that. Just think of all the nasty horrible things he did to you." Yes, that'll cheer him up!

Not surprisingly at the thought of this Lenny began to sob hysterically. Nice one Metro!

Metro gently rubbed Lenny's back but he clearly didn't know what to do so he just murmured stupid things like:

"Don't cry Daddy's here," ignoring the fact that it was Daddy who had made him cry in the first place!

He was saved by a babble of noise from the landing and realising that bears were coming Lenny wiped his tears away and stopped crying. I mused how strange it is that bears can stop crying as soon as other bears are on the scene. It's as if they were doing it deliberately!

Suddenly there was screaming, shouting, swearing and sounds of a kaffuffle on the landing.

"Tell the flipping truth!" bellowed Milly.

"Get off her!" ordered Catherine.

Jean screamed.
Penny shrieked.
And Samantha giggled.
There was a loud thud.
"Just admit it. Admit it!"
"Never!"
"Milly you're not helping yourself," piped up Penny.
"I couldn't give a..."
Jean flew into the room.
Milly leapt in behind her with a waddling Catherine in hot pursuit.
Milly grabbed hold of Jean. She struck him on the face.
Samantha lunged into the room, rugby tackling Milly to the ground.
He swore.
Samantha yanked him off the floor and Penny and Catherine grabbed hold of him also. Together they frog marched a loudly protesting Milly from the room.
"You won't get away with this," was his parting shot to Jean.
Metro sprang over to Jean's assistance and helped her to her paws.
"Are you alright?" he inquired.
"Yes thank you Metro."
"I apologise about him. The bear is a fruit cake."
"Oh it's not your fault."
Having disposed of Milly; Penny, Catherine and Samantha returned to the room.
"But it is," Metro whispered in Jean's ear, before heading back over to Lenny.
"Alright Jean?" Samantha asked.
"I'm fine thanks Samantha."

"Good," butted in Catherine. "I can't afford to lose a bridesmaid at this late stage."

Suddenly she clasped her paw over her mouth in shock. "Oh fiddlesticks! That's reminded me what I haven't got!"

"What's that?" Jean asked.

"A stand-in bridesmaid. Just to be on the safe side. Oh who can I ask to do that?"

"But Samantha I'm absolutely fine. Milly hardly touched me."

"I know. This time. But say he catches up with you in the middle of the night. There's no-one else around. No-one to hear you scream. You tussle on the top of the stairs and then... ahhh!" The room had fallen silent. "No I just can't take the risk."

Everyone looked round in amazement.

"But where are you gonna get a stand-in from? Who else is there?"

"I know Samantha. I know. Don't pressurize me. I thinking. I'm thinking."

Jena protested. "Catherine you're worrying over nothing. Milly isn't going to hurt me. He just wants me to admit the truth."

"The truth?" queried Penny. "I thought you were telling the truth?"

The question threw Jean as everyone in the room stared hard at her; not least Metro who started to fiddle nervously with Lenny's bandages.

"Yes... yes I was... I am but I just meant... what did I mean? ...Oh yes... The truth as Milly sees it... Yes that's it."

Metro smiled proudly to himself at how well Jean had been able to lie to protect him. But Catherine, who had busily been muttering possible suspects

under her breath, had seen this and stared curiously at Metro.

"Metro, are you alright? You look as if you've got a little bit of wind?"

"No. No. I'm fine."

All the bears had now turned their attention away from Jean and were staring at him. Obviously not keen on their unwanted curiosity, he quickly helped Lenny (who had also been staring at him - well I think he had but you can't really tell with all those bandages) to his feet hastily telling him:

"Come on Lenny. Let's go back downstairs."

"Why Daddy?"

"Err... because I don't think the language is going to be entirely suitable for your little ears. You've already heard enough from Milly's little scene."

"But Daddy," Lenny protested, "I know all the swear words!"

And as Metro ushered him towards the door he set about proving it, much to the horror of Penny and Jean; who were still of the opinion that young bears should be seen and not heard. But Metro, Samantha and Catherine didn't seem bothered by Lenny's recital. Metro was probably too concerned with his own affairs (literally!); Samantha was probably contemplating how many of them Toby had already picked up and Catherine was too busy muttering to herself even to notice.

"Well... she's a possibility but... too old. Now what about... No. No. Too deranged."

Metro and Lenny almost collided with Corny, who was purposefully making her way into the room.

"Ah Metro. The very person I've been wanting to see."

"Really? Sounds promising."

"Mm. Well I just wanted to apologise for Milly's behaviour really. There was absolutely no reason for him to take it out on you. He seems to have this silly idea that it wasn't him having the affair with Jean but you."

Metro laughed a nervous laugh. "Huh! How very silly. And slanderous too."

"I know. Yes well I just thought I'd better apologise because I don't think he's going to. He seems to think everything he's doing is acceptable."

"Yes. A very regrettable incident. Oh well. We must be off."

"Of course. See you."

"Yes see you." Metro added as if to explain. "Lenny doesn't want to miss Postman Pat."

"But Postman Pat's not on on a Tue..." Metro bundled Lenny onto the landing before he could complete his sentence.

Luckily for him Corny hadn't heard. She was too busy enjoying a staring contest with a rather nervous Jean.

But before anything rude or violent passed between the pair Catherine had rushed over to Corny.

"Corny you're a lifesaver."

"I've been called many things but never that."

"Yes but I need a stand-in for my wedding and now I've found one. And I mean the wedding couldn't really have gone ahead without..."

Corny had held up a paw. "Hang about. Hang about. You want me to be one of your bridesmaids."

"Well not as such. I just need you to be my stand-ins. A sort of substitute."

"So you're gonna sub me on at half time?" joked Corny.

"No, no," replied Catherine completely serious. "Hopefully we won't need you."

"Oh charming. No but seriously I'll do it..." Jean had just caught Corny's eye. "Hang on is she one of your bridesmaids?"

Turning and seeing Jean, Catherine realised who Corny meant and replied, "Yes. Why?" Catherine never was the first bear to the honey jar, if you catch my drift!

"Right then I'm not doing it. I refuse to associate with that slap..."

"Wo. Wo. Wo," interspersed Catherine. "Let's just cool down. No-one's asking you to be a bridesmaid with her. I'll only need you if she can't do it. We're just a bit worried that someone might push her down the stairs."

"Well I can help you with that." Corny lunged forward but Catherine blocked her path.

"Wo. Wo. We'll have none of that."

"Okay, okay," sighed Corny, putting her paws in the air to show that she surrendered, "I'll do it. But as long as I'm nowhere near the troll..."

"You won't be," Catherine promised. She turned and called to Samantha. "Samantha, remind me not to sit Corny in Jean vicinity."

"Catherine!" protested Jean. "You make me sound like an infectious ogre."

"I bet you've heard worse," coughed Corny.

Jena scowled at Corny and Corny replied by making a face. Nice to see that they're both so mature!

Anxious to avoid a confrontation Penny piped up, "Oughtn't we be starting sorting out our dresses?"

"Yes Catherine," agreed Samantha. "I didn't get up at this ridiculous hour for nothing."

"Oh stop moaning. It's healthy to get up early."

Samantha spread out her arms, had a good stretch and yawn heavily. "Well I don't feel very healthy."

"Well you should do it more often then. Healthy! Oh that's reminded me of something else I've got to do today. Chester's going to try and help me get fit before Thursday so I don't start bulging out of my outfit." If I remember the outfit correctly, with those slits it would be quite difficult not to bulge out of it! "I'll have to do some training later on."

Samantha laughed. "Training? You?" Samantha laughed again. "It's a good one that. You had me going for a minute."

"I'm serious. I need to lose some of my flab before Thursday."

Samantha's laughing ceased. "You are serious, aren't you?"

"Oh yes."

"But you and fitness have never seen eye to eye."

"Yes but that was the old me. This is the new me. The old me would have preferred a game of cards to a jog round the garden. The old me would have preferred lounging on the roof, sunbathing instead of seeing how many press-ups I can do in a minute."

Samantha sighed. "He's changed you."

"It's nothing to do with Chester. This is for me. You could do with shedding a few pounds as well." Catherine looked critically at Samantha's figure. "Yes your hips are a little too rounded and your stomach's a little too..."

"I'd stop there before you find my leg up your..."

"Are we going to get started?" asked an impatient Jean. "I could have been doing other things."

"Like snogging someone else's husband?" chipped in Corny.

Conveniently Jean seemed not to have heard.

"But Samantha," droned on Catherine, ignoring Jean's original question, "you could just do the odd jog with me around the garden. Obviously you wouldn't be up to the really physical training but you could just do something less strenuous."

"Wouldn't be up to it, eh?"

"Well you're not exactly the fittest fiddle are you?"

"Right. I'm going to kick your backside into next week. If you can do 20 press-ups a minute then I'll be doing 21."

"I bet you I can do more than 20."

"We'll see."

"We will." Catherine smiled wryly to herself. This was what she had wanted to happen. The fact that she didn't want to do this strenuous activity without her best friend was touching really; a little soppy but touching none the less. Though it wasn't as touching when you considered that she was having an affair with her best friend's husband!

"Catherine, can we start now," persisted Jean.

"Oh yes. Yes. Keep your knickers on."

"She'll find that quite difficult," commented Corny cheekily.

"I don't wear any knickers," replied Jean, oblivious to Corny's cheeky comment.

"That figures," muttered Corny, louder this time.

This time Jean couldn't help but hear and she turned on Corny. "What did you just say Madam?"

Seeing that trouble was brewing Catherine hastily grabbed Jean by the arm and told her, "Come on we're starting" before dragging her into the cupboard. "Samantha! Penny! Keep up," she called over her shoulder and obediently they followed her into the cupboard.

Corny was left standing alone in the room; smiling at how easily she had been able to rattle Jean.

Just then Milly's head popped naughtily around the door frame.

"Corny," he called. "Corny."

Corny spun round but Milly's head had disappeared back around the door frame.

"Milly?" she called out tentatively.

She gasped as suddenly he sprung out from behind the door frame. "Boo!"

"Oh for goodness sake! You can't win me round by playing childish games."

"I wasn't trying to. Don't you remember? That was how I first won you round. First got you to like me enough to go out with me. When we were in that shop."

"What shop?"

"Oh you know the one. On the busy road." Corny was still puzzled. "Owned by the smelly man with the lopsided glasses."

"Oh I remember."

"Yeah well that's what I did isn't it? I sprung round the door and you laughed and you laughed. Don't you remember? Anyway I never thought you'd go out with me. I thought you fancied that bear... oh what was his name?"

"Danny."

"Oh so you remember do you?" teased Milly in a tone of false peevishness.

"Don't sound so put out. We're over and dragging up the past isn't going to alter that."

"But Corny..."

"Don't bother. Did you want anything else apart from going over all that again? I've heard all the excuses I can take for one day."

"Little Toff believes me."

"That's nothing to be proud of. Indoctrinating a little bear's mind with your lies."

"I know there's no point in telling you that they're not lies but will you just let me prove it to you?"

"Prove it? How?"

"Well all you need to do is follow Metro around and sooner or later he'll go to Jean."

"Oh don't be so silly. I'm not following him around. Bears will start talking."

"Six years ago they'd have had reason to."

"Oh is that the best thing you can throw back at me."

"Well actually it isn't. Yesterday I was talking to Jean and..." He stopped himself.

He had sensed movement behind him. Big Toff had come up behind him in the doorway. Turning he saw his son and held out his paw to touch him. But Big Toff pushed it away and brushed past him as he strode over to Corny.

But Milly grabbed his arm and pulled him towards him.

"Get your paws off me!"

"Big Toff you can't just ignore me. I couldn't cope with that. I'm your father."

"Didn't I make myself plain enough yesterday?" growled Big Toff, thrusting his face in his father's. "I don't have a father anymore. I thought I knew you. But I don't."

"Of course you know me. I haven't changed. I'm still the happy go lucky, cheeky chappy bear, who has an eye for bears of the female variety, I've always been. But my affairs; they've never meant anything. It's your mother I love."

"So you admit to the affair."

"No. No. That's not what I was saying. I was saying that I've always had an eye for the female bears and you've always known that and it hasn't stopped you loving me before. What's changed now?"

"Because those were casual flings. But you can't say this one meant nothing. You've had an affair with Jean before so to go back to her she must mean something."

"But I haven't gone back to her."

"Save it. And that's not the only thing. After your last affair with Jean you promised you'd never have another affair and you've broken that promise."

"I haven't. And anyway after her affair with Metro your mother promised it would be her last one."

"But Mummy kept to that promise. You didn't."

Big Toff broke free of Milly's grip and headed towards Corny.

Softly Milly called after him:

"But she didn't Big Toff. She had an affair with Mickey. Jean told me about it yesterday when I was trying to persuade her to tell the truth."

Big Toff stopped dead in his tracks. Corny froze. Milly waited with baited breath to see his son's response.

Slowly he swivelled around to face his mother. "Is this true?"

Nervously, Corny laughed. "No of course not. It's just Jean making up spiteful rumours. That's it isn't it Milly?" asked Corny severely.

Big Toff turned back to Milly. Unbeknownst to him, over his shoulder Corny mouthed to Milly:

"Don't you think you've made him suffer enough?"

Milly didn't respond immediately. He was silent for a few seconds before replying.

"Yes that'll be it. I'm sorry I shouldn't have mentioned it."

A tense Corny relaxed. "No you shouldn't."

"I think you should go. You've done enough damage without trying to tarnish Mummy with your brush."

"She's done that for herself," he murmured under his breath, inaudible to Big Toff but not to me. I've spent years listening in to conversations so my ears are exceptionally sensitive. I know it sounds a bit sad but there we go.

Big Toff ran towards his mother, his arms outstretched, tears in his eyes; maybe of sadness or relief. As Corny took him tenderly in her arms Milly called across the room in a hushed voice:

"I know it was the truth. But it doesn't matter. I love you. I love you. Just take me back."

After a moment's hesitation, Corny slowly shook her head.

CHAPTER 17

Corny and Big Toff were still hugging in the middle of the room, (how long could you hug someone for?) but Milly had now gone; rejected and dejected.

Suddenly Big Toff broke away from his mother's grip.

"Big Toff what's the matter?" asked a rather concerned Corny thinking he might have realised Mickey's allegations to be true.

"Mummy, I've been thinking about what Daddy said." Corny gulped. "He said Jean told him that you'd had an affair with Mickey."

"I haven't!" protested Corny sharply.

"I know that," Big Toff sighed. "But why would Jean make up that horrible story?"

"Because she's a nasty, spiteful vindictive..."

"I know that," interrupted Big Toff. What did he know? I wondered. Corny hadn't had chance to say what she thought Jean was. I think I can imagine though... "But if they were having an affair why would she tell him that story? Why would she want to hurt the bear she loved by making him believe his wife had had an affair?"

Corny considered this; baffled by the intelligent question. "Oh she'll have had her reasons. She was probably trying to say that having an affair was alright because I'd had one. Not that I had."

"I know that. But I don't think she'd be saying that once he'd lost his family and she'd lost hers."

"Oh well I don't know. Maybe he'd dumped her and she was just getting back at him."

"Possibly," mused Big Toff; unconvinced.

But before any more could be said on the subject the wardrobe door swung open and Catherine alighted proudly exhibiting her three lemons.

Now when I say lemons, they weren't literally lemons (that would just be silly!) they were Samantha, Penny and Jean dressed in bright yellow. Obviously as this is Catherine they weren't just going to be wearing yellow dresses. In fact they weren't wearing dresses at all, (obviously Penny had never knitted yellow dresses for previous weddings- I wonder why...) they were wearing bright yellow scarves wrapped around them, leaving revealing little slits like Catherine's had done! But you might have guessed that as Catherine was behind the outfits they weren't going to be as simple as that. On their heads each of them was wearing a bright yellow woolly hat with a bobble on top! I have no idea where Catherine got them from but I doubted that they had been specially made because they kept slipping down over the bridesmaids' faces. Oh well, maybe they were designed after all! And to top it off a prosthetic daffodil was shoved down the front of their outfit. Ooh painful!

Also the scarves were wrapped rather too tightly around them and the three of them waddled awkwardly out of the cupboard, grabbing onto each other to stop themselves tripping up.

Catherine beamed at Big Toff and Corny. "I give you Catherine's Angels. Well? What do you think?"

There was an awkward silence as Corny and Big Toff looked at each; unsure what to say about her three lemons.

"They're erm..." began Corny, "very erm... original."

"Original?"

"Well I've never seen anything like them before."

Catherine was unsure whether to take this as a compliment or a criticism. I think I'd know which way I'd have taken it!

Catherine just shook her head and tutted at her bridesmaids. "Some bears just don't appreciate fine art."

"There's fine art and there's this," grumbled Samantha.

"Nonsense. It took me hours to think of this costume. To make sure you were all colour coded. You made it difficult by being blue."

"Well I'm very sorry but I can't see what took you the time. I'm wearing a woolly hat and a scarf. I look like a flower picker in the middle of winter. And I hardly think that you took me being blue into account. Blue and yellow aren't really in."

"Oh sometimes you're so disrespectful." Catherine turned to Jean and Penny. "You two are sensible. What do you think?" Considering she was talking to the bear who had an affair with Metro and the bear married to someone who could recite wedding ceremonies in every language except English, I hardly think sensible was the right word. But we'll be finding out about that later...

Jean turned to Penny. Penny turned to Jean. "Go on Penny. What do you think?"

"No it's alright Jean you go first."

"No I insist."

"I insist too."

"Oh for goodness sake!" interrupted Catherine. "I only wanted your flipping opinion."

Penny and Jean were saved from answering by the arrival of Pete. He sauntered into the room, saw Catherine and started moaning. "I just can't believe

that. The TV Guide gave it four out of five. Well I wouldn't have given it two. I mean the twist at the end was very disappointing and the final battle scene was very poorly staged. But the TV Guide had been going downhill for sometime. I don't know why the Partridges still buy it. But they hardly ever read it so they probably don't know what it's like. Only Mrs Partridge reads it and she only watches the soaps and that section isn't too bad. But it's film section. Deary me! Anyway what was I saying?"

"I've really no idea," muttered Catherine dryly. "What do you think of the out...?"

"Oh that was it. The film. I mean it had a good beginning but having it on that early in the morning was very silly. I said before it started that it was silly having a film of that calibre on that early. But then I didn't realise what calibre it was. So that's why they put it on early. Get the rubbish out the way before anyone's got up. But I got up specially to watch it. Just because the TV gave a raving report. But I think the TV Guide's going downhill..."

"Pete!" interrupted Catherine sternly, making Penny jump. "What do you think of my bridesmaids' costumes?"

Pete glanced briefly at them. "Very nice. Very yellow. Anyway where was I? Oh yes the TV Guide..."

Catherine put her paws over her ears and screamed. "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"You alright Catherine?" inquired Pete.

Thinking he was still going on about the TV Guide (she still had her paws over her ears) she just replied, "I'm not listening," in the strange voice bears seem to use when they can't hear what they're saying.

Samantha marched over to him. "What do you want? If you just came to rant about the film then the door's over there."

"Actually it wasn't all I wanted. You're very perceptive this morning."

"False flattery will get you flying through the door at 100mph but don't stop trying."

"I just wondered whether there was any chance that the rota might still be on. I mean I did keep to my side of the bargain. I promise never to insult you again. So it wouldn't really be fair to go back on our deal just because John got the wrong end of the stick."

"For once John got hold of the right end of the stick but if you're willing to keep to the terms and conditions then the rota can begin today."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me thank..." but Samantha couldn't think of anyone else for him to thank. "Oh I don't know thank anyone you like but if you go off and start boasting to John that I've gone behind his back then I'll screw up the rota and insert it someone unpleasant. Understand?" Samantha didn't give him time to reply. "I take it you've still got the rota so find your next slot and stick to it. If you're one minute late then your contract will be terminated. Goodbye." I had half expected her to say "You are the Weakest Link. Goodbye." If you're wondering how I know about that programme, well its annoying catchphrases come through the floorboards every evening at 5.15.

And with that Samantha firmly grabbed hold of him and pushed him out the door.

From the landing I could hear him grumbling, "That's no way to treat the aged."

Ignoring this comment Samantha tapped Catherine's shoulder. "You can take your paws off your ears; he's gone."

"What?"

"Take your hands off your ears and you can hear me."

"What?" demanded Catherine, still covering her ears.

"Your outfits make us look like Tweetie Pie," teased Samantha.

Catherine's paws flew off her ears. "What did you say?"

Samantha laughed hysterically.

CHAPTER 18

Catherine and her 'angels' had bustled off downstairs to promote the bridesmaids outfits. Ah, sometimes I wish I could be bothered to get off my shelf. The bears' expressions when they saw those outfits would be priceless.

Left standing in the room were Big Toff and Corny, in an uncomfortable silence.

"Gosh, it's nice to have a bit of peace and quiet again!" exclaimed Big Toff, breaking the temporary silence that had ensued. "I know they've got a wedding to plan but they're flipping loud."

"I know what you mean."

There was another awkward silence where nobody spoke (sorry that was just stating the obvious!).

"Look Mummy..."

"Big Toff don't. I know what you're going to say."

"But..."

"No. He isn't worth discussing. He's had an affair after he promised he never would again. Now let that be an end of it."

"But he might be telling the truth Mummy," insisted Big Toff.

"I didn't think you believed him?"

"I didn't. Not at first. But think about it. He wants us to take him back. Now it's obvious to him that we aren't going to believe him if he had had an affair and he wanted us to have him back he'd have admitted it and started saying how sorry he is."

"That'll probably come soon. Little Toff believes him so he's probably still clinging to the hope that he'll be able to convince us."

"He can't still think that surely?"

"Well he's convincing you."

"Yes but I haven't let him know that. So if he was going to confess he'd have done it by now. You know Daddy; he's not what you'd call patient. If it was a lie he'd have given up persisting with it by now. The only reason he'd still be persisting with it was if it true."

"No. It's early days yet. I know it seems longer but it was only yesterday that his affair was discovered."

Big Toff raised his voice. "But he isn't having an affair!"

"Big Toff just accept it! He is!"

"He isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Mummy you're just being childish." Yes, you tell her Big Toff. That little game of 'is' tennis had started to get up my beak! "For some reason you want to believe he's having an affair. I just don't understand you."

Turning on his heel Big Toff stormed out of the room; tears welling up in his eyes.

"Big Toff," Corny called hopelessly after him. "Come back!" Oh how pointless! As if he was going to come back now. I could really see him turning round and running back to Corny, arms outstretched shouting:

"Oh Mummy, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I take it all back." Sometimes bears were just so irritating! Well actually it was most of the time but I'm ranting on again...

Corny sighed and then looked dejectedly up at my shelf. Oh no I was in for it. I was going to have Corny squeezing me for information about Milly that it was

against my principles to give. Hastily I looked up at the ceiling, feigning interest in a fascinating black mark. But it was no good. There was no escaping her.

Two minutes and 27 seconds later (I had been counting the seconds on Lucy's bedside clock- well it was more interesting than the black mark) Corny had bounded up the dressing table and the shelves and was sitting next to me on my shelf. Actually she was a little bit too close for comfort as I could feel her leg brushing against my fur. I didn't like it when bears invaded my personal space. It was one thing climbing up to *my* shelf and demanding my advice but stroking my fur was quite another! This may sound extremely petty but... oh I'm not going to bother! It is extremely petty!

"Chris..." began Corny.

"That's my name."

"I'm going to ask you a straight question so I want you to give me a straight answer."

"Let me halt you right there. I refuse to comment on anything I have seen or heard."

"But..."

"No buts. I will provide you with advice from the point of view of a neutral who knows nothing."

"That shouldn't be difficult," she murmured but not inaudibly to my trained ears.

"And if you're going to be offensive then you can go right back down where you came from."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Corny looked softly into my eyes, providing me with her most vulnerable look and then as if by magic, tears started to roll down her fur. Once more it amused me how bears could turn on the water works at exactly the right moment. But I had made myself immune to it. "I just don't know what to do," she sobbed. "I didn't give Milly a

chance. I convinced myself he'd done it. There didn't seem any other option. But now... Oh I don't know. I just have to know the truth."

Luckily I was immune to all this blubbering or I might have been tempted to put her out of her misery and break my biggest rule.

"It isn't my place to give it to you."

Forgetting her tears she shouted, "But I need to know the truth and I'd only believe it from someone impartial like you."

"Well that's bad luck then. My purpose of sitting on this shelf is not to interfere myself in the bears problems. For the truth you'll have to rely on Jean and Milly."

"She's a spiteful, backstabbing cow and he's lied to cover his tracks in the past. I need your help."

"I'll give you advice but that's as far as I go."

"So you're happy to sit there and watch my family fall apart when Milly's innocent?"

"If you know that then why come to me?"

"You're saying he is?"

"I'm saying nothing of the sort."

"Oh you're blinking infuriating!"

"I've already warned you about being offensive."

"I don't care. I'm not stopping," she shouting jumping up and stamping her foot on my shelf. It rattled precariously beneath us. Some bears had no respect for others' property! First she comes up and touches my fur and then goes and stamps on my shelf. Deary me... "I don't want your stupid advice. All I wanted was the truth but it seems you prefer to pad around the issue with up in the air pieces of advice when all you really need to say is "Yes Milly was having an affair," or "No he wasn't." But oh no you can't do that, can you?"

"Your lives have nothing to do with me so I don't think it would be fair to influence what happens in them by sharing things that I see and hear. You must understand that? Surely?"

"No I don't," was the instant reply. "You have my permission to get involved; to tell me the truth."

"It's not your permission I need it's Milly's and Jean's."

"Well you'll have Milly's permission 'cause he knows that if he doesn't give it to you then I'll know he's being lying about not having an affair with Jean."

"But I wouldn't have Jean's."

"Why do you say that?"

Whoops, had I said too much?

"Why?" demanded Corny.

I didn't respond. I couldn't respond. Not without giving more away.

"Well?"

"Oh I don't know, maybe she would... It was just my opinion..."

"But if she'd been having an affair with Milly, she'd want me to know that. So he must have been telling the truth."

"Please don't try and read between the lines of what I've said."

"There's no reading necessary. You've said more than you wanted to. Milly was telling the truth. He wasn't having an affair with Jean. It was Metro she was having an affair with."

Oh no. I had let slip my vital piece of knowledge. Some of the time it was difficult to provide advice without letting the truth slip out. I had done it many a time in the past but bears had been too stupid to notice. Corny was many things but stupid certainly wasn't one of them.

What I had done would shake the lives of the bears. I should put it right. But I was torn. Should I just leave it at that and let the truth emerge; let justice be done for the lying, cheating Metro? But that wouldn't be fair. He was an adulterer but he had covered his tracks well. Only Milly knew the truth and no-one believed him so it wouldn't be fair for me to reveal the truth. It wasn't my place. For years bears knew as long as they kept their secrets secret from other bears then their secrets would remain secret (I know that sounds silly but I'm getting myself worked up - probably a little bit of Catherine syndrome!). They had thought that they didn't need to keep their secrets secret from the wise crow on the shelf (not that they'd have been able to - although I hadn't immediately known who Jean had been having an affair with) and so hadn't tried. It wouldn't now be fair to break their trust.

Corny was climbing down from the shelf. "Corny stop." She turned head round.

"What?"

"It *was* Milly Jean was having an affair with. You misunderstood what I said. I wouldn't have told you but I refuse to be misquoted."

Corny stared at me blankly, without talking, for at least a minute. She was completely shocked and seemed to be refusing to take in what I had told her. Well it was lies.

I too was shocked with what I had done. I, who never interfered in the bear's business, had almost certainly broken up Milly's family. And for what? To save guilty, slimy, stuck up Metro from a beating from Mickey. And surely lying to poor Corny was worse than admitting what I had really seen; what I really knew?

Oh what an absolute mess.

Tears glistened in Corny's eyes. "But he was so insistent. I almost believed him. And it was all lies?" I gulped nervously. "How could he do this to me? Cheating with that slapper again was bad enough but no. He was to fill Little Toff's head with lies and get me and Big Toff almost believing it as well."

"I'm sorry." The words only just came out of my beak. Although probably sounding insincere Corny would never now how heartfelt they were. Apologising was not something I did lightly and something I don't think I'd ever done before. Corny would also never realise exactly what I was apologising for. Unless Metro or Jean ever decided to enlighten her to the truth. But I doubted whether that would ever happen.

Corny turned to go, her tears dripping onto the shelf. "Corny, wait!" Was this the moment to tell her the truth; to put her out of her misery? "Corny you won't mention where you got this from, will you?" I couldn't bring myself to do it. I admit it. I'm a coward. And a rather selfish one at that. "I have my reputation to think of."

"If I had your reputation I wouldn't be worried about keeping it but no, I won't mention your name." I wonder what she meant by that. What did the bears say about me behind my back? Anyway I had more important things to think about. I had ruined Milly's life just to save my principles.

Corny lowered herself down off my shelf just as Big Toff entered the room, his father a few steps behind him. Oh dear. We were in for some fireworks. And as I had lit them I couldn't bear to watch.

CHAPTER 19

"Look Big Toff. It's the truth I promise you. You just have to believe."

"Please just leave me alone. I'm not saying I don't believe you. I think I might be willing to believe what you're saying but I just need a little bit of time to lull it over in my mind and take it all in. Is that alright?"

It wasn't Milly who answered. An emotionally charged Corny had jumped down off the bed and was now striding towards Milly and Big Toff.

"No it flaming well isn't alright," she screeched. Pointing wildly at Milly she bawled, "That bear is a lying, two timing, good for nothing waste of space who you will never ever speak to again. He's used an innocent child to try and get us to believe his lies. And that's what they are. Lies!" She spat the word.

"But Corny..." She slapped him across the face.

"Don't even try to talk. Neither of us want to hear it."

"But Mummy I do. I think he's telling the truth. I thought you were starting to believe him. You said you were going to speak to..."

"Shut up Big Toff!" ordered his mother. I smiled a sad smile. Corny had protected me. She had realised Big Toff was going to say my name. I didn't deserve that act of kindness. "Your Daddy is a liar. We thought he'd changed but he never will. I have it on excellent authority that he was having an affair with Jean after all."

Out of anger Corny punched Milly in the face knocking an already dazed Milly backwards onto the floor. "That was for messing us about." And with that she grabbed hold of a speechless Big Toff's paw and led him swiftly out of the room.

Milly lay on the floor, shaking, for a few minutes. But there were no tears. He had passed that stage of depression.

Suddenly, full of energy, he leapt off the carpet and kicked and punched the wall with his paws. I hoped he didn't mark it as Lucy liked that wallpaper. But it wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

After a minute of this Milly abruptly sprung backwards as if the wall was electrified. It was as if he had suddenly woken up to what he was doing. But from my view point on my shelf his eyes still looked delirious. The shock of being told by his wife that she had concrete proof about an affair he hadn't had, had made him go very strange.

Muttering something I couldn't hear he looked up at the ceiling and started to pull at the fur on his head. All the while he was spinning round and round in a circle, making himself even dizzy. He had completely lost it and I was to blame.

I just hoped that Jean or Metro would walk through the door in the next few seconds, because surely if they saw him like this they would tell Corny the truth. But I was watching him go through this and I could tell Corny the truth. But even if I decided to it wasn't as if I was going to get up off my shelf and go and find her. That would just be breaking the habit of a lifetime. I only move when someone can be bothered to stick their hand up my you know where!

The stairs creaked and there was a babble of chatter. I just prayed to see Metro or Jean, or both of them, to come waltzing through the bedroom door. Not waltzing in the sense of dancing as those two dancing would be laughable and I'm not sure who I was praying to either; someone up there in soft toy

heaven, no doubt. Basically the sentence was a little bit silly!

Milly collapsed back down onto the carpet and silently began to beat his paws against the carpet. He was just in despair and didn't know what to do for the best.

The chatter got louder before John and Samantha (still in bright yellow) bumped into the room.

"I understand that," John was saying, "but I don't see why you brought me up here."

"There's something I need to tell you and I didn't want to compete with all that noise," explained Samantha stepping over Milly. "It's like a flipping circus down there."

"Well what was it you wanted to tell me?" asked John, also stepping over Milly.

I sighed. Any hopes I had that they might have helped poor Milly had now gone. They didn't seem to have even noticed him!

"Oh yes... that. Well you see... You know your father."

"Yes but I'd prefer not to after what he's done to you."

"Mm... well it's purely practical," blurted out Samantha, looking away quickly.

"What is?" asked John, suddenly suspicious.

"Morning all," a voice sounded from the doorway.

Samantha and John spun around to see Pete standing in the doorway with the rota dangling from his hand.

"I don't even want to speak to you," John told him turning away.

Unbeknownst to him, from behind his back Samantha was desperately signalling to Pete, trying to tell him to hide the rota.

Suddenly Pete hid the rota behind his back. But unfortunately he made rather a big thing of it which made John suspicious. Mouthing "Whoops, silly me," at Samantha didn't help matters either.

"What was that?" demanded a suspicious John.

Pete tried to pass it off casually. "Oh just a bit of scrap paper."

"Let me see," instructed John stepping forward.

"There's no point," declared Samantha. "I can explain."

"Explain what?"

Samantha sighed. "I know you're very annoyed with him but it did seem very silly to throw away the rota."

"What?"

"You wouldn't want to waste a tree now would you?"

"If you were so bothered about that you should have bunged it in Lucy's recycling box. So you told him he could look after Toby without even consulting me?"

"Err... err... yes."

"Oh Samantha how could you? It was you he was so nasty to."

"I know but we could with someone to look after Toby. We hardly have any quality time together any more." John shifted uncomfortably. "I can't stand the wrinkly either but..."

"Don't mind me," interspersed Pete. "Just pretend I'm not here."

"Shut up!" shouted Samantha and John in unison. After this show of togetherness they turned to each other and looked lovingly into each other's eyes (although John couldn't maintain eye contact for long).

Touching her on her shoulder he apologised. "Oh I'm sorry Samantha. I was just over reacting. I'm under a bit of stress recently. You're right we could do with an extra pair of hands but just don't expect me to speak to him, that's all."

"I won't. I don't really want to speak to it either."

"Oh this is charming, this is," muttered Pete.

Ignoring him Samantha asked her husband, "Why are you under stress?"

John was spared answering this awkward question because Milly clambered nosily off the carpet and staggered over to Pete; still in a daze.

"Can I borrow that piece of paper?"

"What for?"

"I just need to give a quick message to Corny."

"Oh alright then," agreed Pete, handing over the rota.

"Oi," shouted Samantha seeing what was happening. "What you giving him my rota for?"

"He just wants to give Corny a message."

"Has he lost his voice?"

"No but it's not the sort of thing I can tell her face to face," answered Milly cryptically, making me wonder what he meant. Had he decided to leave and was leaving a note to let her know? But I didn't think he would go without saying goodbye to his children. Then again he wasn't really thinking straight...

Samantha shook her head. "Yes... well make sure you write on the back. I don't want a load of scribble on my rota."

"Okay." Milly paused. "Have you got a pencil on you by any chance?"

Samantha gave him a sarcastic look and lifted up her hands revealing the tight yellow scarf wrapped

around her. "Where would I keep a pencil in this outfit?"

Noticing the revealing slits in the scarf wrapped around his wife John jumped in front of her, stretching out his arms in an attempt to obscure her from view. This seemed rather silly and she normally walked around with nothing on; just like the rest of the bears!

"Samantha," he whispered, "you've just revealed quite a lot of fur."

"Oh don't be such a prude," she admonished. Over his shoulder she called to Milly. "I think there's a pencil in the wardrobe. Catherine's insisting on sketching all the outfits for her wedding so she knows exactly what they look like in case we forget."

"Thanks." Milly dashed into the wardrobe without another word.

"Do you think he's alright?" mused John

"I don't know," replied Samantha. "He seems in a very strange mood. Probably gone off the rails 'cause he's lost his family. But what did he expect? That's what happens when you have an affair." John gulped guiltily. Samantha stared at him peculiarly. "You can stop doing that now John. I've put my arms down."

John turned around just to check that his wife's arms were safely at her side; covering up the slits in the scarf. Seeing that they were, he relaxed his arms and moved to her side.

Just to tease him, Samantha lifted her arms in the air and then dropped them when John went to move.

"Samantha stop that now!"

"Oh stop being a..."

Pete turned to leave the room shaking his head. "You'd expect the mother of a two year old to behave

with at least an ounce of decorum." Luckily for him neither of them heard and he left the room unscathed.

Milly re-emerged from the wardrobe with a pencil in his hand, plonked himself down on the carpet and began writing.

"Oh damn him!" exclaimed Samantha. "Your old wrinkly has cleared off and Milly's still got the rota. When I gave him that rota I expected him to guard it whether it meant life or death. Preferably the latter," she muttered under her breath.

"Samantha I've told you I want nothing to do with him. As far as I'm concerned I don't have a Dad anymore."

"Huh," Milly snorted. Samantha and John turned to look at him. "That's exactly what my Big Toff said to me yesterday. Don't say it lightly John because it really hurts like hell." He sighed. "And then today I almost convinced him, almost convinced him I hadn't been having an affair and then bang. Some lying toe rag goes and ruins everything." He struggled off the floor, like an old bear, and folded up the rota. "Oh well it doesn't matter any more." He moved over to Samantha and John and held out the rota. "Give this to Corny, will you?"

"Can't you give it to her yourself?" asked a curious Samantha.

"No," was the blunt response.

"Please?"

"Oh alright then but I hope she won't want to keep it. It's my rota you know. For when Pete can see Toby. You see what happened was (oh no she's off!) Jean suggested to me that I..."

Milly interrupted. "I really don't want to hear that name. That name's poison to me." He thrust the rota

to Samantha and then turned away and began climbing up the duvet and onto the bed.

Samantha turned to John, with a puzzled expression on her face. "What's Toby ever done to him?"

"What?"

"He said that name was poison to him. Why? What's Toby done to him?"

"I think he meant Jean, Samantha."

"Jean? That's a bit harsh. He can't blame their affair on just her. As my Dad used to say, 'It takes two to tango.'"

"I don't know what he meant but he certainly wasn't himself. He had a detached, far away look in his eyes."

"Mm, I noticed that an' all." Samantha looked nervously around to check no-one was watching. Satisfied that there wasn't (she hadn't taken any notice of the only person who was watching her - me) she whispered to John, "Do you think we should have a look at what he's written?"

"No. It'll be personal and private."

"Do you think?" asked Samantha eagerly, beginning to unfold the rota.

John grabbed her arm. "Samantha that was not what I meant. I was saying that it wouldn't be right to read it."

"Oh John, you're turning into your Dad."

"I am not. I don't want to be compared to that... that..." a word escaped him. I'm not sure why. If I was in his position I'm sure I could think of a couple.

"Okay. I'm sorry." Samantha spread the rota out. "It's alright. Don't look if you don't want to."

"Well... I suppose I could just have a peak." Samantha smiled knowingly as John peered around the edge of the paper.

They began reading in silence. A minute passed. And another. And another. And another. For goodness sake Milly hadn't had time to write a whole essay! Why did it take bears so long to read? I started tapping my two feet, which drooped over the edge of the shelf, together impatiently. Come on. Come on. I wanted to know what it said.

The rota fluttered out of Samantha's hand. They stood fixed to the spot with horrified looks on their faces.

"Oh my life," exclaimed Samantha. "It's a suicide note."

"What?" Metro's pompous voice sounded from the doorway.

Samantha tried to explain what had happened in two seconds and it came out as a babble. "Milly asked to have my rota... wasn't keen but Pete... you know... said give to Corny... and it's suicide note..."

"Where is he now?" demanded Metro.

"I think he went onto the roof," replied John.

Suddenly, as if someone had flicked a switch, Metro went into superhero mode. He bounded up to the bed and skilfully mounted onto it. It was the most active I had ever seen him. Having mounted the bed he sprinted towards the window, his fur blowing in the draft from the open window. Springing onto the window still he sprinted out across the roof top.

Milly was teetering precariously on the bottom of the roof, looking down onto the patio with his arms spread out at his side; ready to jump.

It was all my fault. How would I be able to live with myself? Metro had to get to him in time.

"Milly don't jump. Don't do it," called Metro dramatically; relishing a drama.

Realising he was not alone on the rooftop Milly spun around. "Stay back or I'll jump."

Metro cut his sprint and dramatically held his hands up in the air, trying to mimic what he must have seen people do on the TV. That bear never seemed to amaze me! The situation was bad enough; he didn't need to exaggerate it.

"Come on Milly. Just move away from edge and we can have a good old natter." Oh yes, just what he wanted!

"I don't even want to speak to you. It's you're fault I'm here."

This disturbed Metro and he looked away across the gardens of the street. "I'm sorry. But I never asked Jean to lie. She took it upon herself."

"You didn't put it right though did you?"

"No regrettably I didn't. But I wasn't going to admit to it was I?"

"You would if you had a shred of decency in you," snarled Milly, glaring at him.

There was a few seconds pause. "I know I've behaved selfishly. But I can put it right. I can tell everyone the truth."

"Huh. That's the irony of it all. Now no-one will even believe you if you step forward and admit to it. Because... some little swine... some bitter and twisted swine..." Milly struggled to get the words out and tears rolled down his fur," has told Corny it was true and she trusts them." I think he might have been talking about me. Whoops!

"But surely she'd believe me more if I told her everything."

"Don't know. Probably just think you were doing it to help me."

Metro was insistent. "But would I really help you? We're not exactly best friends."

"Then why are you offering to help?"

"I want to show to you that Jean was behind this not me."

"You ran off though didn't you? You didn't hang around to be caught by Mickey."

"I'm not stupid am I?" I won't comment on that. "No but I'm willing to put myself selfish acts right. Or as right as they can be."

Milly waved his arms in a signal of dismissal. "Don't bother. Corny will get to hear we were here together and will think you're just doing it to stop me jumping. And it's not as if Jean will back you up. Nothing can save me now."

Tears dripped onto the roof from both the bears as they stared pathetically at each other. "Milly don't talk like that. I know we've never seen eye to eye. Well only when you've punched me. Anyway I've probably always been a bit up myself." Probably? But that aside was he going to be able to talk Milly out of it and give me a chance to put everything right? "But although we've had our differences I wouldn't want to think I caused you to jump."

"That's the real reason isn't it!" accused Milly, his eyes wandering. "You just want a clear conscience."

The blinding sun was rising in the sky behind them as morning was breaking causing them to become two small dark shadows on the tiles of the roof. The sun was stinging my eyes and this *was* the reason that a few, only a few, tears trickled down my orange fur.

"Milly that has nothing to do with it. Our feud has been entirely caused by me. I came back here after

abandoning Lenny for six years and stole him away from you. And for that I'm very sorry and want to make amends."

"It isn't me you should be making amends to; it's Lenny."

Metro raised his paw to his face and rubbed away his tears. "I know. I know. But Lenny isn't standing on the edge of the roof. I've been so nasty to you; I can't just let you jump. You wouldn't stand back and watch me jump, would you?" Not a good question.

"I'd try and kid myself that I would but I'm sure if the situation ever arose I'd try and save you; if only to stop me feeling guilty if you'd jumped and I'd done nothing."

Metro looked down at the roof. Not really the response he'd been fishing for. "Anyway that's beside the point," dismissed Metro. "Come away from the edge and everything will be alright."

Milly crouched over the edge; looking down at the patio. Metro froze. He turned towards Metro. Was this the moment he jumped?

No. He slowly stood upright and began pacing towards Metro who visibly relaxed. His shoulders sagged as he breathed a sigh of relief.

As Milly approached his arch enemy he held out his paw. There was a few moments pause as Metro looked suspiciously at Milly whose weary face seemed past caring about shaking his enemy's hand. Milly seemed to have lost the plot as I'm sure a few hours ago he would have died before shaking Metro's paw. Maybe he was just doing it in reverse...

Dramatically, Metro thrust out his paw and firmly shook Milly's; who was looking past him with a glazed expression on his face.

They stood there for at least half a minute; their paws locked, before Metro asked. "Will you let go of my paw now?"

Milly didn't reply but instead pulled Metro closer to him and whispered in his ear. "Get the swine who set me up, will you?" I gulped again. "The one who told Corny they knew for certain I was having an affair."

"You can get him yourself."

Milly smiled regretfully. "For the first time since I've known you you've been very kind but whatever you say no one can save me now."

And with that Milly spun around and bounded towards the edge of the roof.

Realising what was happening Metro, stood rooted to the spot and yelled; "Noooooooooooooooooo!"

I froze as the edge of the roof came ever never for poor old Milly. This was all my doing.

As Milly leapt into the air time seemed to stand still and he seemed to drop in slow motion. But time hadn't slowed or stopped as the ominous ticking of Lucy's clock sounded continuously behind me.

I flinched as Milly plummeted out of view and waited with horror for the light thud as he hit the patio...

CHAPTER 20

Two hours had passed.

Immediately after the fateful jump there had been a horrified screaming that seemed to last for hours (not that I'd ever indulge in exaggeration) and bears seemed to come running from everywhere. Bears had come running from the landing and had climbed onto the roof, some bears had already been on the roof and had started sprinting down to the edge and began climbing down the drainpipe and some bears came running from the bushes in the garden (what they had been doing in there I dread to wonder - the mind boggles!).

And then they had disappeared out of view as from my vantage point I was unable to see the patio (how inconsiderate of Milly to try and kill himself out of my view!).

The initial mayhem was now over but all of the bears (with the exception of Corny, Big and Little Toff) were now on the bed, pushing and shoving to get a look at Tutankhamun the second.

Now I say Tutankhamun the second I don't actually mean Tutankhamun the second (if he existed) I mean Milly who was now wrapped in bandages, tucked up in bed, but was very much alive. Though to be fair no one knew if it was actually possible for bears to die. Though Milly wasn't the first one to try...

A number of years back there had been an old bear called Arthur who was mentally wanting, shall we say, (in other words a few books short of a bookcase) and one day he climbed up onto the roof above Lucy's bedroom and jumped off. None of the bears knew why he had done it but afterwards he claimed

that the Lord had told him to. Not very considerate really...

Anyway he survived and all he achieved was getting very dirty as he landed in Mr Partridge's bag of compost. Lucy never knew where that brown stain on his bottom came from! About a year ago Mrs Partridge realised that Lucy was no longer playing with Arthur so she suggested that he either be put in the loft or in the jumble sale at Lucy's school. Luckily for him he was put in the loft. Well I bet you could have lots of fun in a loft full of junk; if you were a bear that is. I suppose it was the bear equivalent of a mental asylum. If you weren't nutty when you went in you certainly would be when they bothered to get you out. But it was better than a jumble sale; whatever happens to me I just hope that I don't end up in a school hall full of noisy children, next to China teapot, with a price tag on my beak!

Right, getting back to it, Milly, the main attraction, was still unconscious from his jump. He had apparently knocked himself out from his jump and was yet to come round. But 'Nurse Penny' was confident that he would be round shortly. Huh, she made him sound like the milkman!

Suddenly Milly grunted, swung his arm about in the air and let off the noise "Wobblemobbleyurrgh". There were shocked murmurings from the bears; their exhibit had moved. "Did you see that?" "What did he say?" "Is he alright?" And Metro added, "He moved!" He never was the fastest duck to the pond.

Nurse Penny forced her way through the crowd and clambered onto the pillow above Milly's sleeping head. "Right," she announced, "I'm going to have to ask you to all move back. I'm going to try mouth to

mouth resuscitation.” But surely the fact he moved meant he was alive? But then what do I know?

“Ah, that’s your excuse,” joked Santa from the crowd.

“It would be purely for professional purposes,” began Penny but was interrupted by Milly sitting bolt upright in bed.

“Someone’s left my hat on the roof,” he announced and dropped back into the bed. The bears looked at each other in amazement trying to work out what this cryptic message meant.

“I don’t think he needs resuscitating,” Santa informed his wife.

“I can quite see that,” barked an agitated Penny.

“Calm down dear. It’s only a commercial,” teased Santa. Huh! The bears really needed to get out more. They really did watch too much telly. But then again, where was there for them to go? I imagine the garden got boring after a while. Some bears had ventured over the garden fence; some have never been heard of again but others who were aiming to go and stay with relatives had made secret phone calls to the house, once they had arrived at their new accommodation, to say they were alright. Having lived here they knew when the house was likely to be empty so that a Partridge wouldn’t answer the phone. Though a few times the Partridge’s were convinced that they had a persistent prank caller but it was only a bear phoning to say he’d arrived safely - on one occasion the police were called to investigate. Though to be fair the bear in question would obviously have to replace the receiver hastily when they heard the voice of a Partridge; so they couldn’t be blamed.

Moving house presented many problems though. Over the years, long lost relatives of certain bears had

turned up out of the blue and had stayed for a while (in some cases even permanently- much to their relative's 'delight'!). Problems arose when Lucy saw the particular bear on the shelf and wondered where on earth it had come from. Poor old Lucy, eh? She must have thought she was going mad a fair few times.

Coming back to reality I realised that the babble of voices had ceased and the bears had gone ghostly quite. Oh no! Had Milly died while I was thinking?

No. Catherine had entered the room carrying a tower of paper and all the bears were feigning an interest in that remarkable spot on the ceiling.

She stumbled awkwardly into the room as the tower of paper was blocking her view. Plonking the tower onto the carpet she grabbed a handful of paper and began climbing up onto the bed.

And suddenly it dawned on me what they were. Wedding invitations. Mm, wedding invitations to a wedding to which everyone was invited and everyone knew about. Is it me or is that very silly?

But it wasn't just silly. Looking closely at the tower of invitations I could see that they were folded up pieces of A4 paper. A4 paper! 1 piece of paper per bear.

Now no one had ever bothered to count the number of bears, and I certainly wasn't that sad, but a rough estimate would be 47. 47 pieces of A4 paper; more likely than not taken from Mr Partridge's study.

What was he going to say when he saw the dent in his computer paper supply? And what were the bears going to do with their invitations when they'd er... 'used' them.

Catherine climbed over the edge of the bed and placed her smaller pile onto the duvet. Taking the top invitation from the pile she read:

"Pete."

Looking up she saw that the bears' interest was elsewhere. "What you all looking at?"

Realising they weren't going to be able to escape Catherine and her wedding plans they all sighed and turned around. The synchronised sighing sounded like someone letting the air out of a helium balloon.

And then there was a babble of 'innocent' voices. "We wasn't looking at anything." "We were just..." "I was only..." "It was all him!"

A very confused Catherine just stared at them. "Yes well... anyway. Where's Pete?"

A sheepish Pete stepped forward. "I didn't do it Miss."

"Oh don't be a Dipsy. I'm here to give you your wedding invitation but after the way you've treated Samantha you're lucky I'm not here to give you a smack in the mouth."

Ignoring the last comment he asked, "But haven't you already invited everyone?"

"Yes but this is your personal invitation. Look it's even got your name at the top." Catherine pointed proudly at the invitation. "It took a lot of time to work out how to use Mailing Merge or whatever it's called."

"Very impressive," replied Pete sarcastically, "but if everyone knows they're going then why do they all need an invitation."

"I just want everything to be right."

"Is there a slip for me to tear off to say whether I can come or not?" Pete sarcastically uttered.

Catherine smiled her falsest smile. "Everyone is invited. That can be altered." Pete didn't respond. Sensibly he didn't want to miss the wedding of the year. "Right, then," continued Catherine handing Pete his invitation and heading back to her pile. "Who's next?"

Out of the crowd of bears Santa came running over to Catherine. "Er... excuse me Catherine just a quickie."

"Pardon me?"

"Could I just have a quick *word*?" reiterated a rather embarrassed Santa.

"Oh right. Well it'll have to be, I've got all these to hand out."

"Yes... well that's what I wanted to have a word with you about. Do you not think these invitations are a slight waste of paper?"

Catherine sighed and turning back to her pile muttered under her breath, "Oh God it's the tree hugging patrol!"

Catherine turned angrily on Penny, "No I don't. It's for my wedding."

"Yes I know but I'm sure a verbal invitation would have been just as effective."

"Oh what is it with you bears? Why don't you want a glitzy invitation with your name printed at the top in bold, Times New Roman 13.5 font?" Santa went to reply but Catherine bumbled on. "I just want my wedding to be proper. Corny was allowed to give out invitations for The Milly and Corny Wedding Mark Two without being pestered by dodderies and tree huggers."

"Well Corny did only invite a handful of guests."

"Only because they couldn't find anyone who wanted to go and watch a repeat. There're enough of them on the telly."

"Anyway that isn't my only concern. Do you not think you could have found a more appropriate occasion to hand out your pieces of tree?" asked Santa.

"Oh for crying out loud. I can't print the blighters and now I can't even hand them out."

"I'm just suggesting that there might have been a more appropriate occasion to hand them out. Milly has just tried to kill himself."

"No he hasn't," dismissed Catherine lightly, "he merely jumped off the roof. Anyway it's turned into a perfect opportunity. I needed everyone together to hand out my invitations. If this hadn't happened I'd have had to try and round them all up, and you know how hard that is, (why on earth would Santa know how hard that is?) but Milly jumping has saved me the bother."

"Catherine you're exploiting someone else's misfortune."

"Oh you make me sound like a right ogre. Next you'll be saying I pushed him off."

Santa froze and stared hard at her. "You didn't did you?"

"Oh for goodness sake. I can't pass wind without an inquisition."

Before Santa could respond Penny called. "Santa come quickly."

Casting one last disapproving look at Catherine Santa charged back into the crowd of bears towards his wife.

Catherine shook her head and, grumbling under her breath about "Tree hugging loonies", proceeded to hand out her "pieces of tree."

Santa had now fought his way through the crowd and was standing at his wife's side. "Santa, Santa he's waking," his wife was telling him.

Looking at Milly I saw that he was stretching out his long arms and yawning as if this was early morning and he was bracing himself for the day. His eyes opened and Penny leaned over her patient.

Upon seeing Penny Milly's expression was one of surprise. Cautiously he greeted her with the word:

"Morning."

"Morning," responded Penny after glancing quickly at Lucy's clock to check that she wasn't committing a horrendous error. That would just never do. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Happened? When?"

"This morning."

"This morning? Penny dear are you alright? I've just woken up."

"So you don't know what you did?"

"Well I just did a bit of a stretch. Before that I was asleep. Oh yeah. I had a horrible dream where I had an affair with Jean, Corny found out and so I jumped off the roof."

Penny paused. "I'm sorry to tell you this but that really happened."

Milly just stared at her; dumbfounded. "What all of it? Even the affair with Jean?" Penny nods her head. "My, I have been busy this morning! I bet I'm in trouble now aren't I?" I was amused by how unconcerned he seemed by the fact that he'd tried to kill himself.

"Don't be silly," Penny reassured him. "Everyone's come to see if you're alright."

Milly noticed the rabble of bears peering at him for the first time. Rather nervously he raised his paw in the air in recognition. "Morning."

Jean stepped forward out of the crowd and came over to Milly. "I think we need to have a word."

"Yeah. I'm very sorry if I had an affair with you. I can't remember a thing after... well I don't know. I can't remember the last thing I can remember."

"That's what I need to talk to you about." Jean turned round to face the crowd. "Could we have a little bit of privacy please?"

Reluctantly the bears turned slowly around and trudged away muttering things like, "I wonder what they're going to be doing," and "The cheek of them, making it so obvious like that." I heard Chester grumbling that it was, "a disgrace. And my mother used to be such a reputable bear as well."

As the bears climbed down off the bed and headed towards the door, Catherine chased frantically after them waving her invitations shouting, "Oi what about my invitations?" I could have sworn (not literally) that the bears seemed to hurry out the door when they saw Catherine on their trail. I wonder why that could have been...

Milly and Jean were finally alone. Milly started talking. "Don't worry Jean I haven't forgotten a thing. I was just seeing if pretending to forget would change anything but I soon realised that Corny hadn't even bothered to come see if I was alright. She probably wished I'd..."

"Milly don't even say it," interrupted Jean sternly.

"And why do you suddenly care? I thought I was getting my just deserts."

"No one deserves to be driven to throw themselves off the roof and for that I'm really, really sorry. More than I can say in words. Metro told me how he tried to talk you out of jumping and how you said that even if he told the truth now it wouldn't make a difference. Apparently you told him that now only I could put your life back on track. Well that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to tell Corny the truth." Well thank goodness for that. At least it saved me from having to put Corny straight; well I couldn't have just left it at that, could I?

A smile of relief started to appear on Milly's face; the tension of the last few days flowed out of his body. And right on cue Corny, Big Toff and Little Toff strolled into the room; they had come to visit Milly. They had obviously been waiting until the rabble dispersed, but were unaware that Milly still had a visitor.

"Oh Jean. You'll do it?"

"Yes of course I will. I can't let you suffer anymore. You've had more than even punishment for all your philandering and so now I'm going to put it all right." Corny and co began climbing up the duvet. "While you were lying unconscious I just kept thinking, 'What if he doesn't wake up? I'll have as good as killed him,'" and I realised how mean I've been."

"Forget it," Milly instructed her. "It doesn't matter now." He smiled and struggled to sit up in Lucy's bed. "Oh Jean you're a star." Tutankhamun the second leaned forward and gave Jean a big bear hug.

Corny, Big Toff and Little Toff popped up over the edge of the bed.

"Oh I love you Jean," Milly told her warmly. Oh dear. If he could see Corny's face he wouldn't be smiling!

"We've caught you at it!" screeched Corny.

Jean spun around and Milly almost leapt out of the bed in surprise. I'm sure I heard the ripping of his bandages.

"Corny... Corny..." stammered Milly, "it's not what it looks like."

"Oh no," mocked Corny angrily, "I suppose you were just itching her back!"

"Now you're just being silly."

"Oh pardon me. But I'm not the one with my arms round my brother's sister (thank goodness for that!) telling her how much you love her and then trying to deny that there's anything going on."

"But Corny all that happened was that..."

Corny interrupted. "I'm sure that pigs came flying through the window but I'm really not interested in your silly excuses. I've had enough of your stupid, pathetic lies; in fact I've had enough of you. And when I think back to Sunday my stuffing boils. You were excusing me of having an affair with Santa and all the time you and your floozy (Jean stood up - trouble was brewing) were planning the next time you could give the clothes in Lucy's wardrobe an eyeful! And now... and now," tears trickled down her face as she struggled to get her words out, "now you have the absolute nerve to do it in front of your children with your trollop of a tart."

Marching towards her Jean shouted, "Who are you calling a trollop?"

"You deary," answered Corny bitterly and fiercely.

"Well for your information the reason Milly was hugging me was because..." Corny slapped her across the face.

Jean gasped; indignant and clasped her face. "You!" Jean then slapped Corny across the face. Big Toff and

Little Toff gasped and Milly slid slowly under the duvet. The shock of being slapped knocked Corny off her feet. But she quickly sprung back up.

"Right you've asked for this!" she shouted and lunged herself at Jean. Jean hadn't been expecting this and was knocked back onto the duvet with a raging Corny on top of her. Big Toff and Little Toff screamed but made absolutely no attempt to move. I heard a groan from under the duvet as Milly realised that it was all kicking off. Oh well, not to worry, I'm sure Big Toff and Little Toff were about to intervene. Any time now...

Corny and Jean rolled about on the duvet, hurling abuse at each other and growling rather viciously.

"You two timing slapper!"

"You vicious animal!"

"Isn't Mickey enough for you?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Not a good response!

Jean screamed as Corny started to beat with her paws but then started to strike back. Before I knew it they had become a blur and all I could see was fur flying upwards. The odd bit landed on the stationary Big Toff and Little Toff but they just brushed it off. Well as long as they weren't inconvenienced.

The screaming and rolling about continued.

"Get off me you cow!"

"Never!"

Suddenly I realised that they were rolling perilously close to the edge of the be... Too late they'd gone!

There was a loud thud as they crashed onto the carpet but a shocked Big Toff and Little Toff still stood rooted to the spot.

Instead of getting up and dusting themselves down and apologising amicably, they just continued rolling about on the floor, pawing viciously at each other. Well, what had I expected really?!

The abuse and screams continued. Surely some of the bears downstairs must have been getting curious about what was going on. Any moment someone would rush in and put a stop to the whole thing. Surely?

The blur of fur hurtled towards the wardrobe door, leaving a trail of brown and purple fur in its wake. They really were heading quite fast towards the wardrobe. They were going to have to stop soon.

Smash! Crash! "Ahhhhhhhhh!"

If you're wondering what all that was about well the smash was as they slammed into the wardrobe (obviously), the crash was as the wardrobe rattled violently and it sounded as if everything inside fell down and the "Ahhhhhhhhh!" was Big Toff trying to be dramatic.

After hitting the wardrobe Jean had bounced off it and now lay a metre away from Corny, who was sprawled up against the wardrobe door. Oh well, at least they're learnt their lesson now.

Oh dear, I had spoken too soon.

Suddenly Corny sprung off the floor and ran towards Jean, screaming wildly. Hearing her coming, a rather shaken Jean struggled off the floor and sensibly hobbled as quickly as her legs would carry her towards the chest of drawers under my shelf. Yes, very intelligent, don't bother running for the door just head for that chest of drawers they'll give you shelter.

A thought struck me. I hoped she wasn't coming up to my shelf; I didn't want a slanging match on my shelf thank you very much.

Jean lost her balance and almost tumbled into the chest of drawers before clambering awkwardly up them using the handles on the drawers.

Just as Jean had lifted her leg up onto the handle of the second of the three drawers the 'bull' (otherwise known as Corny) charged into the bottom drawer.

After regaining her composure she began to mount the drawers. "I'm going to get you, you cow!" she shouted up after Jean. "Don't think you can get away!"

The breathing under the duvet seemed to be getting heavier; indeed the lump under the duvet seemed to be going up and down a lot faster.

Jean desperately reached for the next handle but she just couldn't get a good enough grip on it.

Corny grabbed her leg. Jean yelped. She lunged at the third handle.

She was now being slowly stretched as Corny pulled her downwards and she desperately held on to the handle. Suddenly with her free leg she lashed out at Corny's paw and gasping in pain Corny let go.

With no time to lose, Corny had now got a grip on the second handle; Jean hauled herself up and onto the top of the chest of drawers. Corny began reaching for the third handle. Jean stood for a moment on top of the chest of drawers - which was occupied by a vase of fake flowers, a few of Lucy's expensive ornaments and a couple of photo frames with pictures of Lucy and her family - trying to get her breath back. Then she sprinted towards the back of the chest of drawers and flung herself through the air at the shelf, which all the bears used to climb up to me.

Jean must have done this at least 17 times before (not that I'm counting), as she was one of my most frequent visitors but this time she hadn't got close

enough to the shelf before jumping. Her flailing arms desperately grabbed at the shelf and she just managed to cling on.

Corny thrust herself onto the top of the chest of drawers as Jean desperately tried to swing her legs onto the shelf and to relative safety.

Seeing her dangling legs Corny sprinted towards her. "You won't get away!"

Hearing Corny's voice so near made Jean panic and frantically she tried to swing her legs onto the shelf but this wild action just made her position even more insecure.

Corny grabbed hold of Jean's swinging legs and wrenched her down off the shelf. Jean screamed as she thumped down onto the top of the chest of drawers.

Suddenly Corny went absolutely bonkers and started kicking and kicking a whimpering Jean. Someone had to intervene! But there was no way Big Toff or Little Toff were going to intervene now that their Mum was on top. Instead I saw them both give a little smile.

Corny stopped kicking. She drew back her foot and prepared to kick. This was going to hurt. Suddenly Jean wailed and leapt up. Jean lunged forward and gave an off balance Corny a hefty shove, before she even knew what was happening. Corny toppled backwards and slid across the top of the chest of drawers into one of the photo frames.

The frame smashed onto the carpet; one whopping metre below (well it was a long way for the bears!). Glass lay sprinkled on the floor as Lucy and her brother smiled up at me.

Hitting the frame had stopped Corny from going over the edge as well. Now she jumped with new

vigour and grabbed the vase. What was she going to do with Mr and Mrs Partridge's best china vase?

Jean ducked as the vase smashed against the wall and the flowers sprinkled onto the chest of drawers. Everyone in the room, except Corny, gasped; even me. Things were getting out of hand. Were they not thinking about what the Partridges would say when they got home? ... No I don't suppose they were.

In retaliation Jean thrust up a photo frame and chucked it at Corny.

Corny managed to get out of the way in time but the frame lay cracked into two on the carpet below. Corny lowered her head and charged at Jean screeching, "I'm going to get you now!"

At the last possible moment Jean craftily sidestepped out of the way. Corny flew past her and collided with the wall. A panting and rather disorientated Corny lay prone on the floor. But instead of giving her time to recover Jean hurled her onto her feet and flung her across the top of the chest of drawers.

I gasped as Corny crashed on top of two of Lucy's ornaments; crushing them to pieces.

A dazed Corny lay among the debris for a few moments before springing up and lunging herself at Jean. Both bears slid across the top of the chest of drawers clearing it of any remaining photo frames before sliding off the edge. They screamed as they plummeted towards the carpet below.

But if you thought the fall would stop them you were very much mistaken. They were now in full swing.

Jean dragged herself off the carpet first but Corny reached out her paw in an attempt to trip her up. Stumbling, Jean dashed towards the bed.

Realising Jean was getting away Corny sprung up like a Jack-in-box (oh dear - that conjured up bad memories) and bounded across the carpet.

Hearing Corny's breath on her back Jean literally flung herself at the bed spread in an attempt to make it back onto the bed. But she hadn't jumped high enough (not for the first time in this encounter) and still had about a foot before she reached the bed. Jean desperately pawed her way up the duvet but Corny grabbed her kicking legs and wrenched her down. But Jean clung on to the duvet. This however was not enough to hold her up as the duvet was fixed to anything.

The duvet slid down off the bed, revealing a startled Milly who was rather curious to know where the duvet had gone, and swept Big Toff and Little Toff onto the carpet as their floor disappeared from under them before crumpling down onto the carpet covering Jean and Corny from sight.

Suddenly there was yelping and screaming from underneath the duvet and it started to violently lift up and down. The fight was continuing under the duvet.

And then relief. Stung into action by being knocked off the bed, Big Toff and Little Toff jumped up off the carpet and sprinted towards the tangled mass of duvet and fur. Bravely, they plunged themselves into the darkness of the duvet. They were so brave they had waited until half the room had been wrecked before getting involved.

Moments later Big Toff emerged from the crumpled duvet dragging his mother behind him, who was violently kicking and resisting whilst shouting, "Let me get her! Let me get her!" From the other end of the duvet marched a disgruntled Jean, with Little Toff

desperately clinging onto her bottom. Nice to see who was in control!

"Calm down. Calm down," Big Toff whispered soothingly in his mother's ear.

Jean headed towards the door and with a little shake of her bottom left an exhausted Little Toff panting on the carpet. Jean marched past Pete who had been leaning on the doorframe watching the show for the past few minutes, but hadn't thought to get involved. I could criticise that action but really that's what I did everyday.

"Good morning," he greeted her cheerfully but she just ignored him. Really! But what can you expect from a bear who has an affair with Metro and flings photo frames across the room?

After regaining his breath Little Toff picked himself up and trudged over to his brother and mother.

"Let me go!" Corny was shouting at Big Toff whilst trying to break free of his grip.

"Mummy she's gone. She's gone."

"Don't let her get away... Don't... let her get..." Corny broke down in tears as she finally came to her senses and realised how desperately pathetic the fighting and ranting had been. She grabbed hold of Big Toff warmly and sobbed into his arms.

"It's going to be alright," he reassured her. Why did the bears always say that? It really got on my beak.

Not wanting to miss out of on a big bear hug with his mother and brother, Little Toff jogged towards them and leapt on top of them with his arms spread out. Although slightly disgruntled at first Big Toff and Corny smiled and put their furry arms around him. Ah, wasn't this nice! I felt a tear coming to my eye.

Little did I know that the ‘hankies at the ready’ moment was still to come.

This touching family scene had attracted all my attention and I didn’t notice that Milly had risen and had moved to the edge of the bed, until he spoke that was.

“Corny?”

Everyone looked up, rather shocked to hear his voice. It’s not as if he was dead. “Now you’ve let off (oh she hasn’t has she?) all your pent up frustrations do you think you’re ready to make a decision about us?”

“Yes. I’m ready.” She gently eased her two sons away and took a few paces towards the bed before looking up at Milly. “I’m leaving. Without you.”

Big Toff and Little Toff gasped and Milly looked as if he was about to faint. His legs started to quiver and he sat down with a bump.

Tears streamed down his face as he pleaded with her. “No Corny don’t... please. Just stay one more day ... and... and let me prove that I didn’t have an affair.”

Corny smiled sadly. “Milly that’s just immaterial now... That really doesn’t matter now. And do you know something, this’ll really sound wet but, I actually believe you didn’t have an affair. While we were scrapping under the duvet Jean said to me, “You really are a stupid cow. Do you really think I’d have been so stupid as to go anywhere near your idiot husband again? You’re welcome to him.”

Milly smiled pathetically. “She really does have a way with words. But Corny if you believe that then why are you going?”

Corny gesticulated with her arms. “Look around you. I’ve trashed poor Lucy’s room. When the rest of

the bears find out about it they'll all hate me. And I'm sure 'innocent' little Jean isn't wasting time in telling them. I've got to get away from here before they come upstairs. There's nothing left for me here."

Milly gulped. The words only just came out. "What about me?"

"Our marriage is over. There's no trust any more. Now I know this latest incident is my fault but you did accuse me of having an affair with Santa and I'd have been more willing to believe you if you hadn't had affairs in the past."

Milly glanced at Big Toff and Little Toff and then mouthed, "Well I'm not the only one."

"See that's exactly what I mean. There's just no trust left. All we can do is argue and rake up the past. We've had some fun but now like all good things it's come to an end. And that's why I'm leaving. There's nothing left for me here."

"What about the kids?" a tearful Milly sobbed.

Corny took a deep breath. "They're coming with me."

Milly swept his tears away. "They flipping aren't."

"They flipping are!"

"Corny I've suffered enough these past few days for something I haven't done. I'm not losing my kids as well."

"They're my kids too."

"But you're the one moving."

"But I gave birth to them."

"I didn't know it was a competition." Milly sighed. "Look can I come with you. There's nothing left for me here either. Every one thinks I'm a two timing scoundrel (er... I don't know how to break this to you but they thought that anyway). Let's move away together and make a fresh start."

Corny paused for a few moments and scratched her head. "Milly look... I'm moving away for a fresh start without you. I've already explained. Our marriage has run its course and now it's time to move on."

"And I can just about except that but you don't have to move the kids as well. Why do you think you can just move away at the drop of a hat and have the right to take the kids with you?"

"Well... because... you see... er..." the reason seemed to evade Corny. "Right let's ask them then." Corny turned to face Big Toff and Little Toff who had each been watching with baited breath with one arm around the other brother's shoulder. "Do you want to stay with your Daddy or come away with me?"

"Where are you going Mummy?" asked Little Toff innocently.

"I don't know. Wherever the wind takes me."

"Why is it a bit windy outside?"

"No, no. It's just a term of phrase." Corny smiled at Little Toff's innocence. Huh! He wasn't that innocent I can tell you; not when he was loosening my shelf and making me fall flat on my derriere. Oh Santa's got me at it as well now! "So do you want to come with me or not?"

"Not if it's windy."

"IT ISN'T FLIPPING WINDY!" shouted Corny. Little Toff jumped; taken aback. Corny quickly dashed over to him and put her arm around him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just a little bit tense." Little Toff began to cry into his mother's arms. "It's alright Little Toff, don't cry."

"But I want to stay here. It's my home."

"It's alright Little Toff. It's alright. I perfectly understand if you want to stay with your Daddy."

"But I want to stay with you as well," sobbed Little Toff.

"It'll be alright," Corny reassured him, "you'll be fine with Daddy." Knowing he was a lost cause she turned to her other son. "Big Toff?"

Big Toff returned his mother's gaze with a sombre expression on his face but remained silent. Interpreting this look Corny turned away sighing, "Oh right, as long as I know where I stand."

Suddenly Big Toff gushed into speech. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... It's just that if Daddy didn't have an affair then I've got a lot to make up for."

"Big Toff it's fine. I understand. So please don't apologise. If anyone should be apologising then it's me. I'm abandoning you just because things have got a little bit tough." Corny craned her neck to listen as there were the sounds of footsteps on the stairs. She dashed to the bed and mounted up it (obviously not using the duvet as that was still on a pile on the floor!) with Big Toff and Little Toff close behind. Having climbed onto the bed she hurried over to Milly who was huddled up on the floor, had his head in his hands and was sobbing violently. Corny placed her paw on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Milly, I really am but trust destroyed our marriage; well a lack of it."

"No. I had almost got you to see the truth but then some spiteful so and so [me] poisoned your mind. They destroyed our marriage. Who was it?" blubbered a tearful Milly. Was Corny going to drop my in the frying pan or whatever the expression was?

"I'm sure he was just mistaken in what he saw like we all were."

"Oh, so it's a he is it?" asked Milly, pouncing on Corny's slip up as his tears continued to plop onto the bed. My wings started to shiver.

"Look I'm not going to tell you who it was. I refuse to break their confidence and it would only cause trouble after I've gone." Thank goodness for that! "I want to leave knowing that everything will be alright and you'll look after Big Toff and Little Toff."

Milly stared up at her, his tears glistening in the midday sunlight. "Of course I will. They're my world. But... you are too," choked Milly.

"I'm sorry Milly that things have come to this. Maybe one day..." her words drifted away. The footsteps on the stairs were getting louder. "I'll have to go." She leaned forward and kissed him on his forehead. "Bye."

Milly reached out his bandaged paw and gently grabbed Corny's arm. "I love you Corny. That will never ever change."

Corny nodded in acknowledgement and made her way towards the window. Big Toff and Little Toff followed behind her; subdued and with silent tears running down their faces.

They all clambered up onto the window sill and then Corny turned around. "Big Toff. Little Toff. I'll think about you everyday... You'll be in mind for as long as I'm a bear. I didn't want to leave you but I understand that this is your home and... and... you don't want to... leave it." Tears now streaked down Corny's face as well.

"Don't go Mummy," begged Little Toff.

Footsteps now sounded on the landing.

Corny knelt down and kissed Little Toff warmly on both cheeks. "I have to. I love you."

"I love you too."

Corny affectionately ruffled the fur on Little Toff's head before moving along to Big Toff. She kissed him

as she had done with his brother and then whispered in his ear:

"Look after your brother. Help him get through whatever life throws."

"I will do Mummy," promised an emotional Big Toff.

"I'm sure he'll be fine. He's... always... always been... Lucy's favourite..." I think it had suddenly hit Corny what she was leaving behind. This was the last time she would ever see her darling cuties and she broke down in tears. "I... love... you... .. Big Toff," she sobbed.

The footsteps on the landing had got louder and Corny picked herself up off the floor.

"I love you both." She blew them a kiss before turning away and half running onto the roof.

The two sobbing brothers hugged each other; both inconsolable.

Milly had struggled up onto the window sill and was now standing behind them. As Corny disappeared over the edge of the roof and made her way down the drainpipe Milly stepped forward and thrust his arms around his two sons. They flinched at the sudden contact of fur before turning and seeing their innocent "Daddy" and then they hugged him back.

Corny was out of sight for just a few seconds. Then she emerged onto the lawn striding out towards her new life. As she reached the fence at the bottom of the garden and began climbing up it Chester stepped into Lucy's bedroom.

Corny mounted the fence, easily and energetically. When she reached the top she turned around and stood for a few moments taking one last look at the house and the garden. She saw Milly, Big Toff and

Little Toff huddled together at the window, crying hysterically and she raised a paw in recognition of the final farewell.

Almost like robots, Milly, Big Toff and Little Toff raised their paws too. Corny smiled.

And then she was gone.

Chester had been surveying the room and now he saw the huddle of sobbing bears by the window.

“What in the name of goodness has been going on here?”

CHAPTER 21

The following hour had been one of chaos as Chester had rallied all the willing bears together (there wasn't that many) to tidy up Lucy's bedroom. An emotional Milly had offered no help and had not waited long before hurrying downstairs with Big Toff and Little Toff. Penny, who had needless to say been there with her paws glistening, had been put in charge of tidying up the chest of drawers. Santa had taken away the broken items to see what could be done with them - but what you could do with a shattered photo frame and a headless ornamental ostrich was really beyond me.

The work was now just about finished. The broken items had been cleared away, the duvet had been fluffed, folded and replaced and on top of the chest of drawers, where there had once been three photo frames, sevens ornaments and one vase of flowers, stood a solitary ornamental owl in the exact centre. Penny had taken great care to ensure the dimensions were just so but I think Lucy might just notice the difference when she returned.

All the bears had now filtered out of the room. All except Pete and John who, after rather reluctantly had "done their bit for the bear community" as Chester had put it, now sat on the windowsill with their legs dangling over the edge and about a 40 inch gap between them.

Pete broke the awkward silence. "I don't know why you're even sitting with me."

"No, neither do I."

Pete sighed. That approach hadn't worked. He tried a different tactic. "Oh come on John. I just threw a

tinney winney bit of abuse at Samantha. She gave as good as she got. "

"That's not the point. From what I've heard you made her very upset."

"Oh she's just dramatic..." Pete stopped himself. He realised that that wasn't the best response. "Yes I'm sure she was very upset. And I'm very sorry. I'm sure you'll never be able to find it in your heart to forgive me." Move aside I think I want to vomit. Paw licking really wasn't Pete's style.

"You're right."

Pete abandoned the paw licking. "Oh John don't be such a drama queen. It was just a bit of banter. You know what she's like. You must have called her a few things yourself."

John was indignant; his father had hit a sore spot. "I love Samantha dearly."

"Of course you do, I just meant..."

"But I'm having an affair with Catherine!" Yes, that was the way to shut him up!

A confused and rather taken aback Pete, sat making gesticulations with his hands and muttering as he tried to take this in. "An affair... I see... an affair... with Catherine. With Catherine!" He sprung up. "Sorry John I think I misheard you. Could you just run that one past me once more?"

"I'm having an affair with Catherine."

"Right... now when you say Catherine do you mean the one who's getting married tomorrow afternoon?"

John nodded and covered his face. His muffled voice told Pete:

"I just had to tell someone."

"There. There." Pete moved across the barrier of 40 inches and placed his paw on his shoulder.

"Samantha will never find out. We can go and end it now and she'll never be the wiser." We? She hadn't been having an affair with both of them!

"No. You don't understand. I don't want to end it. I've fallen in love with her."

"But what about Samantha? Don't you love her?"

"Oh as if you care about her!"

"John!" admonished Pete. "She's the mother of my grandchild."

"Is that all she is to you? A bear who churns out babies?"

"Well from what you're saying, you don't think a lot more of her!"

"How dare you? I love Samantha. Just... just in a different way. Samantha is more dependable, more predictable."

"Samantha? Predictable? Come on. She's as an unreliable and as unpredictable as you can get."

"Yes I know she's very eccentric and all that but she's so unpredictable that she's predictable because I always know that she's going to be unpredictable." No, I didn't understand that either! "With Catherine there's a sense of danger. The thrill of trying to escape discovery. I feel a buzz of excitement running through my stuffing."

Pete shook his head. "How can you say Samantha is boring? She's a live wire; the same sort of bear that Catherine is."

"But I'm meant to be with Samantha! Catherine's like the forbidden fruit. When I'm with Samantha I feel safe, secure. But when I'm with Catherine I feel alive."

"But you can get that sort of buzz from doing anything."

"Like what?"

"Oh I don't know... Have you ever tried chess? My fur always stands on end when I get into a good game of chess. The other day..."

John interrupted. "Dad, moving pieces of plastic up and down a board isn't going to replace the excitement of being with Catherine."

"I'd be happy to give you a game anytime."

"Oh Dad shut up about your stupid game of chess. It was a mistake ever telling you."

"No John it was a mistake getting involved with a bear soon to be married when you've got a wife and little one."

John considered this. "But she wasn't even with Chester when we started our fling."

Pete wasn't impressed. "Strewth! How long has it been going on for?"

"Oh, about six months."

"Six months! Oh John you've been so stupid. Why didn't you come to me sooner?"

"I never intended to tell you at all. It's not something one discusses with one's father but well it's the wedding you see. It makes it more of a problem."

"No it don't. You dump her and let her marry Chester. Simple. Problem over."

"Dad... I don't think I can let her marry him."

Pete took a few moments to take this in. Well he was getting old, like me really, so it did take longer for things to go in. "But why not? It's not as if you can marry her. You've got Samantha."

"You just don't want me to divorce the baby machine," accused John.

"John, you just said you loved her. Well you can't love her that much if you're willing to divorce her for a bit of fun with her best friend."

"I do love her but I just can't bear to see Catherine marrying someone else when it's me that she loves."

"She can't love you that much if she's marrying Chester."

"She says she doesn't love me; that it's Chester she loves, but I know that's not true Dad."

"Are you really willing to take that chance? Are you willing to throw away your family on the off chance that Catherine will marry you instead of Chester? And what exactly do you intend to do? Run down the aisle shouting, 'Don't do it Catherine!'"

"If necessary, yes."

"Oh John listen to yourself. Do you think she's going to marry you if you throw away her chance of happiness with Chester? And what if she turns you down? What then? Samantha will know about your sordid affair with her best friend, I imagine she'll go ballistic and that will be the end of your marriage. And you'll probably lose Toby as well. Look at what happened to Milly. He had a little bit of fun with Jean and now he's lost Corny for good. And he was lucky not to lose Big Toff and Little Toff as well. It's only because they wanted to stay with their Dad, why I've no idea, but I don't think at two years old Toby's going to get much of a say in it. Even if he could talk who knows if he'd want to stay with you after you've torn his family apart. So if they moved away, as they probably would considering that Samantha would have lost her best friend and husband and she's been wanting to get away from me for years, then you'd never see Toby again and he'd grow up without a father; his only recollection of you would be a pink blob. I know what that feels like; not been there to see your son grow up. And I'd never see my grandkid again either."

"That's all you care about isn't it? You don't give a stuff about Samantha; as long as you can you can see your precious Toby."

"John I wasn't there to see you grow up as a little bear and that's been my biggest regret. But there's nothing I can do to change that but I can make sure I'm there for my grandkid. And I do care about Samantha. Okay I've never really got along with her and I've never really thought she was right for you but I wouldn't wish this upon anyone. Despite all her faults she loves you and I suppose is a fairly good mother to Toby; some of the time." Pete couldn't find it in himself to be completely positive. "And I certainly don't think that Catherine would make a better wife for you. She's even worse than Samantha."

"I'd never wish to hurt Samantha."

"But if you stop that wedding tomorrow then you're going to."

"I know. I know. I've got to chose who I love the most. Samantha or Catherine?"

"Don't forget Toby."

"I never will. I'll always love him."

"It's all very well saying that but he won't know that if you're not there to tell him. So I'd think very carefully before you interrupt that ceremony tomorrow. Because there'll be no going back."

"I know. I know."

Pete rose. "I'll leave you in peace now. You've got a lot of thinking to do before tomorrow."

"About what?"

Samantha had come up the roof and was now standing behind them in the window frame, with the rota dangling in her paw.

John and Pete spun round. "Nothing," blurted out Pete.

"Nothing?" queried Samantha.

John hastily butted. "What Dad meant when he said "Nothing" was that it was nothing of any importance."

"Well what was it? If you've got something on your mind you can tell me."

"Oh it was just something silly."

"You can say that again," muttered Pete.

"What was silly?" persisted Samantha.

"Oh ... I'd just been asking Dad for some advice..."

"... about what clothes to wear for the wedding tomorrow," completed Pete. "And I told him he'd need to have a think about it."

"Oh right." Samantha laughed. "You really have cracked up haven't you John? Going to your old wrinkly for fashion advice. He wouldn't know fashion if it walked round with Neon lights. And you've been wasting your time anyway. Catherine only wants the bride, bridesmaids, groom and best bear to wear clothes so they stand out."

"Really? I had no idea about that." That was probably the truth; John hadn't exactly taken an interest in the wedding's minor details.

"Anyway I thought you weren't speaking to the wrinkly."

"Samantha I'd be grateful if you didn't refer to me as the wrinkly."

"And I'd be grateful if you'd put a sock in it!" She turned back to John. "Well?"

"Oh we've patched up our differences. It's all sorted now."

"Right but he better not think he can insult me again. Not if he wants to keep to the rota."

"Oh I won't. I won't. I've turned over a new leaf," replied Pete cheerfully but rather falsely.

"No one asked you," retorted Samantha sternly before stopping herself. She seemed to become aware of the rota dangling in her paw and then remembering why she was holding it, let rip at Pete. "Oi you! Talking of keeping to the rota, you're meant to be looking after Toby now. "

"Why can't you do it?"

"Whoa! Whoa! That isn't the attitude. 12.00pm to 4.00pm is your slot. If you want to miss the first slot we've ever given you then go right ahead but don't think you'll be getting another one. And if you must know I've got my fitness session with Chester and Catherine."

"Oh well I can't argue with that. But I don't know how you expect me to know when my slots are if I don't have the rota."

"But I need this one," Samantha jiggled the piece of paper about, "to check whether you're keeping to it."

"But how can I keep to it when I don't know what it says?"

"I went through it yesterday; slot by slot."

Pete cringed at the memory. "Oh I know. I know. And very exhilarating it was too but I haven't got a photographic memory."

"Well I wasted my time then didn't I? I knew you wasn't listening."

"Oh I was. I was."

"If you're not committed to learning it off by heart..."

"Oh I am. I am. I just... just haven't had the chance yet."

"Mm. Been too busy watching dreary "Bang Bangs" (that's Westerns for those of you not on Samantha's wavelength), have you?"

Pete was about to respond but Samantha beat him to it.

"Anyway have this one for now," Samantha thrust the rota into his paws. "I think I've just about learnt I off by heart by now. Now let me see. On Saturday you've got the one slot at..."

Pete hastily interrupted. "No, no it's fine. I believe you."

Samantha was slightly disgruntled at being interrupted from her flow, which would have probably lasted for an hour or two. Non stop. Without a pause! "I was going to have to print another one off anyway, I don't want to see the words "I'll see you in bear heaven" every time I look at how long your 3pm slot on Tuesday lasts while I have my legs waxed." Uh! I cringed at this thought. I had never seen it done but I was told it involved plasters from Mrs Partridge's medicine cupboard and wasn't at all pleasant! "It was most inconsiderate of Milly; using my rota for his suicide note." Yes, why couldn't he have just done it quietly in the corner! "Anyway there's no time to stand about chatting. You need to hurry. I've left Toby with Penny. If you don't hurry up she'll already have got Santa to try and explain Pythagoras' theorem to him. I've always said to John we don't want Toby to turn into one of them boffins."

"No," agreed Pete. "You want to keep him more on your level." He clambered down quickly off the windowsill. Before Samantha, who was almost literally fuming at Pete's comment, could think of a rude retort he called up to her. "Enjoy your fitness session. You could do with shedding a few pounds." He quickly slid down off the bed; out of firing range! There was a plant pot on the windowsill but we'd had enough of that already for one day!

"The cheeky little wotsit!" mumbled Samantha. Pete jogged cheekily (but not quickly) out of the room waving the rota above his head. "Yes you run! You'll have an extra leg in minute!" Samantha turned to John who had been sitting on the windowsill; deep in thought and hadn't been paying any attention to his father's antics. "Did you hear what he said, John?"

"Pardon? What?"

"Oh John wake up. You seem to be on another planet. Your Dad's been hurling abuse again."

"Who?"

"Your Dad. Oh John wake up. Just recently you seem to be on another planet. You mentioned yesterday you were under a lot of stress. What's the matter with you?" John remained silent. "Oh come on you can tell me. I'm your wife."

John smiled. "It's nothing honestly, Samantha. I'm just being silly."

"Well it is silly if it's about nothing. How can you be stressed out about nothing?"

"Oh it's just all this with my Dad. I've been worrying for some time about you not letting him see Toby. And then I found out how abusive he'd been towards you and all that. It's just got on top of me a bit. But I'm alright now. It's all sorted. Anyway what was it you wanted to tell me about?"

Samantha was lost for words. Wahey! Record the time and date! "Oh it was... oh nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Don't you start. It was just something your Dad said but it can keep."

"Until when?"

"Oh... er..."

"Hi-de-hi!"

Samantha was spared answering by the entrance of Chester and Catherine. And quite an entrance it had been too. They had come jogging into the room, each with one of Mr Partridge's sweatbands on their head; holding back their ears. They were now jogging on the spot.

"Come on Catherine keep your knees up," instructed Chester.

"I'm trying," panted Catherine. "Come on Samantha. Join in."

"Coming," she called, awkwardly clambering down off the windowsill.

A few minutes later an unfit Samantha had managed to make her way down onto the carpet. But now she was exhausted and she flopped onto the floor panting. "I... can't go on. Much... much too... much."

Chester jogged over, keeping his knees high in the air. "Come on Samantha. We haven't even started yet. Now roll over and do 20 press-ups just to warm you up."

"Just to warm me up? I'm already simmering!" She glanced up at John for some encouragement but he had already gone back into his own little world.

A heavily panting Catherine took one deep breath and collapsed back onto the carpet. Chester spun round and sighed. "I think this might have been a bad idea," he commented. I felt sorry for Chester; there he was jogging up and down with a load of energy and his ridiculous headband surrounded by a panting and now horizontal Samantha and Catherine. "Come on. Up we get. You've got to push your barriers. We've still got lots to get through. I thought we'd try 10 widths of the roof, followed by 30 press-ups and then 20 laps of the garden. How does that sound?"

Catherine groaned and Samantha let off steam; unfortunately that was literal, if you know what I mean! Very dignified!

Penny flew into the room waving a wedding invitation above her head. "Catherine! Catherine!"

Catherine leapt up. "What? What? What is it?"

Penny tried to get her breath back and they both stood there for several seconds; panting. "It's about the... the wedding invitation."

"Penny I'm sorry... but if you've lost... lost yours then you're going to have to share with Santa... I can't go printing them off willy-nilly just because bears have been careless with them."

"No. No... I haven't lost it. There's a slight problem with it."

"What? I haven't missed the venue off, have I?" That would be vital. The bears would never know where it was taking place! "I thought to myself when I started designing them, I must leave a place for the venue and I'm sure I remember typing it but..."

"No. No. The venue's there. But there's a typing error. It was Santa who noticed it. He's good like that. Can always spot errors. Your eye doesn't go to it immediately and that's why I didn't notice it when I read it. Even Santa didn't notice it at first but then after his French lesson he decided to proof read it for you. I said to him, I said, "It's a bit late if you find anything" but he went ahead and did it anyway. He likes doing things like that. I remember once..."

"Just tell me for Flip's sake!" demanded an agitated Catherine.

Penny dramatically opened the invitation and read. "Ahem. Dear Penny. You are invited to the wedding of Catherine and Cheater."

"Cheater?" exclaimed Catherine.

"Cheater?" echoed Chester.

Samantha, who had found the energy to get off the floor when she realised something interesting was happening, burst out laughing. "Cheater! Ha ha! That's a classic that is. John did you hear that?" But John wasn't listening. "Oi John! Did you hear that? We're invited to the wedding of," she tried to control her laughter, "Catherine and Cheater!"

"Really dear," commented John dryly.

"I don't know why I bother! Humour's wasted on you!" exclaimed Samantha.

Meanwhile Catherine was in full flow. "Chester it's a complete disaster. We'll be the laughing stock of the bears. I just wanted this wedding to be perfect..." Catherine burst dramatically into tears (I wonder if Santa runs a drama course that I don't know about) "... and I've just had everything going wrong. First my reserve bridesmaid waltzes into the sunset without a thought for my plans and now this. I might as well just give up now."

"Oh Catherine don't say that," admonished Chester. "Everything will be alright." It's that annoying phrase again!

"Well I'm going to have to retract all the invitations and hope they haven't looked that closely." I'm sure they won't have! "Then I'll have to print them all off again; correctly this time. And I bet I'll have the tree huggers on my back for wasting more paper!" Penny was standing just behind her.

"Santa and I just think it's a shame to waste all those trees printing off unnecessary invitations. I know you have your own views on that and you're entitled to them."

"Well that's very generous of you. But you can say what you like I'm going to have to print off all my

invitations again. And the only person you've got to blame for that is Santa. If he'd helped me from the beginning instead of nit picking afterwards I wouldn't have printed them off with the mistake on."

"Santa didn't want to get involved in the destruction of trees."

"You make me sound like some sort of tree murderer!"

"I'm just airing our views."

"Well air them in your head!" Catherine turned to Samantha. "You alright now?"

"I... think I've got my breath back."

"Right. Well now Penny's got me riled I'm certainly ready to let off steam (Samantha had beaten her to it)."

"Then let's go and lose some weight!" Samantha lifted up her paw and Catherine slapped it.

"Yeah!" they cheered in unison.

Penny butted in. "I feel I must apologise, I didn't mean to rile anybody."

"Oh shut up!" Catherine told her.

Catherine was obviously still a little bit tetchy over the fact that she had made a mistake and had had it pointed out by Penny. Of course the irony about the mistake was that if it were to reflect reality it should have read 'Chester and Cheater,' as it was Catherine who was having an affair.

CHAPTER 22

“Come on! Keep up!”

There was flash of yellow fur as Chester sprinted past the window, full of energy. Then there were the sounds of heavy breathing and a rather unhealthy panting.

About 10 seconds later Catherine trundled past the window; bent double and clutching her midriff (that’s quite an area). Seconds behind her was Samantha; rocking her head from side in an attempt to... well I don’t know what she was trying to achieve and limping awkwardly because she trailing one of her heavy legs behind her and seemed to be in some pain.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Can’t... can’t... go... go...” She had hobbled out of sight before she could say the word “on.” Funny, I’d never had a difficulty with that word before. It seemed pretty straightforward to me. On. On. On. On.

And they were only on their second width would you believe! Still eight more to go. And ten laps of the garden to follow. It was going to be a long night...

I think the stag and hen parties were going to be slightly delayed... But so far Catherine had failed to mention them. I wonder if she’d forgotten the bear’s tradition to celebrate their last night of freedom with noisy music and a bit of dance. Not that I was complaining. How did they expect a wise old crow to get to sleep with all that rowdiness?

Suddenly I was aware of a presence in the room. No, don’t worry, I haven’t gone senile; I haven’t started sensing mysterious presences. I had just sensed movement by the door and sure enough Harry had crept in, looking nervously around him as always. Convincing himself that the room was empty,

by glancing under the bed (oh yes there was always a bear under there), he started to talk. I won't bother adding that he wasn't alone; I don't want to sound repetitive!

"Thank you for coming," he began timidly. It's quite alright I was here anyway. "I'm sure you'll agree it's been a lovely ceremony. It happens to have been one of the proudest days of my life. I've always wanted to see my dearest brother Chester get wed to a beautiful, kind and caring bear." Oh well, better luck next time! "I'm sure she'll make him very happy. No. I'm sure he'll make her very happy. No. No... I'm sure they'll make each other very happy. Yes. That sounds better. They are both very lucky to have found each other." I wasn't aware they'd lost each other! "I wish them all the luck in future. Three cheers for the happy couple. Hip hip."

"Hooray," I murmured under my breath.

"Hip hip."

"Hooray."

"Hip hip."

Oh this was getting boring!

"Thank you once again for coming and enjoy the reception. Thank you for listening."

Mm. To me it had been too cheesy, too much like a children's tea party and had had a complete lack of humour. Whoops. I think I just said that aloud.

Harry looked up.

"No offence."

"It's fine," he replied shyly. "It's nice to hear some constructive criticism. It's very kind of you."

"Not at all."

There was a nervous pause. "Will you help me to make it better?"

"No."

"Oh alright then."

Hang on. Maybe I'd been a bit hasty. I know I never interfered in the bear's lives (well almost never) but it couldn't do any harm could it and he was such a cute and polite bear.

Harry had turned away. "No wait a minute Harry. I'll help you."

He spun around his face beaming. "You will?"

"I will."

"Oh that's very kind of you Mr Chris."

"Not at all. Just doing my bit for Catherine's wedding."

"How do you think I should start my speech?"

"I can't help you from up here," I called down to him. "You'll have to come up to my shelf." I hope he appreciated the invitation. I wouldn't just let any Tom, Dick or Harry onto my shelf. Though I was letting Harry up and I had let Tommy come up the once. And I've certainly had a few Dicks up here! But if they're determined how can I stop them?

Just a minute later an eager Harry had bounded his way up onto my shelf and now sat huddled up against the wall; rather nervous and keeping a distance between us that approved me. Why couldn't the other bears who came onto my shelf show the same sort of decency and respect my private space?

"So... how do you think I should begin?" he asked shakily.

"Well you want to start with a bang. Set the pace; show it's going to be funny."

"I was just going to say thank you for coming."

"Yes. That's what I mean. You need something much sharper, much wittier."

"Like what?"

"Well it just so happens that sharpness and wittiness are my strong points." Along with being wise, intelligent, kind, caring... Shall I go on? "You could say, "When Chester, or should I say Cheater, asked me to do this speech I promised him that it would be short and sweet and wouldn't have any embarrassing details. I think I'd better apologise now."

Harry stared blankly at me. "But that isn't true?"

"Yes but no-one else will know that."

"Mm... but I don't want to lie. It wouldn't be nice. And I don't get that about Chester and Cheater?"

"You will soon don't worry." I had the distinct feeling that this might be more of a marathon than Samantha and Catherine were running.

CHAPTER 23

By the time I had helped Harry to come up with a witty speech that lasted for a substantial amount Catherine and Samantha were running their eight lap of the garden. I say running but this is probably pushing the meaning of the word to the limits. It was like a stumbling sort of walk. They really looked very unsteady on their feet and I thought they were going to topple over at any moment.

By now they had given up with breathing, as this was too much effort. Obviously this is not advisable when running ten laps of the garden; not that I understand science.

Chester was a good couple of metres in front of them; still running in his exaggerated fashion by keeping his knees unnaturally high in the air.

"I... .. blame... you... you... for... this," stammered Samantha. "All-your-idea," she blurted out in one go.

"Wanted... wanted to get... fit."

"Well... I don't... Not if it... involves this."

"Neither... do I. I'm happy fat."

"Me too... I know why... why... I've stayed fat... all these years now. Too much... too much effort to... lose it."

"At least... at least I won't... won't be a fat bride."

"That won't be much... much consolation when you... ..you haven't got energy to... walk down aisle."

"Come on. Keep digging in," called Chester over his shoulder.

"I'll be digging something in you in a minute," murmured Catherine, miraculously not panting.

Chester didn't hear. "This is just so easy, it's laughable."

"Do we... do we..." began an out of breath Samantha.

"What is it?" asked Chester slowing down to wait for them.

"... look like we're laughing?" breathed Samantha.

"Pardon?"

"I 'ain't repeating it! I just... haven't the... energy."

Catherine and Samantha now caught up with Chester and he began to walk briskly alongside them, still managing to keep in front of them as they stumbled along.

"There's nothing like a good stroll in the garden," beamed Chester cheerfully.

"Chester... you're really... really not helping," moaned Catherine. "We know you're good... no need to show off!"

"Catherine darling, I wasn't showing off. I'm just going at your pace."

"Chester! You're walking! And we're running as fast as we can. So that is not helpful!" Funny how when she gets worked up she doesn't pant once!

"Well if you put slightly more effort into in darling."

Whoops! Chester found himself face down on the grass. He had tripped up Catherine's foot which had accidentally been sticking out. Oh well accidents will happen!

CHAPTER 24

Laps and laps and laps later the fitness session was over. Even the sun had had enough and had lowered itself behind to the trees to avoid watching the painful display of panting, moaning and sweating. Chester now strode energetically up the roof back towards Lucy's bedroom. It always struck me as strange how the bears always seemed to head for Lucy's room when there were plenty of other rooms in the house. It was probably because she was their owner and it was in her room that they slept (when she wasn't away) and so they felt at home there.

Samantha and Catherine's head popped up over the edge of the roof. They both looked completely shattered and were panting like mad.

"Che... che... ester!" called Catherine.

"What's the matter Catherine darling?" inquired Chester, marching ahead.

"Can you... can you... give us a paw?"

"What seems to the problem darling?"

"Can't... can't... can't..."

"Oh can't you get up onto the roof Catherine darling?" asked Chester turning round. "Don't worry I'll give you a hand."

Minutes later Chester was once more striding up the roof but this time he was dragging Samantha and Catherine behind him. Now he too was panting; this was the most strenuous thing he'd done all day as they weren't exactly what you'd call light! Added to this they were wriggling about and moaning as they were so exhausted they didn't know what to do for the best.

Just before they reached the bedroom window Chester plonked them down on the roof before collapsing down next to them; panting heavily.

The three of them lay panting in tune.

Ha.

He.

Hu.

Ha.

He.

Hu.

After irritating minutes of this Catherine spoke.

"Come on. We should be getting up. We haven't got time to lounge about. We're getting married tomorrow Chester and there's still lots to do. I've got to print off all those invitations and hand them out again and I've got to finish the seating plan. And I've got this niggling feeling that there's something I've forgotten."

"Just calm down Catherine," Chester told her. "It's no good getting yourself stressed up. You'll give yourself a stuffing attack."

Catherine clambered up off the roof. "What'll give me a stuffing attack are these stupid fitness sessions. I don't know why you ever forced me into them. I don't know if I'll have the energy to walk down the..."

An indignant Chester interrupted. "I did no such thing. You persuaded me to help you get fit. I said it wasn't necessary!"

"Oh don't be so finicky. Who cares whether it was you me or Fred Bloggs what suggested it? Anyway do you think I look any thinner?" Catherine sexily ran her paws over her large stomach and tossed her head back.

"You look sumptuous Catherine, but you were lovely before you went running and you can't expect one session to shed all that weight." Chester winced as the words came out. Catherine turned on him with a stern glance. "Catherine that came out all wrong. I love you just the way you are."

"But you think I'm fat?"

"No. No. No. Just plump. But that's the way I like you. And I'm not saying that you haven't lost some weight but I just think with our wedding tomorrow you could have spent the time more wisely."

"Oh that's rich coming from Mr 'Calm down it'll be alright on the night.'"

"Wo! Wo! Wo!" injected Samantha getting up off the roof. "You've got to be married to have a marital argument. Save it for after the service. And hey Chester! Do you think I look better than before?" Samantha smiled sexily at him and ran her hands over her... shall we say assets!

Catherine giggled but Chester looked embarrassedly away and wriggled uncomfortably on the tiles. "I'm... I'm sure John will find you very attractive."

"Oh don't be so evasive. I'm not going to jump on you," laughed Samantha. "Unless you want me to," she told him sexily, purring like a wild cat.

Catherine burst into hysterics but Chester was not amused. He sprung up off the roof with a distasteful look on his face.

"Oh don't be so prudish," Catherine moaned. "You need to have a bit of fun and a flirt every now and then."

"Really Catherine. I consider it quite immoral."

Samantha was now creased with laughter. "You should have seen the (she shrieked with laughter) look on your face."

Chester just shook his head. But Samantha wasn't finished yet. Giggling she moved over to him and thrust her paw on his backside.

Imagine swallowing a grapefruit at the same time as getting an electric shock up your "derriere" and you've got Chester's reaction. Astounded he exclaimed, "Samantha! Please!"

Wiggling her 'assets' she told him in a deep voice, "You won't escape me tomorrow Chester. Haven't you heard of the tradition where the groom has to kiss the bridesmaids? I'll have to decide whether I'm going to let you up for air."

Chester gulped and hurried towards Catherine, who was trying not to laugh, and held her hand.

"I think you ought to choose your friends more carefully. Did you see her just come onto me Catherine?" whispered Chester.

"Yes Chester," she murmured desperately trying to keep a straight face. But it was no use. She burst out into uncontrollable laughter. "Samantha that was a classic!"

But Samantha was rolling about on the floor in fits of laughter.

Chester tutted and turned to Catherine, "In her role as Chief Bridesmaid will she have a speech to make at the ceremony."

"Naturally."

"Do you not think you could tactfully edit that part of the service, in order to preserve dignity?"

"No I couldn't. Her speech will probably be the highlight of the ceremony considering we've got your laugh-a-minute brother doing the best man's speech."

"I'm sure Harry's speech will be very pleasant."

"Yeah but I'm not after that. We need a bit of humour, something to liven the atmosphere. Not that it'll be boring; I'm going to make sure of that."

"And I'm sure you'll be successful darling."

"Chester you don't think I've wasted time with that fitness malarkey, do you? I'd hate it if something went wrong, like there was a slanging match over where bears were sitting or someone's outfit fell down like Judy Finnigan's did or there was one of those embarrassing silences where the vicar doesn't know what he's meant to be saying. Something that could have been avoided if I hadn't done that stupid fitness session."

Samantha had got up off the roof and now followed them through the window into Lucy's room. "Catherine, how can seeing you waddle round the garden like a constipated chicken have been a waste of time? It was hilarious."

"You were waddling too. But you were more like a... ah! Chickens!"

"That's what I said."

"No. Chickens!" Catherine had finally lost it. I knew the wedding would tip her over the edge.

"Pardon?"

"Chickens and hens!"

"Catherine what on earth are you talking about?"

"I haven't organised a hen party." Huh! She really does go round the world, doesn't she? All that just to say she hadn't organised a hen party!

"And you've got to have a stag do as well." If she wasn't careful she was going end up getting her words all mixed up again. "Oh no. I've got to invite off the printations, seat the finish plan, go through

Sermon's Santa and now I've got a henning flip do to organise as well!"

"Calm down darling."

"Chester you haven't got time to stand there telling me to calm down. I'll calm down when I can calm down. And I won't be able to calm down while you're standing there telling me to calm down while you've got a stag do to organise."

"Catherine I'm really not that fussed. They're normally very noisy and end up getting out of hand."

"Haven't got time to argue with you Chester," Catherine called over her shoulder as she waddled across the duvet. "But if you don't you'll be breaking tradition and breaking tradition always brings bad luck. I don't want anything to go wrong. I've already lost my reserve bridesmaid. Corny thought it was alright just to sun off into the swanset without a second thought to what it would do to my wedding arrangements. Some bears just have no consideration."

Catherine slid down the duvet and landed with a thump on the floor. Funny how normally she needed Chester to give her a paw. But now she was dashing about she could slide down without a second thought.

"Alright Catherine, I'll have one."

Samantha called after Catherine as she made her way towards the bedroom door. "Don't worry about the hen do..."

"I'm not worrying. I'm flipping panicking."

"No but there's no need. I'll take care of it. DJ Sambo's in da house."

"Good, good," mumbled Catherine as she charged through the doorway, brushing past Jean on her way out. From the landing Catherine's voice sounded.

"Jean. Stay in there. Don't move. The hen do is on its way. I'll be back soon."

Chester and Samantha made their way across the duvet, slightly more casually than Catherine's mad dash. It was strange how she'd recovered from that run so well.

"Samantha, you will keep your music down, won't you. My stag party is going to be nice and quiet and low key. We don't want to be distracted by loud music."

"Oh stop moaning. We'll have it as loud as we blinking want." Chester easily climbed down from the bed.

"Oi give us a paw you misery."

Sighing a reluctant Chester turned around, climbed back half way up the side of the bed and proffered a half hearted paw to help Samantha. After helping Samantha down Chester rubbed his paw against his leg as if to avoid infection. Very childish for someone as sensible as Chester.

"Oh don't worry Chester. I was only having a laugh before. I wouldn't touch you with a barge pole. I'd never cheat on my John (the feeling wasn't mutual unfortunately) and certainly not with an up themselves dipstick like you."

"Oh Samantha you have a way with words." Oi! I do the witty one liners.

Samantha just ignored him and marched towards the CD player which was next to the dressing table. Luckily this had escaped being damaged by flying objects after the earlier slanging match between Jean and Corny.

"Hi Jean," greeted Samantha. "Heard about your fight earlier. Good on you I say. I've never liked that

Corny. Always thought she deserved a good slapping."

"Samantha what I did was despicable and unforgivable."

"Oh alright then," agreed an unconcerned Samantha as she moved over to the CD player and started rifling through the selection of CDs stacked next to it.

"For once I agree with you mother," piped up Chester. "It was unforgivable. It also completely diminished the respect you had earned in the bear community. Corny was just as bad but at least she had the sense to leave. Shame you haven't followed suit."

Chester strode briskly past his mother, with his nose in the air, onto the landing.

"Chester!" she called uselessly after him.

Jean put her head in her hands and groaned, "Oh what have I done?"

"Oh I'm sure he'll come round," beamed Samantha cheerfully as she flicked between Eminem and Atomic Kitten.

"He won't," murmured Jean thoughtfully. "He won't."

"Oh well." Samantha placed Eminem and Atomic Kitten to one side and started to go through the rest of the CDs. "Hey Jean. Would you have Kylie Minogue or Katy Mellua?"

Jean brushed the tears from her eyes. "Samantha to be honest I really couldn't care. I don't really feel in the partying mood. I think I might give the hen party a miss." Jean turned towards the door.

"Wo. Wo. Wo. Catherine told you to stay up here and I can see that I'll get the blame if you manage to get away. She's not in a mood to be reasonable what

with all the last minute wedding arrangements to be made. To be fair she's never in a mood to be reasonable but there's only going to be you, me, Penny and Catherine going. Now Corny's gone we're the only female bears left and if you go then Catherine will feel neglected."

"But I'm only one of her bridesmaids because I'm Chester's mother and now I've disgraced him I don't think he'll want me to be a bridesmaid. He probably won't want me at the wedding full stop."

"Catherine wants you there and surely you don't want to miss your oldest son's wedding and seeing your medium son (Chester was right- Samantha did have a way with words!) doing the best man speech? Won't that be the proudest day of your life?"

"Of course it will," cried Jean. "But Chester doesn't want me there."

"I'm sure he does really. And Catherine definitely does." Was that meant to be some sort of consolation? "But that's not the issue at the moment. This is about the hen party. It doesn't matter if you're going to be a bridesmaid or even go to the wedding now. Catherine just wants you there because you're female."

"Oh alright." She smiled through her tears. "But don't expect me to help you with the music. If I had my way we'd be listening to Barry Manilow all night."

"I think Mrs Partridge has got one of his CDs downstairs. I'll go and get if you like."

"No, no. It's fine. Catherine won't want to listen to him."

"Yes but she isn't organising it is she?" explained Samantha bustling past Jean. "And I'm open to suggestions so there you go." Samantha disappeared onto the landing. "Oh hi there Big Toff."

Hearing his name Jean spun round to see Big Toff just coming through the doorway. "You nasty..." he began.

"Big Toff please. I know I've really messed up this time. I know I've ruined Milly's life and Corny's too."

"And mine. And Little Toff's."

"I know it was spiteful to make everyone believe it was your Dad I was having an affair with but I really didn't think..."

"You're flaming right there."

"No I didn't think that it would have these far reaching consequences."

"The really sickening thing is that I fancied you. I wanted to have a relationship with you."

"You were willing for me to have an affair behind Mickey's back then, weren't you?"

"Yes because it's not the fact that you've had an affair with Metro that I'm bothered about. What I'm annoyed about is that you had to drag my Dad into it."

"I'm really sorry about that but I just wanted to protect Metro. I did try to make amends though. I told Corny the truth when we were wrestling under the duvet."

"It was a bit late by then. Mummy had already trashed Lucy's room and being the decent bear she is she felt she had to leave. And Daddy had already tried to kill himself."

"Yes and it was then that I realised how serious it all was. And I told your Dad then that I'd tell everyone the truth but he said that it wouldn't make any difference now. No one would believe it. They'd think I was just saying it because we were lovers. I'd offered to late and for that I'm truly sorry."

"If you're that sorry why don't you tell everyone the truth anyway? It might make things a bit easier for Dad at least. The bears would be more understanding towards him whereas at the moment he's upset that Mummy's gone, we all are, but the rest of the bears are sympathetic; they think it's his fault. That makes it all the harder for him. And she's only been gone a few hours."

"I'm sorry. I was only willing to do it because Milly was suicidal over the fact that Corny was going to divorce him. But she's gone now and she knows truth so there's nothing else I can do. And when I offered to tell the truth I was only going to tell Corny, like I did, not all the bears, so there's no way I'm going to do that now. I'm sorry."

Big Toff smiled. "No I'm sorry. Because you've given me no other option. Little Toff come in."

Little Toff stepped into the doorway with Mr Partridge's digital video camera in his hand. I had noticed something jutting out around the doorframe but I didn't think it worth mentioning!

Jean gasped and stared at the camera in horror. And before she knew what was happening Milly, still clad in bandages, had appeared behind Little Toff in the doorway. "Gotcha!"

"Milly!" exclaimed Jean. "I... I... what..."

"Lost for words are we?" inquired Milly patronisingly.

"What are you going to do with the footage?" gulped Jean nervously.

"What do you think I'm going to do with it? Send it off to You've Been Framed?" replied Milly sarcastically. "I'm going show this to every single one of Lucy's bears; so they all know the truth and how you've spitefully wrecked my marriage to Corny."

"But why?"

"Why? To make everyone see what you're really like is reason enough but when Corny went me, Little Toff and Big Toff were naturally very, very upset but I said to them, "Look there 'ain't no point in sitting around moping. We've got to get up off our furry backsides and do something to try and get her back."

"But she's gone," protested Jean. "How will exposing my affair with Metro get her back?"

"Because when the rest of the bears realise how selfish and underhand you've been I think they'll see that Corny has suffered enough and doesn't deserve to lose her family as well because of a few tacky ornaments." Lucy loved those ornaments! (notice the past tense)

"Milly I tried to help you."

"Too little much, much too late."

"Please don't Milly. For old times sake, eh? Think about what there used to be between us. Please?"

"Jean, I owe you nothing." And with that he turned dramatically on his heel and hobbled out of the room. Little Toff, Big Toff and the camera, which was a little to big and too heavy for Little Toff to carry, followed him out.

"You fancied Auntie Jean!" teased Little Toff as they made their way down the landing.

"Oh shut up!"

"Ow! Daddy, Big Toff just hit me."

"Be careful with that camera. It's our evidence." Forget the fact that Mr Partridge wouldn't be over the moon if he returned home to find that his £399.99 digital camera had spontaneously decided to smash to pieces. It was strange that they had opted to take their old video camera (that had bits hanging off it) instead of their spanking brand new digital one. Mr

Partridge had mentioned wanting to keep it safe but there was no point having it if they were just going to keep it safe and not use it. Huh! People were as funny as bears. "And don't hit your brother Big Toff. He might drop the camera."

"Hiya!"

"Oh hi Samantha."

Moments later Samantha bumbled back into the room with a tower of CDs in her paws. "When I was looking for your Barry Manilow I found all these as well. I've got Cold Play and..." Samantha noticed that Jean was standing stock still, with a glazed and dazed (hey I'm a poet and I know it) look on her face. "Are you alright Jean? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I'm... fine," croaked Jean.

"It weren't my Great Uncle Frederick, was it? I always wondered what had happened to him."

"No. No. I haven't seen a ghost. I'm fine. Really. Now what can I do to help?"

CHAPTER 25

Music was blaring. Samantha and Jean were jiving in the middle of the room. Well when I say jiving I mean they were sliding across the carpet and wiggling their bottoms!

Next to the CD player were three piles of CDs. Samantha had arranged them into piles according to whether they were suitable for Catherine's hen party. The first pile was what Samantha classed as 'Definites', the second 'Maybes' and the third 'No nos'. On the other side of the room was a clump of red and white balloons which Jean and Samantha had had some fun blowing up. Indeed there were a number of flat balloons, scattered randomly about the room. These were the ones that had leapt of Samantha and Jeans' mouths and danced around the room making a noise like a police siren.

Above the pounding of the music I could just hear voices on the landing.

"... do it in Spanish if you so wish," Santa was saying.

"Nah," dismissed Catherine. "It's a bit too much like gooble-de-guke for my liking."

Santa, Penny and Catherine appeared in the doorway and slowly trundled into the room.

"But all foreign languages are very difficult to understand," piped up Penny.

"Yes but Spanish has always seemed exaggerated and silly. "Hola. I mean why not just say 'Allo. Why stand on heirs and graces?"

"But Catherine it's their language," protested Penny.

"Yes well they're welcome to it. I don't know why you can't just do the sermon in English," she

complained to Santa. "You can speak English can't you?"

"Yes but I've never learnt the sermon in English, I've only learnt it French, German, Spanish, Latin and Chinese." That was clever wasn't it?

"But you know what it means in English, surely? So just say that instead."

"But I don't know what it means anymore. I did when I first learnt them but now I just know them as set phrases and it would be too much trouble to learn the English again."

"Well I'm sorry to put you out. Why didn't you just learn it in English in the first place instead of in Double Dutch, or whatever it is?"

"I wanted to be multi-cultural."

Catherine sighed. "Right well we'll have it in French. No one will understand a word of it but it's meant to be the language of love, isn't it, so it'll sound romantic." Santa went to speak... "But I don't just want the bog standard sermon. I want it to be different. Everyone's heard the "Do you take blank to be your lawful wedding wife? Will you honour and cherish her?" and all that blurb I don't know how many times so I want to spice it up a bit."

"But they've never heard it in French before. All the other services have been in Latin or Spanish. They're the popular two. And you said yourself no one will understand what's been said."

"Oh I suppose you're right." Catherine seemed unwilling to admit this. "But what language do you expect us to speak in? We don't know any French but it'd sound a bit funny if we answered you in English."

"Oh it's alright. What I normally do is a version that requires the contestants (I thought this was a

wedding not a TV quiz?) only to say the words 'I do' in whatever language the service is taking place in. You've seen weddings before."

"I know. I know. I'd just forgotten that's all."

"Right. So all I need you and Chester to say is 'Je fais.' That means I do."

"Yes I'm not stupid." No. She just does convincing act. "You need to tell Chester about that when you go down for the stag party. It should be in full swing by now (this was Chester she was talking about!). But one last thing. How will we know when to say 'I do' if we can't understand a word you're going on about?"

"I'll pause."

"But you could have just forgotten your lines or it could be for dramatic effect. We don't want to come in too early. We'd look like right nanas!"

"Well I won't be pausing for either of those reasons but if you insist I'll cough when to let you know when to speak. And you'll hear your name so you'll know which of you is meant to reply." Contestants and now coughing! Was Santa trying to turn this into 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'

"Right. You'll need to tell Santa that as well. We don't want him missing his cue." There was a pause. "Well off you go then. This is an all female bear do. We don't want your prying eyes."

A rather embarrassed Santa scuttled out of the room and Penny turned and began to bumble out after him. But she found herself being tugged back into the room by Catherine. "And where do you think you're going? It's my hen party."

"I just... didn't think you'd want me to come after my earlier comments about your use of paper."

"Oh that reminds me..." Catherine headed for the door. Over her shoulder she called, "Oh course I want

you to come. You're my bridesmaid. And don't get thinking I'm going to let you drop out of that."

As Catherine disappeared out of the door Samantha called to Penny. "Come on Penny. Join in the jiving."

Moments later the three bears, paw in paw, were jiving across the dance floor (well really it was the carpet but let's not nitpick). It didn't take long before Jean had put her troubles far behind her and Penny had forgotten her stern exterior and they were laughing, giggling and shouting at the top of their voices whilst jiggling around and wiggling their derrieres.

By the time Catherine had returned, karaoke had begun. They were huddled together; Samantha was in the middle with her arms round the other two and they were belting out the words to Barry Manilow's 'Looks Like We Made It.'

"Looks like we made it," sung the three bears. I say sung but it was more like an out of tune screeching. Left each other on the way, de de de de de." They obviously weren't up to speed with that particular line. "Looks like we made it or I thought so... till today," they sung the last two words hastily at the end.

"Oh you missed your cue," moaned Jean.

"It was Penny's fault," accused Samantha, pointing her paw.

"It was not."

"Was."

"Wasn't."

As they argued the song droned on.

"Can you stop talking?" asked Jean. "I like this bit."

Jean opened her mouth to continue singing along.

"What in the name of Flip is going on here?" Catherine was back!

Like naughty school children, they all turned around. Samantha stepped forward. "It's your hen party. You don't mind that we started without you, do you? You beetled off somewhere."

"I went to hand out the invitations. I'd printed them off but I forgot to hand them out. And no I don't mind but I just wondered why Barry Manilow is singing at my hen party (well he wasn't really there silly!) and what are those doing there," she pointed at the red and white balloons."

"They're balloons Catherine dear," replied Samantha simply.

"I know they're balloons. You got them from a packet with a label saying, 'Twenty luxurious...'

"... red and white balloons," completed Samantha. "Keep away from small children. Do not..."

"Alright. Alright," protested Catherine.

"How do you know what the label says, anyway?"

"Because I found them in the drawer..."

"... with the wobbly handle, in Mrs Partridge's kitchen."

"Alright enough of that."

"How do you know where I found them?"

"Because I was going to use them for the party after the wedding. Now they'll be flipping flat by then (nice use of alliteration- Catherine was so poetic). They were just the sort of classy thing I was looking for."

"Oh you can still use them. They don't go down that quickly."

"Look Samantha. I 'ain't having some saggy pancakes at my stylish after party. The buzz word is classy. Classy and stylish."

"I knew Chester would change you. You always told me the buzz word was..."

"Yes okay. And it still is just not for tomorrow. I just want tomorrow to be special; for everything to be perfect. Chester will never change me, however hard he tries; I'll always be down to earth Catherine and I'll always be your friend. So stop fretting."

Samantha's eyes welled up with tears. "Oh Catherine." She ran forward and hugged her friend.

"Oh isn't that nice," Penny commented to Jean.

"Oi steady on Samantha." Catherine eased her away. "Now here's your invitation." Catherine gave her one of the invitations from the pile she held in her paw. In her other paw was a piece of unfolded A4 paper. I guessed that that was the famous seating plan.

"No it's alright, Catherine. You've already given me one."

"This is a new one."

"What do I need a new one for?"

"It's been revised and updated."

"Revised and updated. You'll be telling me I'll be getting one every month next, with a new front cover."

"No there was just a minor error and it has now been corrected."

"What was it?"

"What?"

"The error, the Catherine."

"Oh just something minor."

"Like what?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes nothing."

"Well if you won't tell me I'll have to have a look at my invitation."

"Oh for goodness sake," shouted Penny, fed up of the bickering. "It said Catherine and Cheater instead of Catherine and Chester."

"That's it. Just go and let it out!"

"Catherine and Cheater!" Samantha burst out laughing. "That's a classic that is."

Catherine was now annoyed as her mistake had been made public and I could see her silently fuming.

"Looks Like We Made It," sung Barry Manilow.

"Samantha! Why is Barry Manilow playing at my hen party?"

"Jean suggested him."

"Oh well that's alright. Don't worry about what I want playing at *my* hen party as long as Jean's happy."

Jean butted in. "I said I wasn't fussed."

"Look Catherine," argued Samantha ignoring Jean, "you never said what you wanted me to play so I was open to suggestions."

"But you know I don't like him."

"I don't."

"You do. You know I passed out at Mickey's birthday bash when Jean had him playing all flaming night."

"That had nothing to do with it. If I remember rightly you'd been doing the birdie song all night and it was just 'Quack' too many and you passed out."

"Well... well..." Catherine struggled to think of a response. "Well I told you that I didn't want Barry Manilow playing at the hen party. I said "You can have anything but Barry Manilow." I don't remember Catherine saying that.

"You did not."

"No... but I would have done if I hadn't been too busy doing other things." She sighed. "I give you one measly thing to do and this is what happens. You pinch my balloon supply and go and treat us all to Barry blinking Manilow!"

"So I could have played anything but Barry Manilow."

"Yes."

"What about S Club 7?"

"Yes well anything but Barry Manilow and S Club 7."

"What about Westlife?"

"Alright. Alright. Maybe not just Barry Manilow and S Club 7. Look we can either stand here rowing all night about Marry Banilow (she'd gone again) or we can get down to some partying. I can see Jean and Penny's Tiger feet beginning to twitch."

"Oh can we have Tiger Feet?" asked Samantha eagerly. "I love that one."

"Yes if you're good, but we've got some bridesmaid jobs to do first. Now Jean, Penny here are your invitations." She handed them over. Then from underneath the seating plan, as if by magic, she produced two pieces of card; one was red and the other was white. From between her legs her legs she produced a pair of scissors. I dreaded to think about where the next hidden item was going to be produced from! "Now what I need you to do is to cut each piece of card into about 150 pieces." Jean and Penny stared blankly at her. "No I haven't lost it; it's for confetti. As part of her duty as bridesmaid Samantha is going to make sure that no one brings their own confetti and that the only stuff that is thrown is this official stuff."

"Am I?" asked an amused Samantha. "Does it really matter?"

"Yes it does. It looks a mess when you have bears throwing lots of contrasting colours at you. It looks like a tacky rainbow. Now I know previous brides have put up with this but I'm not previous brides. I'm me. And I'm more pernickety than they were (you can say that again). Much more pernickety than they were (you didn't actually have to do it!). And I want everything to be coloured coded. From the dresses to the confetti to the balloons. You'll notice that the confetti will then match the balloons I would have had." Samantha grumbled something inaudibly to herself. But I have a feeling that even if it had been audible I wouldn't have been able to write it down! "Now fair enough the dresses aren't red and white but that would be going to extremes. But all the bridesmaids dresses are colour coded, as you know." She does on, doesn't she?

Catherine now finally handed the scissors to Jean's waiting paw, which probably felt as if it was about to drop off as she had been holding her arm out for all of Catherine's speech.

Although this was taking it to the extremes I had often wondered what the point of confetti was. Throwing pieces of paper over newly married bears seemed rather silly to me and I was surprised that Penny had never complained about the waste of paper. But this was a tradition and bears never seemed to question them! Plus it was a nightmare for the bears who had the job of getting the bits out of the carpet before any of the Partridge's should see it.

"Now Catherine, while they're doing that I need to have a quick word with you about your Chief Bridesmaid duties." Catherine placed her arm on Samantha's shoulder and led her across to the other side of the room.

"Looks Like We Made It," sung Barry Manilow, just to remind us he was still there.

"Will someone please shut him up?" snapped Catherine. "He's getting up my wick." I don't think that's the exact expression but I'm not one to nitpick!

Penny hurried over to the CD player and, in a bit of a flap, hit the 'Pause' button. Silence.

"Thank goodness for that!" exclaimed Catherine. For once I agreed with her. No offence to Barry Manilow but at that volume ten minutes of his screeching (sorry singing!) is quite enough for one day!

Catherine and Samantha plonked themselves down on the carpet and Catherine spread out her seating plan on the floor. I had a feeling that this wasn't going to be the "quick word" Catherine had made it out to be.

"Now then, (she was off) this is the official seating plan for mine and Chester's wedding." She made it sound like a top secret document. "You're going to stand at the door for at least an hour before bears are meant to arrive..."

"But..." began Samantha.

"Don't interrupt I'm on a flow. Yes you're going to be there for an hour in advance because there are always idiots who think it's necessary to get there early so as not to miss anything. So you need to be there early to show them to their seats as soon as they arrive. And with my master seating plan you'll be able to seat them quickly so we don't have any congestion. Now I'm hoping to start the ceremony at 3pm but I've put the starting time on the invitations as 2.45 so that everyone's there by three. I don't want late comers creeping in with a mouthed apology once we're started. So I need you to make sure bums are on

floor by 2.45. And if there are any latecomers I need you to make sure they don't get in. We don't want them distracting the proceedings. So for that reason, after much deliberation, I've decided not to give you a seat on my plan, as I want you to act as security. And I've just thought, as I've put 2.45 on my invitations I need you on the door by 1.45. You'll only have to stand about for an hour and a quarter so it's not too bad. Obviously that doesn't include the ceremony but once that gets underway it won't feel like standing." Let's just say, judging from her facial expression, Samantha wasn't about to start jumping in the air singing "Yip-pi-dee-do-dah yip-pi-dee-day." "Also before you let them in they have to show you their invitation. As proof they've been invited."

"But you've invited everyone Catherine."

"Yes but what if bears from other houses have got wind of my spectacular wedding. They might try and gatecrash it."

"Yes but I'll know if they're one of Lucy's bears or not, won't I?"

"Yes you probably will but no-one gets in without an invitation, whether you know them or not. Say John turns up without an invitation you still have to turn him away. If they haven't got their invitation then they might be an impostor in disguise."

Samantha burst out laughing. "And they've chosen to come as my John. Just the thought of it tickles me."

"Samantha calm yourself. We've got to stay focused. This shows just how easily you let yourself be distracted. While your laughing, tomorrow, an impostor could have sneaked past you into my wedding. And then they'll through the whole wedding, not least the seating plan, into chaos." With difficulty Samantha displayed a straight face but I

could see her lips were twitching and she was desperate to laugh. "Now another thing you need to watch out for is intruders climbing in through the window. I know you're going to be on the door but you need to keep an eye on the window just to make sure someone sneaky wotsit isn't trying to get in that way."

"Yes well it's always a possibility isn't it?" mocked Samantha.

"Say someone should try to gatecrash the wedding; I say try because with you on the ball no-one will be able to get in. But say they should try I need you to get rid of them with the minimum of fuss. Regrettably there a few bears here that like to stir a problem and make it ten times worse. If you're not careful you could have a full scale riot on your hands." Catherine made her wedding sound like a football match. The irony was that the two bears that most like to stir trouble were herself and Samantha! This had not been wasted on Samantha and I noticed her a smirk on her already twitching lips. "So what you need to do is politely ask them to leave and then if they refuse quietly get John or someone to march them off the premises. But tell him not to make a scene we don't want anyone else getting wind of it. Not just because some bears may make the situation worse but others like Metro who are a bit up themselves might start preaching on about how "morally unacceptable" it is that we've physically removing someone. We don't want a walk out before the wedding has even started!"

"Is that it?" asked Samantha, suppressing a yawn.

"Just one more thing. I've put Metro and Lenny in row 3."

"That's lovely now is that it?"

"No you don't understand. Chester told them they could sit at the front because we knocked them out with a door."

"Knocked them out?"

"Well they weren't unconscious. They exaggerated it of course and Chester decided they needed compensation. Well now he isn't the best bear I don't want him messing up my arrangements. Only bears of importance get to sit on the front row. Now I know he thinks he's important but that's a different matter. I'm only interested in importance to do with my wedding. Only bridesmaids, the best bear and parents of the groom sit on the front row."

"Why aren't your parents coming?" asked Samantha.

"Oh you're a nosy one you, aren't you? No, it's alright. I've tried phoning the house they've moved to but there's either no answer or I get a human." Just in case you're wondering how Catherine knew this, a bear would always say they were a bear when they answered the phone. For example Catherine would answer, "Catherine the bear speaking." This had naturally given a few salesmen a shock over the years! "Anyway," began Catherine, eager to change the subject, "if Metro starts causing a scene just tell him its row 3 or nothing. But don't let Chester hear about it and make sure he doesn't go and complain to Chester. He'd just throw my plan out the window and sit him wherever he requested to be sat." Catherine tutted. "You've got to be firm with these bears or they start thinking they only have to ask and they get." She sighed. "Right I think that's all my points out the way," But would you like me to run through it one more time so you can make notes. It'd be terrible if you forgot anything crucial."

"It'd be dreadful," agreed Samantha sarcastically, "but I think I've just about got it all up here," she told Catherine tapping her head. "I'd hate to waste your time."

"No, no. I can spare another half an hour."

Samantha sprung up. "No. No. It's fine. Come on. Let's get this party started."

Catherine too rose from the floor and they strolled over, together, towards Jean and Penny who were frantically chopping up pieces of card. Well more accurately Penny was frantically chopping pieces of card and Jean was sitting there, murmuring encouragement. Yes, it needed a lot of encouragement to cut up card.

They were sitting on the floor surrounded by little pieces of red and white card. Catherine and Samantha came up to them.

The former asked, "Have you finished yet?" Penny went to reply. "You're taking your time aren't you?" Why bother to ask if she wasn't going to bother waiting for a reply.

The scissors clicked together, two more pieces of red card fluttered to the carpet and Penny looked up beaming. "Finished."

Catherine bent down and picked up one of the pieces of white card. "Look at this." She waved it under Penny's nose. "It's just shoddy workmanship. It looks as if something has nibbled at it." Oh for goodness sake. Did it really matter? They were only going to be thrown in the air. It's not as if they were going to be on display!

"Come on Catherine," moaned Jean. "We've worked hard on these." You haven't I thought. You just sat on your backside! "It's not as if they need to be works of art."

"Well if you've got that sort of "anything will do" attitude then maybe you're not the best choice bridesmaids."

"We're the only choice of bridesmaids," Penny told her. "Unless you want Metro to walk down the aisle in a fluffy pink frock!" Please! Please, don't even put that image in my head!

Catherine's serious expression creased into a smile. "No, but I could have... just had... Samantha," choked Catherine, bursting into laughter. "Oh you're terrors you are. I try to be serious for just one moment and..." She sighed. And then burst into hysterical laughter once more. "Oh it's no use... let's get this party this started!"

CHAPTER 26

Once more music blared out through Lucy's CD player. But this time it was music of Catherine's choosing.

Michael Jackson squealed through the speakers.

"Wo!" exclaimed Catherine flinging her arms in the air and thrusting her midriff forward and as if someone had just inserted something up her you know where!

Samantha, Jean and Penny all stood behind her in a line, clapping, shouting encouragement and gently wiggling their hips in time to the music. It was quite a scene I can tell you!

Catherine was undoubtedly the main performer as, sad as it maybe, she knew all the dance moves to all of Michael Jackson's songs!

"I like this bit." Catherine expertly balanced on one foot and spun around so many times that I felt dizzy just watching her. "That's what you call a 360 degree turn," Catherine told Samantha, Jean and Penny knowledgeably. But they weren't impressed.

"Really Catherine?" exclaimed Jean, as if this was just unbelievably incredible.

"This is the best bit." Catherine grabbed her head with her paw and then without warning she started to slide backwards across the carpet. Samantha rolled her eyes and Jean began chatting to Penny.

"It's quite a good party isn't it?"

"I don't want to be rude Jean but I'd prefer it if you didn't speak to me. I know Corny was to blame as well but you trashed Lucy's bedroom. Hopefully my Santa will be able to mend most of the damage but it isn't the point. Tomorrow I'll be amicable towards

you so as not to ruin Catherine's wedding but for now I'd prefer it if you didn't speak to me."

Suddenly Catherine sprung into the air and began spinning around. She landed heavily on her bottom! Was it just me or was that not meant to happen?

"That is what you call a flying flip," Catherine proudly informed them. Really? I thought that's what you called a sore backside!

The song ended.

Catherine dragged herself back onto her feet. "That was my grand finale. Who wants a go now? I'm not sure which track is next." Catherine jogged over to the CD player as if this was a matter of urgency and picked up CD box and peered at the writing on the back.

Chester nervously poked his head around the doorframe.

"Don't stop 'till you get enough."

"Pardon dear?" inquired a puzzled Chester. Well she wasn't speaking to you was she?

Everybody looked round. "Chester! What are you doing here? You should be entertaining the males. We told you before this was a private do. The girls don't want a male bear popping in every five minutes."

Chester turned to Jean, Penny and Samantha. "Sorry about this. I just er... need a quick word with Catherine."

"Hi Chester," greeted Jean nervously. Chester looked away and placed his nose in the air.

"Catherine, do you think it's a little too early to be bringing the stag party to a close."

"A little too early? It's only just started. This party will be going on well into the night. Won't it girls?"

"Yes," cheered Samantha.

"Yes," cheered Penny and Jean half heartedly.

"Come on, sound more enthusiastic. We get to have a bit of a dance, stay up well into night and spend a few hours away from our husbands."

"I happen to think that's a bad thing," piped up Penny. "Santa and I do almost everything together."

"I can believe that," muttered Samantha under her breath.

"... but there's only so many times you can animal snap without it getting tedious," Chester was telling Catherine.

"Animal snap?"

"What's wrong with that Catherine, darling? Someone suggested a game of cards and requires a lot of concentration. It's actually a very intellectual game." Surely he wasn't still talking about animal snap!

"But Chester surely you can find a more fun way of spending your last night of freedom."

"Last night of freedom? I'm only marrying you darling."

Samantha was still blabbering on about time away from their husbands. "I'm sure Jean enjoys a bit of time away from her husband." Samantha nudged her. "We know she does. But she does prefer to spend it with someone else's husband."

"Really Samantha!" exclaimed Penny.

Jean just looked sheepishly away.

"Oh she knows I'm just having a laugh. Don't you Jean? Jean?"

"Well... I know that was your intention but it did come across quite hurtful Samantha."

"And having an affair with someone else's husband isn't hurtful at all," retaliated Samantha.

"Someone suggested poker," continued Chester, "but I don't want to be seen as encouraging gambling."

"Ah but you only bet buttons! It's hardly Las Vegas scale gambling! Go on, do that if that's what they want to do. I've been letting my lot do what they want." Like letting them listen to Barry Manilow. Not that I'm complaining! "That's the trick, you see, keep them happy, let them do what they want. Otherwise you'll have a rebellion on your hands. Oh God!" Catherine had seen something on the other side of the room. I had taken my eye off the ball, so to speak, and hadn't noticed that a fight had broken out between Jean and Samantha. Well I say a fight, but it was more handbags at stuff. Samantha had hold of Jean's flapping arms and they were tousling with each other.

"You take your eye off the playpen for one minute," grumbled Catherine, running with Chester towards the debacle.

Penny was already, unsuccessfully, trying split up the fight but wasn't forceful enough and kept getting pushed back by Jean and Samantha.

"I won't be spoken to in that tone of voice!" Jean was shouting.

"Yeah well I won't be given lessons on politeness by two timing trollops!"

"Wo. Wo. Wo." Catherine forcefully grabbed hold of both of them and yanked them apart. "Now then, let's calm down before you both say something that you may later regret." Was it me or did it sound like they were being arrested?

"She already has said something she's gonna regret," threatened Samantha pushing herself towards Jean, but Catherine held her back.

"Don't stop..." sang Michael Jackson. I don't think he quite understood what was happening.

Just at that moment all hell broke loose. Mickey, John and Pete charged into the room chanting:

"Football's coming home, it's coming home."

"This is what I call a party." John told Mickey.

"Yes, this looks just the ticket!"

"Better than that animal snap yawn."

"Mm. I know he's my son and all that but he has absolutely no idea how to celebrate your last night of freedom."

"John!" cried an over excited Samantha breaking free of Catherine's grip and running towards her husband.

"Mickey!" cried Jean also breaking free of Catherine's grip.

"Don't even think about coming near me!"

"But Mickey. I'm so sorry. I love you. I love you." Running up to him Jean tried to grab hold of her husband's arm but he lashed out and knocked her backwards onto the carpet. Jean screamed and Chester ran forward.

"Daddy! No! Don't degrade yourself to her standards."

Samantha leapt forward into the air, John grabbed her spun and around and around before landing her gracefully on the ground (sorry, I make her sound like an aeroplane). For me the romanticism of the moment was ruined by the knowledge that John was having an affair and chaos that was ensuring on the other side of the room.

"Shall we dance?" John asked his wife.

"Lets." Together they started to jive to music.

Back on the other side of the room Jean was clinging on to Mickey's leg and was finding herself being dragged across the room.

"Mummy stop making a show of yourself," pleaded Chester. I think it was slightly too late for that demand to be fulfilled.

Catherine had slumped against the far wall, fanning herself with her paw to try and stay conscious. Her hen party wasn't going quite to plan. Though half of the trouble was that there hadn't been a plan. "This is what happens when you don't plan for every eventuality," mumbled Catherine to herself.

"Get off my leg, Jean!" shouted Mickey, his patience running out. Mickey wasn't a bear known for his patience and he had put up with it for at least ten seconds!

Just at that moment the children arrived. Big Toff and Little Toff sprung into the doorway.

"1,2,3," counted Big Toff.

Suddenly they both pointed their arm in the air and started singing. "Night Fever Night Fever. You know how to do it..."

"Is this the entertainment?" asked Pete grumpily. "'Cause if this is as good as it gets I'm off now!"

Milly's voice sounded on the landing. "... I know Santa. I know. They're so upset about their dear Mum's departure. I don't know how they'll ever get over it!"

Milly and Santa appeared behind Big Toff and Little Toff in the doorway.

"You know how to do it. Night Fever Night Fever." They started to shake their hips and up and down movement with their arms. They were really getting into the swing of it and didn't seem to be concerned

by the fact that Michael Jackson was still wailing away.

Mickey fiercely grabbed hold of Jean and wrenched her off his leg.

"Daddy!" yelled Chester at the top of his pompous voice.

Pete spun round. "This is more like it," he commented, rubbing his paws together with perverse pleasure.

Jean flew across the room and landed right on the pile of Catherine's precious red and white balloons. Pop! Pop! Pop!

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" screamed Catherine leaping to her feet. "My balloons. My balloons. My blinking balloons." Catherine rushed forward.

Milly tapped Big Toff on the shoulder. "Feeling a little bit better now, are we?"

Big Toff turned around and burst into the fakest tears I've ever seen in my life. Maybe excluding that episode of Emmerdale I once saw! "Daddy! Daddy! I miss Mummy... so much!" Big Toff ran forward and hugged his Daddy, sobbing all the while onto his chest.

Milly patted him on the back. "It's alright son. It's alright. I miss her too."

"Big Toff look. Balloons," pointed Little Toff.

Big Toff let go of his Dad and chased his brother towards the balloons. Milly turned to Santa and shrugged. "It comes in dribs and drabs. One minute they're beside himself and the next they're well... feeling slightly livelier."

Catherine waded into the stack of balloons in order to try and rescue Jean before any more damage was done to her precious balloons. Pop. Pop. Pop.

Unfortunately clodhopping through them wasn't the best way to save them.

Just at that moment Little Toff flung himself into the mass of balloons. Pop. Pop. Pop.

Catherine screamed.

Big Toff charged at the balloons.

John and Samantha continued dancing.

Big Toff's feet suddenly went from under him and he landed in the pile of confetti. "Hey Little Toff, look at this," cried Big Toff chucking a pawful over himself.

"Wow that looks wicked," exclaimed Little Toff darting out of the balloons to sounds of pop, pop and pop.

"No, don't touch that," shouted Catherine dashing out of the balloons. "That's my confetti." Pop. Pop.

Little Toff dived into the confetti and pieces fluttered everywhere. He grabbed a handful of confetti and chucked it at Big Toff.

"Ow you..." Big Toff grabbed a handful and a confetti war ensued.

"No. No. No," cried Catherine rushing into the snow storm of confetti. She stepped into the middle of the battle and immediately got hit by a large clump of confetti. The draft from the open window started to blow the pieces and they fluttered all around the room in random directions creating the effect that it was snowing.

"Look what you're doing to my confetti."

"I think a good party was just what we needed," Milly told a disgusted Santa. Oh yeah! When your wife leaves you there's nothing quite like a good party! "Just to take our minds off it," he added hastily seeing Santa's disapproving glance.

Jean moved her arm. Pop. Pop.

“Oh you little terror.” The confetti got caught up in her fur and she looked like she had a rather severe dandruff problem!

"When does the entertainment start?" asked Pete.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

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CHAPTER 27

Minutes later the party had been cancelled.

The dust hadn't necessarily settled.

But the confetti certainly had!

Now only Catherine was left in the silent room (Michael Jackson had been turned off), monotonously bending down and picking up her pieces of card and placing them in a container that belonged to Lucy's brother; it had held his collection of Pogs but they now lay in a pile on Lucy's carpet.

"Some bears have absolutely no consideration," Catherine was muttering to herself. "Like caged flaming animals. Let them out and they go wild. Anyone'd think they'd never seen a balloon before. And I'll have to tell Samantha not to let those tearaways near the confetti tomorrow or we'll have another war on our hands. Unbelievable!"

"Catherine?"

Instantly recognising the voice, Catherine looked up startled. "John?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes. Why?"

"But you were talking to someone."

"Mm... just... running through the plans for my wedding." Catherine was rather embarrassed at being caught talking to herself.

There was an awkward silence. "Great party." John flinched as soon as the ice breaker had left his mouth.

"Really? Which part did you enjoy the most? The cat fight? The confetti war? The balloon bursting session."

"No the music really." Catherine gave him a stern glance and he gulped as he realised that the questions

had been rhetorical. "Oh I can't say anything right, can I?"

"What do you want?"

"I just needed to talk to you."

"Go on," prompted Catherine.

"I can't let you marry him!" That's the way to do it! No messing about just plunge straight in there.

Catherine bent down and picked up a piece of confetti. "Oh John, I thought you understood. What we had was just a little bit of fun. I thought I told you that I loved Chester. That I'll always love Chester. And I don't love you." Yes that's it; spell it out to Catherine.

"But I love you Catherine. I know it was just a bit of fun to start with but I've fallen in love with you Catherine. I didn't intend to (oh that's alright then) but it's happened. I've thought long and hard about it and I'm willing to leave Samantha to be with you. It might mean never seeing Toby ever again but I'm willing to make that sacrifice for you."

Picking up confetti she replied, "John I don't need this now. I'm marrying Chester tomorrow and that's that."

"But I won't let you. I won't stand back and see the bear I love walk down the aisle with someone else."

"Well you won't have to."

"No?" John voice was incredulous.

"No, because Samantha isn't getting married."

John's shoulder's sagged. "Oh I do love Samantha but in a completely different way."

"I don't care how you love Samantha. You love her and that's enough. If you want to have me as well you're just being greedy. You're already married and have a beautiful baby son. I'm not married and I don't have a child. That's what I want you see. I want to

marry Chester and have a family with him. That's not too much to ask is it?"

"But you can marry me. We can have a family together. We can be happier than you ever would be with Chester."

"No. No. No. We couldn't. Because I don't love you. IT WAS JUST A BIT OF FUN!"

"But it wasn't to me."

"Then you're going to have to get over it. Because I'm marrying Chester tomorrow and that's an end of it."

"No you're not. I won't let it happen. All I have to do is stand up and tell everyone what we did together and it's wedding over."

The piece of confetti fluttered out of Catherine's paw. "You'd do that would you?"

"Yes."

Catherine thrust up a pawful of confetti from the carpet and hurled it at John. "Then you're an idiot. An idiot! An idiot! An idiot! You'll lose everything and for nothing. Do you really think I'm going to marry you, have children with you, after you've ruined the happiest day of my life. The day I've spent most of this week, planning and preparing. Do you?"

John went to speak.

"Never! Never! Never!"

"But..."

"There's no but." She smiled sexily. "Now if you keep quite then maybe, maybe our fun sessions can continue after I'm married but that's all they'll be. A bit of fun."

"It isn't enough."

"It's the most you're going to get."

They stared at each; their eyes locked. Thoughts of what they had done, the fun they had had, almost

visibly passed between them. "It's the most you're going to get," repeated Catherine.

"Oh there you are," exclaimed Samantha, waddling into the room.

Catherine and John spun around startled. Catherine had jumped with surprise and bits of confetti fluttered out of the Pog container.

"Oh sorry, did I startle you?"

"No, no," dismissed Catherine laughing. "We were just er..."

"... talking," completed John.

"Yes... talking, that was it," emphasized Catherine.

"Is something the matter?" asked Samantha, looking suspiciously between them.

"Everything's..."

"... fine," completed John.

"Good," nodded Samantha, still slightly suspicious. Silence.

"Oh Samantha I was going to come and find you." Catherine was back in wedding mode. "Tomorrow I need you to make sure that Big Toff and Little Toff don't get their paws on my confetti container." She lifted the Pog container in the air. "I'm going to put all the confetti into here, once I've found it all, and put the lid on. Then you can hold it while you're guarding the door tomorrow and you can be safe in the knowledge that bits come flying out every time there's a draft. And then when it comes to the confetti throwing part of the ceremony distribute it evenly out to every bear who wants some. Now you'll have to give the Toffees some or you'll have problems but just make sure you're sparse with them. But more importantly don't let them get their paws on the box. If they get hold of that Christmas is going to come early in more ways than one."

"You're the boss. Well just in this instance anyway. Don't think you can boss me about when this is all over."

"Of course not. Wouldn't dream of it?"

Samantha laughed. "Well it's alright because I've got my John and he'd never let you take advantage of me. Would you John?"

Nervously John ran his paw through the fur on his head. "No. Of course not Samantha." Embarrassed, he looked away.

"Oh don't be so bashful, you're my knight in shining armour." You'll have to decide for yourself who said that!

Suddenly, the wardrobe door shuddered. The three bears froze.

"What was that?" asked Samantha; frightened.

"Don't be so silly," demanded Catherine. "Probably just the wind."

And then the wardrobe door creaked slowly open and Catherine screamed while Samantha lunged at John and clung onto him; shaking.

There was a shadowy figure standing in entrance to the wardrobe.

"Who... who's there?" stammered Catherine.

"It's only me," replied Jean cheerfully, stepping into the light of the room.

Breathing a sigh of relief, a still shaking Samantha let go of her husband.

"What on earth were you doing in there?" demanded Catherine. That was certainly a valid question but the question that Catherine would have wanted to ask, but would never have done so in Samantha's presence was, "How much have you heard?"

"I just needed some time alone," explained Jean.
"Sorry, did I give you a bit of a fright."

"Yes you blinking did," Samantha told her bluntly.
"We thought you were a ghost."

"Well I'm not," retorted Jean dryly, obviously having not forgotten her earlier 'incident' with Samantha. Jean turned to face Catherine. "I did need some time alone to contemplate everything but also when me and Corny were having our to-do we crashed into the wardrobe and knocked a load of things down. And as I thought a lot of clothes and stuff had fallen down on top of all your wedding gear."

"Oh that's just what I need the night before my wedding..."

"No, it's alright," interrupted Jean. "I've tidied it up the best I can."

"Oh very generous of you. That reminds me actually I need to go and have a look at my check list; see what I've still got to do before 3 o'clock tomorrow." Catherine began striding towards the wardrobe.

"I thought the wedding started at 2.45," piped up John.

"It does," dismissed Catherine.

"But you just said..."

The wardrobe door creaked open. "Oh don't argue with me John. Alright? I'm just too busy. Just listen to me for a change ay?" Catherine disappeared into the darkness of the wardrobe, the door slamming behind her.

"Sorry about that John," apologised Samantha. "She's really het up about this blessed wedding. I'll be glad when they've said "I do" and got the whole hoohah over and done with. Now talking of apologies

Jean, I'd just like to say, about what happened before..."

"... I'm sorry," John completed for her.

"Hey you. What's got into you? You keep finishing everyone else's..."

"... sentences."

Light heartedly, Samantha slapped John on the shoulder. "You're pushing it now." She paused. "No but seriously Jean. I am sorry about what happened before. I said some things I shouldn't have done. It started off as a joke and then things just got out of hand. I'd hate it to affect our friendship."

"Don't be silly Samantha," Jean told her in softer tone than she had done when she'd spoken to her a minute earlier. "Right now I need all the friends I can get so I'm certainly not going to fall out with one of my oldest friends over something really silly like that."

"I've already got Penny requesting that I don't even speak to her."

There was a ferocious scurrying from inside the wardrobe.

"She hasn't?"

"She has."

"I've got it!" shouted Catherine from within the wardrobe.

"That's nice for you," Samantha called back before continuing her conversation with Jean. "I can't believe Penny would say that."

"Well she did. She can be a right madam when she wants to be."

Chester came bouncing into the room. Not literally bouncing, but he did have a spring in his step. Well he was getting married tomorrow but I had a feeling

it was more to do with the fact that the shambles (sorry stag do!) was now over. "Where's Catherine?"

"Is that you Chester?" Catherine called from within.

"Yes darling, it's me."

"Right. I'll be out in a minute. Just wait there."

Jean slowly and nervously moved over towards Chester and opened her mouth to speak.

"I'm sure it would be very intelligent and well worth hearing Jean but I'm really not interested so save your breath."

Jean closed her mouth and stared long and hard at her son. This was the final rejection. He never wanted to speak to her again. Tears glistened in her eyes and before she burst into tears in front of her son she hurried out of the room; her paws covering her face.

Samantha and John glanced at each other to acknowledge that this was an awkward moment. What should they say?

"Tick."

Chester decided to break the silence. "It's a lovely evening isn't it?"

"Marvellous," agreed Samantha.

"Splendid," echoed John.

"Tick."

A tile creaked on the roof. "What was that?" dramatised Samantha.

"Probably just a bird." If he could see what I could see then he wouldn't have made that remark.

Samantha shivered. "Oh this room's getting spooky! We're not normally up this late (who are you trying to kid?). Come on, take me downstairs." Was there a problem with her legs?

John wrapped his arm around his wife's shivering shoulders and lead her towards the door.

"Night Chester."

"Yes night Chester."

"Goodnight."

Chester was then left standing alone in the centre of the carpet. A tile on the roof creaked again. He wrapped his arms around him and emitted a low; "Burrrrrrr!" before calling:

"Hurry up Catherine!"

"Tick. Oh I'm coming. Tick."

Catherine popped her head around the door. "What's the matter are getting frightened of the ghosties?"

"No," he retorted hastily. "Don't be silly."

Catherine then crept out of the cupboard waving her arms above her head in a spooky way. "Wooooooooooooooooooooo," she called mysteriously. "Wooooooooooooooooooooo."

"Oh don't be so childish Catherine." The tiles creaked again. Chester emitted a high pitched girlish scream and leapt in the arm.

"Don't be so childish," mimicked Catherine. "Now I need to discuss with you how I'm arriving to the wedding."

"Okay but do we have to do it in here? With that window open it's absolutely freezing in here. Let's go downstairs." Wouldn't closing the window be a simpler suggestion?

Chester, relieved to be able to get out of the 'haunted' room at last, started for the door but Catherine hovered in the room before turning and striding towards the solitary white balloon amongst the waste ground of ripped rubber. Picking up the balloon she told Chester, "This is our balloon. It survived all that bursting. It represents our marriage. It'll survive anything life throws at it."

"That's a very poetic analogy Catherine but what are you going to do with it."

"Tomorrow I'll... I'll release it outside. Now it represents us we don't to want keep it do and have to watch it shrivel up and eventually pop, do we?"

"No... we don't."

Chester turned and paced out into the landing and Catherine waddled after him. "Now about how I'm arriving. The buzz words are understated and simple so I thought what I'd do was..." Catherine's words drifted away down the landing.

The room's somewhat eerie silence didn't last long. The tiles creaked again and Milly, Big Toff and Little Toff stepped onto the window sill and out of the darkness of the starry night.

"Of course you'll never forget her," Milly was saying, as he struggled through the window in all his bandages.

"You don't think we were enjoying ourselves too much tonight, were we?"

"Of course you weren't. Do you think you could hear your mum saying you were having too much fun? You know how much she loved a good party," he reminisced fondly.

"But for the first night without our mummy, you don't think it was too much do you?" Big Toff asked sadly.

"No, you'll only end up going bonkers if you think about it all the time; if you cry and cry and cry. Your mum wouldn't want to see you moping about for the rest of you life. I can just hear her saying, "Big Toff, you've go to pick yourself up and move on with your life."" Big Toff obviously agreed that this is what she would have said had she still been around as this brought a tear to his eye. "And that's what you've

done. You've had a bit of a cry; we all have, and then you sprung up and had a bit of a bogie to take your mind off things."

"But I was still thinking about her."

"Of course you were."

"I'll always be thinking about her."

"Of course you will."

"I'll always love her."

"Of course you will." Cor blimey, was the record stuck? "And I'm sure someone out there," Milly gestured to the big black sky with his paw, "your mummy will be thinking about you; about how much she loves you."

A tear trickled down Big Toff's face as he thought about his "mummy" thinking about him.

"When's Mummy coming home?" Little Toff asked innocently.

Milly smiled at his son's naivety and ruffled the fur on his head. "I don't know son. I don't know. But she has only gone been gone for a few hours."

"But we've never been without our Mummy for this long before," reflected Little Toff sadly.

"I'm sure she'll be back soon. Once we show everyone our footage it'll only be a matter of time. And you've still got your Daddy." This didn't seem to be much comfort to them. Milly wrapped his long arms around his two sons. "Come on. Let's go back downstairs. It's well past your bedtime."

They groaned. "Can't we have just a little bit longer?" asked Little Toff cheekily.

"You've had long enough. What would your Mummy say?"

Realising that their Mummy wouldn't be pleased they leapt down off the window sill and bounded across the bed. Wincing, Milly struggled down after

then; not wanting to show his sons that he was in pain.

What really baffled me was that Little Toff and Big Toff had chosen to stay with Milly but now they had decided that they wanted their Mummy. Maybe they didn't realise how much they'd miss her. But I wasn't blaming them; they were only young and in a perfect world they would want their parents to be together. Whichever parent they stayed with they were naturally going to be missing the other one.

"Will you read us a bed time story?" asked Little Toff eagerly as he clambered down the side of the bed after his brother.

"Well... it's a bit late," answered Milly hesitantly.

"But Mummy always read us one."

"Oh alright then. But just a short one."

Little Toff and Big Toff cheered as they rushed out of the room.

Slowly and clearly in quite a bit of pain Milly made his way down the side of the bed, after his two sons. And in that moment I felt so guilty. There he was, wrapped up in his bandages, and left by his wife to care for his two energetic sons, all by himself and in pain. And although I had been the main cause of his wife's departure there was now nothing I could do.

There was nothing anyone could do.

But Milly seemed to think differently. He was deluding himself that the tape would win over the bears support for his departed wife. But I was quite sure that playing that tape would only achieve one thing.

Absolute mayhem.

Tomorrow was going to be a very interesting day...

CHAPTER 28

It had been one of those sticky, humid nights and even the slight draft breezing in through the window didn't help to cool me down. I longed for the cool breeze that Chester had moaned about the previous evening but I'm quite sure that was in his imagination as even then I had felt rather hot.

So all in all I hadn't had a very good night's sleep, but it wouldn't be fair to pile all the blame onto the heat. Lots of things had been buzzing through my head about today. Would Catherine marry Chester or would she jilt him for John? Would Milly play his footage and if so how would the bears react? Would they forgive Corny? And was there any way I could make up to Milly for the lie I had told to his wife?

Lucy's bedside clock told the time to be 7.01am and although this was fairly early I wasn't the only one awake.

From the within the famous wardrobe there was a babble of talking, clattering, banging and shuffling of paper.

"I was wearing that," Samantha was shouting.

"Now you weren't," argued Jean.

"Oi get off."

"Give it a rest, will you?" ordered Catherine. "Some of us are trying to think."

"Okay, but while you're thinking will you tell Jean that she's got my daffodil."

"Jean you've got Samantha's daffodil." There was the sound of yawning. "Are we keeping you awake Penny?"

"Sorry Catherine, it's just a bit too early in the morning for my mind to be completely focussed."

"Well I'm sorry to inconvenience you but in case it's slipped your mind I've got a wedding in," Catherine's head popped out of the door, "7 hours 59 minutes and 35 seconds." She disappeared back inside.

"Exactly. I just can't see that point in getting kitting out in my outfit, which is rather difficult to move in, when the wedding isn't for another 8 hours. I don't want to have to sit around for the next eight hours in this costume which digs in on my..."

"You won't be sitting around," Catherine told her, butting in as usual, "you'll be helping me to set the church up and making all the final preparations."

"Not in my bridesmaid's gear I won't. It's a struggle to breathe in that let alone helping you with preparations."

"Well fine then, don't wear it. I've just got to much to do to argue with you and I can't stand hearing your winging."

"Well if Penny's not putting hers on then I'm taking mine off."

"And me," piped up Jean.

"Oh look what you've started now!"

"I'm sorry," Penny apologised.

"Oh forget it. You can all strip off for all I care. Just don't come moaning to me if you don't have time to put it back on and you end up walking down the aisle in the nude."

"The nude?" echoed Samantha.

"Yes, it's when you have no clothes on Samantha dear," replied Catherine sarcastically. "Now let me think."

"About us in the nude?"

"No. About my wedding. I've got so much to do. Now when you've decided whether you're stripping

or sticking I need you to help get the church ready. Unlike you I'm proud of my outfit and I won't be taking it off until later tonight so I'm ready to get started. Basically, without being rude, I can't stand rudeness, you're holding me up now and I just haven't wime to taste so can you hurry up and decide what you're doing."

"Oh I'll leave it on then," Samantha gave in begrudgingly.

"Oh and me then."

"Well I'm sorry if I'm putting you out. It is only my wedding. Now what are you doing Penny?"

"I'm not putting it on."

"Right, but don't get thinking I'll remind you to put it on so if you're happy to walk down the aisle in your birthday suit then that's fine by me. Right let's go."

The door swung open and the wedding gang emerged from the wardrobe.

"Now then," began Catherine, "this is where the church is going to be situated." She motioned with her arms the area at the bottom of the bed. "The altar will go here," she pointed at the far side of the room, "and then bears can come in through the door and sit on either side of the aisle, which will go along here."

"Are we going to use the roll of blue carpet for the aisle?" asked Penny curiously.

"No."

"But normally..."

"Penny dear, this isn't a normal wedding. This is original, extravagant; the wedding of the year. So if you think that I'm having that mouldy, moth eaten carpet that we drag out every time there's a wedding then you're very much mistaken."

"What are you having instead then?"

“Well it just so happens that I remembered the luxurious red carpet that used to be in the living room until Mrs Partridge got fed up of it; I’m not sure why, it was lovely and soft under your paws. Anyway I remembered that it hadn’t been thrown away and that Mr Partridge had put it in the loft. Well last night I told Chester about it and asked him to go up in the loft and bring it down for me. But he seemed determined to put barriers up saying that he wouldn’t be able to manage the whole roll.” Samantha seemed to have lost interest, Penny was regretting having asked the question and even I was wondering where the tale was going. “Well I mean that was obvious, the carpet had covered the whole lounge, I don’t know how stupid he thinks I am. No, I told him that I wanted him to take a pair of scissors up and cut off as big a piece as he good. I didn’t bother him with exact measurements; I could always cut it down to size once he’d brought it down. Then he started moaning on about how he wouldn’t be able to get up there. I mean that’s a fair point really because there aren’t any ledges on the landing wall where bears can climb up; a bit inconsiderate really.” Penny had nodded off and even Jean’s eyelids were fluttering. “Luckily I’d already thought about that. So I went downstairs and got Mrs Partridge’s feather mop from the cubby hole and brought it back up here. Then I told Chester to get on the fluffy end and I hoisted him up. He was a bit heavy but I managed it. Anything for the wedding, ay? Anyway Chester managed to get into the loft, he had a bit of trouble with door,” Catherine lowered her voice, “bit too heavy for him but I shouted some encouragement (I can imagine) and he got in (I thought I’d heard strange noises above me last night but after Chester’s comments about ghosts

and such like I hadn't like to think about them). Then he chopped off a fairly big piece of carpet and I lowered him back down on the feather duster. It was quite fun really, although it was heavier the second time because he was holding the piece of carpet. But when he got down he said he'd spoken to some strange bear up there called Arthur, I think he'd been up there a while, completely covered in dust and rather bored as you would be. Well Chester's only gone and invited the fruitcake! I said to him, "Look Chester there isn't a seat for him!" but he wouldn't take any notice. Hopefully Chester will forget and he's got to hoist him down on the duster so if he forgets he won't be able to come. But if he doesn't then he's going to completely mess up my seating arrangements. From the word go Chester seems determined to throw my seating plan in the air!" Suddenly she clapped her paws firmly together. Penny woke with a start and Jean leapt up. "Right! We haven't got time to stand around chatting." How hypocritical was that? The three bears stared indignantly at her and Samantha went to speak in protest:

"Bu..."

"Look Samantha we've already wasted enough time already. Now I need you and Penny to bring the roll of red carpet out the wardrobe. I had Chester put it in there for safe keeping. Off you go!"

Penny shook her head to try and wake up, before managing to drag herself after a chuntering Samantha, into the wardrobe.

"Of all the flaming cheek!" Samantha was muttering to herself.

But Catherine didn't hear. "Now Jean I need you to go downstairs and collect the biscuit tin that's on the

dining room table. I'm going to use that as the altar. Now I know what you're thinking. That's going to look incredibly tacky. But don't fret. I'm going to cover it in this nice bit of material I found in Mrs Partridge's sewing box. I've put that in the wardrobe somewhere. I'll go and get that while you go and get the altar. Oh and while you're at it could you bring the candle that's on the mantelpiece in the lounge? I want to put it on the altar to make it look churchy."

"Oh course," replied Jean making her way out of the room.

Catherine, smiled to herself at how well things were going and moved over to the wardrobe.

"One, two three, heave!" shouted Samantha from inside the wardrobe.

Just as Catherine reached out her paw to open the wardrobe door it flew open and Penny was shoved out backwards by a roll of red carpet.

"Steady on Samantha. You nearly knocked me over."

"You're obviously not holding tight enough."

Samantha now emerged from the wardrobe, holding the other end of the roll of carpet. She was pushing quite hard on her end, not appreciating the fact that poor Penny was trying to hold on to a heavy roll of carpet and go backwards at the same time. This was why she had come flying out of the wardrobe backwards.

"Just put it down there." The carpet was plonked unceremoniously down on the carpet (I know it sounds silly but that's the bears for you!). "Be careful with it; there isn't another one (yes and carpet's very easily damaged!). Right, I need you to unroll it while I go and get some things from the wardrobe."

As Catherine beetled back into the wardrobe, Samantha and Penny positioned themselves behind the roll of carpet and crouched.

"On my count," instructed Samantha. "Three, two, one, go!" Samantha and Penny heaved and the carpet unrolled itself revealing a knotted, dusty and moth uneaten red carpet.

For a few moments Samantha and Penny stared in disbelief at the "luxury" carpet. Samantha clasped hold of her mouth to suppress her imminent laughter and even Penny, who tried to resist the temptation to laugh, began to splutter as the laughter was just too much to control.

"What's going on?" demanded Catherine curiously from within the wardrobe. "I can hear funny noises."

Regaining her composure Penny called to Catherine. "Everything's fine."

"Good. Just you be careful with my carpet. There's isn't another one quite like it."

"You can say that again," whispered Samantha to Penny.

There was more laughter before Penny held up an authoritative paw. "We need to get this covered up," she whispered urgently, "before she comes back out."

"Good thinking," mouthed Samantha.

Penny and Samantha hurriedly grabbed hold of one end of carpet and frantically began trying to roll up the carpet.

"She'll go spare if she sees this," Penny whispered to Samantha.

Too late!

Catherine came stumbling out of the cupboard with an armful of royal blue material.

"What you rolling it up for?" asked a puzzled Catherine.

Penny and Samantha literally sprung in the air with surprise.

"Oh Catherine," began Samantha, nervously trying to casually spread out her arms to obscure Catherine's view of the carpet, "didn't see you there."

And then Catherine saw it.

The pile of material landed in an untidy heap at Catherine's feet. "What...?" stammered Catherine. "What on earth have you done to my carpet?"

"Us?" exclaimed Samantha. "We haven't done this. Look at it. This has come from years of moth abuse!"

Catherine couldn't immediately think of a response to that. "But... but it's all knotted. The moths haven't done that!"

"No but it's had years of being trampled on and years of being in the loft. You can't expect it to come out looking like a showroom exhibit!"

"But it was all nice and fluffy when Chester brought it out of the loft last night. I rolled it up before I put it in the wardrobe. You can't tell me there's been a moth attack overnight!"

Samantha and Penny were baffled by this. "Well... are you sure it's the right carpet?" inquired Samantha.

"Er..." considered Catherine thoughtfully, kneeling down. She bent close to the carpet and began smelling it, squinting at it and running her paw across the surface. "I'm not sure."

"Only me," Jean greeted them brightly, stepping slowly into the room with the Cadbury's biscuit tin in her arms and the candle in its ornate holder balanced precariously on top. "What's happening?"

It was Catherine who answered. "These two clowns have ruined my carpet."

"How many times do I have to say it wasn't us?"

"No, they're blaming it on the moths," Catherine told Jean sarcastically.

"But I thought you were using the old carpet from the lounge?" queried Jean.

"Well I was but these two burkes have put an end to that." Samantha went to speak but Catherine held up a paw. "Talk to the paw Samantha because the face is getting annoyed. No, I'm going to have to use the naff blue carpet we use every year."

"But Catherine," persisted Jean, "that isn't the old lounge carpet. That's the old toilet carpet!"

Everyone turned to look at Jean with a shocked expression on their face.

"The toilet carpet," repeated Catherine. "God, I wondered what that smell was!"

"But if that's the toilet carpet, where's the lounge carpet?" asked Penny.

Samantha shook her head. "Flip on bike knows!"

"It's got to be somewhere in the wardrobe. I'll go and have a look." Catherine sprinted back into the wardrobe, calling over her shoulder, "Don't just stand there looking pretty (I don't think there was any danger of that!) do something useful like getting that bit of tat cleared away."

"What do you want me to do with this?" inquired Jean holding the tin in the air, which seemed a little pointless considering that Catherine had disappeared into the wardrobe!

"Don't tempt me!"

Jean began grumbling to herself. "Well it's all very well being rude to me but I still don't know where to put it." Rude? Surely not? Catherine couldn't tolerate rudeness!

"I think she wanted it up that end somewhere," Penny told her helpfully, as she continued to help Samantha roll up the carpet.

Jean strode over to the far end of the 'church' and plonked the tin down on the carpet, with a metallic clunk. The candle rocked precariously on top before falling to the carpet. Jean bent down to pick it up but then thought better of it. "No, she can stick that where she likes!"

Clunk!

I jumped. What on earth was that? And then I saw one of Lucy's shoes lying in the middle of the room. It had missed Penny and Samantha by inches and they were now looking about themselves in bewilderment.

"What the...?"

"Where did that come from?"

Their question was answered when, following the shoe, a heap of trousers, shirts and jumpers flew out of the wardrobe and swamped them.

"Ha ha, I've found it!"

"That's nice for you," uttered Samantha sarcastically as she and Penny untangled from the heap of clothes. To do this they obviously needed their hands but as they let go of the carpet it unrolled itself. "Oh that's brilliant that is!" groaned Samantha.

"I know it is," beamed Catherine, popping her head around the wardrobe door. "I'd put it in my secret hiding place so as to keep it safe."

"But it was so secret that even you couldn't find it!" joked Samantha. Don't tease her Samantha. It's a necessary precaution to take what with all those carpet thieves about! Every night I see a bear running off with a roll of carpet! "Thanks for flinging all these clothes at us!"

"Well you shouldn't have been standing there should you?" She turned to Jean. "Some bears have no sense, do they?"

"It's not as if you gave us any warning."

"I haven't got time to argue with you Samantha and you shouldn't have either. I thought I'd asked you to roll up the naff carpet."

"We were until you threw a load of clothes over us."

"Of stop winging Samantha, you're just being childish now. And why are you just standing around doing nothing Jean? I turn my back for a few seconds and things come to a standstill. Right, Jean you go downstairs and get me a Bible from the study. You can't have a church service without a Bible. But I don't want that scraggly one with the cover hanging off. I want that nice red one with the title in nice gold letters."

"Why didn't you tell me when you sent me downstairs before?" demanded Jean, a little aggrieved.

"Alright! Alright! Don't get shirty. I didn't want you to be carrying too much up the stairs. I know you're not the strongest bear and it'd be terrible if you fell down the stairs."

Penny and Samantha nodded agreement in unison.

"Horrible."

"Awful."

"I know," continued Catherine, "I'd never find another bridesmaid at this short notice." Penny's eyebrows almost rose off her head but Samantha wasn't surprised. "Right Penny and Samantha, I need you to put all those clothes back; we can't have the church cluttered with all them. And while you're at it I need all the burst balloons clearing away and

bunging in the bin. Then when you've done that you need to get the *real* red carpet out of the wardrobe; I've put it right by the door, you can't miss it. And while you're doing all that I'm going to start setting those pieces of material on the carpet," Catherine gestured to the pile of material she had dropped on the floor in surprise. "They're going to be the rows; where the bears are going to sit (yes we do know what rows are for). And I'm going to cover the altar in the same type of material. Off you go then; no time to lose."

And so the next few hours passed.

The church was set up by Catherine's rather reluctant little helpers. The burst balloons and the clothes were tidied away. The impostor carpet was but back into the wardrobe to suffer more "moth abuse" and the real carpet was brought out, unravelled and placed down the middle of the 'church' as the aisle. Catherine then set about dusting it, fluffing it up with one of the Partridge's toothbrushes (nice!) before spraying it with 'Mr Muscle.' Well one had to be sure, didn't one?

Next it was the turn of the biscuit tin for Catherine's meticulous cleaning. It was dusted and sprayed in 'Mr Muscle' and in Mrs Partridge's varnish, before being covered over with Catherine's royal blue material! Don't ask! The candle, which was going to be placed on the 'altar', had about to be subjected to 'Mr Muscle' before Penny had noticed what Catherine was about to do and pointed out that it was flammable. As Catherine intended to light the candle at the ceremony this was a fairly important point! I didn't imagine that the Partridge's would be too pleased to arrive home to find the bears had set fire to their house!

The remaining pieces of material were then laid out in rows. Catherine placed 5 pieces of rectangular material on one side of the aisle and 4 pieces on the other. But as this was Catherine this wasn't just a random action; she had calculated it exactly so that there would be room for every bear invited. She was obviously proud of this achievement so decided it was worth bragging about to her bridesmaid; who were naturally fascinated by it!

"In total there are 48 bears (well I'd almost guessed it!) and they're all coming to my wedding. But obviously me and Chester don't need a seat as we'll be standing at the front taking our vows. And I've already explained to Samantha that she don't need a seat either because she's going to be standing at the door keeping guard; making sure no gatecrashers from another house get in. So I realised that I needed to seat 45 bears. Now over the past few days I've been measuring the widths of various bears bottoms; being careful to make sure that I measured the largest and smallest bears. So Metro and Tommy were first on my list." I think that this might have evoked a little bit of laughter if her audience hadn't already resorted to counting the number of bits of fur they had on their arms! "Obviously I measured the bottoms of medium sized bears as well so I could take an average (some bears were just so sad!) and I found out that the average width of a bear's bottom is eight and a half inches. So I cut the pieces of material so they were forty-two and a half inches in length and this should take five average bears. And with 9 rows the church should hold all of the 45 bears coming to my wedding." Just in case you're wondering, you're probably not but just in case you are, none of the bears who had got married in the past had ever gone

to this much trouble before! "Obviously bears with bottoms larger than average are going to cause a problem which is why I've been careful to seat them on rows where bears with smaller than average bottoms are sitting. That's why I couldn't have Metro sitting at the front because that's where you lot are sitting and let's be fair you have got rather large bottoms!" Luckily for Catherine they weren't listening because if they had been she might have had trouble walking down the aisle. "I haven't bothered to measure how long bears legs are; that would just have been silly! (Mm!) If their legs stick out over the edge of the material, which has a width of 10 inches by the way; so they probably will, then it doesn't really matter. I'm just going to leave big gap between the rows so everyone can fit in. But it does mean that the people at the back might have trouble hearing. But I've taken this into account. I haven't put any wrinklies, like Pete, whose hearing might be on the decline, at the back." She does waffle on, doesn't she?

While Catherine was setting up the main structure of the church, and waffling on about things that the bears really couldn't give a monkey's about, Jean, Samantha and Penny were busy decorating it. Well, decorating is when you make something look nicer so I'm not sure that's the right word to use. Catherine had made them raid the Partridge's Christmas decoration box so the "tasteful" decorations could be put up around the church. Personally I didn't think that purple and pink tinsel classed as tasteful, I hasten to use the word tacky but... they were Christmas decorations and we were in mid-summer! But under Catherine's instructions the pink and purple tinsel were being selotaped to the duvet on Lucy's bed and the side of the bed was effectively one of the walls of

the church and even a piece was going on the altar. I didn't think using selotape was the cleverest idea, as when it was pulled off it would surely bring a big chunk of Lucy's duvet with it! Unless Catherine was planning on leaving it there!

As a final touch Catherine had brought a vase of prosthetic hydrangeas from downstairs and placed them by the entrance to the church, with the aim of welcoming the guests. I had a feeling they were more likely to deter them from entering as they weren't exactly what you'd call pretty and I could smell the wiff of mould from where I was sitting! I was surprised that they had got past Catherine's high standards. Maybe she hadn't had chance to examine them yet!

CHAPTER 29

It was 1.45pm.

Samantha, now clad in her luminous outfit that looked like a cross between winter and summer wear, had already been standing at the door for five minutes under Catherine's strict instructions.

"I know I told you 1.45," Catherine had said, "but let's not quibble over five minutes. We don't want to be caught out by early arrivers."

Samantha had muttered something about it being "a wedding and not a football match," but Catherine had already disappeared back into her wardrobe where the sounds of Jean and Penny getting dressed could be heard.

"I tell you that's my scarf!"

"Look, you can have it if you want Jean but it won't fit you. Catherine chose it specially for me."

"Nonsense. It fits me perfectly. Look." There was a pause.

"I'd hardly say perfectly. It's rather revealing."

"Yeah but that's the style, isn't it? Catherine tell Penny that that's the style."

"Oh give it a rest you two," snapped Catherine. "You're giving me a headache."

The argument had then ceased but now, five minutes later it bubbled up again.

"Look Jean we're wasting time now. I can't get dressed until you give me my scarf back."

"You've got one in your paw look. Put that one on."

"But this one isn't mine. It would be miles to big for me."

"Well it would be miles to small for me."

"Look at the one you've got on. That hardly covers anything."

"Are you calling me a tart?"

"No."

"I thought you weren't talking to me anyway?"

"In this situation that would be most childish but when the wedding's over we need have nothing more to do with each other."

"Right. Suits me. I always thought you were a silly little... idiot anyway." Is that the best she could come up with? "Too friendly to be true."

"Well if we're going to get personal then I do think the dress makes you look like a tart. So maybe you should keep it on."

"You..."

Then there was a screech, a shout of "Help" and a loud thump, followed by a constant clattering noise.

Catherine's voice pierced the din. "Stop it! Stop it! Get off her! Oi you watch my agapanthus! You almost squashed it!"

Samantha, who was leaning on the door frame to try and stay conscious, seemed completely unmoved by the noises within the cupboard and simply continued to whistle the 'Coronation Street' theme tune to herself.

"Calm down! Calm down," Catherine was shouting. "Penny get off her scarf!"

"It's my scarf. The tart nicked it."

"Call me that once more and I'm going to..."

"Ahh!"

Catherine screamed. There was silence; except for the irritating rendition of the Coronation theme tune. "Just stop it now before we all go bonkers. We're meant to be grown bears but you're acting like little kids. I'm getting married in an hour, there's stacks of

last minute preparations to do and the last thing I need is two of my bridesmaids squabbling over a scarf!"

"Sorry Catherine," apologised Penny meekly.

"Yes sorry Jean."

"Right now get changed for goodness sake. There isn't long left before kick off (Samantha did have point- Catherine was certainly getting confused, she'd be putting a turnstile up next). Now you've both got a scarf in your paw so just put that on for crying out loud. And I don't care if it's the one I gave you originally; it'll do. They all got mixed up when Corny and Jean crashed into my wardrobe."

"I tidied up after that I told you."

"Yes well, you messed up my system didn't you? But let's not have an argument about that."

"No you wouldn't want me to talk about what I heard while I was tidying up, would you?" So she had heard Catherine's conversation with John! How had she kept it to herself for so long without even a snide remark? If it had been any of the other bears they'd have been running up and down the roof top, shouting it at the top of their voices by now.

There was a silence.

"I... don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"I think you..."

"Just shut up, will you? Shut up! I'm going to go and give this to Samantha."

"Mm, I've got something to give to Samantha as well," replied Jean sneakily. "I'm sure she'll find it more interesting than confetti."

"Shut up!" bellowed Catherine rather viciously. Now get changed! When I come back I want you in your gear so I can take you onto the roof and have a

very stern word with you. I won't have empty accusations thrown about like that." I bet Penny was now secretly regretting having fallen out with Jean and telling her that she didn't want to speak to her again as I bet she was dying to know what Jean had been referring to. Not that Penny was one to indulge in gossip. No. No. No. Not respectable old Penny.

Catherine, clad in her ridiculous outfit (complete with all the trimmings- agapanthus, Lucy's ballet shoes and Mrs Partridge's crochet mat), came storming out of the wardrobe with a raging expression on her face and the Pog container in her paw. But I couldn't help feeling that this was just covering up her real emotions (her expression I mean, not the Pog container!), which must have been fear and desperation.

"What was all that about?" asked Samantha, ceasing her whistling.

"Oh they're acting like your little Toby; in fact he's probably better behaved. They're having a to-do over a scarf would you believe. Nice and grown up I know."

"But what was that about at the end when Jean mentioned me?" Samantha was cleverer than she looked (it was just as well really!). Although she had looked to be in her own little world merrily whistling to herself and not paying attention, she had really been listening to what was being said inside the wardrobe. Or her ears might just have pricked up when she had heard her name! Come to think of it that was more likely.

"Oh she was er... just accusing me of... favouritism (really I could have sworn it was adultery!). She was saying that it wasn't fair you got to stand on the door and she didn't." Catherine waited with baited breath

for Samantha's response. Would she fall for it or had she heard too much and recognise it to be a lie?

"Oh right. You can tell her she's welcome to it. I've had more fun watching paint dry."

Catherine let out a sigh of relief. "That's fantastic."

"Pardon?"

"I'm just... glad you're having so much fun."

"No but..."

"Anyway here's the confetti," Catherine told her, handing over the Pog container. "Now you be careful with it. And remember what I told you. Don't let the live wires have too much. And that reminds me. No crying."

"Pardon?"

"Babies aren't allowed to cry."

Samantha just stared at her flabbergasted. "Well how on earth am I going to stop them? Bung a sock in their mouth."

"If needs be. But that's too drastic to start with. Just ask the babies owner to leave the church. If they refuse use force but don't make a scene. Especially not if the service has started. But whatever you do just make sure you get the baby out. We don't want it crying all the way through the service. If you have to send or drag them out, don't let them back in until they can prove that it isn't going to start crying again."

"How?"

"Well if it's asleep it isn't going to start crying again or if it's got a dummy in its mouth. Well it might start crying again but at least we won't be able to hear it. That reminds me..."

"Oh God, something else," muttered Samantha.

But Catherine just droned on, "... could you also tell the congregation as they come in that talking will not be tolerated."

Samantha sighed. "I'm gonna get abuse aren't I? You don't just stand at the door saying, "No crying, no talking and no breathing without getting abuse."

"Don't be silly Samantha. Of course they can breath." There was a pause. "But tell them not heavily and not in excess."

"If you think I'm saying that you've got another thing coming. Why don't you just put a sign up; the 'Do's and 'Don't's?"

"Oh why didn't you suggest that before? I haven't got time now."

Samantha gawped at her. She'd only been joking!

"Anyway, I'll have to dash. Lots still to do. But don't forget how much of an honour it is to be Maid of honour. I wouldn't just ask anyone. So just you make sure nothing goes wrong."

"Okey, dokey," Samantha assured, sniffing as her eyes welled up. "Come on Samantha, pull yourself together. The wedding hasn't even started yet." Talking to herself! That was the first sign of madness that was! I wondered if something was going to happen that would tip her further over the edge. Like finding out what her husband had been doing behind her back.

That was what Catherine had gone to try and prevent.

A rather bedraggled Jean was now dragged from the wardrobe by Catherine, who waddled awkwardly in Lucy's large ballet shoes. Her woolly hat was half way off her head, the scarf, which was quite clearly Penny's, barely came down to her waist and that was with a number of large, revealing slits over her

midriff and the daffodil painfully shoved down her front was lopsided.

She raised a paw to Samantha. "Hi there Samantha. Delightful day isn't it?"

"Come on," Catherine ordered sternly, turning to Samantha. Beaming falsely, she told her jokily, "She's been playing up again. The aged of today, eh?"

Samantha smiled politely but was clearly rather puzzled as Jean was dragged onto the bed, wincing in pain as Catherine was rather rough with her. It really hadn't been her past few days, had it?

Moments later Jean was marched out onto the safety of the roof, before being roughly flung down onto the slate tiles.

"Ow!"

"Oh did that hurt?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now what the hell do you want?"

"I could ask you the same question," retorted Jean. "You've been cheating on my son with John. John, I ask you?"

"I prefer not to see it as cheating."

"I bet. What do you see it as then?"

"Oh just a little bit of fun."

"A little bit of fun?" repeated Jean. "I'm sure Chester will be trying to contain his amusement when he finds out."

"Obviously it wouldn't be fun for Chester but it didn't mean anything. It started well before I went out with Chester."

"But you've been going out with Chester for months!"

"Yes well me and John have been having our er... sessions for half a year now."

"Oh congratulations. Would you like a medal?"

"No. No. It isn't an achievement."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Jean.

"I'm just trying to prove that although me and John had already started our sessions I still went out with Chester. That shows that John isn't important to me. It's Chester that I love. What I had with John was just a harmless bit of fun."

"Harmless? I hardly think it's going to be harmless when Chester gets wind of it."

"But he isn't going to get wind of it, is he?"

"Isn't he?"

"You're going to tell him?"

"What sort of mother would I be if I didn't; if I let him walk up the aisle with a bear I knew was cheating on him behind his back?"

"Look you know what it's like to have affairs. You've had enough of them. You must understand the need to have a bit of extra marital excitement?"

Jean considered this before replying slowly and thoughtful, "Yes... but I also know that if Mickey's mother had found out about any of them my, if she was still around that is, I wouldn't have tried to justify them to her." Slowly Jean picked herself up off the roof and dusted herself down.

"I'm not trying to justify it. I'm just trying to persuade you not to tell Chester about it."

"I feel it is my duty as a mother," answered Jean almost regretfully.

"But don't you agree that I make him happy? You must have noticed the change in him since we started dating. He's been happier, chirpier (she made him sound like a bird!). Don't you agree?"

"Yes but it's not me who's ruined that."

"It will be if you tell him. I love him." Jean sniffed and looked away in disagreement. "I do honestly.

Look would I have thrown myself into this wedding like I have done, making sure everything's going to perfect if I didn't love him?"

"Yes because you just want a really special day where you can get all done up and walk down the aisle like a princess." Was Jean not looking at Catherine's outfit? It made her look like a ballet-dancing gardener not a princess!

"Oh Jean!" exclaimed a shocked Catherine. "That's really hurtful that is. Do you think I'm marrying your Chester so I can get all tatted up and strut down the aisle?"

Jean's expressions softened. "No... no, I didn't mean to say that."

"But it's obviously what you were thinking. I don't know how you can think that of me. We're friends. And it was Chester what suggested the wedding, in case you'd forgotten. Now fair enough I've dashed round like a demented gypsy to make sure everything runs smoothly but it's only because I want the day I marry your son to be the happiest of my life. It's not as if I'm going to get married again, is it, so why not go OTT?"

"But that's what concerns me. Are you going to get married again?"

"Why should I? I've found the bear that I love; love dearly."

"I don't deny that but is it Chester?" posed Jean dramatically.

Catherine laughed. "You think I love John. You think I'm going to dump Chester and marry John."

"I heard your conversation don't forget. He wants you to marry him."

"If you heard our conversation (I think that's already been established; Jean hadn't got all this off

the top of her head!) then you'll know where I told John to get off."

"But he still tried to persuade you otherwise."

"I'm not going to change my mind. I had no idea he'd fallen in love with me. I'd never considered him in that way."

"But you've been having an affair with him," persisted Jean.

"Oh it wasn't an affair. Don't dignify it with that title." Oh that's right because affairs are just so dignified! Everyone wants one!

"So you admit it was sordid and disgusting?"

"Yes. Our sessions meant nothing to me. You heard me tell John I didn't love him and didn't want to marry him. And you can't say I knew you were listening. It's not as if I said it for show!"

"That changes nothing."

"Of course it does. Okay, so you've never really approved of me but you can't deny I make Chester happy. So why go and ruin our relationship, the happiest day of both our lives by telling him about my fling with John? It won't do anyone any good. Chester will be distraught and I'll lose my fiancée and my best friend. You should know what it's like to lose everything. What would be the point in telling him about a relationship that's over?"

"Don't come that one. I heard you offer yourself to him, after you'd got married."

Catherine swallowed guiltily. "Yes... but I was just trying to sweeten him up so he wouldn't go and make an outburst at the wedding. I wouldn't really have done it," she added hastily. Sure!

"I don't believe that for a moment."

"Okay... maybe I would have done but I promise you I won't know if you'll just let the wedding go

ahead. It does prove to you Jean what I think of John if I'm going to offer him a quickie solely to keep him from spilling our secret."

"Yes but it also proves what a trollop you are and gives me another reason why I shouldn't let you marry my son."

"Look I can understand why you think I love John. All the bears you've had affairs with, you've loved; they've meant something to you. At their peak you'd have been willing to leave your husband and marry the affairee (I don't think that was a word but I'm not one to interfere!). So now you think that when other bears have flings they must love each other. But the thing is Jean, and I include myself in this, other bears just don't have high standards." Having an affair with your husband's brother isn't exactly what I'd class as high standards but that's probably just me. "They're willing to have a fling just for fun. That's why it's called a fling; if you fling something it doesn't stay in the air for long. Something motivated by fun isn't going to last. But love lasts." Ah! How poetic!

Before Catherine could get carried away Jean interspersed with, "I believe you when you say you don't love him."

"You do?" Catherine seemed surprised. She expected to have to rant for at least another five minutes.

"Yes but it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference."

"It doesn't?"

"No. You're still making a fool of my son. I have to tell him to try and restore some of his pride."

"But you don't. No one else knows about it. It's not as if I'm going about boasting about saying, "Ha ha

Chester doesn't know what I get up to behind his back!"

"It's not the point. Just by doing it is showing how little you think of him."

"I've told you how much I love your son and what he doesn't know can't hurt him. *You'd* be destroying his pride by telling him."

There was a pause. "Don't try and make me feel guilty. I have a duty, as Chester's mother, to do what's right."

"Okay." Catherine took a deep breath before sneakily asking, "Did you care about Mickey's pride when you had an affair with his brother?"

A stern expression appeared on Jean's face and she clenched her paws. "Don't... don't," she stammered (oh come on spit it out) "don't you bring my affair with Milly into this."

"Don't you mean affairs?" questioned Catherine antagonistically.

"Just shut up!" shouted Jean suddenly angry.

"Touchy subject is it?" teased Catherine dryly.

"You're in no position to talk."

"But neither of you when you consider your track record.

"Right!" shouted Jean stomping her foot on the tiles. "I'm going to tell Chester this minute."

"Well go on then. And give him my love."

"Uh you really... really..." but Jean couldn't find the words. She just stood on the rooftop; fuming.

"I thought you were going," mocked Catherine, more confidently now as she realised Jean wasn't going to tell Chester.

Jean didn't reply immediately. Instead she stared hard at Catherine; looking her up and down, as if she

was assessing her suitability to be Chester's wife. "I can't do it," she whispered almost inaudibly.

"Pardon?" asked Catherine, but I had a feeling that she had heard. Let's face it, I'd heard and I was a few metres away from the pair.

"I can't do it to him. I've put him through enough through the past few days. And he'd probably hate me more for telling him; accuse me of being a bitter and twisted old hag or such like." There was a slight pause as Jean was hoping that Catherine would jump in and correct this statement but no such luck! Catherine wasn't known for her common decency. "And you have put together what looks like a really well organised and beautiful ceremony. It would be a shame to ruin it. And you do make Chester happy and I think that you do love him. And you're going to finish with John aren't you?" How many 'and's was that?

"Yes, but really there's nothing to finish."

"Good. But you mustn't think that I'm condoning what you've done because I don't. You put your relationship with my son and his happiness in jeopardy for a silly bit of fun. And John of all people! He's hardly a sex bomb."

"I know," agreed Catherine, smiling. "I don't know what I was thinking." Suddenly the tenseness was over and Catherine and Jean burst into girlish laughter. "He was rubbish in..."

Jean rapped Catherine gently on her shoulder with her paw. "Catherine that's far too much information," giggled Jean. The laughter continued for a few a few more seconds before Jean became serious again. "Seriously though Catherine, if you ever get found out you mustn't let on to Chester, or to anyone for that matter, that I knew. I'm not in Chester's good

books as it is. If he found out that I knew and said nothing then that would be that. Now you are an old friend and Chester's fiancée so I'm willing to take the chance but I'm just asking that you don't mention it."

"I won't. I promise."

"Good." Jean hesitated for a moment. "But there is another problem."

"What?"

"John," replied Jean bluntly.

"What about him?"

"I heard your conversation don't forget. He said he was going to gatecrash the wedding."

"Oh he didn't but it like that," squawked Catherine. "He merrily said that he might mention it if the occasion arose."

"That was pleasant of him."

"I know," agreed Catherine sarcastically, "he's such a nice chap."

"Seriously though Catherine. What are we going to do? It would be more harmful to Chester if John blurted it out at your wedding and pledged his undying love for you than if I'd told him."

"We? There's no we about it. You're going to have to stop him. He's likely to try and make his announcement when Santa asks if anyone knows of any lawful reason and all that blurb; that's when people always do it on the telly."

"What do you expect me to do? If he's determined there's not a lot I can."

"You'll just have to keep your eye on him and if you see him about to get up, grab him and drag him out the church."

"Oh yeah. And how am I going to explain that."

"You'll have to use your imagination." And with that Catherine brushed some imaginary dust off her

arm and strode purposefully into back into the bedroom.

Samantha, still leaning on the doorframe, seemed completely oblivious to the conversation that had just taken place on the roof. But had she heard really?

Just at that moment Santa, with the black collar round his neck, came waltzing in through the door. Seeing him coming Samantha quickly jumped in front of his path; blocking his entrance.

"Can I see your invitation?" demanded Samantha, in the most official voice she could muster.

The request flustered Santa slightly. "Er... er... I'm sorry I don't have it on me."

"Well I can't let you in then. I'm sorry it's the rules."

"But I'm the vicar Samantha! Look," he ordered, pointing at his collar.

"Yes it's very nice but it doesn't prove anything. You could be an impostor."

"But Samantha, it's me Santa." He did a little twirl as if this would prove it.

"That's very impressive but I'm just following my orders. No one gets in without an invitation. If you've been invited then you can go and get your invitation."

"But you know I've been invited," protested Santa.

"Look, I can't let you in without an invitation whether I know you've been invited or not. I've been told to turn John away if he comes without his invitation."

"But I don't know where I've put it."

"You don't know where you've put it?" repeated Samantha in a disbelieving voice. "Very convenient."

Catherine and Jean clambered down off the bed.

"Look this is ridiculous. How I'm going to conduct the service if I can't..." his voice trailed off as he saw

Catherine and Jean striding towards the wardrobe. "Catherine! Catherine! Can you help me? Samantha's refusing to let me in because I haven't got my invitation."

Catherine whispered something to Jean, who nodded and made her way over to the wardrobe, before trotting over to the doorway, shaking her head and tutting.

"Oh Santa I'm very sorry about this. Samantha takes everything to extremes."

Samantha went to protest, "But..."

"There's no buts Samantha. Of course you let the vicar in, silly. There wouldn't be a ceremony without him. Now let him through."

Shaking her head and muttering something along the lines of, "She can stick her invitations up the same hole she talks out of!" Samantha stepped out of Santa's way. She curtsied as he went past her.

"Welcome your royal highness," she greeted him sarcastically.

"Much obliged," nodded Santa, equally sarcastic, as he brushed past her into the church.

"Just go and wait by the altar Santa," instructed Catherine, smiling falsely at her guest, before taking hold of Samantha's arm and leading her onto the landing.

"Just what do you think you're doing?"

"He didn't have his invitation!"

"Stuff his invitation! He's the vicar."

"No blinking, blooming, flipping exceptions you said."

"Language Samantha. We're in God's holy place."

"No we're not on the landing. And it's hardly God's holy place." Catherine made a disagreeing

noise. "Well come on Catherine; it's just a roll of carpet and a biscuit tin!"

"Samantha!" exclaimed Catherine, offended. "You've got no sense of occasion."

"Oh whatever. You can find yourself another invitation collector. I've had enough. I don't know who I can let in anymore. If I've got to assess each bear on whether they I should make an exception or not then it's too confusing. Thinking has never been my strong point." You can say that again!

"Look from now on you don't let in anyone without an invitation. No exceptions."

"No exceptions?"

"No."

"Right."

"Really Samantha, sometimes I just despair," admonished Catherine jokily as she made her way over to Santa.

After mouthing an obscenity at Catherine's back and emitting some rather strange grunting noises, Samantha resumed her guard at the door.

"Sorry about that Santa. If you want a job doing properly do it yourself, I always say."

"You're welcome to it," called Catherine.

"Oh... thanks," acknowledged Catherine awkwardly. "She's a card isn't she?"

"Quite. Now then, why did you ask me here this early?"

"Well you see I thought we might try and shake things up a little bit." Here we go...

"You're going to walk up the aisle and she's going to do the service," interrupted Samantha cheekily.

"Yes thank you Samantha. We haven't got much time so we really could do without your childish smart Alec remarks."

"Yes miss," giggled Samantha, quietly.

"Sorry about her. I'm not quite sure what's got into her. Now then your not known for your big entrances. You just normally pace up the aisle with a Bible, praising the Lord in Latin or whatever language it is. Now no offence but that's rather boring." It puzzled me how Santa could avoid taking offence from that! I had often noticed that bears thought they could say anything they liked as long as they added the magic words, 'No offence.' "So what I thought was that you could arrive with me and my bridesmaids."

"With you?" Santa was incredulous.

"You make it sound like a punishment."

"Not at all. It's just that's it's not usual for the vicar to travel with the bride and her bridesmaids."

"No but I don't want this wedding just to be usual. I want this wedding to be out of the ordinary, unusual. So that's why I think it'd be good if the vicar had a big entrance." She made it sound like a play! "You'd be making a statement; "Santa is in da house.""

But Santa was far from convinced. "But I'm not sure if I want to make that statement."

"Nonsense," dismissed Catherine. "You're the vicar; you're the one leading the service. You want to let everyone else know that."

Santa was still dubious but he gave in. "Oh alright then. But it won't be an extravagant entrance will it? Nothing over the top?"

"No. No. The buzz words are understated and simple." But secretly I wondered wherever Catherine was capable of doing anything that didn't go over the top.

"Oh right... Good."

"I'll just go and get Penny and Jean and we'll go and take our transport down." Take it down? Now I really was curious.

"Very well."

"Just excuse me a few moments."

A couple of minutes later Catherine re-merged from the wardrobe with Penny and Jean reluctantly tagging on behind. And "no offence" but they both looked completely ridiculous. I have already mentioned Jean's revealing scarf and lopsided daffodil (which had tilted to almost 90 degrees and was quite a danger to bears passing close to her) but Penny looked equally silly. She was quite obviously wearing Jean's scarf as it was wrapped loosely around her without any of the 'designer' slits, and there was still two foot of it trailing behind her. And because her dress was loose to try and shorten the amount trailing behind her, the daffodil down her front kept sliding from side to side as she moved, making it look as if Penny had windscreen wipers attached to her!

"Penny you look awful," exclaimed Catherine. Didn't she just have a way with words?

"Oh thanks."

"Just look at your dress. It's all sagging and you've got quite a lot of scarf trailing behind. Only the bride has a dress that trails. Are you trying to outclass me or something?"

"No. I did tell you that Jean had taken my dress but would you listen?"

"Oh don't start all that again..." her voice trailed away as she noticed Jean's dress, for the first time. The first time! Oh well we can let her off, it's not as if she'd just spent the last five minutes talking to her! Catherine hastily covered her eyes. "Jean... I think

Penny might have a point. At the moment there's quite a lot on show."

"Oh it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? You're not walking down my aisle dressed like a slapper!"

"Your aisle?" piped up Samantha. "I thought it was God's aisle."

"Oh shut up Samantha!" snapped Catherine before calling across to Santa. "Santa, will you tell Jean that her dress is too revealing."

"Pardon?" Santa had been too engrossed in reading the Bible that Samantha had placed in front of the altar to hear the question.

"Do you think that Jean's dress is too revealing?"

Santa peered over the top of his Bible. And then he saw her! The Bible was hastily lifted upwards to obscure his eye line. "Yes... it is rather... short." Was it just me or did that seem really silly? Jean normally wandered about in the buff; all the bears did, so he was only seeing what was usually on show!

"See, you've had a male's view now."

"But I think most of the male bears would approve," argued Jean.

"Look Jean, I'm quite aware of your track record but I have absolutely no desire to turn my wedding into some saucy strip show!

"But before you said we could walk down the aisle naked for all you cared?"

"It was just a figure of speech!" Yes it's quite a famous figure of speech that is! I often hear bears saying "Walk down the aisle naked," to each other. "I was just trying to make you get changed then," explained Catherine. "I thought if I said you'd be walking down the aisle naked if you didn't get changed when I wanted you to. I wasn't aware that

you'd actually want to walk down the aisle with naught on!"

"I don't want to walk down the aisle naked. I just want to be able to wear a dress which is slightly naughty and trendy." Do excuse Jean, I think she was in the middle of a mid-life crisis. One minute she's having an affair with Metro and then she's demanding to be allowed to walk down the aisle in a dress that showed off her... well I think it'd be quicker to say what it covered up.

"This is a wedding Jean not an audition for those adult movies you see on the TV! Just imagine what Chester would say if he saw you wearing that dress, with everything hanging out." Oh yuk! Why couldn't Catherine just call a spade a garden implement for once in her life?

It only took Jean a second for her to consider this before she wrapped her arms around herself; trying to cover herself up and made a dash for the wardrobe. "Come on Penny, I need your dress."

"Wo. Wo. Wo." Jean halted as she heard Catherine's voice. "There isn't time to get changed now. We've got to sort our transport out. If you're lucky you might have time to change before we have lift off." At the time I took that just to be a term of phrase but... it wasn't!

"But Catherine," protested Jean, "I've got everything on show."

Catherine smiled sweetly at her. "Yes deary. Haven't you just. I wonder who you've got to blame for that. Oh yes, yourself. But I can't see why you're complaining. You wanted to come to the wedding looking like *that*." Yes, well bears were just so unpredictable. I'd have thought Catherine would have known that by now!

"But..."

"It's pointless arguing and we just haven't got the time Jean deary." I was slightly puzzled as to why she kept calling Jean 'deary'. "Come on Santa we're going."

Santa jumped up, plonked the Bible down on the carpet and followed Catherine, Jean and Penny towards the door.

As Catherine neared Samantha she gave her last minute instructions. "Right, then next time you see me will be when I'm making my entrance at the wedding, so just make sure you keep everything in order. I don't want to arrive to find there's a riot going on. Make sure no intruders get in."

"Right you are."

"But do try and be more polite to the bears Samantha."

"You've changed your tune. You said I could use force to restrain..."

Catherine clamped her paw over Samantha's mouth. "I'm sorry Samantha I just don't have the time to talk. Come on everyone time to go." Catherine turned and smiled brightly at Santa before mouthing, "Not in front of Santa," discretely to Samantha. Then she let go of her mouth and marched out of the room. Catherine was such a paw licker! Yesterday she had been insulting Penny and Santa, calling them tree huggers and such like but now she needed him (she'd already said that the wedding couldn't go ahead without the vicar) suddenly he was there guest of honour and she wanted him to think everything was running smoothly. She probably thought that he might refuse to be vicar if he learnt that she'd given Samantha permission to beat up the guests if they

misbehaved. Well she hadn't put it quite like that but that had been the gist of it.

The bears passed out of the room.

Samantha slouched back up against the doorframe and the Coronation Street theme tune continued.

"Nerrrrrrrrrrrrr ner ner ne ne nerrrr. Nerrrrrrrrrrrrr ner ner ne ne nerrrr. Nerrrrrrrrrrr ne ne nerrrrrr. Ne ne nerrrr. Ner ne ne nerrr."

"Oh Mickey, glad you could make it," greeted Catherine from the landing. "Go on through. Samantha's waiting for guests to arrive."

"Mickey..." began Jean.

"Now isn't the time for a reconciliation," interrupted Catherine. "Come on."

Their footsteps echoed away down the landing and moments later Mickey came trudging in through the doorway; deep in thought. Luckily for him he had what looked like an invitation in his hand.

Waving the invite in the air he proudly told Samantha, "I've brought my invitation along."

"Well done. But then again your wife is a bridesmaid so you were bound to..." Samantha stopped herself as she realised what she'd said. She clasped her paw over her mouth. "Whoops! Me and my big wotsit." It's alright she means her mouth! I think!

"It's alright. But it was Chester who told me actually."

"Oh right." Samantha bent down and picked up the seating plan she had previously discarded on the floor. "Right, let's see where you're sitting." Samantha's paw hovered over the page as she tried to find Mickey's name on the piece of paper. "Er... oh here you are. You're in 1F."

"Pardon?"

"It's not difficult," tutted Samantha. "You're in row 1, because you're family, and you're in seat F. That's on the right hand side and it's the first place in the row. Though you're only allowed eight and a half inches. But I think Catherine's marked on the material where one seat ends and another one begins so everyone knows where their bottom can go to." Yes, indeed she had. I'd watched her do it and it had been absolutely gripping, as I'm sure you can imagine.

Samantha suddenly knelt down and started peering up at Mickey's bottom.

"Samantha, what are you doing?"

"Hang on." Samantha continued with her examination. She placed her paw on one side of his bottom and her other paw on the other side.

"Samantha! Please!"

"Oh don't be so bashful. I'm trying to measure your bottom. It's not as if I'm not getting any pleasure out of this." Oh yeah! Who was she trying to kid? Samantha now removed her paws from Mickey's bottom whilst trying to maintain the distance between them.

Relieved that Samantha had stopped caressing his backside Mickey now relaxed a little, before brushing his bottom down with his paws.

"It's alright I'm not infectious!"

"No... no... of course... course you're not... I was just... just..." Oh give it! It was painful to listen to.

Peering critically at the gap between her paws Samantha announced, "You have a very large bottom. You might be struggling to get in your seat." I think you can see why her and Catherine get on so well! "But you'll be alright. You just need to clench your cheeks up a bit." Oh please! That's not an image I want in my head.

"This is charming this is," grumbled Mickey.

"No, it's alright. Come and sit down and I'll help you squeeze yourself together," offered Samantha ushering him towards his seat.

"No, I don't want to sit down yet. I want to go and have a quick word with Chris." Oh delight!

"Chris? Who the hell's Chris?" Oh charming! Just pretend I'm not here why don't you?

Santa turned and pointed at me, as if I was some sort of exhibit. "Him up there."

Samantha peered curiously up at my shelf. I raised my wing in acknowledgement and smiled my falsest smile. "Oh that thing!" Huh! This just got better and better! "What do you want to speak to that for?" Mm, why bother with that tatty old thing?

"I just need to ask his advice on something."

"Advice? From him? He's been up there so long he probably doesn't even know his own name!" It's Chris actually and I happen to be capable of giving very sound advice; if I say so myself. Well it's not as if the bears are going to praise me, is it? "I shouldn't let you leave the church you see because if I let bears start wandering off then I'll get in a muddle and I won't know who's handed in their invitations and who hasn't. The next thing I know there'll be bears getting in who aren't meant to be here." Was it me or was she starting to sound more and more like Catherine?

"Why don't you give me back my invitation then?"

Samantha scratched her head, trying to work out if this would work. "Yeah... I hadn't thought of that."

So Samantha handed him back his invitation and a few minutes later he was sitting next to me once more.

"How can I help you this time?"

"Well," began Mickey, "it's rather awkward you see." Well he wouldn't be up here if it wasn't, would he?

"Go on," I prompted.

"You know that I've split up with Jean?" Well he didn't exactly do it quietly, did he?

"Yes," I answered cautiously, wondering whether he was trying to catch me out. You never can tell with bears.

"And do you know that she tried to make me take her back last night?"

"Yes." I do see everything that goes on in this bedroom. Did he think that I sat up here in blind fog oblivious to what was going on below me?

"Well it set me thinking." Here we go. "It made me realise that I do actually want her. When she ran towards me, her arms outstretched, it would have been so easy just to have taken her in my arms and said, "Oh Jean I love you. I love you. I love"" Steady on! "But there was something deep inside my stuffing that just stopped me." Mickey looked expectantly up at me.

What did he want me to say? "So why have you come to me?" I asked.

"I thought you might be able to offer some advice."

"About what?"

"What I should do next?"

"Well what is it you want?"

"To have Jean back."

"Then take her back." Could he not have worked that out for himself?

"But it's not as simple as that. If I take Jean back then I've got to take Milly back as well. But there's no way I'd ever contemplate taking him back."

"But he's only as bad as Jean."

"No he isn't. He's my brother and he betrayed me in the worse possible way."

"But Jean's your wife and she betrayed you in the worst possible way?"

Mickey waved a dismissing paw. "Oh but that's different, Chris!"

"How?" I asked curiously.

Mickey was rather flabbergasted by the question. "Because... because..." I didn't think there was a reason. "Because I love her." My mistake!

"But don't you love Milly as well?"

"Chris!" cried Mickey. "Don't be so disgusting!"

"No! No! No!" I protested. Why did bear's have a one-track mind? "I didn't mean in that way. I meant brotherly love."

"Oh right. No, I don't. Not after what he's done."

"But you love Jean after what she's done?"

"I never said I loved her."

"Yes you did."

"I did not."

"You did."

"Alright I did but I'm not going to make up with Milly. Ever. Ever. Ever." Okay I get the idea! "He won't even admit to what he's done. At least Jean's admitted to the affair but he's still denying it." But the difference is she's lying and he's telling the truth! Luckily I didn't say that aloud. Or was it lucky? Not for Milly certainly, but he had his video footage now. He'd be alright. I suddenly realised that Mickey was still talking. "... do?"

"Pardon?"

"So what do you think I should do?"

"I don't know it's up to you."

"Oh that's a great help. I thought you were meant to provide advice."

"I'm not meant to do anything," I pointed out. "But I do from time to time."

"Well go on then."

I was getting slightly annoyed with him. Okay maybe more than slightly! "Look I've been giving you may advice but you're refusing to take it."

"What advice was that?" Oh bears were so frustrating!

"That if you're willing to make up with them then you should make up with both of them and not just with Jean."

"But I've told you..."

"... that you don't want to make up with Milly. Yes I know. I know. But I just can't see a reason why."

"I've already explained all that."

"See!" I shouted. "You're refusing to take my advice."

Bears had started to filter into the church after Samantha had taken their invitation and had pointed them in the direction of their seat. Now some of them cast curious glances up at my shelf as they wondered what all the shouting was about.

"It's hardly your advice. I told you from the beginning that I was aware that I'd have to take both of them back."

"Right then do it. That's my advice. If you don't want it then could you please leave my shelf? And even if you do want it then could you still leave my shelf? So either way can you leave my shelf please? What you do after that is up to you?"

Mickey made no move to get up and go.

"Well?"

"That isn't my only problem," explained Mickey sadly, all his energy now zapped out of him.

"Go on." Was he not capable of talking without a prompt?

"Today should be the happiest day of my life. The day when my oldest son gets married to a beautiful kind and caring female bear." I'm not sure why he stressed the word 'female' so much. It's not as if... No we won't even go there! "I've always had images of what it'd be like and seeing all the hard work and organisation that Catherine's put into it I don't think it's going to be any less than I imagined. I've sat through a number of weddings during my time here," he made them sound like a chore; in my opinion you couldn't beat a good wedding, "and I've always thought that one day I'd be sitting at Chester's wedding; the proudest bear in the world. And that day is today." A tear rolled down Mickey's furry cheek.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I don't think I can go."

"Why on earth not?"

"Because *she'll* be there."

"I take it you mean Jean."

"Yes." Oh this was just ridiculous! Just a minute ago his dilemma was that he desperately wanted Jean back but didn't think he could have her. Now he didn't want to go to his son's wedding just because 'it' was going to be there. I wish he'd make up his mind. I couldn't help feeling that he was trying to make problems for himself.

"Well, what's wrong with that?" I asked. "Chester's her son too and you just told me you loved her."

"Oh I do but we've just established that I can't have her back." No, that wasn't the conclusion *we* had reached. He'd decided that for himself. "I can't bare to sit in that church and see her sitting there, all the

while knowing that I'll never be able to have her back."

"But you're bound to see her again so it seems stupid to miss one of the most special days of your life just to avoid seeing her."

"Oh I'm not going to miss it," Mickey reassured me. "I'm just going to watch it from up here."

"Up here?"

"Yes, that's right. With you." Don't bother asking if that's alright or anything petty like that. And just completely ignore the fact that I've already asked you quite firmly to leave my shelf.

"Oh I see," I began unsurely. That display of rudeness had rather thrown me off my guard. Though by now I shouldn't really have been surprised. "But you'll still be able to see her from up here," I pointed out just in case he thought that by sitting up here she would magically disappear from view.

"Oh I know that. But at least I won't have to in such close proximities with the bear I love but can't have. I mean I bet Catherine would have seated us next to each other." Actually I doubt that; knowing Catherine's thoroughness and attention to recent events Mickey and Jean would probably have been as far away from each other as they possibly could have been. But I didn't bother telling Mickey this, as I don't think it would have made any difference at all. He'd already made up his mind; he was determined to watch the wedding up here with me. Oh to be popular!

CHAPTER 30

"Seat 3C. That's just over there."

The church was starting to fill up. There was still quarter of an hour until the printed "kick off" as Catherine called it but she had apparently been right in her idea that the bears would want to arrive early. So there was still half an hour before the ceremony actually got under way.

With the air of an organiser about him, Chester marched into the room.

"Samantha, how's it going?"

"Not to bad. It's starting to pack out a bit now." She made it sound like a theatre.

"Good. Good. Any problems."

"No. A few bear forgot their invitations but they went and found them without any complaints."

"Glad to hear it. I'm sure everything's in safe paws." After allowing his eyes to pan across the seated guests, Chester called, "Oh Charles glad you could make it. Catherine wasn't sure you'd be well enough." Chester made a move to enter the church but walked straight into Samantha's outstretched arm.

"And just where do you think you're going?"

"Into the church Samantha. To speak to Charles. He hasn't been very well."

"That's a shame but I can't let you in before you've given me your invitation."

Chester couldn't believe what he was hearing. In his most high pitched and pompous voice he cried, "It's me Samantha. Chester."

"I'm perfectly aware of who you are but I can't let you into the church until I have your invitation in my paw."

"But I'm the groom. I don't have an invitation."

"Mm, a likely story."

Over Samantha's restraining arm Chester called into the church, "I won't be a moment Charles."

"No he'll be several!" completed Samantha smugly.

"Look Samantha, I'm not going to invite myself to my own wedding am I?"

"Earlier I had a bit of an altercation with Catherine when I refused to let Santa, the vicar, in because he didn't have his invitation. Catherine said I should have made an exception."

"Yes and you should make an exception for me. I'm the groom and that's more important than the vicar. Yes I'm on my way Charles."

Samantha babbled on. "Catherine also said that there were no more exceptions to be made. From that point onwards no one got in without an invitation."

"So you're not going to let Catherine come in when she lands." Lands? Had I heard that right? Well this was Catherine he was talking about so I probably had! "She won't have an invitation," he insisted.

Samantha considered this for a few moments before conceding. "Oh alright then, but don't let on or they'll all think that they can get in without an invite."

"Okay." Samantha dropped her arm and Chester strode into the church, over to his friend Charles. You won't have heard me mention Charles but he was rather old and, I hasten to use the word but there's no other way around it; boring. He wasn't married and like me tried to keep out of the bear's affairs (take that as you will) so he wasn't worth mentioning.

If Samantha thought she was now going to have a rest after dealing with Chester she was very much mistaken. A high pitched, unmistakable voice sounded on the landing and Samantha's most

difficult customers (I know they weren't buying anything but you know what I mean) were on their way.

"Come on Lenny pick your feet up; you're lagging behind." It's not as if he was covered in bandages or anything like that? "We're going to be late for the wedding and that would never do."

"I'm going as fast as I can Daddy. It's rather difficult in these bandages."

With his invite in his hand and his nose in the air and his fur carefully brushed, so that he looked as if he'd had an electric shock, Metro briskly strolled into the room.

"Oh there you are Samantha. Lenny will be along in a moment. We haven't missed anything have we?" Samantha went to reply. "Good. Good. You just wouldn't believe the trouble I've had trying to look presentable for the wedding." We'd noticed! "Well as reserve best bear one's just got to make the effort hasn't one. But Lenny was a problem. It is rather difficult to spruce up one when one unfortunately finds oneself in bandages. I mean with me I just ran a brush through my fur but Lenny proved more difficult."

Just at that moment Lenny trudged into the room. His bandages were spotlessly white and a hideous green ribbon was attached to his ear. I was glad to see that it wasn't just Catherine who went over the top.

"But I think I've done a fairly magnificent job in the end, all things considered." Not that he'd ever dream of being boastful. "Don't you agree Samantha?"

"Yes he looks very... very... exceptionally... er..." yes I could imagine that it would be difficult to find a word "... nice."

"Nice? Well I think he looks just splendid."

"Yes that as well."

"Anyway we haven't got time to stand around chatting have we? We want to be in our seats for when the bride arrives. Here's my invite. Lenny hand yours over to Samantha."

Samantha studied the invitations carefully. "Yes... they seem to be in order." Did she really think the bear she'd just been speaking to was an impostor? Could anyone apart from Metro himself really make their voice that high pitched and pompous? "Right let's see where you're sitting." Samantha picked the seating plan up off the floor and scrutinised it; searching for Metro's name. "Oh right here you are." She took a deep breath before announcing, "You're in seat 4A and 4B."

"Does the number refer to the row?"

"Yes," replied Samantha cautiously.

"Well that's curious, isn't it? Calling the row at the front row number 4."

Samantha gulped before quickly saying, "It's not the one at the front."

"Pardon?"

"It's not the one at the front."

"Oh right. There's been some sort of mistake, you see? I thought there had been when I heard the number 4. I'm good at noticing trivial little details like that." Trivial being the operative word! "You see Lenny and I are sitting on the front row; as compensation you understand. Catherine came charging out of the wardrobe the other day, with no consideration for anyone sitting against it, and knocked poor Lenny and myself out of the way. Well Chester was just behind her and seeing meek little Lenny in his bandages made him feel sorry for us, I think, so he said we could have front row seats at the

wedding. He thought it was the least he could do. Catherine threw a bit of a wobbly but Chester said that we'd get our seats."

"Yes well he hadn't consulted Catherine about it and she told me personally that regrettably you wouldn't be able to have front row seats. Only family, bridesmaids and the best bear are allowed on the front row. Very sorry. Now would you like me to show you to your seat?"

"No. I would not. I was promised front rows seats. And I'm reserve best bear so I'm not settling for less. I've been keying up for the excitement of sitting at the front."

"Well you'll have to unkey yourself. Reserve best bears don't get to sit at the front when the real best bears are alive and breathing."

"That can easily be altered," muttered Metro.

"Daddy does it really matter where we sit?" asked an exhausted Lenny, who really wanted to sit down and unlike his Dad didn't care where.

"Yes it does. I want a front row seat."

"Look this isn't a boxing match," Samantha told him, getting slightly annoyed.

"No but it's just the principal, isn't it? I was promised a front row seat as compensation and that's what I'm going to get."

"No you're not," shouted Samantha, waving the seating plan at him. "I'll be in the dog house with Catherine if bears aren't in the exact position that she intended them to be. If I start meddling with her plan just to suit the likes of you..."

"I resent that remark."

"Well you weren't supposed to like it!"

"I find your rudeness absolutely..."

"Just what is going on here?" demanded Chester, breaking off from his 'riveting' conversation with Charles.

"Oh Chester there you are. Samantha is refusing to give Lenny and me the front row seats you promised us."

Chester looked quizzically at Samantha. "Samantha?"

"Look Catherine specifically told me that everyone was supposed to sit exactly where it says on this seating plan. And on the seating plan it says Metro and Lenny are in seats 4A and 4B so that's where they're going to have to sit."

"Let me see that plan," demanded Chester, snatching the seating plan off Samantha. "Oh I'm very sorry about this Metro. Catherine's been purposefully obstructive. But not to worry I'm sure there'll be room for you on the front row."

"No there won't," argued Samantha. "Catherine's measured exactly and there's only room for five bears on each row."

"Well they'll just have to squeeze up a bit won't they? It doesn't matter if one of them isn't sitting on the material, does it?"

"And I've only got a very small bottom;" piped up Metro, "I'm sure they won't even notice I'm there." Mm...

"I'm... I'm..." stuttered Chester, "I'm sure that's true."

"Look I can't allow it. If Catherine sees that there's more than five in a row and her symmetry has been ruined she'll throw a wobbly."

"Okay, okay. Two of the bears sitting on the front row will just have to move into seat 4A and 4B."

"I think that would be the simplest arrangement," agreed Metro.

"No. It's absolutely out of the question. If Catherine finds out that I've meddled with her arrangement just to suit Metro!"

"I don't like your tone!"

"No I think that was rather rude Samantha. Apologise to Metro."

"No."

"Right! Now we've definitely got to sit on the front row as compensation for Samantha not apologising." Oh this was just getting silly!

"Okay I'm sorry but you 'ain't sitting on the front row."

"I think you'll find we are. Now Chester let me have a look at that seating plan, I want to see who we can move." Chester handed over the plan and after clearing his throat, Metro began to scrutinize it. After a few minutes of silence he announced, "Right, it's going to have to be John and Toby."

"Oi! You can't just move my John and Toby like that."

"Well they don't have a reason for being there, do they? John isn't a best man and he's not family of the bride or groom."

"No but they're my family."

"Yes but you're just a bridesmaid. Why should the bridesmaid's family get to sit on the front row?"

"Well they have more right than the reserve best bear."

"No they don't. I need to be on hand so that if anything should happen to Harry I'm there, ready for action. I mean let's face it Samantha John and Toby aren't *that* important are they? I mean one of them can hardly talk and the other one's only two!"

"Right, I'm going to swing for you!" Samantha lunged forward; fuming but luckily Chester was on hand to restrain.

"Samantha calm yourself."

Mimicking Metro she announced, "But I find that remark incredibly offensive. I demand compensation. I need a front row seat just to recover from the shock of it."

And then, right on cue, John entered the room, cradling a crying Toby in his arms.

"There, there Toby. There, there."

"Oh John, am I glad you're here. I'll take Toby; I think you're going to need your paws free. Metro's been very offensive about you. He was calling you thick and all sorts."

Metro began taking several steps backwards. "Oh... I didn't...I didn't say that. No. No."

John hunched his shoulders and sauntered menacingly towards Metro. "Who are you calling fuck ay?" he asked gruffly. After listening to that sentence I think Metro might have had a point! It's not often you'll hear me say that!

"I didn't... didn't call you thick. I was merely saying that I didn't think you and Toby should have front row seats when Lenny and I are on the forth row. I'm the reserve best bear you know?"

John's shoulders sagged and he resumed his normal voice. "Oh yeah I quite agree with you. Me and Toby don't mind where we sit."

"John, you're not supposed to agree with him," chastised Samantha in a hushed voice.

"Oh... right. I completely disagree with you."

"Chester, Samantha's being deliberately obstructive, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I must say Samantha. John did say he was happy to move."

"Yes but Catherine won't be. And I'll be the one getting into trouble."

"No you won't. I'll tell Catherine it was my decision. It's my wedding as well so I should have a say in it. Yes, just a moment Charles."

"No it's Catherine's seating plan. You can't just overrule it."

And then there was more crying as Harry timidly moved into the church, with a bawling Tommy awkwardly in his arms. I don't think I'd ever seen Harry holding his brother before so no wonder he didn't know what to do. At least he had him the right way up!

And then there was chaos.

Everyone started talking at once.

"Oh Harry, there you are."

"Daddy, I want to sit down."

"Yes alright, let's go."

"No, you don't!"

"Now let's see where you're sitting Harry."

"We're just sitting down."

"Not in row 1 you're not."

"Yes we are."

"Ah 1G. Off you go."

"Chester, Harry hasn't given his invitation."

"Lenny run!"

"Oi you come back. John stop 'em!"

"Come here you little blighters."

"I haven't got my invitation."

"Oh Harry I told you to bring it."

"Don't let him in without it. Grab 'em John."

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Get off me you brute!"

"Run Harry. Now!"

"But Catherine said..."

"Now!"

"John there's another one."

And then:

"Hi-de-hi!"

The bears froze.

I spun around on my shelf. Standing at the window were two bears I was sure I'd never seen before; although there was something familiar about their features. One was a male bear, about 18 inches in height, with short, spiky brown fur and hunched powerful shoulders. The other was a white female bear, only about 10 inches in height and rather obese. I feel I must say that they seemed a rather eccentric and loud couple. They didn't seem the sort to meekly sit in the corner, keeping themselves to themselves.

"Chester," the female called down brashly, "we made it."

And then it struck me.

Catherine's parents had arrived!

CHAPTER 31

"George! Marjorie! Glad you could come."

"Oh Chester, darling. We wouldn't have missed this for the world. Would we George?"

"Absolutely not."

Samantha called across to John in a hushed voice. "John, we've got a problem."

Wrestling with Metro, John shouted back, "Can't you see I've got my hands full?"

"Oh leave that pillac! You can deal with him in a minute. We've got gatecrashers! Up there!"

"On my way dear," assured John dashing towards the bed.

"Anyway, George, Marjorie, come down here and we can have a good chat. Just a few more minutes Charles!" reassured Chester, noticed Charles' waving paw.

Before George and Marjorie could make a move Samantha called up to them, full of false politeness. "Actually if you wouldn't mind just waiting up there, my husband John is just on his way to escort you off the premises. Thank you so much for your co-operation," thanked Samantha, giving a little bow.

"Samantha!" protested Chester. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"I'm asking them to co-operate fully as John removes from the Partridge's grounds." Lowering her voice she told Chester conspiratorially, "They haven't got an invitation."

"I know that. Catherine had given up trying to phone them so I had a go and got through first time. It's always the way isn't it? Well I invited them here, but didn't tell Catherine; I thought it'd be a nice

surprise for her. So that's why they don't have invitations. She doesn't know they're coming."

"Mm, a likely story."

"But it's the truth."

"Can we come in Chester?" Marjorie called down to Chester.

"Absolutely..."

"... not," completed Samantha.

"Oh really, this is ridiculous isn't it George?"

"Quite. Chester, dear chap, what's going on?"

Before Chester had time to even open his mouth John had scrambled up onto the windowsill. He placed his paws firmly on Marjorie and began to guide her out of the window."

"Oi! Oi! Oi! Get your paws off me pinkie!" She definitely was Catherine's mother!

George grabbed hold of John by the scruff of his neck. "Get your dirty little paws off my wife if you still want to be able to walk!" And he definitely was Catherine's father!

John's tough act was now forgotten and he started to quiver under George's grip. "Please... please... please don't hurt me. You can come in... you can do anything you like."

"Samantha," pleaded Chester, "can you put a stop to this please?"

"Sorry. No can do. But don't fret. John's got the situation under control." Under control? It was shame Mrs Partridge had take her varifocals on holiday with her, as I think Samantha could do with them!

John was now flung to one side by George who proceeded to make his down off the windowsill, before turning to help Marjorie down.

Samantha and Chester had now taken their eyes off the windowsill so they could now be excused for

thinking John had everything “under control.” “Look Samantha, what do you think Catherine’s going to say when she gets here and you have to say, “Oh your parents were here Catherine, but they’ve gone now. I wouldn’t let them in.”

“Oh I’m sure she’ll understand,” replied Samantha confidently, “when she hears they didn’t have an invitation.”

“You think?”

“No maybe not. Oh alright then. What the hell ay? John let them in!” Chester and Samantha looked up to see that Marjorie and George were already waddling over the bed towards them.

A rather embarrassed Samantha told Chester, “Oh John must have read our minds. He’d knew we’d let them in, eventually.”

“Yes that’ll be it.”

Realising that this battle was lost Samantha turned her attentions back the four bears sitting in the front row of the church; Metro, Lenny, Harry and Tommy. But she was still lumbered with Toby so she shouted up to John, “Get your backside down here John! I need you!” For the first time Samantha realised that the eyes of all seated guests in the church were staring at her. “Sorry,” she apologised weakly.

George had helped Marjorie down off the bed and they made their way towards Chester, with Marjorie still chuntering on about her near departure from the house. Huh! I made it sound like Big Brother. That was another of those programmes that blasted through the floorboards of the bedroom. But I can promise you I haven’t listened or paid even the slightest attention to that tacky, immoral programme (I still can’t believe Nadia won!). “... it’s a disgrace

George. Almost being thrown out of our daughter's wedding."

"Yes I'm very sorry about that," Chester apologised. "There was a little bit of a misunderstanding."

"Yes well we're not very happy about it. And we don't even know why that brute tried to throw us out?"

"Well he's the husband of Samantha. That's her there," Chester gestured towards Samantha who, aware of the congregations attention, was silently motioning to John (who was still horizontal on the windowsill) to come and take Toby off her paws. "Now your daughter has put her in charge of what can only be called security, with the strictest of instructions not to let anyone into the church without an invitation. She's worried about unwanted bears from other houses." He meant gatecrashers but that was the sort of slang that Chester just didn't use; especially not in front of guests.

"That sounds like our daughter, doesn't it George?" George nodded his agreement. "Always organised."

"That's Catherine alright," agreed Chester. A brief pause followed as Chester summoned up the courage to ask something. "You know you've been calling me Chester...?"

"Oh that is you're name, isn't it? I'm a terror with names, aren't I George?" But she swept on before giving poor George time to answer. I say 'poor' because it seemed to me that George was naturally loud but allowed himself dominated by his wife. "I'm sure that the bear I spoke to on the phone said his name was Chester but..."

Chester bravely interrupted her flow. "No I am Chester but I just wondered how you knew that.

You'd only spoken to me on the phone but when you first came into the room you immediately knew that I was Chester."

Marjorie grinned. "Well I did vaguely recognise your voice from the phone call and you were the one who welcomed us and you did know our names but there was something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on but when I came into the room, I saw you standing there and I thought, "That's the bear Catherine's going to marry. I'm sure of it." My first impression of you was that you were a polite, gentle and fairly quite bear and that's just the sort that Catherine goes for. She's has a very vibrant, outgoing, dominating personality, as you've probably noticed (I think everyone had noticed that) and so she likes quiet, polite bears who will let her do most of the talking and who she can and make a bit more outspoken, a bit more down to earth (was it me or was that not slightly rude; wasn't it just effectively saying "Chester you're a bit up yourself"?). Isn't that right George?"

"Quite right Marjorie." The irony was that I'm quite sure that Marjorie and George's relationship went along the same lines! I doubted that George had been as bold or brash as he was now, when he had first met Marjorie. I seemed to recall Catherine mentioning that they had been married for thirty three years so some of Marjorie's confidence was bound to have rubbed off in that time. Not that George was exactly full of himself now but he had been quite confident when dealing with John.

"And... and..." Chester stuttered, "do you approve of Catherine's choice?"

"Oh yes Chester dear," Marjorie reassured him. "You seem a very nice young bear." I couldn't help

feeling that there had been slightly too much emphasis on the word 'seem.'

My attention fluttered away to the other side of the room. John had reluctantly clambered down off the bed and Samantha had thrust Toby into his paws before marching over to the front row.

Trouble was brewing.

Chester, oblivious to what was going on behind him, was now a little bashful due to Marjorie's 'kind' comment. "Oh that's exceptionally kind of you Marjorie."

"Not at all. If you're going to make my Catherine happy, which I'm sure you will, then you deserve all the praise we can give you give. Doesn't he George?"

"Absolutely Marjorie."

Unbeknownst to Chester, a meek Harry had just hurried nervously out of the room with Tommy in his arms, after Samantha had gone over to him and told him that he had to go and get his invitation if he didn't want to be thrown out of the church. I'm sure if Chester had known about this he would have had something to say, as he was the one who told Harry to sneak in.

Having dealt with Harry, who hadn't even protested, Samantha moved across to deal with a bigger problem; Metro.

"I'm sure Catherine will be delighted to see you," Chester was telling George and Marjorie. "She did try to call you know, just in case you thought that she didn't want you here."

"Oh it's alright Chester dear; we know what Catherine's like. She never did have much patience did she George?"

"No," he replied thoughtfully.

"She did actually seem quite upset that you couldn't come. Not that she let on of course."

Marjorie smiled. "No that's our daughter. Isn't it George?"

"Oh absol..." began George but broke off as Chester and Marjorie spun around at the sound of shouting from the front of the church.

"I'm entitled to my front row seat! I refuse to be moved."

"You can refuse all you flaming like but I'm going to have to physically remove you."

"I'm not going to physically removed from anywhere."

Samantha grabbed Metro's arm. "Oh yeah?"

"Ow! You're hurting. Get off my arm."

George turned a quizzical look on Chester. "Chester, dear chap, what on earth that's all about?"

"Oh it's a long story," dismissed Chester.

"Has the poor bear forgotten to bring his invitation?" asked Marjorie, not put off by Chester's dismissal.

"No. No. Oh I told him he could sit on the front row but Catherine wasn't amused so on her seating plan she put him in row 4. I told you it was a long story! And now Samantha is under Catherine's strict instructions to make sure everyone is sitting exactly where it says on her seating plan."

"Where are we going sit then?" asked a rather concerned Marjorie.

"Oh I'm sure you can squeeze on the end of the front row. You are Catherine's family so you have more right to be there than most of the other's on the front row. Even Metro! But don't tell him I said that!"

"Will we be allowed though?"

"Of course you will. I'm sure Catherine will make an exception; seeing as though it's you." Really? I can't say I shared Chester's confidence!

"Oh yes I'm sure Catherine won't mind. But I'm worried about that blue effort over there; Samantha did you say her name was?"

"Yes Samantha. Oh she's just following Catherine's instructions."

"But we're going to have to sit down before Catherine arrives." Marjorie seemed very concerned about sitting down; wouldn't her legs last until Catherine "landed."

"Oh I can handle Samantha," boasted Chester proudly.

"Good."

An awkward silence followed. Expletives from Metro and Samantha's heated confrontation floated over to them.

Anxious for Marjorie and George not to hear these words Chester threw himself into speech. I'm not really sure why he bothered; George and Marjorie where Catherine's parents. I'm sure they'd heard the odd swear word before. "Did you have far to come?"

"Oh no," replied Marjorie. "We only lived a few streets away. It only took us about twenty minutes to get here."

"Good." There was another awkward pause. "Good," repeated Chester.

"How's Catherine arriving?" asked Marjorie. "Knowing her I bet it's something stylish and extravagant."

"You could say that. "She's arriving in a..." Chester leaned close to Marjorie and whispered something in her ear.

Marjorie laughed. "That's my daughter, eh? George did you hear that?"

"No." Was really likely that he would have done? Chester had whispered it in Marjorie's ear and even I hadn't been able to hear it and although I was further away than George, I prided myself on my powerful hearing. I could hear bears breaking wind downstairs! Not that that really was very useful!

Marjorie leaned close to George and whispered something in his ear. His face creased in an expression half way between smiling and constipation. "He exclaimed, "She's coming in a..."

"No! No! No George!" Marjorie hastily interrupted her husband. "It's a secret. Catherine doesn't want the congregation to know."

"Oh right, sorry."

Silence.

Well let's put it another way. Chester, George or Marjorie didn't speak.

"Take your head out your rear and start talking properly!" shouted Samantha.

"Close your ears Lenny! Really Samantha, I have never been so offended in all my life." Really? Not even when Milly called him a... Oh yes, that word isn't printable!

"Well get used to it 'cause I'm just warming up."

Just at that moment there was a babble of shouting and whoops of delight as more than twenty out of control bears charged through the doorway into the room.

"Sorry about this," apologised Chester to the 'respectable' Marjorie and George.

Becoming alert to the danger Samantha turned to Metro and threatened, "I'll deal with you later,"

before waddling to the cluster of noisy bears making her way towards her.

Madly ushering the bears back with her arms Samantha shouted above the din, "Get back! Get back!" On her way past Chester and co she commented, "Huh! It's like riot patrol this."

Samantha marched towards them, grabbed the seating plan off the floor and began flapping at the bear with it. "Right everyone move back. Move back. No one gets in without their invitation so if you 'ain't got it, flipping well clear off and go and get it."

The crowd simmered down and more than half of them groaned before running out of the room to go and get their invitations.

"That got rid of the rif raf," Samantha joked to John, who had come up behind her carrying baby Toby. "Right then rabble; who's first?"

I don't think you need me to say that that wasn't the cleverest of questions.

CHAPTER 32

All the guests were seated in their places.

Just in case you're curious, Metro and Lenny had ended up on the front row and John and Toby were in row 4. And who said good triumphed over evil? Though I don't suppose John could really be described as good! And Marjorie and George had squeezed onto the end of the front row.

Chester and Harry were standing on the windowsill, nervously awaiting Catherine's arrival.

"Should be any time now." I spun round as a voice sounded at the side. I had completely forgotten about Mickey's presence on my shelf!

I nodded my head in agreement. I hoped that he wasn't going to find it necessary to provide a running commentary of the entire ceremony. Watching the service on my shelf was one thing, spoiling my enjoyment of it by rabbiting on was quite another.

"She's here," shouted Chester, running back into the room. "She's here. She's here." Yes, we heard you the first time!

Looking out across the rooftop I couldn't see any sign of Catherine.

And then I saw it.

Over the rim of the rooftop the top of what looked like a white dome, was just in sight. Suddenly there was a gush of air (it sound like someone taking a deep breath) and the dome lifted up over the edge of the rooftop.

The hot air balloon came into sight!

Yes, you did read it correctly. A hot air balloon. The white dome was the top part of the hot air balloon and it was attached to the bottom part which was a straw basket. In this Santa, Catherine, Penny and Jean

were huddled together as obviously this wasn't a real hot air balloon that humans would travel in, so there wasn't a lot of room. Really it was a lampshade!

Yes a lampshade! When I had first seen the 'hot air balloon' I thought I had seen the thing before and now it came to me. It was Lucy's brother's lampshade and had previously hung on the ceiling in his bedroom. Lucy's brother was quite fanatical about hot air balloons so Mr and Mrs Partridge had thought it was a perfect birthday present. I hadn't been there when they gave it to him but I'm sure he'd been overjoyed; as you can imagine!

Something had been puzzling me since the hot air balloon had first come into sight. Now I stared closely but I was sure there were no strings attached (this wasn't usual for the bears- I can tell you!) to the top of the balloon. And even if there were then there remained the question of who was pulling them. So how on earth was the balloon managing to hover in the air?

Whoosh!

I jumped with surprise. I sensed that Mickey to had been rather surprised as the jet of flame had spurted into the air out of the cigarette lighter Santa held in his paws.

The balloon rose further into the air and had now completely cleared the roof.

I had often thought the bears to be stupid but this was just unbelievable! Fire! They were using fire to power a lampshade made from a very flimsy material and straw! Were they insane?

Oh but why was I surprised; this was Catherine's doing after all! No wonder she had wanted Santa to join them in the balloon. No one else would have

been stupid enough to hold a cigarette lighter in a flammable hot air balloon!

"We need to go forward!" Catherine shouted at Santa.

"Well how do we do that?"

"I don't know you're the driver!"

It was funny but the words "understated" and "simple" didn't immediately come to mind! The thing that really puzzled me was why Catherine had wanted to arrive in style when none of the guests were watching. They were all sitting in the church. Only me, Mickey and Harry were watching her. And considering Catherine couldn't have known Mickey would be on my shelf, wouldn't have gone to this much trouble for me, and Harry now turned his back on her and leapt off the windowsill to follow his brother; it all seemed rather a waste of time. Quite a dangerous waste of time!

Jean gasped. "Oh gosh! Penny, you've still got my dress on! Quick get it off. Santa close your eyes!" An embarrassed Santa looked hastily away.

"I told you this would happen," tutted Catherine. "Santa, do another blast quick! We're going down too fast."

Trying to keep his eyes off the stripped Penny and Jean, who had ducked down below the rim of the basket, (I'm not sure why as they surely weren't aware that Mickey and I were watching- maybe they wrongly thought that the whole congregation were gathered at the window!) Santa clicked the lighter.

Whoosh!

He hadn't been watching what he was doing and the jet of flame had gone up at an angle and had been so close to the white dome I almost fell off my shelf.

"Santa! Careful!" chastised Catherine. "You'll have us in flames!"

An orange and a brown paw popped up over the rim with a bright yellow scarf in each paw.

Catherine looked down into the basket and sighed. "You were determined to get naked at this wedding, weren't you Jean?"

There was the faint sound of giggling from in the basket and Catherine smiled. Then another orange paw and another brown paw popped up and the scarves were exchanged.

"Santa we're still not forward. We're just going higher and higher."

"Look I don't know how you go about going forward (he was a good choice for pilot then wasn't he?) but we're over the roof now so can we just land here."

"Okay, but do you know how to go down?"

"Well... as long as I don't do any more blasts we shouldn't keep going up so then there's only one way we can go."

"Right, but make sure it isn't a bumpy landing!"

"I'll try," promised Santa.

A few minutes later a rather bedraggled Catherine (her 'tea towel' was all skew-wiff) came scrambling out from a tangled mass of material and basket; chuntering to herself. The balloon had suddenly plummeted onto the roof and the dome had collapsed around the bears before they had time to react.

"So much for a stylish entrance! I bet I'll be the laughing stock of the congregation." I don't how to break this to you Catherine, but none of them are actually watching.

With her nose held high in the air (one of Chester's traits!) Catherine marched up the rooftop towards Lucy's bedroom window.

Now both dressed in their ridiculous scarves Penny and Jean also clambered out from the wreckage of Lucy's brother's hot air balloon. As they were dusting themselves down Catherine called over her shoulder:

"Oi, you two! You're meant to be holding my dress off the ground."

Murmuring apologies Penny and Jean raced up the roof after Catherine. Catching up with her they thrust the trailing scarf off the ground and walked along behind her; panting. Dear oh dear! How unfit were the bears? They'd only run a few feet!

Santa now emerged from the hot air balloon, fiddling with his lopsided (careful!) collar. Seeing Catherine's entourage (don't ask me what that means but it sounds good) making their way up the roof he jogged up after them; doing the sign of the cross on his face.

As Catherine stepped gracefully into the church the congregation gasped. "Doesn't she look beautiful?" "Divine!" "Very attractive!" "That Jean's a bit tasty as well!" Trust Metro! You'd have thought he'd have behaved himself if he wanted to avoid discovery.

Voluntary all the bears began to clap as Catherine glided into the room. She raised her paw in recognition. "Thank you. Thank you."

After acknowledging her 'fans' Catherine made her way into the room. Climbing down off the windowsill and off the bed proved a difficulty as once Catherine had managed to get herself down (which was no easy feat) she didn't bother to check whether her bridesmaids had also made their way down but instead carried on walking. This meant that Jean and

Penny were yanked down after her, clinging onto her trailing dress for dear life! What got me was that Catherine was so engrossed in waving to the congregation she had no idea that her bridesmaids were being pulled down off the bed behind her!

Chester rose from the floor and gave a little bow (slightly over the top I felt) as Catherine moved towards the altar, dragging a stumbling Penny and Jean behind her. After their fall they had found it hard to stand up again and Catherine certainly hadn't paused to give them time to regain their balance and they had been half dragged behind her.

"Catherine you look beautiful," praised Chester. "Like an angel." Alright, don't overdo it! It's not as if you'd never seen her in the dress before!

Catherine returned the compliment, "You look very snazzy yourself." I couldn't agree more but was snazzy really what you wanted for a wedding?

Turning around she thanked her bridesmaids. "Jean, Penny. Thank you. You can sit down now. They've been brilliant haven't they everyone?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely."

"Marvellous."

The congregation spontaneously clapped. Catherine joined in. I couldn't help feeling it was slightly too early for thanks and clapping. They had only been holding her dress. Maybe Catherine was recognising that this had been a rather tricky task!

"I just can't look at her."

The words took me by surprise. And then I remembered Mickey again!

"Who? Catherine?" I teased knowing full well who he meant. Well even old crows like me had to have a bit of fun every now and then.

"No. Jean silly." He sighed regretfully. "Oh if only she'd had an affair with someone else. Anyone but Milly and after I'd knocked their lights out I wouldn't have minded forgiving both of them." Yes, that was the philosophy to have! "Oh I want her back so badly."

We hadn't noticed! "Look the wedding's starting now. I'm willing to go through all that again."

"And that's another thing. Chester hasn't even noticed that I'm not there."

"Well he's been very busy, hasn't he?" I snapped hoping he was going to shut up as Santa was now taking his place at the altar. But the bridesmaids had still to sit down so there were still a few minutes before the festivities got under way. Penny and Jean had got over excited by the applause and were now talking to the congregation; much to Catherine's anguish.

"They're delaying everything," she whispered to Chester, signalling to Samantha to come and deal with them.

"Yes too busy to bother with his old Dad, ay?" Tears began to roll down his cheeks. "His stupid old Dad who doesn't know when his wife and brother are having it away." Oh I couldn't stand it when bears resorted to wallowing in self-pity.

"Oh I'm sick of this! Jean wasn't having an affair with Milly for goodness sake!" Did I just say that out loud? Oh dear, I think I did.

Milly turned on me with puzzled eyes; glistening with tears. "What?" he spluttered.

"No. No. I didn't mean that," I retracted. I didn't even now myself why I wanted to deny the truth. I had already done enough damage to Milly by sticking

to my principles, so why bother now when I could try to make up for some of the misery I had caused him.

"Yes you did. You didn't mean it to slip out maybe, but now you have you can't just leave it at that!"

That comment riled me. "I can do whatever I want and I *am* going to leave it at that. I've said far too much already."

"Not for me you haven't."

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed that Jean and Penny had started to amble towards their seats, after seeing Samantha marching towards them; huffing and blowing furiously. At last the ceremony was about to begin.

The congregation fell silent.

"Look," I whispered to Mickey, "if you're going to keep going on about this then you're going to have to leave my shelf. I want to watch the wedding."

"You think I'm going to just go like that? You've just told me my wife wasn't having an affair with my brother and you expect me to just say, "Oh thank you very much. Enjoy the wedding.""

"I don't expect you to say anything."

"You don't think I might want to know who was really having an affair with?"

"How do you know she was having an affair with anyone?"

"Oh don't come that one! She wouldn't admit to having an affair with Milly if she hadn't been having an affair at all. No. She's been having an affair with another bear and she's set poor Milly up to protect whoever it is." How very perceptive Mickey was. He was almost on my wavelength. But not quite! "So who is it?"

"There's no way I'm going to divulge that so if that's all then I'd be grateful if you'd leave my shelf."

Suddenly there was a murmur of shock from the congregation and looking around I saw that Jean was sprawled on the floor at Milly's feet. It appeared that as Jean had made her way to her seat she had clumsily tripped up Milly's bandaged leg, which had carelessly been left in her path. Oh well! Accidents will happen!

Metro sprung up as if an electric current had passed through his seat, and ran over to her. "Jean, are you alright? You've had a nasty fall." Horrific! She may never walk again.

"Oh, I'm fine. I just tripped up my own feet." Really? Was that what had happened? "Sorry about this Catherine."

"Yes well... if you wouldn't mind sitting down. We have got the small matter of my wedding to get through."

"Sorry. Of course."

"Let me help you to your feet," offered Metro.

"Oh thank you."

"Much obliged." Metro softly took hold of Jean's paw and gently eased her off the carpet.

Jean began dusting herself down; a habit of the bear's after a fall.

"Strewth," Catherine grumbled to herself. "Don't bother hurrying yourself. You just make sure you're nice and clean now!"

Metro placed his arm on her shoulders and guided her to her seat. She'd have never been able to manage those 20 inches on her own! It would just have been too much!

After Metro had guided Jean into her seat he allowed his paw to tenderly brush against his lover's cheek. The idiot! Though I suppose he couldn't have known that Mickey was watching him!

I avoided meeting Mickey's stare but I could just sense that he was staring at me. "It's him isn't it?" I remained silent. "Of course it is. They've always been close. I've been stupid not to have suspected something before."

Mickey moved over to the edge of the shelf. "Mickey, what are you going to do? You're not going to let on that I told you are you?"

"Does it matter who told me?" he asked as he lowered himself over the edge of the shelf. Well it did actually! If bears thought that I passed on what I saw and heard to other bears then they might make a special effort to make sure that nothing juicy was said within my earshot.

Metro then went over to his seat, and lowered his bottom onto the material. Catherine had been watching this and I could see on her face something suddenly dawned on her.

"Why on earth are you sitting on the front row?"

"It's called compensation," Metro beamed cheerfully.

"No it's called..."

Santa interrupted, "Catherine, do you mind if we get started? You can sort all that out later."

Still growling at Metro, Catherine agreed. "Yes go on. We've wasted enough time as it." She looked accusingly at Jean and Penny but they were too busy revelling in the excitement of being clapped at.

Santa cleared his throat. "Ahem. Aujourd' hui nous sommes ici pour fête le mariage de Catherine and Chester." If you are in need of a translation well... sorry you're not going to get one! Though I think I might have heard the word "Ahem" before! Not sure what it means though!

As Santa was waffling on in a foreign language Mickey jumped down off the chest of drawers and began marching towards the church. Seeing him coming Samantha moved across to block his way.

"I've already given you my invitation."

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Samantha stepped out of the way and Mickey stormed determinedly past her, down the aisle. "You're not going to cause trouble are you?" Samantha called weakly after him.

"No," was the instant response.

"Shame," mused Samantha. "It could do with a ding dong to liven things up a bit!"

Santa was saying, "Est ce qui l y a personne..."

"Stop the wedding!" bellowed Mickey suddenly.

The whole congregation seemed to gasp in unison and poor Santa almost dropped his Bible.

"Father?" gasped Chester in horror.

Murmurs fluttered around the church. "What's Mickey doing?", "You think he'd know better" and "I knew that Catherine had a fancy chap!"

"It wasn't Milly having an affair with Jean! It was Metro!" The congregation gasped once more. "And now I'm going to teach that two-timing ponce a lesson." Another gasp!

"Father, please," pleaded Chester.

"Samantha grab him," ordered Catherine pointing. Oh as if Samantha hadn't seen where he was!

Taking a deep breath, as if about to go under water, Samantha began waddling down the aisle. "Oi you! Stop where you are!" Yes, that was bound to do the trick!

Metro sprung up out of his seat. "Did I hear you mention my name?"

"Yes you did you..."

"Right, well I'm not willing to have slanderous comments thrown around about me."

"Tough!" was the blunt grunt. (Huh, if this book doesn't sell I can always become a poet!)

"If you want a job doing properly..." grumbled Catherine to herself beginning to 'run' up the aisle towards Mickey. "Come here you," she shouted lunging at him.

But Mickey had seen her coming (let's face it she was difficult to miss!) and easily sidestepped her into the congregation.

"Ow! You trod on me!"

"Sorry!"

Mickey began wading through the congregation towards where Metro was sitting.

"Somebody stop him," shrieked Catherine, wading through the congregation after Mickey.

"Ow! My sore foot!"

"Oh shut up!"

Absolute chaos ensued.

Bears began to leap out of the way of Catherine and Mickey. They landed on top of other bears who tried to scramble away from the madness. Bears then tried to dive out of their way and before anyone knew where they were, the right hand side (well it depends where you were standing) of the congregation was a mass of tangled shrieking bears.

Just to make matters worse Samantha decided it would be 'helpful' to wade through the congregation, to apprehend Mickey. And so her heavy legs trod across the scrambling, frantic bears!

"Mind you back! Mind your arm! Out the way! Whoops-a-daisy. Ah!" Samantha found herself face down amongst the heaving mass.

What amused me was that the left hand side of the church remained seated and most of them didn't even look at what was going on next to them; instead just sat there, with their eyes fixed on the front, waiting for the wedding to continue!

Mickey had caught up with Metro, who had now been flung face down onto the carpet.

Wriggling about he pleaded, "Please don't hurt me! I'm just an innocent member of the bear community." And my name is Donald Duck!

"Don't give me that!" Mickey hauled him off the floor and smacked him in the face.

Now the left hand side reacted! "Wahey! Action!" I'd been wondering where Pete was sitting.

"Father stop it!" cried Chester, rooted to the spot.

Once more Mickey hauled Metro off the floor and punched him in the stomach. Again. And again. Then he punched him in the face.

"This is God's holy place," protested Santa.

Metro had withstood the punch and now stood swaying on unsteady feet. Snarling, Mickey flung himself at Metro. They both tumbled backwards into altar, which toppled over sending the candle crashing onto the floor.

"My altar!" exclaimed Catherine, literally fighting to get out of the chaos that was the congregation.

Santa stood sombrely at the front, by the upturned altar which Mickey and Metro now wrestled on top of, and did the sign of the cross.

"Dear God..." began Santa. I was glad he was praying, right now the bears needed all the help they could get!

Just as Catherine was about to step out of the congregation, Marjorie stood up in front of her.

"AH!" Catherine crashed straight into her and with a thud landed on top of her mother.

Chester had now decided to move and was now tamely tugging at his father who was on top of Metro and was really laying into him. "You're gonna pay you cheating rascal!"

Catherine was now on her feet and was brushing herself down (I'd have never have guessed!). "Sorry about that. Let me help you up!"

Catherine knelt down and lifted Marjorie up off the floor. "There you go."

"Thanks Catherine."

"Not a problem," Catherine smiled at her and then went to turn away.

She stopped. And then turned around.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" She'd recognized her then. "Mum! You're here!" There was no fooling Catherine, was there?

Catherine jumped forward and hugged her Mum and began twirling her around. Surely it should have been the other way around, Mum twirling daughter, but Catherine did have the er... weight advantage. Though Marjorie wasn't what you'd call light! I was so complimentary sometimes, wasn't I?

George came staggering out of the well... what could only be described as a mini riot! "Aren't you going to give your old Dad a hug, ay?"

Hearing his voice Catherine plonked her mother down, screamed and ran towards George. "Daaaaaaaad! You came too!" Spreading out her arms she gave her Dad a big, soft hug. But this time there was no twirling! For either of them to attempt would surely have done their back in!

Milly had now managed to prise himself free of the congregation and he ran towards the altar where

Metro and Mickey were still rolling about; locked in a violent struggle.

"My poor brother almost killed himself because of you... you scumbag!" Mickey drummed his paws harder into Metro.

"Ow! Ow! Owwww!"

Suddenly Milly's arms wrapped themselves around Mickey and he found himself wrenched off Metro.

"What the...?" exclaimed an astounded Mickey. "What are you doing Milly? I'm getting my revenge on him for you."

"I know this is rich coming from me but this isn't the way about it. These last few days have really changed me; have really calmed me down. I've realised that violence isn't the way to go about things; in the end you haven't achieved anything. If you stay calm you can get a better revenge which will actually achieve something. You'll see for yourself in a minute. So don't get heated; revenge is best served cold." Very wise words. Although I've never understood that saying about revenge being served cold. It's not as if it's a meal!

Little Toff had just struggled out from under a bear's bottom and Mill now made his way over to him. After his Dad had whispered something in his ear he bounded eagerly away down the aisle.

With tears streaming down her face, after her unexpected reunion with her parents, Catherine gave her Dad a final squeeze, smiled at her Mum and paced over to Chester. By now he had plonked himself down on the upturned altar in shock.

"It's an absolute farce," moaned Catherine, wiping her tears away. "I wanted the perfect day and it's turned into a disaster."

"I know. It was lucky you thought to leave tomorrow free though. Just in case today went wrong. Now we can postpone it and have it tommorrow..."

"Postpone it?" interrupted Catherine. "Yes."

"We're not postponing it."

"I don't see that we have any choice. Look the church is wrecked. Everything's a shambles."

"Yes but there's no way I'm no way I'm going to postpone this church because of your Dad."

"Mm, I'm very sorry about."

"It's not you that should be apologising. But anyway this wedding will go ahead today even if it kills. Because if we leave it until tomorrow I don't know if I'll even have the energy to go through with it," sighed a drained Catherine.

Chester pounced on this and asked hastily, "You're having second thoughts about marrying me, aren't you?"

"Never. Not in a million years. I just want to be your wife by the end of today."

Chester smiled and took Catherine's paw in his. "If that's what you want Catherine, then that's what you'll get."

Just at that moment, holding his sore parts (we won't even go there!) and groaning in pain Metro staggered up onto the altar behind Chester and announced, "I'd just like to tell you all that the... the claims made by one stupid bear, you all know who he is, are completely and absolutely untrue."

"You sure about that?" piped up Milly.

"Positive."

"Really? Because I have evidence to the contrary. Oh look here's Little Toff now."

Everyone spun around. When I say everyone I mean all the bears on the left hand side, all the bears

standing at the front of the church and all the bears who had freed themselves from the scrambling mass, which was now significantly smaller.

Little Toff had re-entered the room dragging Mr Partridge's digital camcorder behind him.

Jean, who had just been flung out of the congregation and into the aisle, gasped as she saw Little Toff. She turned with pleading eyes towards Milly and begged, "Please."

He shook his head. "Right Little Toff. Open it up."

Little Toff flipping open the LCD screen at the side of the camera.

It was funny but just as something scandalous was about to happen the chaos had now completely died down and basically all the bears stared at the camera with curious eyes. It was as if all that scrambling about hadn't been necessary at all!

"Play," commanded Milly masterfully. "And hold it up so everyone can see."

The camera was held up. Jean and Big Toff suddenly appeared on the little screen. The image was very shaky and you could tell that the camera was jutting around a doorframe.

Jean was saying, "... didn't think that it would have these far reaching consequences."

"The really sickening thing is that I fancied you. I wanted to have a relationship with you."

There were gaps from the congregation. No one had known about this.

"You were willing for me to have an affair behind Mickey's back then, weren't you?"

Wahey! The camera had just shaken in Little Toff's paws and I had seen myself, sitting up on my shelf, staring down at events. I'm sure I didn't look like that really!

"Yes because it's not the fact that you've had an affair with Metro that I'm bothered about," Big Toff told her. "What I'm annoyed about is that you had to drag my Dad into it."

"I'm really sorry about that but I just wanted to protect Metro." There were yet more gasps from the bears as they realised that this was conclusive proof that Jean had been having an affair with Metro and not Milly. "I did try to make amends though. I told Corny the truth when we were wrestling under the duvet."

"It was a bit late by then. Mummy had already trashed Lucy's room and being the decent bear she is she felt she had to leave. And Daddy had already tried to kill himself."

"Stop!" commanded Milly, holding up his paw.

Little Toff reached out his paw and pressed 'Stop.'

Jean had sat down with a thud in the aisle and Metro had fallen off the altar.

The secret was out.

CHAPTER 33

The church had been reset. The bears had been given their invitations back and had been sent out of the church while Catherine and co (this consisted of Chester, Marjorie, George, Samantha, Penny and Jenny) straightened the rows and the aisle, put the altar back up and replaced the candle on top.

Twenty or so minutes later the bears flittered back in, still chatting eagerly to each other about the shock revelation and the previous events.

"Metro and Jean! Unbelievable!"

"I'd thought him to be an upstanding bear. I've always looked up to him."

"I can't imagine what she saw or sees in him!"

"Yes, I wonder if it's still going on."

"Did you see when I flung myself out of Catherine's way into the next row?"

"Did you see when Metro fell off the altar? That was a hoot!"

"I think I need some bandages like yours Lenny. I'm aching everywhere."

After Samantha had taken everyone's invitations back off them they slowly made their way to their seats and sat down; still chuntering on.

I was very concerned about John. As he placed little Toby in his seat, I saw him lean towards him, with a pained expression on his face and murmur, "I'm sorry Toby. I just have to do this." Was John about to throw his family away and completely wreck the wedding? I hoped not; I'd been looking forward to this wedding and so far it had been nothing but a shambles. If John was to say anything now, then it would be over before it had really begun.

Catherine and Chester had already taken their places at the front of the church. Santa was standing between them with the Bible in his paws.

He cleared his throat once more. "Ahem (that "ahem" must be really important). Aujourd'hui nous sommes ici..."

"I've had enough of this," John grumbled rather loudly to himself (well it wasn't really to himself as most of the bears near him could hear).

"... le mariage de Catherine et Chester," Santa waffled on.

Suddenly John was on his feet. "Stop the wedding!"

There were murmurs of surprise from the congregation.

Catherine looked up in horror. "John, don't" she mouthed at him. "Please!"

For a small, old bear Pete, who was sitting in the row behind John, had reacted remarkably fast. He had jumped out of his seat and clamped his paw over his son's mouth. This had proved quite difficult as he was coming from behind and John was a number of inches taller than he was.

"Ever, so sorry about this," he apologised to the congregation. He seems to be rather excitable at the moment! Do carry on."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. "The old codger's saved me," she murmured quietly to herself.

"I don't believe this," Chester muttered to Santa in disbelief. "We only want to get married. You wouldn't think it was too much to ask."

Pete, still with his paw over John's mouth, dragged John out of the row and up the aisle towards a bewildered Samantha.

Jean was now also on her feet.

"Would everyone please stay in their seats?" Santa requested of the congregation. He obviously didn't know the French for that!

"It's alright Santa," Jean reassured him. "I can help sort this." And with that she ran up the aisle after Pete and John.

Samantha had now marched over to them. "What on earth did you do that for John?"

From underneath Pete's paw there were some undecipherable noises. "Uh uh-hnnn uh-hhin uh-hhair uh uhafuhin." Thanks for that!

"It might help if you take your paw off his mouth," suggested Samantha sarcastically. "We can't hear what he's saying."

"You don't want to hear. Now get out of my way! I need to speak to him; in private!" Pete barged past Samantha, dragging a struggling but mute John behind him.

"We will wait a few moments," Santa announced to the bears, "while that er... problem is resolved."

"I wonder what that was all about," pondered Chester.

"I've no idea," dismissed Catherine.

"I see that my mother's gone to poke her nose in..."

Pete had kindly dragged his son over to the chest of drawers. I say kindly because it meant that I was going to be able to clearly hear every word of the 'private' conversation. He now threw him down onto the floor.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"You know full well what I was doing. Putting an end to my marriage and Catherine's."

"And you think I was going to stand back and let you do it?"

"I thought you probably wouldn't but I'm determined so you won't be able to stop me for long."

Pete shook his head sadly. "You're an idiot John. You know I'm not exactly Samantha's number one fan but I've just stopped you ruining your marriage to her. Now why do you think I've done that?"

"Because you want to be able to see Toby?"

"Do you really think I'm that self-centred?" Well I know that Samantha did!

John was immediately regretful. "No. No. Of course not."

"Good because that's not why I did it. I did it because you've got a lovely son and a wife (not a lovely wife- just a wife!) and there's no way you should ever throw that away. Being part of a family is the best feeling in the world. I was part of a family for a while; I had a lovely wife and a lovely son but I was stupid enough to throw it all away." Silent tears dripped from his eyes. "I threw it all away John... I can't let you make the same mistake."

"Dad," sighed John, "I know you regret very much walking out on me and Mum and I've completely forgiven you for it but..."

"Yes and I'm very grateful for that. You didn't have to. Not everyone would. For instance Toby might not." John froze as he considered this option. "Is Catherine worth more than Toby?"

Just at that moment Jean came striding towards them. Seeing her coming Pete motioned her away. "Can you go away please? We're trying to talk."

But Jean just kept walking.

"I said..."

"Yes I heard what you said!" Jean lowered her voice and whispered, "I know too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," dismissed Pete."

"I know about John and Catherine. I overheard them talking. Catherine told me all about it. I'm here to help."

"Help who?" questioned John. "Me or my Dad?"

"This isn't about sides. This is about doing what's right. Now I've lost my children because of an affair and it's certainly not something I'd recommend! To have your children completely blank you, to have them be disgusted by you, well it's horrible. And I'm slightly lucky because at least Metro and I are still together."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh John. I've spoken to Catherine. She's not interested in marrying you. She really did just see you as a bit of fun. She's never thought about having a serious relationship with you. She's never looked at you in that way. She loves Chester and she wants to marry him. If you go and ruin that she probably won't even speak to you again. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course it isn't but... but I'm sure Catherine never said all those things."

"Okay, if you don't believe me then you go back in there and tell the whole congregation what you and Catherine have been getting up to," challenged Jean. "But if you think for one minute that I might be telling the truth, that Catherine doesn't want you, then is it worth throwing away your family? Is it?"

Suddenly John broke down and burst into tears. "No... No! I don't want to lose them. No. Please. Help me!"

Pete put his arm around his son's shoulder. "It's alright son. It's all alright now."

"What have I done?" sobbed John. "What have I done?"

"You haven't done anything. We've stopped you."

"No... but the damage is done. I've cheated on Samantha. How can I ever look her in the eyes?" blubbered John.

"It's alright, she'll never know."

"That makes no difference. It still happened."

"Not to Samantha it didn't," argued Jean.

There was a pause. He sighed; tears still running down his face. "I suppose you're right. But I promise that I'll never do this to Samantha again. I love her too much... to risk hurting her like this again."

"Good," smiled Pete. "Now let's get back in there and let Catherine get married. I think they're waiting for us." You think?

John picked himself up off the floor and the three of them made their way back over to the church. Samantha, who had been leaning on the doorframe whistling a half-hearted version of 'Coronation Street', saw them coming and shouted, "Now is someone going to tell me what that was all about?"

John rushed over to Samantha's side and put his paw on her shoulder. "Everything's fine Samantha. I was just being silly." Realising that the eyes of the whole congregation were fixed on him, waiting for an explanation, he turned towards them and announced, "I just thought it would be a bit of a joke to shout 'Stop the wedding!' after that's what Mickey had done. I just wanted to see your faces." He added weakly, "Sorry."

"A bit of a joke?" Samantha wasn't swallowing that one!

"Yeah. I know it wasn't a clever thing to do but I just wanted to lighten the atmosphere a bit."

"Really? So why did your Dad have to put his hand over your mouth and drag you out of the church?"

The question threw John.

Luckily for him his Dad came to his rescue once again. "Well..."

"I wasn't asking you!"

"Well I know why I did it don't I?"

"Go on then."

"Right... well... I thought he was going to say something else stupid. I wanted to stop him making a fool of himself."

Samantha snorted. "I think you were slightly too late for that. And it was a bit over the top wasn't it; dragging him from the church? And what have you just been discussing now?"

"Well I dragged him from the church to stop him saying anything else and just now I've been telling him how stupid he'd been and not to do it again."

"Not to do it again?" Had Samantha seen through their story? "He's not a child anymore you know Pete? Oh sorry you didn't know him as a child did you?"

Pete growled and lunged forward but John put a restraining paw on his shoulder. "Steady on Dad! This isn't the place."

"But she just said..."

"Yes I know what she said. Samantha apologise to my Dad," demanded a tired, rather fed up John.

"I 'ain't apologising to the wrinkly."

"John did hear what she just called me?" Dear oh dear! They were behaving like little bears!

"Excuse me," Catherine called up the aisle. "Do you mind if we get on with the small matter of my wedding? Could you argue about who called who what and who breathed first later?"

Five minutes later the bears had sheepishly made their way to their seats and a slightly shaken Catherine was standing at the front of the church; waiting for the wedding to commence.

"Shall we go right from the top," Chester suggested to Santa.

"Very well," he agreed reluctantly, getting slightly sick of repeating the same lines, that no one could make head nor tail of. He cleared his throat. "Ahem. Aujourd'hui nous sommes ici pour fête le mariage de Catherine..." Santa broke off and coughed rather heavily. No wonder he'd kept clearing his throat !

Catherine waded straight in with, "Je fais."

"No yet," Santa told her in a hushed voice.

In a big loud voice Catherine argued, "But you just coughed!"

"Yes I know but I've got a bit of cough. I'm allowed aren't I?"

"Well... it would be better if you hadn't." It wasn't as if he could help having a cough. "How are we supposed to tell the difference between you coughing because of your cough and our signal?"

"I said I'd look at you as well when it was your turn to speak."

Certain members of the congregation started to wriggle restlessly in their seats. They were getting fed up!

"You looked at me then!"

"I did not!"

Chester lifted his arms in the air. "Please! Can we just stop this? I'm sure we'll be able to work out when we've got to speak."

"Well... I don't know... you know... but..." Catherine grumbled incoherently to herself.

"Shall I start from the beginning again?" Oh no! Please! Anything but that!

"Yes, I think that would be advisable," Chester told him. Groans were emitted from the congregation but Chester and Santa didn't seem to notice.

"Ahem. Aujourd'hui nous sommes ici pour fête le mariage de Catherine et Chester. Est ce qu'il y a personne qui sont une raison pourquoi Catherine et Chester ne peuvent pas se maries?" Santa looked out expectantly at the congregation. I was assuming that he was asking whether any of them knew of any reason why Chester and Catherine couldn't get married but the congregation were unlikely to know what it meant (except for the odd buff like Metro) so I doubted whether there would be any objections. After pausing for a few seconds Sanat continued. "Chester, prends tu Catherine etre ta femme?" Santa looked at Chester and emitted a little cough.

Chester too cleared his throat before answering, "Je fais."

"Bon. Catherine prends tu Chester etre ta mari?" Santa looked at Catherine and coughed.

"Oh is this me?" Santa nodded. "Oh right. Je fais. That alright?"

"Oui." Santa now looked expectantly at Chester. "Les sonneries?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Chester. But Catherine just looked blankly at him. "The rings, Catherine."

"Oh right, the rings." Catherine knelt down by the altar and reached her hand underneath the draping material and pulled out a gold ring. Chester did the same but on the other side of the altar. I must admit that they had done well to keep these hidden. I don't know when they had placed them there but I hadn't seen them to do it (and that was an achievement

believe me!). I hadn't even seen the rings before. Well I say rings but really they were a strip of cardboard folded round and stuck together. This had then been covered in gold foil. Gold foil? I have absolutely no idea where Catherine had got that from!

Santa gestured to Chester and he took Catherine's paw in his and slid the ring onto her paw until it touched her engagement ring. Catherine's right arm was now more foil than fur!

"Oh Chester, it's beautiful." Catherine began filling up again. It was unusual for Catherine to cry but this was the second time today. Though weddings were an emotional time.

Chester now held out his paw and Catherine slotted the ring on. It glittered in the sunlight and I felt a warm tingling in my fur. This was it. This was the symbolic moment when Chester and Catherine became bear and wife.

Santa announced, "Je vous pronounce ours et femme!" Santa motioned them together with his paws. Catherine stepped forward with her arms outstretched and hugged her new husband (not that there'd been an old husband!). I could see her face over Chester's shoulder and it was a mixture of joy, delight and pure relief. John had, in the end, allowed her to marry the bear she loved.

"We've done it Chester," she murmured. "We've done it." These words were said with such emotion I felt tears coming to my eyes. Oh well, it's not as if any one was looking at me.

A cheer had gone up from the congregation when she had hugged Chester (I think they were relieved it was over as well!) and now every bear in the church was on their feet clapping the newly weds.

Samantha, who had become very emotional (there were tears streaming down her furry cheeks) suddenly realised that this was her cue and she started fumbling around for the Pog container through teary eyes.

Picking it up she went back into the church and walked down the aisle, offering it to the bears. "Does anyone... want any... confetti?" she sobbed.

Most of the bears accepted a handful; only the older bears declined (not wanting to get involved in such a silly tradition- and I didn't blame them!). As Samantha's vision was blurred by her tears she allowed the Toffee brothers to have a slightly bigger handful than Catherine would have liked. I didn't see why it mattered though. All the confetti was going to get thrown at Chester and Catherine, did it really matter how much the Toffee brothers threw? I mean surely even they realised that this wasn't the time or the place to start to start flinging confetti at each other? Surely?

All the confetti had now been given out; much to the disgruntlement of Metro as by the time Samantha had reached him she had run out. Well he had wanted to sit on the front row!

"It's just isn't good enough."

"Look," Samantha tipped the container upside down and shook it, "there isn't any left. What do you expect me to do? Magic some up?"

A single piece fluttered out of the container. "Look there's a piece."

"Yes well you can have that if you must."

Catherine and Chester were still hugging at the front of the church. I think the plan had been that they hugged so as to give Samantha time to hand out the

confetti but she was taking slightly longer than Catherine had anticipated.

"Chester my arms are starting to go to sleep," moaned Catherine.

"Just a little bit longer, I'm sure," murmured Chester, also starting to seize up.

Before he had finished his sentence Samantha had spread her arms out and shouted to the congregation. "Let's throw confetti, everybody!"

The bears jumped up out their seats and ran towards the front, like caged animals just released. There were whoops of delight as the confetti was hurled at Catherine and Chester (this had been the bears' highlight of the day; they were sad like that!).

Within moments Chester and Catherine were speckled with pieces of red and white and were standing in a red and white snow storm. And as the pieces of confetti (thrown by the less violent bears) fluttered down on top of them Chester announced:

"I love you Catherine."

"I love Chester."

They held onto each other tightly. This was the moment they were supposed to let go of each other but because of a combination of cramp and their love for each other, they just kept on hugging.

"This is start of the rest of our life," Chester told Catherine. How cheesy!

"Our life together."

"Yes. Our life together." Years now flowed down Chester's face ,as well, and dripped onto Catherine's shoulders. "And Catherine when things become tough, because we're bound to go through a difficult patch (just the one), every marriage has them, just remember this moment; with the love flowing

between us and I'm sure that everything will be alright."

Now there wasn't a dry eye in the church (some of the bears had picked up pieces of confetti to dry their eyes with), maybe with the exception of the Toffee brothers. They were engaged in a ferocious confetti war at the back of the church!

But Catherine didn't mind. She was too busy sobbing onto the shoulders of the bear she loved.

And John stood on shaky feet; watching and dabbing at his eyes with a red piece of confetti.

CHAPTER 34

"Can I have some quiet please?"

The church had been tidied away (I know that sounds silly but bare with me). The rows and the aisle had been carefully folded away and returned to the cupboard. The candle stick and the Bible (it sounds like Cluedo) had been moved to one side and the altar had been dragged to the other end of the room. There hadn't really been any point to this but Catherine had muttered something about wanting to make the bears feel that they were no longer in the church. She wanted the reception to be held in a different place. Well if that's what she'd wanted then why didn't she just hold it in a different room of the house (not that I was complaining as I would have missed out on all the festivities)?

Mickey had already done his speech (it hadn't been exactly what you'd call hilarious), though the mention of intercourse had brought about a few laughs, and now it was Harry's turn (to do his speech I mean). He was now standing on what had been the altar and the bears were gathered in front of him. He was trying to get their attention.

"Can I have some quiet please?" he called meekly.

Still the chattering persisted.

"Can you just shut up?" bellowed Milly at the top of his voice. "The poor bear is trying to talk." The bears instantly fell silent.

"Thank you Uncle Milly. Very kind of you."

"Not a problem."

Harry cutely cleared his throat. This annoying nervous habit of the bears was beginning to get on my nerves.

"Right." It was time for the bears to hear my speech. "When Chester... or should I say Cheater, asked me to do this speech I promised him that it would be... short and sweet and wouldn't have any embarrassing details... I think I'd better apologise now." Harry was making it so obvious that he hadn't written the speech; that he was just reciting it. But the first punch line had raised a laugh so it couldn't be bad. "But he's only got himself to blame. He promised Catherine he'd write it for me..."

Chester murmured to Catherine, "How does he know that? He wasn't listening when I said that!" No, but I was! Ha ha!

"Shut up, I'm trying to listen!" You could tell they were married, couldn't you?

"... he never got round to it," Harry was saying. "So I got another wise old crow to help me." This provoked vigorous laughter; especially from Catherine. But Chester was not amused. "So thanks Chris." He gestured up to me. Hey, I hadn't told him to do that. All the bears looked up curiously at me. Most of them were probably thinking, "Who the hell's he?" I lifted my wing and waved down at them, in a slightly patronising fashion.

"Anyway. Moving on... to the wedding," recited Harry, shaking nervously. "I've always wanted to see my dearest brother Chester get wed to a beautiful, kind and caring bear. Oh well better luck next time!" There was hysterical laughter; even from Catherine. Well there was until she considered this and turned to Chester asking:

"What did he just say?"

Harry rambled on. "Though in recent years just to see him marry anyone would have done. We'd started to wonder..." Harry stopped and looked up at

me. I don't think he was sure whether he should say the next line I had given to him.

The bears assumed he had forgotten his lines and there were a number of "Ah"s emitted from the crowd. Bears like Penny really got carried away.

"Ah! Isn't it a real shame?"

"Go on," I mouthed down at Chester.

Clearing his throat once more, Harry continued. "We'd begin to wonder... whether Chester was batting for the wrong side." The crowd hooted with laughter; Catherine was now creased with laughter and even Metro, with all his injuries, was in fits of hysterical laughter. Alright, calm down. It wasn't that funny! I couldn't help thinking that the bears were going so over the top with their laughter because it was cute, innocent Harry and they wanted him to feel good about himself. I'm sure if I'd been doing the speech, it wouldn't have got the same sort of reaction. And I knew how to tell jokes!

The speech and the laughter flowed on. Harry followed, almost to the letter, what I had told him to say.

At the end of his speech there was a huge round of applause. Catherine battled her way through the crowd and clambered up onto the biscuit tin.

"I'm sure you'll all agree that was a truly brilliant speech."

"Yeeees!" cheered the crowd in unison.

"Right let's have one more round of applause for the truly superb best bear." The crowd clapped again, louder this time, and there was even a wolf whistle. Though it had come from Jean!

Harry took a nervous bow before stepping down off the stage.

Catherine waited for the crowd to simmer down before continuing with her speech. "Thank you," she thanked, casting a stern glance on a few bear who were still chatting. Well it was her who'd got them going again. They'd already quietened down and there hadn't been a lot of point in making them clap Harry again. One round of applause was more than enough. And before you think anything; no, I'm not jealous that Harry got all the recognition and I didn't get any at all! Not a smudge!

"I'm sure you'll all agree it's been a day and a half and it isn't over you. But despite a couple of problems," she cast glances at Mickey and John, "it all went okay in the end and now I'm Chester's wife and I'm so happy!"

The crowd cheered and some of the bears started clapping.

Catherine waved madly with her arms and shouted above the din, "No! No! Don't start that again. I've got lots to get through." Oh, that's just what they wanted to hear! "Now I've got lots of people to thank. Firstly there are all my bridesmaids, Jean, Penny and Samantha." Metro parted his paws; about clap. "No! No! Wait 'til the end. What was I saying? Oh yes the bridesmaids. They helped to arrange the church, which I'm sure you'll agree looks absolutely divine (nice pun!)." There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd. "You agree? Oh good because I did most of it." The bears laughed. "No, no. They did help really. They did almost send me mental a few times but I couldn't have got through today without them." Jean and Penny began wiping their eyes emotionally, as if almost sending Catherine insane had been some sort of compliment. "And then there's my chief bridesmaid; the wonderful Samantha. Without her

today wouldn't have run smoothly." Smoothly? I can't see why she thought today had run smoothly? "She had to stand all the way through the ceremony just to make sure that no intruders got in and no riots broke out." Well one out of two isn't bad I suppose! "So let's give it up for my chief bridesmaid and the rest of the bridesmaids." The crowd remained silent. "You can clap now." There was a slight hesitation before the clapping began; no one wanted to be the first one to clap as Catherine had previously asked for no clapping. "I'd also like to thank Santa who not only lead the service brilliantly but helped to fly and land my hot air balloon." You could tell that Catherine had planned her speech in advance as she had hardly made a reference to the problems and had been thanking bears for doing things that they hadn't really done. Santa had crashed the hot air balloon don't forget!

Murmurs fluttered around the church. "Hot air balloon?" "What hot air balloon?" "I didn't see a hot air balloon."

Catherine continued, ignoring the bears' comments. "And finally I'd like to thank Chester, because without him... well I'd have been walking down the aisle on my own. Seriously though he's been a great help to me during my planning of this wedding and without him I'm sure the wedding wouldn't have gone ahead. So three cheers for Chester..."

"No!" Mickey jumped up onto the 'stage'. "Three cheers for Chester and Catherine. Without her hard work this wedding would have been nothing. So..."

"Hip hip hooray. Hip hip hooray. Hip hip hooray."

Catherine wiped yet more tears from her eyes and looked rather bashfully at the crowd. This wasn't like Catherine. "Oh that's very kind of you... it really is. I

only made the odd preparation here and there (oh yeah)." She turned to Mickey. "So thanks for that. You've forgiven for earlier now!"

"Oh thanks," he smiled and skipped down off the stage.

"And now all that there's left for me to say is; let's party!" The bears cheered and some of them started to dance already; even though the music hadn't started playing.

Catherine jumped down off the 'stage' and jiggled over to the CD Player and pressed 'Play.' Britney Spears started to blast through the speakers.

Samantha, meanwhile, mounted up the chest of drawers and leaned precariously over the edge; reaching for the light switch.

And then the room was in darkness; except for Lucy's bedside light. I'm not sure why bears felt it necessary to have discos in the dark!

Making his way towards Harry, Chester squeezed his way through the crowd of dancing and screeching bears with his paws muffling his ears. Like me, Chester wasn't one for noise.

"Harry! Harry!" he shouted above the music.

"Yes Chester."

"I just wanted to have a word with you about your speech. I must admit that I thought it was very... very..."

Catherine waltzed over to them. "... funny," she completed for Chester. "Except for that bit when you said Chester would have to wait until next time to find a nice kind bear. That was very cheeky." Harry grinned cheekily. "But it was very funny. That's what you were going to say wasn't it Chester?"

"Er... er..." stuttered Chester, "... yes... yes of course it was." I don't think it was. I had a feeling that the

words "immoral" and "indecent" would have been used. Chester took Catherine's paw in his. "Catherine, my dear wife, shall we dance?"

"That would be lovey... but I need to mingle with the guests."

"Oh come on Catherine, you see them all the time."

"No we don't. Once Lucy and her family get back we'll hardly see them at all. Having to sit stock still on those hard shelves for days and days on end, not speaking to a soul."

"Alright but you can mingle later. I'll be mingling as well but surely our first dance as husband and wife is more important than them."

Catherine smiled. "Yes. Go on then, you've twisted my arm." Really? I thought he was just holding it. Oh right! I see what she means.

Catherine and Chester began to glide across the carpet, jiving to the music. Catherine panted, "All that fitness lark yesterday and I'm still out of breath now."

"Yes, well you've had a very hectic day haven't you. But now it's over we'll be able to spend the last day of the holiday relaxing; together."

"Yes. What with all the wedding preparations we haven't really seen that much of each other. But do you not think we should do some more exercise tomorrow. I mean you don't want a fat wife do you?"

Chester shook his head. "Catherine I love you just the way you are. When you stepped in through that window earlier, I just had to gasp you know? Because you just looked so beautiful in that sensational outfit I thought to myself, "I must be the luckiest bear in the whole world."

A tear in Catherine's eye glistened in the weak sunlight still fluttering through the window. "Oh you'll get me started again. No, that's very kind of

you to say Chester. And I love you just the way you are as well." She leant forward and kissed Chester on the cheek. Ah, what a lovely moment.

Over on the other side of the 'dance floor' John, with Toby in his arms, was talking to his father.

"Look after everything that's happened just recently I really need to talk to her. To try and put things right. To tell her how much I love her."

Pete was confused. "Okay, but why are you telling me this."

"I was just wondering if you'd look after Toby while I go and talk to her. You can't have a serious conversation while he's crying and bawling."

"John, John it's fine," Pete reassured him. "I'd love to look after him. Why were me and Samantha having all those rows? Because she wouldn't let me see my precious grandson. So do you think I'm going to refuse to look after him?"

"Thanks."

"Not a problem. Anything I can do to help my son or grandson isn't a problem at all."

John gulped. "That reminds me. Erm... what you did earlier. You know..."

"Yes I know."

"I'll never be able to thank you enough. I'll always be in your debt."

Pete shook his head guiltily. "John I can never make up to you for abandoning you as a little bear. So there's no way you can ever be in my debt. I'll always owe you something for those years of your life I missed out on."

"No, you won't. You made up for that today. I'd have lost everything today if it hadn't been for you today. We're even now." John smiled lovingly at his

father before scurrying away through the dancing bears towards his wife.

He found Samantha standing on the outskirts of the dancing bears half heartedly wiggling her hips and shaking her arms from side to side.

"Oh Samantha, there you are," greeted John, approaching his wife nervously.

"Oh John. I was going to come and look for you."

"What for?" he demanded sharply; worried his secret was out.

"John we need to talk."

"Yes I know; that's why I came to look for you."

Samantha sighed regretfully. "What's happened to us John? We were so happy at the start of this week but as the week has gone on I've just felt that you've been becoming more and more distant; that you've been keeping something from me. And then there was today when you made a fool of yourself at the wedding. What's it all about John?"

John's legs became rather weak and shaky and he leant up against the wardrobe door. Weeks of lying and having to watch one of the female bears he loved marry someone else had taken it out of him. "Oh Samantha!" He covered his face with his paw. "Things have just been getting on top of me. I've been under a lot of stress."

"Look you've said this before. But you've got to tell me what stress you've been under. We're married; you shouldn't keep things from me. We should share problems." I don't think he could really share this one! "So tell me; what are you stressed about?"

"Oh it's just a combination of things. Like finding how vile my Dad was being to you when I wasn't there."

"But you were uptight before you found out about that. So what's the real problem?"

"No I might have been stressed before I found out about that but I'd still been thinking about it. You'd been saying that my Dad had been horrible to you for quite a while and although it appeared that I didn't believe you it had been playing on my mind. That's obviously going to cause me stress; wondering whether you were lying or whether Dad had been insulting you."

"Oh don't come that! You're lying to me," accused Samantha.

"No I'm not. But that's not the only reason." What was he going to say? "Hearing that Catherine and Chester were going to get married hasn't helped either." Was he going to tell Samantha about his affair?

"What's that got to do with you?"

John sighed. I think he had considered telling Samantha the truth but he couldn't do it. "Oh it's just that weddings are very emotional events." Relief! I could breathe again.

But Samantha wasn't finished yet. "But why on earth should Catherine's wedding make you stressed?"

"No it hasn't directly but..." John's hole was getting deeper, "but... it's just made me upset because they're emotional. But getting upset over something silly like that has just helped to make me more stressed."

"Catherine's wedding has made you upset?"

"Yes why not? You cried at the wedding. I saw you."

"Yes but I didn't get upset before it had even taken place and Catherine is my friend."

"Chester's my friend."

"He is not. You've hardly ever spoken to him."

"Okay. Maybe not." The hole wouldn't go any deeper. "But just the thought of a wedding has made me emotional. Weddings always bring back memories of our wedding and that was an emotional day, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Samantha remembered fondly.

"But that isn't important any more. The wedding's over. I know what my Dad's been up to, he's promised never to do anything like that again and I've made up with him."

"But he was offensive at the wedding."

"Yes but with the way I behaved he was bound to be a bit stressed out. And when you're stressed you just snap at anyone."

"Huh! Everyone's stressed according to you. And what's being stressed go to do with shouting out at the wedding like that. That was so embarrassing."

"I'm really sorry about that. I suppose all the stress had built up and in the end I just cracked and did something very stupid. At the time, in my very confused, emotional mind I thought it was funny."

Samantha softened and told him with a smile on her lips, "Well it flipping wasn't. I was so embarrassed. I just wanted the carpet to swallow me up."

"I'm very sorry. It's amazing but just talking to you now I can feel myself relaxing, as all my problems are over."

"Exactly. You should have come to me when you first started feeling stressed."

"Well I couldn't. I was trying to work out in my head whether you or my Dad was lying. I couldn't really discuss that with you could I?"

"No I suppose not."

"But it's over now. I'll really sorry for being grouchy and I'm really sorry for embarrassing you earlier. But I really love you Samantha and I hope it hasn't affected our marriage."

"Don't be silly," dismissed Samantha. "It'll take something more than this silly business to stop me loving you." If only she knew, ay? "Come here you silly billy." Samantha wrapped her arms around her husband and hugged him tightly.

John's head rested on her shoulder and I could see the guilty look on his face. But at least he did seem slightly more relaxed now. And in time the guilt would probably drain away as well. As long as the affair didn't continue and after his outburst today I doubted that it would.

"Will you try and be slightly more civilised towards my Dad?"

"I've drawn up that rota of when he can see Toby, haven't I?"

"I suppose," mused John.

"That's a point! Where is Toby?"

"He's with my Dad?"

"But I don't think it was scheduled on the rota for him to have him now."

"It probably wasn't but I needed to speak to you and he was more than happy to look after little Toby."

"I bet he was," commented Samantha knowingly.

"Look! More civilised I said."

"Okay! Okay! I'll try," promised Samantha. "But it's difficult," she added.

In the centre of the bears Jean was on her own; gently swaying to the music. There seemed to be a

circle of space around her (radius: 5 inches) as the bears were trying to keep their distance from her.

Suddenly Mickey stepped into the circle. Jean became instantly aware of him.

"Mickey?"

"Jean. You don't know how relieved I was when I found out you'd been having an affair with Metro?"

"Eh?"

"As opposed to Milly," he explained. "Because I desperately, desperately wanted to take you back but that would have meant forgiving Milly as well (I don't know where Mickey had got that rule from) and if he had been having an affair with you I could have never have forgiven him; not my own brother. But Metro, after I've given him a piece of my mind (and the odd punch!), which I have, I'm willing to forgive him. And you."

"Oh Mickey!" uttered Jean pathetically.

Mickey dropped to his knees and scooped up a pawful of confetti that had been left lying on the floor.

"So Jean," he threw the confetti in the air and let it flutter down around them, "will you take me back?"

"Of Mickey of course I will."

"I'm really sorry for the way I've treated you the past few days." Something wasn't right here! *Mickey* was on his knees! *Mickey* was apologising!

"Oh Mickey, please don't apologise. You just make me feel all the more guilty. I'm the one who should be apologising not you."

Mickey got to his feet and kissed her on the lips. "Oh I've waited a long time for that! I love you so much Jean. More than you'd believe. Probably more than I should after everything that's happened.

The confetti continued to flutter down around them.

"And I love you too. I promise you that Metro and I are finished." That's not how it looked in the church!

"Do you know something Jean? I don't think I'd care even if it wasn't. I'm willing to share you (that wasn't a very clever thing to say- knowing Jean she'd probably take him up on that). These last few days that we've spent about I've had the feeling that this affair was the 'biggie.' I realised that this was the affair that could split us up for good. I wouldn't have been able to have coped with that. When you've had affairs in the past and me for that matter, it's always the guilty party who's made the first move of reconciliation. But this time I wasn't sure if you would because of the way I'd behaved. That's why I'm doing this now."

The confetti carried on falling around them.

"What about the children, though? Have they forgiven me?"

"Let's ask them shall we?" he suggested rather confidently. "Chester! Harry!" he called.

Moments later Harry came stumbling out of the crowd of bears with Tommy in his arms. Just behind him was Chester; his nose in the air.

"What is it Father? I was trying to dance with Cath..." his sentence trailed away as he saw that Mickey was holding Jean's paw and he saw the confetti falling around them. "Father what's going on?"

"Chester. Harry. I've decided to forgive your mother." Chester went to protest but Mickey held up his paw. "Wait a minute Chester. I know you probably don't agree but the alternative was that we didn't get back together." Well obviously! "And I wouldn't have been able to cope without. Despite

what she's done I'd have still been miserable without her. Is that what you want?"

"Of course it isn't Father, but..."

"No buts. Are you willing to forgive your mother? Yes or no?"

There was a silence. Well let's put it this way, none of the bears in the circle spoke; with that blaring music there couldn't be silence!

Harry stepped forward. "I forgive you Mummy."

"That's very nice of you Harry." Jean leant forward and kissed him on the forehead before looking up at Chester, with anxious eyes. "Chester?"

"Yes mother."

"Do you forgive me?"

There was a pause and a long, drawn out, intake of breath as Chester considered this. "I don't know..." Looking round at his family's expectant but furry and cute faces he gave in. "Oh alright then." Jean breathed out, Harry smiled, Tommy continued sleeping and Mickey congratulated him:

"Well done Chester. You've made the right decision." Mickey reached out and patted Chester on his shoulder with his paw.

"No listen! I'm only doing this because if you've found it in your stuffing to forgive Mother then it would be immature of me not to but I'd just like Mother to understand this. I don't know what Father's already said to you; what promises you've had to make but if you have one more affair, one more fling even, then that's that. You honestly will have lost more for good! Because next time there'll be no leniency. I think the only reason I'm giving in this time is because I've just got married and I'm so happy."

"Yes Chester," piped up Mickey. "I was really proud of you today."

"So was I," agreed Jean. "And of Harry."

"Yes me too," Mickey murmured his agreement and Harry smiled bashfully.

Jean grinned as she thought of something. "You know we haven't asked Tommy if he forgives me, yet." They all laughed. It was nice to see them all happy as a family again. Just at that moment Tommy burped. "I wonder what that meant," joked Jean.

Catherine, who had popped her head over Chester's shoulder, joked, "Well it had to come out one end, didn't it? And I think I'd prefer that end!" Trust Catherine to lower the tone.

"Yes dear," Chester smiled at her.

Mickey flinched as a paw was placed on his shoulder. He turned to see Milly standing behind him.

"Milly!" Mickey seemed surprised to see his brother. "What can I say? I can't even begin to apologise."

"Oh don't bother. I'm sure if the situation had been reversed I'd have done exactly the same. Well, I'd have probably hit you a bit harder."

Mickey smiled. "Well there's always next time."

"No there isn't. I promised you after the last time that I wouldn't have another affair with Jean. I kept my promise and I'll continue to keep it. Especially after the way Jean's behaved. The way she's made me lose Corny."

"I've forgiven her, you know? Do you think you could possibly do the same?"

"I don't know," sighed Milly. "We'll have to see but not anytime soon. She couldn't even make amends for what she's done by admitting to everyone that it was

Metro she was having an affair with and not me. We have to resort to playing that tape."

Jean, who had been listening to their conversation, interspersed with, "Milly, I really am very sorry."

"Maybe you are, but it's too late. Much too late. The damage is done now. Corny's gone."

Meanwhile, Lenny, still in his bandages, was sitting propped up against the wardrobe door, singing along to the music. It was ironic that the track playing at that precise moment was, 'All By Myself.'

Metro suddenly popped out of the crowd of dancing bears. "Oh Lenny there you are. I've been searching for you absolutely everywhere."

Without speaking Lenny struggled to his feet.

"Oh Lenny, don't be like that. I'm really very sorry about all the things I've done. I know I've been very underhand but..."

Lenny brushed past his father.

"Lenny," he called after him trying to grab onto his bandaged arm. But Lenny aggressively shrugged him off.

"Just get off me Daddy!" he shouted pushing his way through the crowd to try and get away from his father.

Metro didn't bother to pursue him but instead hung his head dejectedly and ran his paw through the fur on his head. I think that he realised he had seriously messed up and had put his relationship with his son in jeopardy once again.

As Lenny shoved his way through the dancing bears he collided with Big Toff.

"Oh there you are Lenny," taunted Big Toff, "have you got something to say to me? Like sorry? I seem to recall getting a fair amount of abuse from you when you thought that my Daddy had beaten up your

Daddy for no good reason. But I'm sure you're now aware that it was your cheating Daddy who was having an affair with Jean and not my Daddy."

Probably feeling closed in by all the dancers and with Big Toff not letting him past, Lenny started hitting him with the flats of his paws, desperate to get past him; not wanting to hear the truth, but Big Toff refused to budge.

Big Toff was not perturbed. "Oh but silly me, I forgot. I'm sure you knew that already, didn't you? Your darling Daddy wouldn't keep something like that from you would he now?"

Losing all his patience Lenny viciously grabbed hold of his former friend and flung him to the floor. Then he continued forcing his way through the dancers, climbed up the bed, bounced up onto the windowsill before limping out onto the rooftop.

There he stood staring out contemplatively at the sun setting behind the houses.

But oh dear! It looked like more trouble was on the cards. Big Toff had climbed up onto the bed and looked as if he was following Lenny out onto the rooftop. Oh why couldn't he just let him have the peace and quiet he obviously craved? The revelation about his father had obviously affected him badly.

I had been right (I know I shouldn't be surprised!), moments later Big Toff was standing on the rooftop about a foot behind Lenny. He stood there staring at the bear he had once called his brother.

Lenny was oblivious to his presence. Until he spoke.

"Lenny, I'm really sorry," he apologised in a tone much softer and gentler than when he had spoken previously.

But upon hearing his voice Lenny moved away, further down the rooftop. "Why can't you just leave me alone?" he shouted indignantly.

"Sorry, I just felt I should say sorry after what I said before."

"Stick your apologies. I'm not interested."

"Be like that then. Do you know I don't even know why I'm apologising? You never apologised for the things you said about my Daddy, did you?"

"No, because they were true."

"Oh were they?" mocked big Toff. "I don't think you'll find they were. I think you'll find that it was your Daddy having an affair with Jean and not mine. So I think you'll find my Daddy had every reason to beat up your Daddy. So there!"

Lenny spun around and marched (as best as he could in bandages) towards Big Toff. "Why do you have to be such a nasty prat?"

"I just want you to know what it's like to hear horrible things said about your Daddy."

"Oh I know what it's like! This isn't the first time you've done it is it?"

"Yeah well he's deserved it!"

"It's not as if your Daddy's a Saint! He's had affairs before!"

Big Toff saw red and lashed out at Lenny. Lenny withstood the blow and returned the favour! Big Toff dodged the punch before lunging in at Lenny and a full-scale scrap ensued.

Fur flew.

After a couple of minutes of scrapping a shaken Lenny was knocked to the floor. He grunted in pain, but without any pause for recovery Lenny sprung up and lunged at Big Toff. But Big Toff neatly sidestepped him and Lenny fell forwards; losing his

footing. Lenny tumbled to the tiles but continued to roll forward; towards the roof edge.

"Help!" shouted Lenny, rolling down the roof.

"No!" screeched Big Toff, rooted to the spot. Don't just stand there! Do something!

"Help!" pleaded Lenny, his pace increasing.

Seeing that the edge of the roof was only a metro away Big Toff leapt into action and bounded down the roof after his 'friend.' "I'm coming," he called. "I'm coming."

I began wriggling uncomfortably in my seat. The edge was just a few seconds away and if Lenny was to plummet off there I wasn't sure he'd survive; not with all the injuries he already had.

Lenny continued to roll.

Big Toff continued to run.

But he was never going to make it in time.

Go on. Go on. Just a little bit faster (I was talking to Big Toff by the way!).

I clasped my wing to my mouth. This was getting too tense.

And then Lenny reached the end.

Rolling at quite a speed, he dropped over the edge. Big Toff, just a few inches behind him, screamed before flinging himself over the edge after him...

My wings flew over my eyes.

CHAPTER 35

Daring to look, I peeped out from behind my wing.

The roof was empty. Both bears had gone over the edge.

And then I saw it. There was a small furry paw just protruding over the edge of the roof.

It was Big Toff- I recognised the toffee coloured fur. He was clinging on. But what could I do? I was stuck up here on my shelf. And I never told the bears anything I saw or heard.

Rubbish! This wasn't a time for principles!

"Metro! Milly!" I shouted down to them above the noise. After a moment's confusion as to who was calling them, they looked up at me. "Big Toff and Lenny are in trouble. They're clinging onto the roof by their paws! Quick! Quick! They need your help!"

Forgetting his aches and pains Metro switched to superhero mode Metro sprinted through the crowd and over to the bed with Milly, stretching out his long but bandaged legs, just behind him.

The climb onto the roof took just 30 seconds but it seemed the longest time it had ever taken for a bear to climb up onto the roof.

With the gentle evening breeze wafting up against their fur the sworn enemies Milly and Metro sprinted down the rooftop; each desperate to save their son.

And finally they reached the end.

Diving onto the tiles they both reached over the edge of the roof; feeling for their son.

Would either of them be there? Had I acted quickly enough?

My questions were soon answered.

There was a flash of 'gold' as Metro lifted Lenny back onto the safety of the roof.

Just seconds later there was a flash of toffee and Big Toff too was rescued by his father.

And then there were lots of tears and sentimental phrases like:

"Oh Daddy you saved me!"

"Oh I'm so glad you're safe!"

"I couldn't have bared it if you'd gone over."

"Oh Daddy I love you!"

And all that sort of soppy stuff!

After lying out on the roof, to recover, the bears made their way back up to the bedroom; Milly with his arm firmly around Big Toff and Metro with an arm around Lenny, who seemed to have forgotten how much he hated his father! Oh well; I'm sure it wouldn't take him long to remember!

"Come on Big Toff, let's get you checked over by Penny and Santa. You don't know what damage you might have done to yourself."

"Well Lenny would have been worse if I hadn't flung myself over. He'd have probably been..."

"Don't even think about that," interrupted Milly, stopping him saying the dreaded 'd' word.

"Right Lenny, we need to get you checked over by Penny and Santa," copied Metro.

"Oi," argued Milly, "that was my idea!"

"This isn't the time nor the place to be arguing the toss, Milly. You should be complimented that I think it a good enough idea to copy it."

"Oh yeah, I hadn't thought of it like that."

As the four bears re-entered the room Milly looked up at me and clapped his paws together. Metro joined in as well. Big Toff and Lenny glanced curiously at each; they didn't know I was a hero! Oh well, give them time!

"How will we ever be able to repay you?" grovelled Milly. "You're an absolute hero. If you hadn't been on the ball (I'm always on the ball) then Lenny and Big Toff would surely have plummeted onto the patio (yes, you just keep thinking positively!). They couldn't have held on for much longer."

If only he knew. He might think I'm a hero but little did he know that it was down to me that Corny had left him. Though at least I had learnt from my mistake; I had realised that there things more important than my principles, like a bear's life, and that's why I had alerted Milly and Metro to the danger.

"So is there anything we can do to repay you?" Milly repeated.

"Yes there is actually. You can forgive me for telling Corny you were having an affair with Jean!"

CHAPTER 36

It was early the next morning. And I mean really early. Even the sun was only just thinking about rising!

But Lenny and Metro were already up; sitting up against the wardrobe, huddled up next to each other. They really were early risers weren't they? Lucy's clock said it wasn't even five o'clock yet!

I had spent the whole night worrying about what I had said to Milly the previous night. After much contemplation I realised that it hadn't been the cleverest thing to say. Obviously it hadn't taken me the whole night to realise that. I'm not that stupid. I think I'd realised that the moment the words had left my beak.

The really ridiculous thing though, was that Milly had actually forgiven me!

Maybe he hadn't really taken it in properly; it had been a long day. But I felt that he had been listening and he had been sincere when he had told me:

"It doesn't matter anymore." He obviously had some mad scheme lined up; some way of trying to get Corny back. Oh but he had; I'd forgotten about that...

"Lenny?" Metro whispered. "Lenny?" Why was he whispering? Fair enough it was early in the morning (very early!) and all the other bears were asleep but they were all downstairs. He probably wouldn't have woken them if he'd shouted!

"What is it Daddy?" answered Lenny, yawning.

"Oh good you're awake! I need to speak with you Lenny."

Lenny protested, "No Daddy, there's really no need. I've forgiven you for all you've done. Yesterday

you saved my life; how ungrateful would I be if I didn't speak to you over some petty affair."

"Well that's very good of you but that wasn't actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Go on," prompted Lenny.

"I've decided that it's time to tell you the truth." Lenny looked up curiously at his father. "Yesterday I could easily have lost you; forever. And you'd never had known the truth."

"About what Daddy?"

"Oh you know you asked me the other day why I abandoned for the first six years of your life and I was very evasive?"

"Yes."

"Well now it's time for me to tell you the truth."

Lenny gulped nervously. "Well?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't what?" queried a confused Lenny.

"I didn't abandon you." Really? This should be interesting.

Lenny itched his bandages as he considered this. "But you weren't there?"

"Not with you no but... Look Lenny I had to leave in case the bears started to put two and two together (and get five!) and work out that I was your father. I thought about leaving but then thought; when that baby is born he's going to need his Daddy. Now I knew Milly would step in, thinking you were his child, but he was only a substitute; you needed the real thing (why was I reminded of meat adverts on the TV?). So I thought instead of actually leaving I'll just make them think I've gone. So I made a dramatic exit and climbed over the fence. When I was on the other side I must admit I was tempted to actually go, to leave all my troubles behind, but then I heard a dog

bark and I climbed back over the fence as fast as I could; being careful that none of the bears saw me come back over. And then for the first six years of your life I watched you from the flower bed." Lenny gasped with surprise. This obviously hadn't been what he was expecting. "Yes it's true. I lived in the flower bed and stared in through the windows; watching you grow up. I must admit that there were a number of occasions I thought about giving up and coming inside; I went through some absolutely freezing winters. I had to bury myself under piles of leaves just to keep warm. And I had to do that as well when bears came into the garden; so as not to be discovered. I remember one occasion when you must have been about three, I had no sense of time when I was out there in the wild (yes, forget the jungles and the rainforests and the deserts, there's nothing quite as wild as Mrs Partridge's flower bed!), and you sat down on the wet grass, looking up at the sky. I remember that I was so tempted to just run out of the bushes and come over to you and tell you not to sit on the wet grass; that you'd soak all your fur (no!). But I couldn't; it was too soon (what three years?) and the bears might still have realised who I was. But as time went on I didn't care. I had been stuck in that dirty, horrible flower bed watching you grow up from afar, not able to touch you, talk to you. In the end I just had to come back; whatever the consequences."

There were tears rolling down Lenny's face. I had wondered how long it would be before someone turned the water works on! "Daddy... why haven't you told me this before?"

"I don't know really... Huh, it's silly. Instead of telling you the truth I let you think I'd completely abandoned you... I suppose that it was because I

wanted to build a relationship up with you, but I didn't think waltzing in saying- Lenny I've been watching you for the last six years from the flower bed, but I haven't done anything to help you, haven't even let you know I was there- would be the best way to start. I thought that might be worse than you thinking I'd abandoned you (oh come off!).

Lenny hugged his Daddy tightly. "Of course it isn't... Of course it isn't... You lived in the garden (no, the wild!) for six years, you stayed out there in all weathers, just to be near to me; just so you could see me. I just think that's brilliant." Lenny happily up at his father. "This changes our whole relationship. Every time I've spoken to you, even when we've been getting on, I've had the fact that you abandoned me for the first six years of my life in the back of my mind, but I needn't anymore. Not now I know you were there."

"Well I only watched you," Metro argued, trying to play down his achievement, "I didn't help you, I wasn't there for you."

"You were there. That's enough. It doesn't make any difference to the first six years of my life, no, but the truth is I didn't need you then. I had Milly and Corny and they were brilliant parents."

"I'm sure they were," agreed Metro with a hint of jealousy.

"But you're here now and that's all that counts. And now I know that you cared about me enough to stick it out in the wilderness (no, the flower bed!) then everything can be just perfect." Lenny smiled happily at his father, relieved that the torment of those six years could be put behind him. "Oh I love you Daddy."

"I love you too Lenny."

Sorry to break the illusion, but I seriously doubted whether Metro's story was actually true. For one I'd like to think that I'm too alert for a bear to have been able to have slip back over the fence without me noticing. Secondly if he'd been living in the flower bed, with leaves as a blanket, why was he almost spotlessly clean when he had come waltzing in through the window. And finally if it had been true, I'm sure that Metro wasn't the sort of bear to keep it to himself. He'd have been immediately boasting to Lenny how he'd been watching him from the flower bed; just to make sure he was safe. But the story had made Lenny happy and that's all that mattered.

"Daddy?" began Lenny nervously.

"Yes Lenny."

"Now you've been truthful, I want to be truthful as well."

"Go on," encouraged Metro.

"Well over the past few days I've realised something and the roof incident has made me be absolutely sure."

"Yes?"

"I want to make up with Big Toff. No, don't say anything yet. Just let me finish. If he hadn't risked his life yesterday I'd have surely plummeted off that roof and... well who knows."

Metro cuddled his son. "Try not to think about that. But yes, you're right, Big Toff did save your life but if you hadn't been fighting together then you'd have never ended up in that predicament. And really it's Chris you want to thank for saving your life (I know, I know). He alerted us to the danger."

"Who's Chris? No that doesn't matter (oh charming!). I know me and Big Toff fight and bicker a lot when we're friends but yesterday's incident has

proved that we fight and bicker the same amount when we're enemies. And I'd much prefer to be his friend because of all the fun times we have when we're not arguing."

"Well..." began Metro dubiously.

"Please?" begged Lenny. "It would make me really happy."

"Oh well in that case," beamed Metro, "how can I refuse? Anything to make you happy." Yes I was right, that's what Metro saw as the most important thing. Well there was nothing wrong with that was there?

"Oh thank you Daddy. Thank you." Lenny reached up and kissed his Daddy on his cheek. "I love you Daddy."

A floorboard creaked and Milly came striding into the room, waving what looked like Catherine's seating plan in his paw. Big Toff and Little Toff were tagging along behind.

"Why have you got us up this early Daddy?" complained Little Toff in his cutest, quietest voice.

"I'll explain in a minute sonny, just keep following me."

All three of them completely blanked Metro and Lenny as they made their way over to the bed. Milly then helped his two sleepy children to climb up the side of the bed before he led them over to the window. Once there Milly turned and announced:

"Here we are."

"But it's just the windowsill Daddy," pointed out a puzzled Big Toff.

"Yes I know. But look at everything we can see from here." Milly gestured out at the houses and the roads, behind the Partridge's house. "Somewhere... somewhere out there is your Mummy."

"Wow!" exclaimed Little Toff.

"Really?" asked a disbelieving Big Toff.

"Yes. Yes. It's true. But look at how big it all is. She could be anywhere; absolutely anywhere."

Little Toff pointed with his paw. "She could be there."

"She could indeed."

"She could be over there," suggested Big Toff pointing.

"Well I think she's over there," pointed Little Toff.

"No she isn't," argued Big Toff. "She's over there."

"No she's over there."

"No she's..."

"Children! Children!" Milly protested. "Let's not argue. Wherever she is I'm going to find her!"

"Find her?" exclaimed Big Toff.

"Find her?" repeated Little Toff.

"Yes that's right sons. Now I need you to both be very brave. I'm going to go and look for your Mummy."

"You're going to leave us on our own?" asked a concerned Little Toff.

"I'm afraid so. I'd like to tell you that I won't be long but I can't make that promise to you. You can see how big all that is down there. She could be anywhere out there. But I promise that where you those places you suggested will be the first two places I'll look."

"Oh Daddy," pleaded Little Toff, clinging onto his father's arm, "don't leave us on our own."

"You'll be alright; you've got Big Toff to look after you and I'm sure your Uncle Mickey and... Auntie Jean will make sure you're alright, as well."

Big Toff snorted. "It's Auntie Jean that made Mummy leave. And that Dipsy down there!" Big Toff prodded his paw at Metro.

“Look we’ve got to try and put all that behind us. Been angry at bears, hitting bears, trying to get revenge on bears achieves nothing. All those things won’t get us Corny back. The only thing I can do to make Corny come home is to go and find her and show her this.” Milly waved the seating the plan in the air. And suddenly I remembered what had happened yesterday and realised what Milly’s plan was. When the bears had been sent out of room so the church could be reset, Milly had taken the seating plan with him, along with a pencil from the wardrobe. He had then asked the waiting bears on the landing whether they could understand why Corny had gone mad at Jean, knowing what they now knew (he didn’t mention the fact that Corny only knew what they now knew towards the end of the big fight). He had said that if they thought that it was unfair that Corny should have to leave her family behind because of Jean’s selfish actions and if they would welcome Corny back into Lucy’s bedroom then they should sign on the back of the seating plan. Most of the bears had; only the older, snootier bears had declined. So Milly obviously intended to go and find Corny and present her with the document, telling her the bears wanted her to come home. Huh! He hadn’t asked me to sign it! “I hope you understand that I just have to do this. Without Corny I’m lost. I know she’s only been gone just over a day but yesterday, which should have been a proud day; seeing my nephew get married, just felt empty. I want to stress that I’m not abandoning you. If you thought that then I realise that it would be really difficult for you to manage; having your Mummy walk out on you and then your Daddy going two days later. But that’s not what’s happening. I promise I will return.

We're not even going to say 'Goodbye' because it isn't goodbye. Goodbye is when you'll never see me again and you definitely will. But I won't be coming back until I've found Corny, so don't get worried; I could be a while."

"When are you going?" inquired Little Toff.

"Now."

"Now?"

"Yes, I want to get away before the bears start waking up. They'll only try to talk me out of going. Saying it isn't worth taking the risk of venturing into the big wide world for Corny. But it is."

"Yes it is," agreed Big Toff. "But you'll be careful, won't you? Bears aren't designed for surviving out there. We're just meant to live in the warmth and comfort of someone's house."

"I know, but I spent last night psychologically preparing myself. I'm ready for anything now. Oh yes, that reminds me. I need to take all these bandages off. The pain's almost gone now and they only restrict my movement." Milly started to unwrap them from around his body and Big Toff and Little Toff helped. "And they'd make me stand out as well." Yes, whereas without bandages a walking bear wouldn't stand out at all!

After a few minutes of wrestling with the bandages and wrenching and tugging at them, Milly was free. His toffee coloured fur was all matted due to wearing the bandages for a few days. He brushed himself down and tried to fluff up his fur a bit before holding out the clump of bandages to Big Toff and suggesting:

"You should give them to Metro. I bet he's feeling a bit sore after what Mickey did to him yesterday."

Big Toff took the bandages from his father, who now stepped out onto the rooftop.

"And Big Toff," he called over his shoulder, "look after Little Toff." This probably wasn't the wisest thing to say as that was what Corny had said when she was leaving for good.

"I will Daddy. I will." Turning to his younger brother he saw that he was starting to tremble, a tear had appeared in his eye and he was staring out after his retreating father with pathetic looked etched on his face. Ah, I felt really sorry for poor Little Toff. He was the only bear who ever bothered with me, except those that wanted something, and now I had caused him all this heartache. Both his parents had left (well Milly was on his way down the roof) and that was my fault. If I hadn't told Corny that... Oh it was no use! I had and it was done. I had tried to rectify my mistake by letting Mickey know the truth and by saving the life of Big Toff and Lenny. But was it enough? And did Little Toff know that it was me who had lied to Corny about Milly having an affair? If he did would he bother with me again? Yes, I know he was a pest but when you're up here on a shelf, all on your own, even pests class as company. Though I shouldn't complain, I had the bear's lives to entertain me.

As Milly reached the bottom of the roof, he looked back at his two sons, smiled and then clambered over the edge. Seconds later I heard a screech of delight as he slid down the drainpipe. Little things ... But was I really in a position to talk?

Milly had disappeared from view for the first time and Little Toff began to sob to himself. Big Toff moved over to his brother, placed his arm around his shoulder and tried to comfort him. "It's alright Little Toff. You've still got me. And when Daddy comes back he'll be bringing Mummy back, so that's good isn't it?"

"Yes," sobbed Little Toff, "but Daddy might never come back." The crying began to get more and more hysterical. "We might never see him again!"

"We will, we will," Big Toff reassured him.

"We won't, we won't."

Milly, marching across the garden towards the back fence, came back into sight.

Seeing his dear Daddy Little Toff shrieked, "Daddy don't go! Don't leave us"

Hearing his distressed son's voice Milly looked back at Lucy's bedroom window and called up, "It's alright son. I'll be back soon. I promise." And with that Milly continued to make his way across the garden.

The tears began to stream from Little Toff's little eyes and the bawling got louder and louder.

Big Toff tried to comfort his brother with, "It's going to be alright, Little Toff," but he wasn't going to buy that meaningless phrase. And good for him I say!

Suddenly there was a paw on Big Toff's shoulder. At the sudden fur-on-fur contact he spun around.

It was Lenny's paw. He had left his father sitting up against the wardrobe; with a mischievous smile etched on his face. So that farcical story had been a lie!

"Lenny?"

"Big Toff, I want us to be friends."

"Oh Lenny this isn't the time. My Daddy's..."

"Yes I know what's happening," Lenny assured him. "But now it's you and Little Toff on your own, you need all the friends you can get. So please say we can put our differences behind us. Please?"

"Oh we'll just end up arguing like we used to."

"But we argue even when we're not friends; yesterday's proof of that. So we might as well be

friends because at lest we'll have some times that way."

"I suppose you're right but your Daddy won't approve. He doesn't like me."

"He's willing to give you a second chance. You did save my life yesterday. We owe you something now."

"Oh don't be silly," dismissed Big Toff. "You don't owe me anything. But yes I will be your friend again. You're the only real friend I've ever had and you're right I do need you now." Big Toff reached out and patted Lenny on his shoulder. They smiled at each other; remembering how fond they had been of each other when they had been brothers and then best friends.

Little Toff had cried all the way through their conversation but now the crying ceased. Milly had scaled the fence, rather awkwardly due to his healing injuries, and was now balancing precariously on the top.

He smiled cheerfully at the three bears at the window and mouthed the words, "I'll be back," before sliding down the other side of the fence. I heard him land with a thud on the other side.

Little Toff's crying continued once again.

Big Toff and Lenny tried to console him but nothing they said could stop him crying. The only thing that could do that was to see his Mummy and Daddy appear over that fence; paw in paw. And that wasn't going to happen; not for a while anyway.

He was just going to have to wait.

What a week it had been, eh? Though I suspected that today was going to be the most hectic day yet. With Lucy's family due back the following day the bears were going to have to work hard to obliterate

every trace that they had come alive while the Partridge's had been on holiday.

All the props (I know it hadn't been a play!) for the wedding were going to have to be replaced; Santa was going to have to see if the ornaments and photo frames on Lucy's chest of drawers could be put back together; Lucy's wardrobe, which had become Catherine's little zone, would need to be tidied; the pieces of confetti would need to be cleared away; the tinsel would have to be taken down off the side of Lucy's bed and the big clumps of duvet it would take with it would somehow have to be disguised!

With all these things to do Lucy, or one of her family, was surely bound to notice that their house had been a hive of bear activity while they had been away. Even if the ornaments were glued back together there would still be cracks in them. And there was surely nothing Santa could do about the glass in the photo frames that was now in an uncountable amount of pieces? I know he was good but he wasn't a miracle worker! And what about the computer paper that Catherine had used for her wedding? Surely Mr Partridge would notice that 90 pieces of his paper were missing? But the most obvious thing, surely, was the absence of Milly and Corny? Lucy couldn't possibly not notice that two of her favourite bears were missing, could she? And what would she make of Marjorie and George or would they have left before the Partridge family returned home?

There was certainly a lot of hard work for the bears to do today in order to try and cover their tracks. I must admit though that even if the Partridge's did notice that something was amiss they wouldn't for a moment imagine that Lucy's bears had come alive

while they were on holiday. They'd try and blame it on something more rational like a burglar or gravity!

Though some consolation for the bears, while they did this hard and rather pointless work, was that at least they would be able to pull together and work in some sort of harmony. Because everything had really worked out alright in the end. Catherine and Chester had got married, John hadn't jeopardised his marriage to Samantha and they seemed happy again, Samantha had agreed to try and at least be civil to Pete, Mickey had taken Jean back and so too had Chester, Harry and Tommy and Santa and Penny well... were still Santa and Penny! I couldn't help but spare a thought for poor old Arthur in the loft. Chester had completely forgotten about him, like Catherine had hoped her would, and he had missed the wedding and had been left to sit indefinitely in the dusty, old loft. It must be so boring up there for him. I knew what it was like to be lonely and forgotten about but at least could be entertained by watching the bears below me. He had nothing.

Though when the Partridge's arrived back on Saturday the bears would have to retake their positions on their shelves and pretend to be lifeless stuffed toys again and I would be deprived of that entertainment. And as it was bang in the middle of the summer holidays- Mr and Mrs Partridge didn't have to go to work and Lucy and her brother didn't have to go to school- it might be a while before all the Partridge's went out and the bear's came back to life.

Though let's spare a thought for two of Lucy's bears who weren't going to be able to go back to being stuffed toys on Saturday; Milly and Corny.

For them life would go on. They had dared to go over the fence and they were going to have to try and

survive against the elements. They were in the midst of a world that none of Lucy's bears were prepared for. For Little Toff's sake, more than anything, I hoped that they would return soon but I secretly doubted that they would return at all. Even if Milly did find Corny, which was unlikely as searching for a bear out there wasn't quite the same as searching for a bear in the Partridge's house, I doubted that they'd be able to find their way home again.

And if they didn't return then that would have serious repercussions for the bears left behind.

But the Partridge's would return home tomorrow and would have no idea of the anguish that the Toffee brothers would be feeling as they sat lifelessly on their shelf. And they would go on with their lives, completely oblivious to the innermost feelings of Lucy's bears.

Knowing Mrs Partridge, going on with her life would include desperately trying to catch up with the soaps on the TV that she watched religiously, and work out what had been going on while she had been on holiday.

Thinking about it, the bears' lives were very much like a soap but unlike the TV soaps, 'Coronation Street' and 'Emmerdale' for example, their soap only had one viewer, and that was moi. And I would continue to watch as their complicated lives unfolded before my very eyes.

Anyway, who do you think is going to have the last word and what is it going to be?

Me.

