

A Serious Business by Anne Brooke

I'd been in the new house for two days when I met Dan. I was standing in the living-room, trying not to cry, when the doorbell rang. Wiping my face with a clean handkerchief, I strode down the hallway, attempting to look like someone in charge of his life.

The man at the door smiled, the expression reaching his eyes as well as his mouth. He was wiry, with fair-gold hair. Clean-shaven. Perhaps ten years younger than me.

'Hello?' I said, trying not to notice how attractive he was. Things were bad enough, without further complications. 'You are ...?'

'Hi, I'm Dan McLeod. I'm hoping you're Jack Byfield.'

'Yes. Can I help?'

'Sure,' he brushed one hand through his hair. 'I heard at the pub you might be on the look-out for a short-term gardener. Until you get the place fixed up. I work at Wisley, Mondays to Thursdays. Fridays I study or do people's gardens. I'm honest, I come with good references and I don't over-charge.'

'Pleased to hear it,' I replied. 'Let me have your card; I'll let you know.'

I must have sounded abrupt as he looked bemused. Then he reached into his pocket and handed over a green-stained business card. I took hold of it by its cleanest edge.

'Goodbye then,' I said, and closed the door. After a few moments, I heard his footsteps crunching along the gravel path to the gate. Thank God. I couldn't take any more conversation at the moment.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I knew I looked older than thirty-five. Dark hair tinged with grey, brown eyes heavy with bags and a few more lines on my face. That's what I got for trusting in that deceitful bastard, Mark. From now on, no more serious relationships; hadn't one of my ex-lover's complaints been that I was too serious? Well, I was going to prove him wrong. I would learn to have fun. Even if it killed me.

Dan McLeod was right about the garden however. I would need help.

After asking around, I discovered he was reliable, talented, with reasonable rates. I rang him back. We arranged for him to look after my garden on Tuesday evenings and Friday mornings over the summer, starting the following week.

It worked well. He proved quick and efficient. The second week, he was in the garden as usual while I went over some legal issues for a major client. Just before lunch, the phone rang.

It was Mark. He was in sarcastic mood, and six years' knowledge of me had only honed his methods of attack. Afterwards, heart beating fast and fists clenched, I stumbled into the utility room.

‘God,’ I swore quietly, gripping the sink to avoid punching anything breakable. ‘The bastard, why the hell is he doing this to me? And why the hell can’t I just tell him enough is enough?’

Still muttering, I turned the tap on and splashed water over my face. As I did so, I sensed a movement behind me.

When I turned, Dan was standing between the back door and cupboard. His hair was sticking up. He shuffled his feet and glanced down.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I was just putting the secateurs back before I left. I didn’t mean to ... disturb you.’

‘That’s all right,’ I replied, wiping my face with my arm. ‘Not your fault.’

He shrugged and handed me a towel. It wasn’t clean, but I took it anyway.

‘Work trouble?’ he asked. ‘I can imagine how stressed lawyers must get.’

I didn’t know what it was – maybe the towel acting like a buffer, or the fact I hadn’t had time to put up my defences – but now, instead of the usual lies, I found myself telling him the truth.

‘No,’ I said. ‘My ex. He dumped me. It was nasty. I moved here, to get away. Now, he doesn’t seem to want to let go. Flattering, perhaps, but not. You see?’

The laugh I’d tried to insert into my words didn’t work and the atmosphere grew more intense.

‘You want him back?’ Dan asked.

‘No. I’ve better things to do with my bloody time.’ I stopped, finding my hands were shaking. Then something occurred to me. ‘You don’t sound surprised. About me, I mean.’

‘I figured it out on day two. Anyway, takes one to know one.’

‘Oh.’

A pause while I dealt with his particular revelation, then he said, ‘You want a cigarette?’

‘Please.’

He reached for the packet I kept next to the sink. I lit a cigarette and felt the smoky calm filling my lungs. We remained in comfortable silence until I’d finished and stubbed the remains out on a nearby plate, depositing them in the bin. My hands had stopped shaking.

Then he said, ‘I’d better be going then. See you next week?’

‘Of course. And, Dan ...?’

‘Yeah?’ He turned round in the process of shrugging on his jacket.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

Another month or so went by and I started to look more like my old self. September was approaching, and Mark’s phone calls tailed off, thank God. I found myself anticipating seeing Dan’s smile as he arrived for work every Friday. Somehow having him around made me feel safe in a way that Mark had never done. Tuesdays I didn’t see Dan though as I never left the office till gone eight. He had his own key. Sometimes on a Friday I’d watch him out of the office window. The garden looked spectacular. And I’d taken to making him a light lunch before he went home, prolonging his stay, as when he left the house seemed empty.

It was on one of these occasions that Mark called round. Dan and I had just begun loading the dishwasher when there was a rapid-fire knocking at the front door.

When I opened it, Mark placed one foot over the threshold. Behind him, I could see the glimmer of his Porsche on the road.

‘Hello, Jack,’ he smirked. ‘Are you missing me?’

‘Actually, I ...’

‘I thought I’d pop round,’ he said, pushing past me into the hall. ‘I like to check up on old friends. Don’t want to lose touch after all, do we?’

For the first time since I’d moved out, I gazed at him and didn’t like what I saw. ‘That’s your trouble, Mark. You never like to lose touch with any of your old boyfriends, do you? That’s what drove us apart.’

‘Oh, come on, Jacky boy, don’t be like that ...’

‘Jack? Is there anything I can do?’ Dan’s voice drifted in from the kitchen doorway. There was a smear of mud across his face I hadn’t noticed before. He must have been trying to clean up.

‘Well, well,’ Mark chuckled. ‘Who’s this then? The gardener? Oh, very Lady Chatterley, Jack. I’m impressed.’

‘For God’s sake.’

Mark began walking towards Dan, who flinched but held his ground. Something in me snapped.

Grabbing my ex, I pushed him towards the front door. ‘I think it’s time you went. You’ve said enough.’

‘Okay, Jacky. It was just a joke. Why must you always be so serious about everything?’

‘Because you see the value in nothing. Your jokes aren’t wanted here.’

Mark snorted. 'Huh! Is that all you've got to say to me after our serious relationship of six years?'

I glanced at Dan and something in his expression gave me courage. 'Actually, no. There is something else I want to say, which I should have said a long time ago.'

'Oh yes?' Mark's lip curled as he stood on the threshold. 'And what's that then?'

'It's this: Mark Fenton, I want you out of my bloody life. God knows why I stayed with you so long. I'm doing fine without you. Not only that, but I never want to hear from you or see you again as long as I live. Do you understand?'

I'd never shouted at Mark before and he gaped at me as I slammed the door against him. Trembling a little, I leant against the cool wood and listened to the silence followed by the sound of his Porsche roaring away.

'Are you okay?' Dan's tentative voice pierced my reverie and when I turned to face him, I realised I'd made one other important decision. 'I can leave if you like.'

'No,' I said, reaching out to wipe the mud from his cheek but, on second thoughts, letting it stay. 'There's no need. And, yes, I'm okay. More okay than I've been for a long time.'

Kissing Dan was a thousand times better than anything. Better than when my mother gave me a bike for my eighth birthday; better than my most profitable work deal; better than my first real sexual encounter.

Later on, touching him was the best of all.

Afterwards, we lay on my bed, hands linked, and stared at the ceiling. I had things I wanted to say but, when I opened my mouth, what came out wasn't what I'd intended. Which seemed to happen a great deal whenever Dan was around.

'I ought to warn you,' I began, 'that I'm too serious. I think too much and I read facts and feelings into things that aren't there. And I'm a workaholic. Then again, I love what I do. It's my life. Like your gardening. Against this, I'm trying to relax more, learn how to have fun. So I promise not to see what's happened as the start of a serious relationship. If that's not what you want.'

When I finished speaking, I saw he was smiling.

'Is it my turn now?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Great,' he said, moving onto his side in order to face me. 'In that case, what I want to say is this: I think you should forget whatever Mark told you. Sure, you're serious, but that's attractive. And, Jack, we already are in a relationship. We're getting to know each other more and we fancy each other. Like crazy. This is just taking it to the next level. There is one thing though, which we're already in complete agreement over.'

‘And that is ...?’

Dan smiled.

‘Learning to have fun together is a very serious business,’ he said.

THE END