

GOODMANS HOTEL

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CHAPTER 1

‘Bloody gearbox is playing up; not supposed to happen with a Porsche.’

Peter Haliburton, first syllable pronounced ‘hail’ as in ‘hail storm’, his wife Caroline, her friend Marie and I stood looking at the delinquent vehicle in a lay-by about seventy kilometres from Poitiers. An hour earlier he had rung Porsche customer services who recommended a garage with an approved Porsche mechanic, but the problem had not been as serious then and he decided against diverting from our scenic route through France.

He was not an easy man to argue with, or to talk to in any way at times like this. A partner – expecting soon to be a senior partner – with a firm of City accountants, the prestigious car was a public statement of his growing status. He doubtless considered it a reward for talent and hard work; office gossip debunked it as the outcome of determined string-pulling.

Marie and I had followed the *de luxe* vehicle from London in my modest Vauxhall. Now he stood glaring at it, his face flushed. Opposite him Caroline forced a thin smile, resigned to the inconvenience. He looked challengingly at each of us in turn, as though one of us might have caused the problem. To break the awkward silence I asked, ‘Has it been playing up for long?’

‘Hmph! If there had been an inkling that something was wrong before we set out I’d have had it seen to,’ he said, as though I had accused him of being negligent. Caroline opened her mouth as though about to speak, then closed it without uttering a sound. His gaze fell on me again. More calmly he said, ‘Everything was perfectly normal until we hit French soil, or French tarmac I should say.’

After glancing briefly at Marie, who looked terrified, he turned to his wife. ‘Bloody thing. Caroline, you try it for a while before I go berserk.’

Five kilometres further on the car pulled up again. Peter got out and walked round to the driver’s door, while Caroline slid over to the passenger seat, carefully holding her finely pleated skirt in place. Evidently he was not satisfied with her ability at the wheel. She must have felt awful. Neither Marie nor I found the courage to go over to her to say a few sympathetic words.

Although outspoken and abrasive, Peter was not usually this offensive. At work he enjoyed controversy, and recklessly disrupted long established practices and relationships. The firm, a staid accountancy practice called Lindler & Haliburton, still bore his grandfather’s name and the family connection allowed him to defy the gentlemanly atmosphere of respectful conduct and play the *enfant terrible*.

The three-year-old Vauxhall reflected my less elevated position. The accountants were the professionals, the firm’s *raison d’être*. Several promotions during my six years’ employment and the high demand for computer experts in the City did not change the fact that I was counted among the ‘support staff’. The most recently recruited trainee accountant was regarded as intrinsically better than me. He might not earn as much to start with, but in a few years time could expect to rise in rank and salary above all us lesser beings.

Marie was a rather frumpy woman of about thirty in an old-fashioned looking dress of flowery cotton whom I had met for the first time that morning. She was not very talkative, but smiled a lot and we exchanged pleasantries now and again. The journey had been fine until Peter’s car developed the transmission problem.

He pulled up for a third time in front of a dilapidated garage converted from what once

must have been a barn. Ahead was a road junction with a small collection of miscellaneous buildings including a few houses and a hotel.

'Bloody woman's made it worse,' he announced to the neighbourhood as he got out of the car. Caroline did not react but sat stiffly, her face expressionless.

'Hello,' he shouted to a man in overalls who walked towards us from the garage. 'You speak English?'

The response was a shake of the head, and I hurried forward to act as translator. The garage owner confirmed that the nearest approved Porsche mechanic was in Poitiers, and that the best plan was to get him to come out with his *équipement de dépannage*. He telephoned to make arrangements, and returned to say that the earliest the mechanic could be with us was eight-thirty next morning. Peter was not satisfied.

'Tell him we need to have the car attended to straight away. How far is it to Poitiers? We'll have a breakdown wagon take the Porsche in. You can drive us all down there in the Vauxhall. Tell him we can't wait until the morning.'

I passed on the message, but after unwillingly making a further telephone call the garage owner returned shaking his head. Whether we stayed where we were or went to Poitiers, the car would not be repaired until the morning, *absolument pas*.

Peter refrained from another outburst, reluctantly turned to me, shook his head and said: 'Is there an inn or hotel of some kind over there?'

Large signs at the front and on the side of the building, clearly visible from where we stood, told us we were looking at the *Hotel des Amis*.

'Looks as though it is.'

'I suppose we'll have to bivouac there for the night. What do you think? Caroline? Marie? Willing to rough it, or should we ask Mark to take us to look for somewhere better?'

'It'll do for one night. At least you'll be on the spot when the car is fixed in the morning,' said Caroline.

'Good girl. Marie?'

'It looks quite respectable from here; these little famil- run hotels in France can be very nice.'

'The garage owner probably runs the hotel too. That would explain why he's arranged things so that we're stuck here for the night.' He looked expectantly at me.

The accusation was groundless, but not worth arguing about. 'Maybe. Do you want me to drive you over and come back for your luggage?'

They decided they could manage the couple of hundred yards to the hotel on foot and I put their bags in the back of the Vauxhall. At reception, Madame, who although middle-aged had retained much of her prettiness, took a handful of keys and showed us up to a large double room on the first floor. Marie and I watched from the corridor as Caroline and Peter inspected it, looked without enthusiasm at the shower and lavatory, but finally pronounced the accommodation acceptable for one night. The allocation of two smaller rooms on the second floor to Marie and myself was then a formality. As we went to get our things from the car we heard Madame call out loudly towards the back of the hotel. 'Georges! Georges!'

A young man of perhaps twenty, his long hair pulled back tightly into an untidy bun, rushed from the dining room to help with our bags. He had smudges of chocolate around his mouth and smears of it on his T-shirt. In the pockets on the outer thighs of his military style trousers were bulky cylindrical objects that made them stick out rather like a clown's costume pants. He looked uncertainly at our assorted collection of baggage until Madame told him to take the two cases nearest the stairs up first. Though Peter looked at him open mouthed,

thankfully he made no comment. Georges' hands looked perfectly clean, but Caroline, unwilling to trust him with her property, was visibly alarmed as he picked up her finely stitched leather suitcase.

In my room, as I took my toilet things from my bag and hung up my jackets and trousers, misgivings about the wisdom of making the trip returned. Peter and I were colleagues, not really friends; he did not even know that I was gay. Our working relationship had been good. My expertise with the firm's computer network was useful to him, and for someone in my position making a good impression on more senior staff was the key to getting on. Until the invitation to spend a week with him at his house in France our social contact had been limited to office celebrations and Thursday lunchtime trips to the swimming baths with other colleagues.

We had started work at the firm on the same day, but did not speak to each other until a year or more later when he needed urgent help with a technical problem that had been souring relations with an important client. I worked extra hours, unasked and without extra pay, to devise foolproof ways to exchange data between the two firms' computer networks, and trained those who would be using the new procedures. Had they failed I would probably not have been given another chance to show my abilities, but luckily there were no hitches. The client was impressed and wrote an approving letter to a very senior partner who congratulated Peter, who in turn congratulated me.

The invitation to join the Thursday lunchtime swimming sessions, attended by half a dozen of the firm's most senior men, followed that success. They rarely said much to me, but simply having my name known to a group of the top men was a useful step. A fortnight later Peter delegated to me the task of contacting everyone to confirm the arrangements, and although most of the time this entailed speaking to their secretaries and sending e-mails, occasionally a partner himself would answer my call. This servile role made me feel awkward, but a few months later my own boss, the head of the information technology unit, handed me a letter from Personnel telling me of my first promotion.

Peter had ambitions he was determined to achieve. Whilst the other partners considered the computer network to be a kind of over-complicated piece of office equipment not worthy of much attention, he saw using the latest technology as a way of attracting business from rival firms that were less up to date. We met several times every week, the two of us often discussing potential new technical developments for an hour or more in his office. Sometimes he took me to meetings with clients to discuss ways of making the firm's service more flexible, more comprehensive, and of eliminating delays.

The conservative kowtowing atmosphere made me decide against revealing that I was gay. Nobody else who worked there had come out, at least not to my knowledge, and my impression was that any kind of sex outside wedlock was considered too sordid to be mentioned. The reaction to an upstart like myself who broke with custom was likely to be haughty disapproval. Also the effect on the partners who attended Thursday afternoon swimming sessions had to be considered. How would the old codgers, as we support staff called the senior men, feel if they learned a gay man had infiltrated their group and been present while they changed into their swimming trunks?

My second promotion brought me responsibility for four staff, and the risk of hostility were I to *come out* was greater than ever. Until practised in my new role, I was vulnerable to anyone who might want to show me up as a novice manager. The firm was a highly competitive place. An individual's status was determined not solely by salary, but also by job title, promotion prospects, houses, cars, family standing, and holiday arrangements. Every time someone

succeeded in pushing himself a little further forward, those close to him fell a little further behind. To 'bend over for someone' was a term used by some of the male staff to mean being subservient, to accept humiliation. To have handicapped myself by declaring myself to be a 'bender' would have been foolhardy.

The electronic warbling of the telephone in my room recalled me to the *Hotel des Amis*. Peter was ringing to say he wanted us all to meet downstairs in ten minutes to go for a walk. He asked me to pass the message on to Marie and to find out from Madame what was on the menu for dinner that evening.

My knowledge of French was probably the only reason he had asked me to join him at his house in the Lot Valley. One day at work his secretary overheard me on the 'phone talking to a friend in French. One or two nearby colleagues knew a few words, but not enough to understand that we were arranging to go to a gay club. She happened to pass by during this call, and a couple of days later he summoned me to his office and asked, 'Don't happen to speak French by any chance, do you?'

I told him about my school exchange visits to a French family. 'Booked your holidays yet?' he asked. 'If not you might like to come down to my house in France near the River Lot sometime. Caroline and I enjoy having company. She'd be delighted to have you as a guest. Languages are not one of my strengths. She knows a bit of French but those little linguistic problems that crop up now and again can be damn embarrassing.'

Not sly enough to invent a fictitious booking for Spain or Greece I mumbled vaguely about not having any definite plans, and when he repeated the invitation a month later I had still not thought of a convincing reason for turning him down. Besides, being more friendly with him could only help my career. Fearing that to spend a whole week with them might prove unbearable, I set up a potential means of escape by saying I had always wanted to visit Bordeaux, and asked if he would mind me fitting in a day or two there.

'Good idea. We know each other well enough now not to have to put up a front. Go with you and have a bit of a fling myself for a few days if I could, but you know what married life is. You're right to make the best of your chances while you can. There will be four of us, Caroline is bringing her friend Marie. Better warn you about Marie, I'm afraid you've no chance in that direction. She's the religious type, fiancé away on missionary work, Philippines or somewhere. Still, you know what the French are like, you won't have to look far if you want a bit of *mademoiselle*.'

At the *Hotel des Amis* Marie smiled bravely when she opened the door of her room, and we went down together to meet Peter and Caroline. We all strolled along a forest path Madame had suggested to a small lake full of fish. We walked around it, joking that the evening meal would probably turn out to have been caught there. On our way back we noticed behind the hotel a large well kept vegetable plot, in which vigorous plants were disciplined into a patchwork of geometrically straight rows, a dozen or so different crops arranged in a neatly executed ground plan. Working steadily, too absorbed in ordering his vegetable brigades to notice us, was Georges, the young man who had helped earlier with our baggage.

That evening at dinner Madame took our order for aperitifs, but it was Georges, in a clean T-shirt, his face freshly washed, though still in his old trousers with their bulging side pockets, who brought them to our table. He uttered a series of odd syllables that made no sense to me, but seeing him pick up the orange juice I gestured towards Marie. The remaining three drinks were all *pastis* and he positioned them carefully on our place mats. As he was on his way back to the kitchen Peter destroyed any hopes that he had forgotten his earlier bad temper. He bellowed in a voice that echoed around the restaurant: 'I hope that half-wit won't be serving

us our dinner.'

He was a quick judge of people, and had realised what my own mind had been groping towards, that Georges had limited mental abilities. Peter's anger was to be mercilessly released on Madame and Georges.

In an instant she was at our table to ask if anything was wrong. Caroline and Marie stared at each other as though daring one another to speak, while I looked unflinchingly at Peter, unsuccessfully willing him to moderate his words. 'Tell her,' he instructed me in a determined tone, 'that in the restaurant I expect to be served by a waiter or waitress, or failing that by Madame herself. I do not expect to be served by the village idiot.'

I squirmed. Her English was not good, but the word idiot is common to both languages; she must have understood it. I ought to have refused, but the vicious nature of the insult he wanted me to deliver shocked me, and fearful of making the situation even worse by infuriating him more, I lamely said to Madame in French, 'Monsieur would prefer it if the young man who brought our drinks did not serve us our dinner.'

In a gentle voice that filled me with shame she replied, 'Georges is my son, Monsieur, he often helps me in the restaurant; but if you prefer, of course I will serve you myself.'

'Forgive us, Madame, thank you.' When she had gone, my voice quavering, I said, 'He's her son.' Caroline's face remained expressionless, but Marie gulped mouthfuls of air and looked as though she was about to cry.

Peter tried to justify himself. 'Being soft with her will do no good. What she has to learn is that the way to make a success of a business such as this, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, is to put the client first, second and third. Exposing customers to a mental defective is only going to put them off. That's the harsh reality of her situation. Country inbreeding, I expect.'

Resolved, too late, to stand up to him I said, 'She's probably been running the place happily and profitably for decades. Why create a problem for her?'

'Look around you,' he said, waving an arm and glancing around the room. 'There are three occupied tables; there would be two if it were not for the complete fluke of our being here. It speaks for itself.' At times when he could not have his own way he had been condescending and rude to people in the office, but never as hateful as he was now.

After the main course I complimented Madame on the food, and said how neatly kept the vegetable patch behind the hotel was. She smiled, and with a brief sulky glare at Peter said that her son cultivated the plot entirely on his own, and that the green salad and tomatoes we had eaten had come from his garden. He might not, she said, be able to do everything that more successful men could, but he worked diligently and deserved respect for his efforts.

'You and Madame seem to be getting along very well,' Peter commented.

'Polite conversation,' I answered grimly, trapped in the hypocrisy of trying to appease Madame without being insubordinate to Peter. When Georges passed our table carrying some empty cartons through the restaurant, I caught his eye and gave him a reassuring smile.

The others went up to their rooms straight after the meal, but I lingered in the hotel lounge over a beer, scolding myself for my stupidity in not refusing Peter's holiday invitation from the first. Putting up with him at work was one thing, but his cruel, pointless dismissal of Georges and the way he had used me in the process were despicable.

On the way up to my room I saw his victim methodically mopping the restaurant floor. Pausing to wish him goodnight, I decided to ask for a final beer. He smiled, did not speak but put down his mop and went into the kitchen to find Madame. She looked tired as she came towards me, but smiled and asked in a gentle, almost coy, voice: 'Would you like your beer in the lounge, or in your room, Monsieur?'

‘Oh – in my room,’ I answered, taking her question to be a hint that she wanted to close up.

‘Yes, certainly. If you want to go up, Georges will bring it for you.’

I could perfectly well have waited the few moments it would take her to bring me a bottle and glass, but she evidently thought it polite to offer me this little service. I went upstairs and sat on down on my bed to wait. Five minutes later Georges knocked.

He stood in the corridor, bottle and opener in one hand, glass in the other. He had let down his hair so that it framed his features, transforming his face, making him much more attractive. I should have reached out to take the beer from him, but amazed by the change in his appearance I hung back. He stepped forwards into the room and put the bottle and glass down on the bedside table, holding out the bottle opener.

‘You want me to open it now?’

‘I suppose so.’

He prised off the bottle’s cap and poured a little beer into the glass, watching the collar of froth rise towards the rim. This effervescence seemed to fascinate him. ‘It’s good beer,’ he said, looking up.

‘Yes.’ What was going on in his mind to give rise to this odd ritual over opening a bottle of beer? Was he curious about me, like a child meeting a stranger? ‘I expect Madame will be waiting for you.’

‘No, she doesn’t wait. If you want I will go, or if not I can stay for a few minutes maybe. *Maman* knows everything I do.’

An inner voice was telling me to be sensible and get rid of him quickly, yet there he was, lingering in my room, saying he could stay for a few minutes. Was he attracted to me sexually? What had he meant by saying that his mother knew everything he did? If he was trying to tell me that he was available for sex, did I want to sleep with someone like him? Would not to do so be to act as a predatory male taking sexual advantage of someone vulnerable?

With his hair down, his warm brown eyes looking at me intently, he did seem very attractive. If we wanted each other, why should a difference in intelligence rule out our making love? If I told him to go because of that, would it not be another unfair rejection, as wrong as Peter’s barring him from serving us in the dining room? Twice I opened my mouth to speak but my thoughts were so muddled I could not formulate any words; when I tried a third time I said in a voice that seemed almost not to be mine, ‘Stay. Sit down.’

He sat on the bed and looked at me with a hunger that was unmistakable. I reached out to touch him, we embraced, began to discover each other physically, and made love. Afterwards for a little while we lay with our arms around each other, but when he sensed that he was in danger of falling asleep he got up. As he dressed I asked him, ‘What have you got in those pockets?’

He unbuttoned them and pulled out two plastic water bottles, the type that cyclists carry on long distance rides. ‘A cyclist was here, he gave me these. Every day I fill two up for him, this one with water, this one zumo de naranja.’

‘Zumo de—?’

‘Zumo de naranja, orange juice, he was a Spanish man.’ ‘Oh I see, of course, Spanish. He was your friend, when he was here?’

‘Yes, he was very good friend to me.’ He folded his arms around himself and made kissing noises, rocking his shoulders. ‘Five nights.’

We smiled at each other, embraced briefly and said good night. Satisfaction and self-assurance had replaced the unhappiness and worry Peter had caused during the meal. I

finished the remains of the beer and settled down to sleep, not sure whether the happiness over purging myself of collusion in Peter's nastiness was justified, or whether I ought to feel guilty for having taken advantage of Georges.

The next day I went down for breakfast loathing the prospect of the week to come. An empty cup and crumpled serviette at the table where Peter and Caroline sat told me Marie had already eaten and returned to her room. Peter was on to me almost before I sat down: 'Look as though you haven't slept. Had a less than perfect night ourselves as it happens. Some bloody couple upstairs thrashing about half the night. You know what the bloody French are like.'

'Bit of tummy trouble in my case,' I lied, hoping to divert any suspicion that I might have been the cause of the noise.

'Poor thing, nothing serious I hope?' Caroline asked. She did not look in the slightest as though she was suffering from the effects of a sleepless night. She had delicately applied a little eye shadow and mascara, and donned a beautifully cut jacket with fine blue and white stripes.

As I shook my head Georges hurried from the kitchen to our table carrying a glass of orange juice. I prayed he was not about to give me away. 'Zumo de naranja,' he said, putting it in front of me and departing at speed back to the kitchen without another word.

'Not that bloody half-wit with his nonsense language again,' Peter said, this time thankfully in a voice not loud enough to be heard in Paris.

'It's not nonsense,' Caroline said, 'it's Spanish for orange juice.'

'What?'

'Zumo de naranja. It's Spanish for orange juice.'

He smiled. 'How on earth could someone like him have picked that up?' The idea seemed so ludicrous to him that he began to laugh. 'Still having trouble with his own language, and they're trying to teach him Spanish!' Again he laughed, at first a little, then with abandon, his shoulders shaking and his eyes becoming moist.

While he was convulsed with amusement at his own joke Caroline said, very softly but distinctly, 'Village idiot knows more Spanish than Peter does.' She had spoken too quietly for him to make out most of her words, but he picked out his name.

'What was that?' he asked.

'I said someone Spanish must have taught him, Peter dear.'

He looked at her quizzically. 'Well, wouldn't have been an Italian, would it?' he said, and was seized by laughter again, shaking his shoulders and creasing up his face.

When the laughing fit subsided he said, 'Better stroll over to the garage and find out what progress has been made. Won't call on you for translation unless I have to, since you're under the weather. Don't worry about the bill. I'll settle up with Madame for all of us.'

When he was out of earshot I leaned across towards Caroline. 'I heard what you said.'

She turned to face me. 'And I've noticed the way you look at attractive men. Wouldn't dream of saying anything to anyone else about it of course.' She gave me a smile so brittle and so forced that it made me cringe inwardly. 'If you'll excuse me,' she said, getting up from the table.

Some hours later Peter rang me in my room to say the Porsche had been pronounced roadworthy. After checking a second time that everything was packed I picked up my bag and turned towards the door. I had been unable to think of a ruse that would enable me to say goodbye to Georges in privacy. The prospect of spending the rest of the week with Peter and Caroline was unbearable. Returning my bag to the luggage stand I went downstairs.

The three of them were looking at a map of the area on a wall near the entrance. 'I'm afraid my stomach is still playing up. I think it would be a bit risky for me to try to drive very far at the moment. If you could take Marie on the back seat, perhaps it would be best for me to join you at the house a little later.'

They fussed over me for a minute or two, offering to fetch a doctor, get me something from the chemist, or take me to a hospital. I declined all offers of help, and assured them that the best thing was for them to go on without me. Marie did not look at all happy at the prospect of sharing the small back seat of the Porsche with several suitcases, and for her to have to endure some uncomfortable hours of travel was unfair, but for me to pretend to be friendly towards Peter and Caroline for five whole days after what had happened at the hotel was impossible. Giving up their protestations about abandoning me, they set off in the heavily laden Porsche.

Two days later I rang Peter to ask how things were at the house, claiming still to be ill but assuring him that the worst was over. 'Come down anyway,' he coaxed, 'you can be ill perfectly well down here. Caroline and Marie will look after you.'

'That's very kind, but I don't want to risk passing this on to you.'

'Perhaps you're right. Come down as soon as you feel up to the journey then.'

I stayed at the *Hotel des Amis* for a further two days, thrashing about, to use Peter's phrase, in my room at night with Georges. He never remained with me until morning. Madame, he said, insisted he return to his room so she could get him up in time to start his day's chores. As well as having his company for an hour or so at night, I spent quite a few hours on his vegetable plot where we picked French beans and weeded between the rows. Conversation was sparse, consisting mainly of him explaining to me how he tended his various crops, but we enjoyed looking at each other as we worked, and would pause to watch the comings and goings at the hotel and the garage. He even taught me a little French, the words for various garden tools, for pinching out the side growths of tomato plants, and that a vegetable garden was called a *jardin potager*.

Madame, as he had claimed, knew we were making love. She and I chatted together during the afternoons; her attitude was not at all disapproving. She had first learned that Georges was gay when he was found 'touching' another boy at school. At first she had been concerned, but he had listened when she lectured him about such things being done only in private, especially with someone of the same sex. He had never shown any interest in girls. Several other male guests at the hotel before me had taken him to their rooms. She wanted more than anything for him to be happy and lead as full a life as possible. At least, she said, she did not have to worry about girls claiming that he had made them pregnant. She wished he could meet someone who would stay with him long term, but accepted this was unlikely in a rural community.

In many small hotels in France the husband is a qualified chef, and he and his wife together undertake the running of the hotel and restaurant. Here, though, Madame ran the hotel alone, and the chef drove in every day from a nearby village. Despite Peter's derogatory comments business seemed to be good. At lunch times the restaurant was packed, and other guests were always in evidence at breakfast time. Madame had a friendly smile for everyone, including me, except for one occasion when she told me off for buying Georges chocolate. 'He makes a pig out of himself with chocolate, Monsieur. Will you be taking him to visit the dentist before you go?'

What I did do for him was to drive him into Poitiers to buy him a couple of good quality shirts and a smart pair of jeans as a present. While there I drew some money from a cash

machine and when the time came to settle my bill I added a substantial tip. With that charming old-fashioned politeness that survives in France, Madame did not immediately put the money in the cash drawer but said, 'Your friends already left a generous tip, Monsieur,' and put the extra money on the counter between us, as though offering the notes back to me.

'Oh, they did, did they?'

'Yes, I was surprised. I thought they were not very pleased with the hotel, but when Georges went to tidy the room he found some money left out on a bedside table. I think perhaps it was the lady who left it, not her husband.'

'My friend was angry because his car broke down. He made us all suffer because of it. That money was from him and his wife, this is from me.' How surprising that Caroline, in the mood that produced her barbed comment to me at breakfast, had left a substantial tip. Possibly she saw it as a way to compensate for Peter's dreadful behaviour towards Georges and had not told him about it.

'Thank you, Monsieur, and thank you for keeping Georges company. He will miss you, certainly, it can be lonely for him here at the hotel. He is not too unhappy in his life, but he will be sorry to see you go.'

She called him out so that we could say goodbye. We shook hands, then hugged each other; as we parted he looked at me with the same expression of hunger he had shown on that first night when he brought the beer up to my room. Regrettably there was no real prospect of us ever meeting again. As I turned the Vauxhall onto the road they stood at the hotel entrance smiling and waving goodbye, and that hungry look of his stayed with me, unsettling my thoughts during the drive down to the river Lot and, from time to time, returning to haunt me for months afterwards.

I arrived at the house in mid-afternoon on the last full day before Caroline, Peter and Marie began their return. They were already preparing to leave. Their welcome was less than enthusiastic, and when they decided to have cold drinks on the patio they seemed to have forgotten about me until, almost as an afterthought, as Caroline was about to sit down she off-handedly told me to fetch myself a glass of whatever I wanted from the kitchen.

Later Peter asked me to help hack back some brambles in the garden, and while we were chopping and thwacking he said, 'Lucky your stomach bug cleared up in time for the drive home. I'd begun to think you might be stranded for weeks in that grubby little hotel.'

The *Hotel des Amis* had not been at all grubby, but the true target of the jibe was not Madame or Georges but me. Except for that one remark of his, my feigned illness was not mentioned again. Caroline and Peter adopted a policy of speaking to me only when necessary. Marie confided that they had been hoping my fluent French would help them settle a dispute with the farmer who had sold them the house about vehicle access to the rear.

The next day she and I followed the Porsche on the unexceptional journey back to England. The nearer we came to home the more I worried about the damage that my holiday escapade with Georges might have done to my career, and the more dubious my own motives and behaviour in ingratiating myself with Peter seemed.

CHAPTER 2

After the holiday Peter did not invite me into his office or walk across the floor to my workspace to greet me. During the first week I saw him once in the distance heading for the lifts, looking straight ahead; if my existence did register on the edge of his field of vision he ignored me. Evidently he had decided to freeze me out. For several days I sat ever more uneasily at my desk, afraid whenever the telephone rang or an e-mail message arrived that retribution for my pretended illness in France was imminent.

The familiarity of the files, forms, manuals and directories on the shelves above my desk and in the drawers of my cabinet was reassuring in a way, but they represented a world of low profile routine tasks, not likely to bring me to the notice of those with influence over my career. As though to reinforce my descent from grace, no correspondence or messages of any importance awaited me, no crisis had occurred that needed my particular talents, whilst a plague of tedious minutiae had accumulated, irritating queries, petty niggles, and circulars that were barely worth reading.

Even a routine small order for a software package that should have been placed during my absence was back on my desk, not sent off on the feeble excuse that the supplier was keen to send a sales representative to visit. Anyone in my little team ought to have known that hearing another lot of sales patter would be about as welcome as the computer going down during a demonstration. We were supposed to be software and network engineers, not excuse engineers.

There was to be no swimming session the first week of my return because of the partners' quarterly meeting. The following Thursday would be the first significant test of whether Peter was sufficiently annoyed to bar me from attending. If he really wanted to embarrass me he might even make the arrangements without letting me know, leaving me to learn from his secretary that she had issued the invitations but been told not to inform me.

On Tuesday, half expecting a rebuttal, I sent her an e-mail asking if the session was to go ahead. The return message contained a rebuke the seriousness of which was difficult to judge: *Peter says yes, meet 12.30 at reception, if you're absolutely sure your health is up to it !!!!!* Presumably he had asked her to use those precise words, but were they a jibe not ruling out the possibility of forgiveness, or a warning that a death sentence was imminent? At least for now I was not completely banished from his presence, and as normal I contacted the other swimming partners, all of whom confirmed they would attend.

Downstairs at reception Peter nodded to me grudgingly without smiling or speaking. As we walked to the baths he talked intently all the way to one of the senior partners, trying to persuade him of some accountancy issue he thought should be raised with the Institute of Accountants. My attempts to make conversation with a couple of the old codgers failed to evoke more than minimal and patronising responses. Whatever Peter's faults his outlook was much broader. He did not discriminate in his treatment of the accountants and the support staff; he was confrontational and rude to both. Crucially he realised that the latest office technology was essential if the firm was to compete with its less staid rivals.

Did I really want to reinstate my previous working relationship with him after his behaviour in France towards Georges? I wanted to get on. Partly for the money, but too because more responsibility and more demanding work were stimulating. After being in the

same job for a year or so, the daily routines always came to seem like a trap. Ambition drove me on, and I learned more and more to mimic the ways of the senior people around me, I suppose hoping to be accepted as one of them. Peter had been the key to my progress so far, and whatever his behaviour in France, to advance further meant regaining his favour.

A certain level of discomfort in the working environment at Lindler & Haliburton was something to which I was resigned. The firm's impressive office building, the staff in their expensive suits, the luxury cars and the business lunches had impressed me at first, until awareness of the snobbery and greed that lay behind the image spoiled the illusion of just rewards for exceptional ability. Facade was what really counted. Anyone who came into work wearing casual clothes and talking about being at a disco the night before would be judged a maverick, irrespective of ability; instead of creating an ambience of wealth, dependability and propriety he or she would be seen as belonging to a different, less privileged world. If I was to make progress my private life would have to stay private.

I suppressed my anger towards Peter over events at the *Hotel des Amis* and followed those around me in thinking of him as strongly motivated and showing leadership. There was a good side to him that emerged sometimes when he was not competing with his peers and not upset because his authority was being challenged. He often used his extensive commercial knowledge and range of contacts to help people, even if there was no obvious business reason for doing so, and a stranger's good opinion was the only likely reward. He was considerate to his secretary, who had school-age children, and had asked me to set up a workstation for her at home so she could be with them when they were ill without having to take time off. Other partners with staff in a similar situation had refused permission for them to do the same, despite a circular from Personnel encouraging flexibility. Peter's secretary spoke of him admiringly, almost reverentially, as though the Peter she knew was completely different from the abrasive character who confronted everyone else.

For three weeks my punishment continued, although at the next Thursday swim he did greet me verbally. If he was softening it might have been a good time for me to go to his office to grovel before him. The danger was that if he detected that my apologies were not sincere, the effect could be to worsen the rift. My dishonesty in France had not, in my opinion, been a serious deceit. Fibs about being ill were a small fault compared to his despicable attitude to Georges, and it was the cruelty of his behaviour that had made the prospect of spending the whole week at his house in France unbearable. Why should I have to apologise?

Also, if he decided to question me about my time at the *Hotel des Amis*, what would I say? Admit something very close to the truth, or tell him a pack of lies? Either option was fraught with danger. Better to hope that another route back to favour would offer itself soon.

The first step towards my rehabilitation came about because of a large indoor plant at reception, actually a small tree, which had dropped all its leaves. On my way to the lifts one day I heard Peter raise his voice to the uniformed man at the security desk: 'I asked for that corpse to be removed days ago. Why is it still there?'

The tree's condition justified his choice of the word 'corpse'. The bare withered branches were like a warning message to visitors, suggestive of neglect or pollution, a contradiction of the desire to give those privileged to enter the premises an impression of longstanding success and propriety. The security man was flustered by Peter's anger and began to waffle, 'None of us in security has done anything to it sir, we keep an eye on it, much as we can. Trouble is everyone in the building goes through this way, anyone might have harmed it, we don't know what could have been done to it while our backs were turned.'

'Oh bloody hell!' Peter said in exasperation.

The office manager would normally have been called upon to sort out this minor irritation, but she was off sick. The problem was nothing to do with the information technology unit, but I stepped forward, grasping the opportunity to help.

'Office Services are having a few problems at the moment.'

He looked at me sharply. 'No need for you to concern yourself. You're being paid to cope with rather more demanding things than this.'

The same might have been said of him. 'Yes, but if it would help... a couple of 'phone calls...'

The security man, hoping my offer would excuse him from further responsibility, backed away.

'Hmph. I'll give Office Services a few problems if they're not careful. If you think you can do something to get them moving...'

'I'll certainly try.'

The contractors, a firm called *Ferns and Foliage*, were easily traced on the firm's database. Elaborating the truth a little I told Office Services that Peter was so annoyed about the dead tree he had asked me to deal with the issue personally. Then I rang *Ferns and Foliage*, who, being told that one of the senior partners had complained that the plant was making a bad impression on important clients, said they would supply a replacement the next day.

When their man arrived I was called down to sign for it. He was attractive, very much my type, a strong thirty year old with dark curly hair. We had seen each other before, when he had been tending the firm's plants and had caught me looking at him. He had been standing on a small portable step ladder, leaning forward above a big container to clip excess growth from the top of some climbing plants. Suddenly he had turned his head and looked straight at me, as though he sensed my gaze. Blushing, I had tried to pretend to be searching for some papers in a side drawer.

I walked diffidently up to reception where he stood holding a clipboard. 'You need a signature?'

'One replacement tree,' he said, holding the clipboard out towards me without any hint of recognition.

I signed a docket with the words *One Ficus benjamina (large)* scrawled on it and asked, 'I wonder what finished off the old one?'

'Someone's probably tipped the dregs of tea or coffee or the remains of a carton of milk into the pot. Milk will kill any plant, it sours the soil. That one all right for you, gov?' he said, looking towards the replacement.

I disliked him using the term 'gov', but his deep, warm, working-class voice excited me. To extend the conversation with the security guard looking on and passers by on their way in and out of the building was impossible; lots of straight men wore well fitting jeans, and there was nothing about him to suggest that he was gay. 'Thanks, it's fine,' I said, risking a smile of appreciation. Grasping the main stem of the dead plant in his right hand he lifted it up as though it weighed almost nothing and strode out into the street. We had met. If I saw him again I would definitely say hello.

We bumped into each other a few weeks later. He was doing his rounds with a watering can, and had stopped to refill it in the little staff refreshment room on my floor. I decided to take a tea break and followed him in. 'You're here again.'

'I'm helping out. Your usual man is away this week.'

'But you have been in to tend the plants before?'

'Yes, I've been in a couple of times.' He smiled, lifted the watering can from the sink and

stood looking at me, not sure what to say.

‘How do you find us?’

‘To be honest with you this is not a very friendly place. I expect most people here are pretty high up, too much on their minds. No offence like.’

I could not resist flouting office etiquette by offering him a cup of tea or coffee. Surprised, he became charmingly coy and looked down. ‘You don’t need to do that for me, gov.’

‘I’m getting myself one, so it’s no trouble to get one for you. At least it will prove we’re not all unfriendly.’ While the tea was brewing I asked, ‘Do you have other calls in this part of London?’

‘My firm does a few contracts around here, a bank and a couple of other companies. The main problem is parking, and finding somewhere decent for lunch.’

‘There are a couple of sandwich bars, and a pub across the road. They’re not bad.’

‘Sandwich bars, might try one of them next time I’m up this way.’ He paused and bit his lip. ‘There’s a good pub, the Beckford Arms, near the garden centre where I’m based.’

Although I was unfamiliar with that part of London, the Beckford Arms was well known and listed in the gay papers and magazines. ‘I’ve heard of it. Never been there, it’s not my area.’

‘It’s friendly, more somewhere people go to talk and have a quiet drink, not a place where they’ve all got one thing on their minds. More like a local pub. Friday evenings is good, lively but not too crowded. It’s a good evening out if you’ve got a few mates with you.’

‘Next time I’m down that way I’ll have to look in. I’m Mark, by the way.’

‘Tom. I go most weekends. Saturdays it gets crowded quite early, Fridays are easier if you want to talk, until the last hour or so when everyone comes in.’

My weekend was free apart from the weekly shopping and cleaning the flat. The effort of trying to pick someone up, deciding where to go, getting myself ready, all the awkward tentative manoeuvres that looking for a partner for the night requires, had seemed too daunting since my return from France, and all my nights had been solitary. Frustration would drive me to end this period of celibacy somehow or other before much longer, and the vague invitation to the Beckford Arms spurred me to act. Even if nothing developed with Tom the pub was worth investigating. Other men there might be of interest, if only to chat to, and if necessary more familiar territory in the West End was only an Underground ride away.

On Saturday evening, showered and meticulously groomed, I arrived at the Beckford Arms at about nine-thirty. While ordering my drink at the bar I spotted him through the throng, sitting at a corner table with an older white-haired man. I took a roundabout route towards them so that he would see me approach, prepared to flee instantly if his reaction was not welcoming.

He saw me, grinned and stood up. ‘Hello, Mark, isn’t it? Great to see you. This is Andrew, he’s my boss.’

‘I don’t want to barge in.’

He found a chair for me while the older man and I shook hands. ‘Good thing you turned up. Tom’s been pestering me about his holidays. We’ve exhausted the subject now, haven’t we?’

‘No we ain’t. It’s nearly a year since I had any time off. To ask about a holiday now is not unreasonable.’

‘Tom, if you have a holiday you’ll be bored stiff after a couple of days. You’re like me. I haven’t had a holiday for yonks. All my time is taken up with business. My advice to you is to forget about holidays. What’s the point in them? We’re too busy. We don’t have time.’ He

took a sip from his glass and looked at me. 'What about you?'

His question was so vague almost anything would have done in reply. 'I had a week in France a couple of months ago.'

'Enjoy it?'

'Mostly.'

'Went to France, ages ago. Pyrenees. Crossed over into Spain. Beautiful, love to do it again one day, when I retire maybe. I bet things are different for you, let me guess, a salaried position with a big employer. Tom and I are not so fortunate. *Ferns and Foliage* is a little shop I run selling a few gardening bits and pieces. I scrape around for business here and there to keep a couple of people who work for me busy, looking after the pot plants in office buildings, that sort of thing.' He spoke softly in humorous self-deprecation.

Tom immediately contradicted him, his voice quiet but clearly audible. 'It's not a small shop, you must have about twenty people working for you. You ain't fobbing me off this time, Andrew. I bet everyone else, except me, knows how much holiday they're allowed. I bet every one of them has a contract saying what his holidays are, like people are supposed to have.'

'Now you mention it, what does your contract of employment say?'

'You never gave me one.'

'I must have done.'

'You didn't.'

'You don't want to be the same as everyone else.' He turned from Tom to me. 'Mark, let me give you a piece of advice. *Never* have staff.' He took another gulp from his glass. 'Tell me, what is it you do in the company? Accountancy, isn't it?'

So, Tom must have spoken to him about me, and the mention must have been favourable; my hopes for the evening grew. 'Lindler & Haliburton is a firm of accountants, yes, but I'm one of the support staff, in the information technology unit.'

'Good... an important job, good money I'll bet, even if you're not one of the accountants. Perks?'

'Company car. A Vauxhall, nothing special.'

'Special enough compared to one of my old vans.' He went on to ask me lots of questions about the job; there was a rhythm to his speech that was mildly hypnotic. Normally people change the subject if I mention computers and accountancy, but he was keen to hear about the office computer network, my past promotions, and somehow he got me to tell him about Peter and the swimming sessions with some of the senior partners. At the mention of swimming he raised a finger and looked at Tom, 'That's something you're keen on, isn't it?'

'I go to the baths most weeks, a couple of times if I can, like to keep fit.'

'You certainly look fit,' I said, glad to say something to him after answering Andrew's questions and wanting to make clear to him that he attracted me. I bought a round of drinks, and having returned was about to ask Tom if he had anywhere in mind for his holiday when Andrew resumed his interrogation. He asked about my personal life, where I lived, what I did in my spare time, and about my family background. Somehow everything came out, that my parents were killed in a car crash, that my sister and I saw each other once or twice a year, that the money inherited from my parents had paid for my flat in Chiswick, that I had a degree in computer science, was definitely gay, not bisexual or undecided, and did not currently have a boyfriend.

'You make me envious,' he said thoughtfully. 'You've plenty going for you, nobody could deny that.' He sat back, rubbed his chin, and seemed to have run out of questions.

Tom, who had sat silent again since the interrogation resumed, asked: 'Have you finished

asking him for his life story?’

‘Almost. Only a couple more things. So what about future plans? Hoping for a relationship? Anything else?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, come on. Promotion? Bigger flat? Better car?’

‘Sometimes I think it would be nice to get together enough money to leave the firm and go into something completely different.’

‘Ever thought of starting your own business?’

‘There are lots of self-employed consultant types in computer services. Or I could become a financial adviser, making use of some of the knowledge of investment I’ve picked up at the firm. Maybe that’s not all that much of a change though.’

‘Aha! A gay financial services company? Perhaps... others seem to have done well out of it.’

‘A gay business of some kind might not be a bad idea. Or just a job with other gay men.’

‘What else is there? Running a pub or a club might be hard going if you’ve no experience. There seem to be more and more estate agencies about, how about one specializing in places for gays?’

‘Isn’t there one already? Anyway, not sure if it’s me. Not that I’m ruling anything out. For a long time to come Lindler & Haliburton, or somewhere very similar, is likely to be my lot.’

‘Well maybe. But you’re right to think about making a change. When to leap and which way... a difficult judgement. One final thing before I go, the very last question. This chap Peter you mentioned, the partner. Is there any chance of meeting him sometime? There’s an exhibition coming up at Olympia in a few weeks. I’m sharing a stand with a furniture supplier, not the domestic market, business requirements – offices, hotels, restaurants, anything commercial. It’s their exhibition stand really, but I’m providing them with flowers and a few house plants, and helping to man it. If I send you a few complimentary tickets, do you think you could get him to pay us a visit?’

‘He’s not responsible for office services or the plants or anything, to be honest I think it’s a bit unlikely.’

‘Business contacts, especially a senior man, are always useful. If you get the chance, you could simply say a couple of free tickets had turned up in the post. I’m not going to pester him, don’t be concerned about that, well maybe as far as to say hello, shake hands, and exchange business cards. I’ll send you a few tickets; if you want to come along with Peter or bring someone else with you, or come on your own, make use of them. If not throw them in the bin.’

He had so far prevented me from exchanging more than a few words with the man who was my reason for being in the Beckford Arms. At last Tom broke into the conversation again. ‘You’ve been talking business and asking him questions all evening, Andrew. Mark’s come in for a quiet drink, he doesn’t want to hear about no trade exhibition.’

‘You’re right. Forget I mentioned it. Let me get the next round.’ He bought drinks for Tom and me but none for himself, and shortly after excused himself saying he had an early start in the morning. When he had gone Tom said, ‘I’m sorry about all that. I thought he was never going to shut up.’

‘Doesn’t matter. He was a bit pushy about that exhibition. Is he always like that?’

‘He must have taken to you. He doesn’t normally show a lot of interest in people, but when he likes someone he likes them, you know what I mean? There’s no harm in him.’

‘What about your holiday?’

‘It slipped his mind, that’s all. He’ll see me all right. He’s been good to me, has Andrew.’

‘Well, you know all about me,’ I said, looking at him expectantly.

He cast his eyes down and shook his head. ‘There ain’t a lot to tell. The gardening is just an occasional thing, when people are away. I am a qualified electrician, but I do building maintenance mostly, bits of plumbing, house wiring, repairs, decorating. Nothing special. Prefer that kind of thing to gardening. Don’t really have, what’s it called... green fingers.’

‘Nor me.’

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Simply looking at him excited me. Did he have any idea how attractive I found him?

‘Is Andrew’s shop near here?’

‘Yes, not far. I live in a flat above it. You go left from here, straight on, left further down, five or ten minutes walk, that’s all. He used to live there himself years ago, when he started out, not the same flat, he’s had all sorts of work done on the place since then. He’s got himself a nice place in Biddulph Mansions now.’

‘You sharing with anyone?’

‘No, I ain’t sharing. I’ve got family not far away, but I don’t see much of them.’

‘Do they know you drink in here?’

‘Let’s say they ain’t expecting me to get married. You know how it is.’

‘Families are difficult. My sister sort of accepts that I’m gay, but we don’t see much of each other.’ The pub was filling up and we had to raise our voices above the hubbub. When our glasses were almost empty he offered to buy another round.

‘Thanks but I don’t really feel like another. Don’t let me stop you.’

‘No, already had enough for tonight. It’s not far to the flat if you felt like a stroll.’

A stroll! If his hopes were similar to mine the invitation was brilliantly understated. Controlling my voice so as not to sound too keen I said, ‘A stroll would be nice.’

Back at his flat he went through the ritual of making coffee. When he returned from the kitchen he did not join me on the sofa but sat in what was probably his usual chair. He seemed calm and relaxed, whereas my eagerness was becoming harder to hide by the minute. Surely the evening was not going to fizzle out over cups of coffee?

Earlier, when Andrew had left us, we had talked naturally and easily in the bustle of the pub, but now neither of us could find anything to say. All attempts to restart the conversation foundered, and we lapsed into two minutes of excruciating silence. At last he said, ‘Hope this isn’t the wrong thing to say but... do you want to see the bedroom?’

Relieved that the deadlock was broken I nodded. ‘Yes, please.’

He got up, reached out and took my arm to lead me through, closing the door behind us. We stood holding each other and he began to kiss me, brief cautious kisses on my lips, my cheek bones, my earlobes, my eyelids. I remained passive, surprised and delighted by this unexpected gentle foreplay. He steered me to the bed and we lay together, his kisses gradually becoming firmer, moving from my face to my torso as we undressed. This was no ordinary casual encounter between two gay men. His lips touched me again and again, now on my hands, moving up my arms, now on my chest, then back to my face. His fingers and lips moved over me, touching where he kissed, and kissing where he touched, each contact making me more hungry for the next.

How long these numerous kisses took I cannot recall, but right from the first we found we had an extraordinary degree of physical compatibility, and as caress answered caress we explored each other sexually, overwhelming each other with pleasure.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning I woke up alone in Tom's bed. A faint smell of fresh paint was discernible, so faint that it had not been noticeable among the flood of powerful sensations of the previous night. When I drew back the curtains bright daylight illuminated an assortment of second-hand furniture. In the kitchen a note written on an old envelope told me he had gone off to work. He asked me to help myself to breakfast, to use anything of his I needed in the bathroom, and to call him on his mobile 'phone.

The door bell rang when I was half way through a bowl of breakfast cereal. Andrew stood outside, smiling cheerfully. 'Hello, bet you're surprised to see me,' he said, evidently himself not at all surprised at seeing me.

'Tom isn't here.'

'I know, he's off doing some job or other. Fitting a kitchen or bathroom for one of the local spinsters.'

'You don't know which? He works for you, doesn't he?'

'Oh, that's an arrangement we came to, saves him having to keep a set of accounts. He'll do jobs for me when the need arises. He prefers building maintenance: plumbing, electrics, decorating, that kind of thing. I don't have enough call for a handyman to keep him going full time, but he'll help me out at *Ferns and Foliage* whenever I'm stuck, otherwise he finds his own work. He probably thinks gardening isn't manly enough for him. That's one of the reasons giving him an employment contract is difficult. You must have had a poor impression of me as businessman last night, but my arrangement with Tom is a rather unusual one. He finds work for himself, his earnings are paid in with the *Ferns and Foliage* takings, tax and National Insurance are deducted, and he gets back what's left. Anyway, you're the one I've come to see.'

'Me? I'm not shaved or anything... You've caught me eating... You knew I'd be here?'

'Tom uses one of my vans. He said he'd left you asleep when he came to collect it. You're probably wondering what I'm doing here. There's a house nearby I was interested in buying, but it proved too expensive... a promising investment for someone with the capital. I was going to have another look at it this morning, hoping for last minute inspiration before giving up on the idea. You probably have other things to do, but if you happen to have an hour or so to spare...'

The prudent thing would have been to refuse, leave Tom a note with my telephone number, and allow a day or two for my mind to settle after the elation of the previous night. We could talk again by 'phone when my customary routines at home and at Lindler & Haliburton had brought me back to the real world, and arrange to meet again or decide calmly and sensibly that one night's love had been enough. However the euphoria had not worn off, and the prospect of learning a little more about Tom was tempting. I vacillated. 'I ought to be on my way. You invest in property as well as running *Ferns and Foliage*?'

'I keep my eye on the local property market, and this particular Victorian house has possibilities. Of course you've other things planned, probably the last thing you want is to go looking at houses. I shouldn't have bothered you. Let me get someone from the shop to give you a lift to the underground station, or all the way back to Chiswick if you like.'

Since I had nothing arranged, why not pass a couple of hours with him? He accepted the

offer of a cup of Tom's coffee while I washed and got ready to leave, and followed me around the flat talking about how he had started with one small shop, slowly built up *Ferns and Foliage* to its present size, and in ones and twos had bought flats in the area to let out until he had more than a dozen. Having interrogated me so thoroughly the previous night perhaps he thought it was his turn to tell me his life story, but my mind kept wandering back to Tom and I did not take in a lot of what he said.

One of Andrew's staff drove us to the estate agent's office to collect the keys, then on to the house, although the whole journey was less than half a mile and we could easily have walked. It was one of a pair of large semi-detached Victorian villas overlooking a junction of five roads. The one on the right had a beautifully kept garden and gleaming fresh paintwork, while the one for sale was dilapidated. The exterior paintwork had largely flaked away, a maze of cracks had spread over the bare rendering beneath, and the garden was overgrown and strewn with litter. In a patch of nettles was the wreckage of an old car.

We walked past the iron posts where the front gate once hung. 'It saddens me to see one of these places let go like this. These grand old houses in this Victorian London suburb are part of local history. Any little patch of a garden in such a built-up area ought to be regarded as precious, and look at the state of it.'

The front garden may have looked like a small rubbish tip, but years ago the house itself clearly must have been impressive. At the end of the path steps rose between a pair of classical columns into the porch. On either side of the door were slender windows with coloured glass panels, and the words 'Goodmans Villa' were painted in black letters on the grimy fanlight. The hall floor was of old fashioned black and white tiles set in a diamond pattern, and the staircase had substantial banisters of cast iron. The door frames to the principal ground floor rooms were carved with an unusually delicate, sinuous, floral pattern. Partitions installed when the house was converted into flats spoiled what must originally have been the imposing overall effect of the entrance.

Andrew led me into a pitch dark room on the ground floor and flicked the light switch without result. 'Damn! There is electricity, the two attic rooms are still occupied.' He found his way to the window and struggled with the shutter fastenings until one of them creaked open, the sound echoing around the room. Bright daylight revealed faded flock wallpaper and a deep bay window. He stepped into the middle and looked around approvingly. 'Imagine sitting down to have your dinner in a room like this!' He shook his head at damage caused to the ornate plaster mouldings of the ceiling where a couple of central heating pipes had been hammered through, and could not resist looking inside a big fitted cupboard in one corner, which was of course empty.

'You really would have liked to buy this place, wouldn't you?'

'I am looking for something, another little business expansion. Actually the size and layout of the rooms here is awkward for splitting the house up into flats, as you can see from the way the existing partitions have created inconvenient cramped little corners. One of the ideas I had was to strip them out and refurbish the building as a hotel. Gay hotels in London seem to do well generally speaking. There's no reason why one in this area shouldn't succeed.'

'Do you have experience of hotels?'

'Only from staying in them. But we're not talking about a large scale place like the Savoy or the Dorchester, perhaps I should have said guest house or bed and breakfast rather than hotel. There are plenty of places to eat locally, you wouldn't need to provide a restaurant. Anyway, I wasn't thinking of managing it myself, I'd have to have someone to run it for me. That was one of the reasons for involving myself in the Hotel and Catering Exhibition, you

remember I was going to send you some tickets? If someone with a bit of money to put in wanted to share the investment with me the project could still go ahead. As things stand a developer has been buying up houses in the area, restoring the facades and pulling down what lies behind to build modern flats. That's probably what will happen here.'

If he was hoping to interest me in putting up money for the project he was about to be disappointed. 'You might find a backer. I don't think anyone from my firm would be likely to help finance a gay hotel, though more than likely someone will have had experience of auditing hotel accounts; I could ask around, they wouldn't have to know it was for a gay hotel.'

'Oh, the accounts would be fairly straightforward. Anyway, for me being open with people is one of the essentials of doing business. If someone doesn't like gays, I'd prefer to look elsewhere for advice or custom.'

'Is everyone who works for you gay?'

'Yes. There's nothing like being with your own kind, is there? How is it in your high pressure City job? Everyone gay-friendly and open minded?'

'The subject is never mentioned. Not by me, not by anyone. They see a thirty-ish single man, no girlfriend... They're a sharp bunch, they'll have drawn their own conclusions.'

'You must know some of them reasonably well... not to confide in anyone at all... But everyone compartmentalises their lives to an extent: work, home, love life, social activities... And a good thing that we do, problems in one compartment need not prevent us enjoying ourselves in the others.'

However mildly put, this was clearly a rebuke for not having come out at work. Despite all his questions in the Beckford Arms he knew little of my circumstances and the criticism irritated me. 'Why should I feel obliged to tell people I work with about my sex life? My being gay doesn't affect them. They should judge me on the work I do.'

'Can't argue with you there, but gay men working in a "straight" environment are like sun-loving plants struggling to survive in the deep shade of trees, we can never develop properly and reach our true potential. Wouldn't you be happier with a firm where you could be more... straightforward with your colleagues?'

'Without a reliable crystal ball that sort of question is unanswerable. How can anyone know for certain they will be happier in a different job? Will you get on with your new boss? Will the work be interesting? Will you have good career prospects? They're the things that count, and you can only really find the answers after you've moved. Lindler & Haliburton is a very traditional stuffy kind of firm. My moving on won't make them any more gay friendly, but if I'm a success there, in time, who knows?'

'You're right, all of those things are important. Let's move on.'

From the ground floor we groped our way down to the musty basement, where the smell suggested a severe damp problem. We had already seen the main rooms of the house, and not wanting to linger there I said there was more to smell than there was to see and returned to the stairs.

He followed me up, but in the hall hurried past me and continued up towards the first floor, preventing me from saying that I had had enough of the place and wanted to go. By the time we reached the landing he was badly out of breath and very red in the face. He fumbled with the keys until he found the one to the door of the first floor flat, where he opened a casement window out onto a balcony at the side of the house. We sat on the balustrade looking out at the street, enjoying the fresh air and allowing him time to recover.

'There would be plenty of work for Tom here.'

'Too much, I'm afraid. He's capable, but he works on his own. Never had much chance to develop management skills, and he lacks confidence. He's not doing badly for himself now, with a bit of luck perhaps he'll do even better.'

'Luck, and your help?'

'To an extent. *He's* been a big help to me, always giving my work priority. Sometimes I worry that he may be... too easily led.'

'Are you saying that I'm leading him on?'

'That's not what I meant. Some well educated gay men develop a taste for...'

'Rough trade?'

'Ghastly phrase. For a bit of a dalliance with someone down to earth.'

'And these well educated men, do they know from the very start that they're leading someone on? And how this "bit of a dalliance" will end? All that is immediately obvious to them is it, being well educated?'

'Aah... you've caught me again! No, as you already said, without a crystal ball... Look, however illogical the question may be, let me ask you this, please don't be offended. Should things between you two develop, and a time comes when you have to drop him, do it as considerately as you can.'

'All we've done is to spend one night together. Anyway, Tom and I are about the same age. Why should it be me who is taking advantage of him? Was that why you went to all the trouble of bringing me here, so you could say that to me?'

'No, of course not. Tom was... so full of happiness when he came into the shop this morning. I was tempted by the idea of nipping up the stairs to the flat to see you, to say good morning, it was an impulse. Asking you to come and look at this house gave me an excuse. There was no more in my mind than that. Perhaps I am a little over protective towards him. You feel I'm interfering, wasting your time.'

'No, no... the house is well worth seeing, it has atmosphere, character. You're right, someone ought to rescue it. Thanks for bringing me, but we've seen it now.'

'Good. I appreciate your company.' For a minute or so we surveyed the street, with its Victorian terraces and London plane trees, then made our way indoors and back to the stairs, locking up behind us. 'Look, if you're free, why don't you and Tom come to have dinner with me on Sunday?'

'We don't know what his plans are.'

'Oh he'll come... Are you free?... Good.' He pulled a 'phone from his pocket, spoke to Tom, and without giving me time to reflect made the arrangements. Having more or less accused me of taking advantage of Tom, how odd that he should suddenly decide to bring us together the next day. We went downstairs, and refusing a lift to the underground station I left him in the porch waiting for one of his vans to collect him.

Since Andrew had prevented me from allowing normality to return over a few days before speaking to Tom again, abandoning all caution I rang him shortly after arriving home and asked him to meet me in Chiswick that evening. From that weekend the part of my life not on hire to Lindler & Haliburton underwent a complete change. Tom and Andrew took joint first place in my social life, and earlier friends, haunts and habits became marginal. As before the two 'compartments' of my world, that of Lindler & Haliburton and my life outside work, remained largely separate. I found them reasonably manageable like that.

At work on Monday my new happiness survived the morning's onslaught of telephone enquiries and e-mail messages, and in the afternoon Peter's antagonism at long last ended.

His secretary rang to say that he wanted to see me immediately in his office. He had successfully enticed a major high street retailer away from a rival accountancy firm, and asked me to assess urgently what work would be needed on our computer network to enable us to take on their accounts. The volume of overseas transactions made special software for handling currency conversions and foreign tax regimes essential.

Of the five people in the information technology unit who might have been called on to share the burden, one was on holiday, another on a training course and a third off sick. For the rest of the week half of my time was spent in Peter's office working through sheaves of documents with long tables of figures sent over by the new client. Fortunately Peter's experience with a US oil company before joining Lindler & Haliburton made him very knowledgeable about overseas trading. We drew up a list of issues for discussion with the new client's representatives, worked through lunch hours and stayed on late, determined to be well prepared at a crucial meeting with senior men who had the final say over the new arrangements.

Our conversation was entirely about business until on Friday evening he asked me to go with him for a drink to a local pub. This invitation was not to be refused, a sure sign of my return to favour. To my relief he did not mention what had happened during the trip to France, but talked mostly about Caroline, saying how the company she worked for was having problems recruiting and retaining information technology staff and being forced to rely more and more on self-employed consultants from agencies. Lindler & Haliburton had so far largely avoided trouble by increasing pay in line with rates elsewhere, but he wanted to know if I thought the trend was going to prove irresistible. I did not give him any hint that freelance work might be a future possibility for me and gave a vague response.

On Monday the tickets from Andrew to the exhibition at Olympia arrived. I rang to thank him and promised to mention them to Peter, but warned that he was particularly busy because of the new client. Persistent as always Andrew said that if Peter could find time to go he would ensure there was enough to interest him to make the visit worthwhile.

Andrew's dedication to his businesses increasingly aroused my admiration. He seemed to work every day, often late into the evening, taking off only Sunday afternoons. As he had claimed, everyone he employed was gay. Whenever 'straights' were mentioned in conversation he would slip in a derogatory remark about them, saying that you never really knew where you were with heterosexuals, or that the most primitive animals had a very strong urge to breed. These jibes may have been a sort of tit for tat for all the horrible things that 'straights' say about gays, but if it had been possible for him to live with no contact with 'straights' whatsoever he would probably have done so.

Arriving at work on the following Thursday morning after spending the night with Tom, I was on my way into the lift when Peter strode jauntily towards me. 'You look like you've been up late.'

'Met some friends last night,' I said defensively.

'Thanks for all your work with the new client. I'm seeing them next week... be nice if we could have something to show, offer them some sort of demonstration or presentation. Any chance?'

'We could develop some screens to show how our system will look when they connect up, ask them to try a few options to see what screen layouts for sending data will suit them. Be another month or two before we can show them real data being processed by the system.'

'Some demonstration screens would be fine. Any idea how long?'

'Give me a few days... There was something else, probably not worth mentioning, you've

got more important things on your mind. Some complimentary tickets have turned up for the Hotel and Catering Exhibition at Olympia. Expect you probably get dozens of that sort of thing.'

'Not as many as you get to computer exhibitions, they seem to be on every other week. Hotel and Catering at Olympia, you said?'

'Yes.'

'Wouldn't take long to get there, could do with a bit of relief from the office grind. Give my secretary a ring. If I've a couple of hours free, why not? How did you come by the tickets?'

The lift arrived at our floor and we stepped out. '*Ferns and Foliage*, the company that looks after our plants sent them.'

To my complete surprise he said, 'Ah, you got on all right with the gay gardeners then?' He looked at me with a friendly quizzical smile. I was terrified. My mouth felt dry, as though it was lined with fur, and my heart was thumping.

'Sorry?'

'If you don't know you're the only one who doesn't. They don't exactly make a secret of it.'

That he could be putting on a pretence of tolerance so as to trap me seemed implausible. Realising that there would never be a better opportunity to tell him the truth I took a large breath and said, 'Yes, I had noticed. I'm gay myself actually.'

Quietly and unemotionally, as though I had told him whether I preferred tea or coffee, he said, 'Caroline said she thought you might be. You know she's in personnel, doesn't miss much. Can be too quick sometimes... you know. Speaking for myself, perfectly happy to accept we all have our different ways... but some of the senior men in a long established City firm like this... you have to be careful what you say to them whatever the topic. Speak to my secretary about that exhibition.'

Welcome though his apparent tolerance was, he had not made personal relationships with anyone else at Lindler & Haliburton easier. The unplanned 'coming out' to him was enough of a risk to my hard-won career progress for the time being, and other pressures demanded priority. A long series of queries, notes and memos to do with the new client needed my attention. For a month after Peter had won the business the pace of work remained hectic. A document drawn up to specify exactly how the link between our system and theirs was to operate contained thirty pages of detail about data formats, technical protocols, timetables for completing activities, safeguards against unauthorised access and other security measures. Some of these were readily agreed between the two companies, but others were revised again and again until an acceptable compromise between our differing working practices was found.

Meanwhile the demands of other day-to-day work continued as before. Some tasks could be delegated to my staff, but with limited authority to pay for extra hours not very many. My immediate boss, the head of the information technology unit, refused additional overtime for my team, probably resentful because Peter had not consulted him before asking me to take on the extra work. To complain to Peter and ask him to overrule the decision against overtime would risk worsening the antagonism, and to cope with the workload I put in far more than my contractual hours. Peter commented several times in the weeks that followed that I looked tired, but neither he nor Andrew ever moaned about having too much to do, and nor would I.

Leaving work unfinished to go to the exhibition seemed irresponsible, but as we boarded the taxi taking us to Olympia Peter reassured me by saying, 'Been quite looking forward to this. About time we let up after all the hours we've put in lately.'

On arrival I suggested we go straight to the furniture supplier's stand, where we found Andrew in conversation with a woman sitting behind what looked like a hotel reception desk.

I introduced Peter, and, as though we really were at a hotel reception, Andrew asked her, 'Is there a room available for us?'

Handing him a small plastic card, the 'key' to the room, she said, 'I hope you'll enjoy your stay.' He inserted it into the lock of a panelled door at the back of the stand and led us into what looked like a large twin-bedded hotel room.

Peter was impressed. 'Marvellous! Looks really convincing. You could believe you had stepped out of the exhibition straight into a hotel!' In one 'wall' was an imitation window with a picture of a country landscape cleverly lit from behind to look realistic. Opposite this, behind mirrored doors, were the fitted wardrobe and the *en suite* facilities. The furnishings included a television, and picking up a remote control unit Andrew turned it on and muted the sound. He pressed another button to bring up a diagram of the room. As he moved an arrow around the screen little menus appeared, and selecting options from these he made the curtains at the imitation window close automatically, dimmed the lights, and boosted the air conditioning. Next he replaced the room diagram with a closed circuit TV picture of the woman at the desk in front of the stand, and holding the remote control nearer his mouth spoke a few words to her.

He flipped open the back of the unit to reveal a miniature q-w-e-r-t-y keyboard. 'This little thing doubles as the room's telephone, and can be used to access the internet. Here,' he said, handing it to Peter, 'would you like to give it a try? I have to pop out for a minute.'

We played with the gadget and sent an e-mail message to Peter's secretary. About ten minutes later Andrew returned with another man he introduced as the furniture supplier's director of finance. He touched my arm and led me out of the room, leaving Peter and the new man together. 'Let me show you our free gifts, assuming we have some left.'

The receptionist opened a drawer and gave Andrew a white cardboard box about three inches square. He took out a clock with a novel feature: every half minute the background colour of the face changed from light grey to dark grey, then back to light again. 'All done with Polaroid, I'm told.'

'It's unusual. Are you offering me one?'

'Yes, I was going to offer one to you and one to your boss. They're only trinkets. Perhaps he'd be offended.'

'No, why should he be? The worst he can say is "no thanks".'

When Peter came out to join us he seemed delighted with the gift. We went on to roam the aisles of the exhibition looking at the stands, mingling with the hundreds of other visitors, accepting the business cards, advertising leaflets, trade brochures, sweets, trinkets and carrier bags that were being handed out as we went along. In return Peter occasionally gave one of his business cards saying: 'Lindler & Haliburton, accountants. I'm Peter Haliburton, by the way. Very pleased to have met you.'

At first the eye-catching displays of the more impressive stands and the bustle of the huge hall were stimulating, but not wanting to buy any of the spotlessly clean restaurant kitchen equipment, or to place a bulk order for wine, or to have a swimming pool installed, after an hour or so we had had enough. Having walked at least once down every aisle and looked at least cursorily at every stand he said, 'All these free samples and advertising gimmicks, does anyone ever actually use any of them? Is there anything you particularly want to see again?'

'No. Nothing in particular. Was it worth coming?'

'Yes, very much so. Enjoyed it. Let's go up to that café on the balcony for a drink.' He bought me fruit juice and a Danish pastry, and we sat where we could look out over the exhibition floor. 'You should have said something.'

Not knowing what he was referring to, I said, 'What, about the clocks... ?'

'I'm not talking about clocks. I mean about that furniture company looking to change its accountants.'

Andrew had given me no hint about this. 'Your chat with the finance director was interesting then?'

'Yes. Seems they've had a lot of changes in personnel at their current firm. Worst thing you can do to a client, makes them think there's no continuity, nobody who is close to their business. Every time they ring up they feel they have to start from scratch. They're not a major league company, but not a bad little contract, if we get it. Might be worth you keeping in touch with your friend Andrew. Could be useful for us to have some sort of presence here ourselves next year; there may be more clients to be won.'

Below us new arrivals were entering the exhibition hall, collecting their identification badges and floor plans, and setting off along the already crowded aisles. Great cast iron arches above us supported the glass roof, similar to the roofs of the big Victorian railway stations. Not wanting to tell him that a boyfriend was the real reason I would be keeping in touch with Andrew I smiled and nodded.

'Seeing all the people to-ing and fro-ing down there reminds me of when I was in the States. The corporation I worked for had a staff restaurant overlooking a shopping mall.'

'Were you over there for long?'

'When I left university the last thing I wanted to do was to join my father in the firm. I changed jobs a couple of times, then joined a US oil company based in Houston. I put in eight or nine years, living most of the time in the States. If you think I throw my weight around at work you should have seen what went on over there. My boss once fired someone during a meeting in front of about fifteen people, all over an error in a set of figures. Lindler & Haliburton, whatever its faults, doesn't do that kind of thing.'

'I suppose the US has a more aggressive culture?'

'In some ways perhaps, yes, but I didn't mind that. They knew how to get things done, they had drive.'

'Anyway you came back.'

'In a lot of ways life over there suited me. The corporation fixed me up with a very good apartment. I travelled a lot, the States, Central America and the Middle East. Worked on some substantial deals. My ambition was to reach director level, but two colleagues with family connections moved up the ladder ahead of me.'

I put pressure on my boss who made some excuse about maybe US citizens having a bit of an advantage. I spoke to Personnel, but they either knew nothing or were not going to give me any hint of what the pecking order was. The US sells itself as the land of freedom and opportunity. They don't tell you that being a second cousin to the founding family or an in-law of one of the major shareholders is the key to getting on. Anyway my prospects became less good. The corporation was hit by economic recession, oil prices fell, and they had to cut back. By this time my father had retired, but he still had influence in the family firm, so, finally he got his way, I did what he had always wanted me to.' He held up his cup and swigged the last of his coffee. 'So here we are.'

Rather cheekily I said, 'Your father retired? Partners do go eventually, then.'

'Hmph. You're right though, some of the old codgers hang on long after they've ceased to be any use to the firm. The place is in need of a damn good shake-up. Not my father though, he had more strength of character. Anyway, enough of my history. How about you? Happy in your work at the moment?'

‘No complaints.’

‘Not quite the same as being happy, is it? Something may be coming up, if you felt like a change. There’s a little team I’ve set up. Might be a role for someone with an information technology background. You’d have to leave your current unit and involve yourself in some general management and accountancy issues for – I don’t know – six months, maybe longer. Interested?’

‘Like to hear more, yes.’

‘Nothing’s settled, a preliminary report has gone to a few of the senior partners, most have yet to see it. You’ll keep all this strictly to yourself?’

‘Of course.’

‘Approval to go beyond the feasibility study will take another three or four weeks. Let’s talk about it again then.’

CHAPTER 4

Joining Peter's secret team meant taking risks that could not be quantified. The aim was to bring about a merger with another slightly smaller accountancy firm, and the desirability of this objective was questionable. A few similar marriages between City accounting partnerships had taken place during the past year, but if a union proved to be a mistake the problems were hardly likely to be made public.

The team's preliminary report recommended a detailed assessment of all the implications of the proposed merger. Peter gave me a copy, warning that if anyone else became aware of the project a severe penalty would follow, not only for me for leaking the report, but for him because he would have shown dangerously poor judgement in trusting me with it.

Every page was headed 'Protected Confidential Information'. The first chapter compared the bigger City accountancy firms by volume of business and market sector, the next two described the organisation and business of the two firms, and the conclusion speculated on the potential benefits of bringing together a long established City firm with one that was younger and more attuned to growing new technology businesses. Graphs and diagrams showed the more balanced spread of work which would result, how the new firm would rank in size among its rivals, and suggested that it would have greatly improved potential to attract new clients.

The next stage was to examine the organisational changes which would result from the merger, develop detailed plans, and analyse costs. If the project came to nothing after six months, all of the team's work would end up being archived until it had gathered enough dust to be thrown out. Irrespective of the quality and extent of my efforts, my career would suffer because of my association with a failure.

Peter did not try to deny the risk, but promised to make sure whatever the outcome I would be able return to my old job. My immediate boss was in awe of the partners and quickly agreed to hire a stand-in from an agency so as to keep my place open for me. However a lot can happen in six months; any reorganisation during my absence might leave me with a rag-bag of tasks that nobody else wanted, and stand-ins can sometimes entwine themselves into the workplace in ways that make them very difficult to dislodge.

Weighing against all the potential disadvantages was the prospect, if the merger succeeded, of becoming one of a small number of people with advanced knowledge of all that would be entailed. As everyone struggled to grasp how the changes would affect them, my knowledge and advice would be in high demand. A generous bonus could be expected, and perhaps a pay rise and even another promotion. After going over the arguments for and against in my mind time and again, and discussing the implications of joining the team with Andrew and others, I gambled that the potential benefits of success outweighed the possible consequences of failure.

Until I joined, the team consisted of three accountants. From our firm there was a partner of Peter's age and a junior who had recently qualified. Representing the smaller firm was a

female partner; the news that a woman had been entrusted with such an important role had yet to be broken to the old codgers. Peter was very selective about what he told them, releasing morsels of information bit by bit in bland terms, avoiding anything that might seem new or unusual, so that the merger came to be perceived as a familiar old theme developing at a gradual pace, not as something radical or revolutionary.

To keep us apart from other members of staff we were put in a room on a floor of the building mostly occupied by another company. Our title, 'Business Strategy Unit', gave no clue as to our real purpose. Even to meet old colleagues from the IT Unit for lunch was risky; my evasiveness about my new job increased their curiosity. Of the team members only the female partner was friendly towards me, the Lindler & Haliburton men evidently believing themselves to be on too high a plane to have much to do with a technical IT specialist.

At my first team meeting they made it clear they wanted me to keep to IT issues. In a way this suited me, allowing me to organize my own time and to visit the smaller firm's IT Unit. To maintain secrecy, Peter arranged for me to be introduced there as a consultant brought in to review system security, giving me a plausible reason to ask about all aspects of their systems and procedures.

The atmosphere at the smaller company was much less formal than at Lindler & Haliburton. Everyone used first names, and during breaks people talked about windsurfing and mountain biking rather than playing golf and attending Rotary Club dinners. When the head of the IT Unit tentatively asked if I was married, telling him that I was gay seemed easy and natural. 'Oh,' he said, 'you'll have to let me introduce you to a couple of the accountants here, they deal with quite a few gay run businesses. It's a growing sector.'

By comparison the two Lindler & Haliburton men seemed even more old-fashioned, often discussing cricket scores and visits to relatives at weekends. On my first Friday with the project, after the morning meeting to discuss the week's progress, they invited me to go for a lunchtime drink. This was the first time they had shown any interest in me, and not wanting to be unfriendly I accepted. We walked briskly past several pubs we could have entered, eventually heading down a narrow side street to a seedy little place, gloomy inside with a raised platform in one corner.

Paunchy middle aged men, their faces oddly alert and expectant, crowded the open area between the bar and the platform. Neither of my two colleagues had bothered to tell me they habitually went there at lunch time on Fridays for the free strip show. With pints of beer and packets of crisps in our hands we watched a woman in her thirties undress under meagre spotlights to raunchy music. 'Does it do anything for you?' the senior of my colleagues asked, probably expecting me to thank him for bringing me to this extravaganza.

'Not my kind of thing.'

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. The younger one seemed too absorbed in the performance to notice me. Should I have declared my sexual orientation to them? Certainly not there, among those sweaty straight men enjoying their weekly titillation. My hasty goodbye and exit from the pub before a second performer began her routine told them as much as they needed to know.

Seeing me return alone early, the female on the team partner asked, 'Not too keen on theatricals then?'

'Do you know where they took me?'

'I overheard them talking about it. I know what they go to see. What made you come back?'

'I'm gay.'

‘Oh, pity,’ she said, giving me a wistful look. ‘Why did you go with them?’

‘They gave me the impression it was a Friday lunchtime drink, you know, male bonding.’

“Male bonding,” is that why you thought they left me out?’

‘Sorry. Still trying to conform to their way of seeing things. I should have said team bonding.’

‘Not to worry. I’ve disqualified myself from that sort of thing.’ In the early days of the team she had infuriated the Lindler & Haliburton men by contacting the Institute of Accountants to ask discreetly about its attitude to the recent trend of takeovers and mergers among accountancy partnerships. This was a sensible act, but they resented her having had the initiative to consult the prestigious Institute when neither of them had thought of doing so. One of the old codgers was a member of the Institute’s General Committee, and any dealings with the organisation were considered a great privilege.

In revenge for her having, as they saw it, robbed them of a prize, they had allocated as many tedious tasks to her as they could, including the job of listing all the small contracts the two firms had in place with office equipment and other suppliers. We became allies, sharing information and documents, discussing ideas and backing each other up during team meetings.

She and I had another means, outside the team, of making sure our views were heard. I reported back to Peter privately, and she likewise reported to one of her firm’s most senior partners. We collaborated in suggesting that some significant problems were being underrated, arguing for instance that decision-making would be more cumbersome in a bigger organisation. Some ideas that had been ruled out by the Lindler & Haliburton men on the team we also put to Peter and his counterpart from the other firm who raised them at project meetings. This may have made hostility and suspicion within the team worse, but it helped the project develop in a more thorough and realistic way.

About halfway through our work Lizetta Williams from Personnel came to join us for one day a week to assess staffing implications. We had met briefly a couple of times in the past; she was in her mid-thirties, pleasant and lively, and after her first team meeting came over to me wanting to chat. Later we went to a sandwich bar for lunch where she ordered soup and a roll, saying that she was dieting. I chose a large sandwich of French bread with mixed seafood and salad which, enviously, she said was disgusting.

‘How do you find the team?’ I asked when we sat down at a tiny metal table.

‘All right-ish. How long have you been there?’

‘Nearly three months now.’

‘Poor thing. The two men are a supercilious pair.’

‘Friday lunch times they go to watch a free pub strip show. They took me with them once.’

‘Tell-tale. You only went once? Excitement too much for you?’

‘No, I’m gay. You’re with us to work on the staff savings, I assume. Don’t suppose you’ll be recommending any cuts in the number of accountants, though. The other staff will be the ones who get the chop.’

‘I’m “other staff” too. Don’t worry, I don’t think we’ll be sacking anyone. The losses will be covered by suspending recruitment. People will leave at the usual rate for the usual reasons; a few early retirements may be needed to help see us through. Of course some managers may see this as an opportunity to settle old scores. Anyway you’ve got nothing to worry about, you’re Peter’s man, aren’t you?’

‘I’m not sure I’m his man, exactly.’

‘I know him and his wife socially. She and I used to work together, ages ago. I am right

aren't I? You're the one who did a disappearing act during their trip to France?'

Surprise at her question made me swallow suddenly. 'You know about that?'

'Friends do talk to each other about their holidays. You probably did the right thing, making yourself scarce. You know Caroline was worried about you getting your hooks into Peter?'

'What?'

'She guessed you were gay and thought you were trying to get Peter into your clutches.'

'Oh my god!'

'Not your type?'

'Is he anyone's type?'

'Caroline liked him enough to marry him.'

Was that the reason Caroline had been so unpleasant to me that first morning at breakfast in the *Hotel des Amis*? I moved the slice of chocolate cake I had bought so that it was between us in the middle of the little table, watching Lizetta's eyes drawn away from my face towards it. 'Would you like some?'

'I mustn't.'

'Oh go on,' I said, cutting it in half. 'Is he attractive – to women, I mean?'

'Yes, to some women he is. He's strong-minded, intelligent, decisive. He may not be the easiest person to get on with, but life will never be dull while he's around. Think of the old codgers, or those two tailor's dummies you're working with, who would you prefer? And like Peter, Caroline is ambitious; she would never settle for years of child rearing or the Women's Institute.'

'We should have got to know each other before. We've said hello once or twice.'

'Yes, we could have gossiped about all sorts of things. For instance, that woman on your team, is she really a partner?'

'Yes. She might liven up the old codgers' Thursday swimming sessions if she tagged along. A female partner in a swimsuit, it would be like their world coming to an end.'

'You know about the partners' swimming sessions do you?'

'I am allowed to go. They need someone to e-mail reminders to them so they won't forget.'

'You are privileged. A gay man getting into the same pool as the old codgers. *That* sounds like their world coming to an end.'

'Peter is the only one at senior level who knows about me, as far as I know.'

'You might be surprised. You don't hide it all that well.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You look at men you pass in the street. You were doing it while we walked here. Fortunately I'm not one for tittle-tattle.' She pursed her lips. 'Well, not all of the time.'

Since my return to favour Peter and I had not discussed my 'disappearing act' in France, and if what Lizetta had said was true we were never likely to. Her comments raised too many awkward questions: for instance if Caroline had considered me a rival for Peter, was there something in his behaviour towards me or in his past that caused her suspicions? Whatever might have been in her mind or his was best forgotten. When I mentioned to him that Lizetta had joined the 'team' he confirmed she was a family friend: 'She's a good chum to Caroline. Both working in personnel they always have plenty to talk about. By the way your plan for combining the two computer networks has gone down well. How would you feel about giving a little presentation to a joint meeting of partners from both firms?'

This was my chance to project an image of myself as more than a backroom technical specialist. Ten days later, to an audience of nearly forty, aided by a projector and screen

showing charts and diagrams, I described my plan for merging the two IT systems. My voice wavered slightly over the first few words but then steadied; the projector did not fail, and no accidents or collisions befell me in the semi-darkness of the boardroom. During the subsequent discussion one or two partners said, doubtfully, that they were surprised at the comparatively low cost of my plan given the price of software and high salaries earned by IT specialists, but Peter had anticipated the criticism and had my figures checked and agreed with an independent consultancy. Reassured, the partners' questions and comments became friendly and approving.

Another favourable sign came during one of the Thursday trips to the baths when the most senior of the swimming old codgers, a man who had hardly said a word to me until then, walked beside me as we returned to the office telling me about how his grandchildren used personal computers and mobile 'phones to send each other e-mail. As we neared the office he said, 'Of course my secretary looks after all that kind of thing for me. Peter's been talking me through some of the figures you've produced. Won't claim to have understood all the intricacies, but you seem to have grasped the critical issues. Good work.'

The team's final report was a hefty document with eight chapters, appendices crammed with facts and figures, and a management summary written by Peter which in five pages covered all the important issues and concluded that a merger would result in savings in costs and be attractive to new clients. Copies were sent to all the partners, and having completed its task the team disbanded. The promise to hold my old job for me had been kept, and the stand-in departed on the Friday before my return to the IT Unit.

Two months later news that the merger was to take place flashed around the building by e-mail. Little groups of excited staff gathered on every floor, speculating about their futures and what was meant by the words at the end of the message: *Creation of a new combined organisation will require some staff re-allocations; these will be staged over a period of time.*

My boss called me in to talk about the effect on the IT Unit. After half an hour with him I called together the four people who worked for me and took them into a quiet corner with comfortable chairs to discuss the news and confess my part in it. They looked at me with curiosity and suspicion, listening carefully to my explanations, trying to assess what impact the merger would have on them personally. I assured them that after the reorganisation they should be no worse off, but nevertheless two were clearly worried.

Elsewhere the news was not so good. Office Services was expected to be reduced in size by a third. Other than the partners, everyone was uneasy about their future. Uncertainty caused many staff to ask themselves whether they might do better elsewhere, and during breaks people could be seen studying the job adverts in 'Computer Weekly' or 'Accountancy Age', surreptitiously turning to a different page if anyone with influence walked by.

Lizetta and I continued to meet at least once a week for lunch. She believed that several partners were trying to use the reorganisation as an opportunity to get rid of staff they thought of as troublesome or not capable. She was fighting for a couple of people she thought were being unfairly treated. 'You'll be all right,' she said to me accusingly, 'you'll do very nicely out of all this chaos.'

'I'm back at my old desk, that's all.'

'Have you heard anything lately from the IT Unit you are about to merge with?'

'No. There's been no reason for me to contact them recently.'

'Their top man has found another job. He's moving on.'

The head of the new combined unit was to be called 'Director of Information Technology Services', and was to have a deputy. My assumption was that my boss would become

'Director', and his counterpart in the other firm his deputy. Lizetta's news meant the post of deputy might be within my grasp.

From Peter I learned that both jobs were to be advertised in 'Computer Weekly', and my hopes faded. Dozens of applications could be expected from people in senior positions in other companies. When the advert appeared my immediate boss, the head of the IT Unit, called me in, held up the newspaper and said, 'You've been keeping an eye out for this, I assume?'

'Yes, but...'

'Which job do you intend to apply for?'

'What would you say my chances were of getting Deputy Director?'

'Why don't you put in for both?'

'I assume you'll be Director, they've had to advertise because of personnel policy, but you're bound to be appointed.'

'They've offered me early retirement. I've spent enough of my life trying to satisfy all the old fusspots in this organisation. Sixteen years of dealing with them is plenty. Put in for Director. If you want it, you're welcome to it. God knows you're ambitious enough. You've been wily, the way you've cultivated your contacts among the partners. I have to admire the way you've done it. Myself, I never managed to overcome the instinct to tug my forelock to them; they've always thought of me as one of the servants. You can still put in for deputy. Make it a two-way bet.'

Peter and Lizetta endorsed his advice to aim high. They also gave me the names of the four partners who were to make the appointment. One of them I knew from the Thursday swimming sessions; the others I discreetly found opportunities to talk to, saying warm, mildly optimistic words about the firm's prospects after the merger.

Three outside applicants and I were invited for interview. I was nervous, but my voice did not waver and my hands did not shake. My rivals were at a disadvantage because they were known only from their curricula vitae and references. However impressive these might be, and however well they performed at interview, how could the panel be as confident about these strangers as they were about me?

Three days later I was working quietly at my desk when Lizetta rang to tell me the Director's job was mine. The announcement would not be made official for several days, and was not to take effect until my boss retired in three months time. When I told him the news he shook my hand warmly and we went out for a drink. His recommendation must have been very positive for me to have been successful. When I tried to thank him he said he was looking forward to passing me all the pressures and problems, and that since I was so keen there would be no need to wait three months, he would begin handing them over tomorrow. The knowledge that he was shortly to leave seemed to have reinvigorated him and rekindled his sense of humour, and we agreed on a combined party to celebrate his retirement and my promotion.

Lizetta contacted me again a few weeks later to ask if I had thought about requesting a new company car. I said that my preference, if any rewards were due, was for money. 'Motor cars are what I've rung you about, not money. I'm trying discreetly to hint that if you act quickly you stand to benefit, that is if you don't mind driving something that one of the old codgers has had his hands on.'

'Exactly what sort of benefit are we talking about?'

'I can't tell you the details. Can't you just put in a simple memo when someone asks you to?'

One of the old codgers, a man of at least sixty-five with pale wrinkled features, had for the

past year been driving a Mercedes convertible. He looked out of place in it, like an old nail in a jewelry case. He had decided to trade up, at the firm's expense, to a more appropriate Mercedes saloon, and the one year old convertible was offered to me. The car was in beautiful condition, the white leather curves of the interior flawlessly sculpted into an outer shell of gleaming blue bodywork. I would never have chosen something as showy myself, but since such a generous symbol of my new standing in the firm was being offered, why refuse?

Misgivings that I might be thought to have accepted a cast off faded completely when those around me gasped in envy. One day Peter saw me getting out of it in the car park and said: 'You look as though you're doing better than some of the accountants. I'd watch my back if I were you.'

On the first Friday evening that the trophy was in my possession, without saying anything to Andrew or Tom I drove down to the garden centre. Instead of going as usual straight to the Beckford Arms I went up to Tom's flat, interrupting him eating. I waited while he finished his meal and showered, resisting the urge to join him, sitting instead by the window and smiling over the prospect of showing him the Mercedes.

On our way downstairs to the street I said off-handedly: 'I came over in the car this evening for a change. We may as well drive to the pub.' He shrugged his indifference. We walked past half a dozen standard, ordinary vehicles parked at the roadside, the usual jumble of popular makes of car in assorted colours, until we reached my magnificent Mercedes. I sauntered around to the driver's door, opened it, got in and flung open the passenger door, looking up at Tom's bemused face with a casual smile.

'How d'you get this?'

'It's my new company car.'

He climbed in. 'What are you – chief exec or something now?'

'I told you, I got another promotion.' He inspected the dashboard and fingered the lever that controls the indicator lights. The firm's leasing agreement for cars had a clause that restricted driving them to staff, but he was an experienced and careful driver and I asked if he would like to take the wheel.

We completed a circuit of the neighbouring streets. Passers-by must, we felt sure, be turning their heads to look at us, but of course we kept our eyes straight ahead. At a junction where an elderly couple were waiting to cross we stopped and magnanimously waved them forward. We were the most terrible show-offs.

We wove our way around the streets for a quarter of an hour or so then headed for the Beckford Arms. Street parking was always difficult there, but Tom spotted a tight parking space a couple of hundred yards from the pub, and edging the car back and forth half a dozen times brought it tidily into the kerb. Not until after he had put the hand brake on did he think of the risk. 'We probably shouldn't leave it here. Might get nicked.'

'Having it stolen from outside a pub might not go down too well at work.'

'You're right. Be safer to put it in the garage at the back of the garden centre. You don't want it being crated for the Costa.'

'Don't want it being what?'

His mood changed suddenly. He must have thought I was making fun of him. 'You know what I mean. Do you have to make something of it every time I use a common expression?'

'That wasn't how I meant it. "Crated for the Costa", it's the first time I've heard the term, that's all. Shipped to a villain in Spain... it's a good way of putting it.' Anything I said now would make his mood worse. There had been other instances when he had sulked over a

chance remark or some trivial mishap, and hours might pass before his good humour returned. He seemed to become gripped by some deep internal insecurity. Perhaps the difference in our incomes made him feel inferior. To me it hardly mattered; we could enjoy ourselves perfectly well together without needing to squander large amounts of money. His abilities were no less valuable than mine. He could, as if by magic, install an electric light fitting without visible wires in the middle of an internal wall, or cure burst pipes that were damaging people's homes and causing real distress and anxiety. Business executives in the City might be better paid, but their high salaries were more likely to be won through greed and forcefulness than by talent and hard work.

We drove back to the garden centre in silence, both miserable. He moved one of the vans out of the garage to the street to make room for the car, and when it was safely locked inside I put my hand on his arm and said plaintively, 'Oh Tom.'

He turned to look at me, and to my relief his expression lightened. He put his arms around me and hugged me. 'We'll go and see Andrew. Have a quiet drink in the pub together. Don't take no notice of me.'

In the pub Andrew talked so enthusiastically about his latest venture that he made us forget our tiff. He had bought a part share in a horticultural nursery in Buckinghamshire. Discussions and negotiations through solicitors had taken months, but at last the contract had been signed and he had spent the whole day looking over the greenhouses, talking to the staff, and updating himself on sales figures.

While Tom was at the bar I told him about the Mercedes left in his garage at the garden centre and our misunderstanding. 'Just another of his moods. He's had his share of problems, but he always comes round. Congratulations on the Mercedes, puts the *Ferns and Foliage* vans to shame. You're becoming too important for us, Mark.'

Later, lying beside Tom trying to sleep after making love, all the other occasions when he had sunk into a dismal mood for no or little reason passed through my mind. Any slight mishap or misunderstanding might set him off. Once he had over-cooked a casserole, not ruinously but badly enough to carbonise a few bits of meat and turn some chunks of vegetable into rather odd goo. It was still edible, and the chips and cauliflower he had cooked separately were fine, but he over-reacted and apologised again and again for hours afterwards. Nothing I said could take his mind off it. On another occasion in a restaurant a knife slipped out of his fingers and dropped onto the tiled floor with a clatter. He hardly spoke through the rest of the meal except to apologise: 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you, I'm sorry,' or 'I can't help it, I'm clumsy I know I am, I'm sorry.' In fact he was anything but clumsy, but for the whole evening every time he picked something up he did so with extreme caution, as though the wine glass was about to shatter in his fingers or his coffee cup break away from its handle. Reassuring words or attempts at humour did nothing to bring him out of these fits of self-denigration.

The next morning, following our misunderstanding in the Mercedes, he was the one who was in the more cheerful mood. After breakfast to my surprise he was keen to take the wheel again, and we showed my prize off along the King's Road and went on to Regents Park. We took photographs of each other in the driving seat, and asked someone from the garden centre to take one of us sitting together in the car, and standing, arms around each other's shoulders, beside it.

That evening in the Beckford Arms Tom asked everyone we knew if they had seen my new car, boasting about how it looked and handled on the road. Among the 'Wow!', 'Really!' and 'Fantastic!' responses were a couple of sour comments: 'more money than sense' and 'public

transport's best, causes less pollution.' What was important was that, despite the misunderstanding of the night before, he was now happy with the Mercedes. Whether others liked it, loathed it, or were envious mattered not at all.

CHAPTER 5

Expensive cars ought to come with a warning: possession of this engineering showpiece may make you feel like a millionaire, but imagine how dreadful you will feel if you crash it. At the end of summer on the Friday morning of a stressful week, about four months after the Mercedes had come into my possession, breakfast cereal and orange juice failed to help prepare me for the drive to work. Instead a twinge of queasiness in my innards, not severe enough to call a stomach ache, made me wonder if the previous evening's take-away meal had been as wholesome as it looked.

Had half a dozen staff not been booked for a demonstration of some newly set up IT system facilities at ten o'clock I would have gone in late, or even for the first time in years taken a day off sick. The rain that morning was relentless, and before leaving the garage I put the top up over the Mercedes. The streets around my flat in Chiswick had a faint odour of decay, probably caused by the sticky mess that washes off lime trees in late summer. After a mile and a half the line of traffic in front of me slowed to a crawl, then halted, red stop lights shining brilliantly in the gloomy grey of the road ahead. We inched forward, stopping and starting in a fug of exhaust fumes.

A brief surge took us forward perhaps forty yards, and in a disastrous muddle of normal reflex actions instead of releasing the accelerator and putting my foot on the brake I did the opposite, shooting the car forwards and hitting the two-door Peugeot in front of me. At low speed the crash did not cause injury, but there was the inevitable crunch of plastic as the lights shattered. Putting the lights that were still working into hazard mode I got out to inspect the damage. The impact had crumpled a patch of metal around the Mercedes' front bumper and badly dented the rear of the Peugeot.

Mercifully the other driver was calm. I shook my head, ignoring an impatient horn sounding a hundred yards back. 'I can't explain it, I don't know how I came to do it. I'm really sorry. I can't believe it.'

He looked at me with restrained disgust. 'The insurance on those things must cost a fortune. Glad it's not going to be me losing my no claims bonus over this. Probably a company car though. Is it?'

That was none of his business. 'All my fault, no question. Are you all right?'

The rain discouraged us from talking more than was absolutely necessary. We exchanged details and he drove off, chancing that he would be safe with one rear light working. The Mercedes was not so battered that it could not be driven, but rather than take the scarred vehicle into the office car park where the ugly effects of the impact would be seen and everyone would gossip, I skulked into a side road, parked and walked to the nearest Underground station. I was in danger of being late for the demonstration and had to make getting to work my priority; calling a breakdown service would have to wait.

After escaping the Underground the queasiness left me and my head cleared. I reached work about five minutes before the demonstration was due to start and, not having time to go to my office first, went instead to the toilets to comb my hair and straighten my tie before

facing the audience waiting in the training room.

In the front row, smiling encouragingly, was Lizetta Williams. The partners were holding their quarterly meeting that day, and having them out of everyone's way in the board room made this a good time to bring together all the senior support staff. Two earlier demonstrations of the new software had been straightforward, but this time the moment I touched the keyboard an exclamation mark inside a bright yellow hexagon appeared on the screen. Beside it was the intimidating message in vivid red: *Fatal Error! System Protocols Violated or Network Parameters Exceeded!*

Some work on maintaining the system was regularly carried out after users had gone home, and the likely cause was that last night someone had interfered with the way the training room system was set up. Highly embarrassed I faced my audience: 'We seem to be having trouble with the network. I'm not sure how long it will take to put right. Would it be a good idea to have coffee now and, hopefully, resume when things are sorted out?'

Lizetta helped me out by organising coffee while I went off to find the two members of my staff who understood the training room system best. They put aside what they were doing immediately to investigate the problem, but could not agree on its cause. Half an hour later they were still arguing about where the fault lay. Everyone had booked the morning's session in their diary weeks ago, but there was no option other than to abandon it.

To try to salvage a little credibility I called them all together again and proposed giving a summary of the new system facilities with the aid of marker pens and a large whiteboard. They watched attentively as I reached into a cardboard box of about twenty pens, picked one up, and accidentally flicked the edge of the box as I lifted it out; the contents spilled out onto the floor and rolled everywhere, several pens coming to rest at Lizetta's feet. She helped me pick them up while the others looked on, their expressions varying from exasperation to suppressed amusement.

When we had gathered in the last of the pens she said gently: 'If I were you I'd call it a day and go home. Relax over the weekend and make a fresh start on Monday.'

My confidence had gone. Burning with embarrassment I turned to the others. 'Sorry everyone, I still don't know how long it will take to sort out the system. I'm not the superstitious type but — is it best to give up now before anything worse happens? I'll contact you about another demo when we've sorted ourselves out. Sorry again, I hope I've not wasted too much of your time.'

I returned to my desk physically shaking. My own terminal was unaffected by the failure in the training room, and from habit I logged on to look at my e-mail. Among a dozen routine messages was an urgent one from Peter asking me to produce a paper on the latest system enhancements for the afternoon session of the partners' quarterly meeting.

His secretary could not give me a reason for this sudden request. Peter himself could not be consulted as he was at the meeting, but she promised to tell him that I needed to talk to him about exactly what he wanted as soon as he came out.

As I put down my 'phone I noticed a message asking me to ring Tom immediately. I tried his home number and his mobile 'phone several times without success, and was annoyed that he had left an urgent message but was not waiting to take the call when I rang back.

Curious as to why the partners were to discuss the latest system enhancements that afternoon I began hunting through earlier papers and memos, looking for positive statements about the benefits, guessing at the sort of thing he might want. Three-quarters of an hour later he came hurtling towards me. 'You've made a start?'

'Yes.'

He looked quickly at what I had prepared. 'What I want to do is to argue for using what you've developed as a standard for accountancy systems nationally. There's no technical reason why other accountancy partnerships should not take on the developments is there?'

'No, but they may have other—'

'My idea is this. If we can convince the Institute of Accountants it should act as the national authority for setting standards for accountancy systems, better deals could be negotiated with suppliers, inter-working between companies would be easier, and the profession would be saved a lot of reinventing the wheel. In the long term we should have better systems at lower cost, the copyright on software owned by the Institute rather than individual suppliers. You see what I mean?'

His thinking had taken a giant leap from an upgrade to our internal system to the adoption of national systems and standards. 'Ideally yes, but would the Institute be willing to involve itself? They've always kept aloof from information technology. All their Systems Subcommittee does is to produce a newsletter about things that have already been implemented, they don't take a lead in anything. Competition among accountancy software suppliers is tough. Trying to take over control and get them to co-operate and let the Institute hold copyrights...'

'I know about all that. Accountancy and computers are so intertwined now the Institute ought to play more of a role, not leave it to the suppliers to make all the running. They are the independent body, they are supposed to look after the interests of the profession, and that is precisely what I am suggesting they start to do. Let me have what you can put together in the next hour. Then, will you be able to come into the partners' meeting this afternoon? I want to convince them we have to stop the Institute dragging its feet.'

'Yes, but... I'm not sure what use I'll be. The partners won't be interested in anything too technical.'

'You're right about that, no techno-babble, keep everything in layman's terms. My secretary will ring you when the item comes up for discussion. Should be between three and three-thirty to judge from where it is on the agenda, but be on standby from two-thirty. Keep the whole afternoon free if you can. Is that likely to be a problem?'

'No, no, I'll be waiting for the call.'

'Excellent.' He rushed off again, leaving me bewildered. Even if there were good arguments for what he was suggesting – and I myself was not convinced – an hour was not long enough for me to write a coherent well argued case. What I gave to his secretary was a hotchpotch. The thought of him putting his proposals to the partners without a lot more work, and thoroughly softening them up beforehand, appalled me.

Worried about making a fool of myself in the afternoon for the third time that day I rang Lizetta to ask if she had any idea why he had suddenly become so interested in engaging the Institute on computer system standards.

'There are rumours flying around that the knives are out for Peter. A lot of it is probably exaggerated, but let's meet for lunch and I'll tell you what I know.'

We went to our usual sandwich bar where she ordered her soup and roll. Preoccupied with the misfortunes of the day, although my appetite had recovered after the morning's nausea I ordered the same. We sat at one of the little chrome tables, eating with our elbows tucked in so as not to jab people nearby. My soup and roll lasted about five minutes, whilst Lizetta, busy telling me what she had heard, made hers last a full half hour.

'This is rumour, you understand, and I'm putting together bits from different sources, some of it from Caroline, some from elsewhere. You've probably heard most of it already.'

'No, I've heard nothing. You may not have thought so this morning, but setting up the new software has kept me extremely busy. Outside the information technology unit I've not talked to anyone much for the past few months.'

'You should always make time for gossip. Let me bring you up to date. After the merger the support staff were reorganised very quickly, but the accountants themselves carried on much as before, keeping the same clients they had been dealing with over the years. The plan in that report of yours, remember, was that they should reallocate their work according to a new classification of business sectors, and a few months ago they all went off to a hotel in the country to battle over who should take over what.'

'I remember churning out masses of statistics for them. All that's been worked out now, hasn't it, the reorganisation is under way?'

'Yes, but Peter has a problem. There was a scramble for the sectors with the most prestigious clients. Peter's success in steering through the merger must have gone to his head. Rather than join the fray he set out to take over the firm's seat on the Institute of Accountants' General Committee. For as long as anyone can remember that privilege has been shared by the three most senior partners, each taking a year in turn. Why he thought they could be induced to make him the Committee member I can't imagine. He couldn't have picked on anything more likely to make him unpopular. You could probably steal the clothes off the old codgers' backs more easily than deprive them of their stuffy meetings at the Institute. You'd stand a better chance of persuading them to give up their pensions.'

'Peter must be aware of that, surely.'

'You would think so, but somehow he has convinced himself that he is so valuable to the firm they ought to give him whatever he wants. Caroline thinks he's been led on to some extent by people who are out to get him. As well as infuriating the three current partners who take turns on the Committee, all those who were waiting in the queue for the current triumvirate to retire are also upset. Some accused Peter to his face of trying to ruin their chances.'

'So what is going to happen at this afternoon's meeting?'

'While he has been wasting all his energy demanding the impossible, all the main industry sectors have been allocated to other partners. There are two jobs left. One is dealing with an assortment of small clients; the other is to go on loan to the firm we have links with in New York for one to two years. Guess who everyone thinks would benefit from a couple of years' experience in the States?'

'Peter... but he gave up a job in the US before joining the firm.'

'Exactly. He is now desperately trying to find a way out. Maybe he's accepted that the three senior partners will not give up the Committee, and is hoping he can persuade them to put him forward to the Institute in some sort of computer supremo role.'

'What will happen to Caroline if they send him to the States?'

'She will probably go with him. There are plenty of multi-national firms based in New York that would be glad to take on someone with her personnel experience in the UK and Europe. She's fine, by the way. She asks after you, you know. We'll have to fix up to have a meal together. You'll find her good company now.'

No matter how good the paper that Peter intended to present that afternoon, it was unlikely to be well received. In the partners' eyes the Institute was sacred. To convince them to put such a novel proposal forward would require months of persuasion. To try to push the idea at the quarterly meeting without doing the preparatory work was hopeless.

I had a dozen routine tasks to get through that afternoon, but dread of the summons to the

meeting made it difficult to focus my mind on any of them. After half a dozen attempts I gave up trying to contact Tom. Increasing hunger was making me irritable. Why had I not had something more substantial at lunch with Lizetta? I dared not go out again in case Peter sent for me; one or two people who might have been asked to go out to the sandwich bar for me as a favour were engaged on tasks that could not easily be set aside. I would have to starve.

Suddenly I remembered the car. It had been in the side street for hours and might easily have been stolen or vandalised. The breakdown service was engaged twice when I tried to ring, but I got through the third time and hurriedly explained the problem, no doubt sounding like a complete buffoon. They repeated back the details of where to find it and, with understandable annoyance, promised to make collecting it a priority, 'since all your appointments have prevented you from letting us know about the accident before now, sir.' Reporting the crash to the office manager would have to wait until Monday; by then her disapproval might be easier to bear.

The call to the quarterly meeting did not come until four o'clock. I was as nervous as I had been at my first ever job interview. In the board room there was one free chair, more or less opposite Peter. The chairman waved me towards it, thanked me for coming to help with what he called Peter's 'submission', and asked him to begin.

Copies of the paper refined from my hurried drafts were passed around the table. Peter could have had little more than an hour to work on it, but had turned my rag-bag of extracts into a three-page well ordered document. He spoke for ten minutes, rehearsing the main arguments in the paper, sounding more and more enthusiastic as he went along, expanding on the benefits that would flow when the Institute became the leading influence on new computer technology throughout the profession.

He said that recent progress with the firm's own systems put it in a unique position to help the Institute take on the key role of helping the whole profession obtain better value from computer suppliers.

Listening to him I almost began to think that he might win the partners over. The old codgers' faces expressed nothing, but that was normal. On the table, too far away for me to reach, was a plateful of biscuits. No coffee had been offered me, and it would have been impertinent to ask, but the chocolate bourbons and jam creams looked mouth-watering. After finishing his peroration Peter turned to me and said, 'Have I given a reasonably accurate summary, Mark? Anything you'd like to add?'

He had put the case so comprehensively there was little for me to say. 'I think you've effectively covered the ground. I might mention one specific thing, the improved level of security now available for high speed transmission of data over telephone networks. This does extend the scope for co-operation with other organisations. I could provide more detailed information on any of the topics mentioned if you,' I looked at the expressionless faces around me, 'have any questions.' I wished a couple of strong new arguments had come to me; what I said was better than speechless embarrassment, but not much.

The chairman, concealing the nastiness of what he was about to do behind a smooth civilised tone, said, 'Forgive me if I show ignorance of computer science, but this latest *software* that you're *implementing* – am I using the right technical terms?'

'Yes.'

'This new *software*, I am sure it is a wonderful advance, but how big a difference will it make to our firm, or to the other firms which Peter believes might benefit from it? Will there be, for instance, major cost savings, or some great attraction to our clients? Should we look forward to it bringing us substantial new business?'

'I can't say that, no. Some things will take less time to do under the new system, so there will be some savings...'

'But not major savings?'

'The main advantages are qualitative: some things can be done in a more straightforward way, there are additional facilities, presentation is better. The broad sweep of what Peter is saying does not depend on these particular enhancements, they would be a sort of starting point...'

'Thank you, Mark, that's been extremely helpful. I think I can speak for us all when I say that we have come to expect no less from you. Would you all agree with me there?' He was evidently deriving pleasure from making me look small. He looked around the table, raising his eyebrows to encourage nods and smiles of agreement. 'I hope we haven't kept you away for too long from your other pressing duties.'

'No, not at all.' I stood up, took a last longing glance at the plate of biscuits, and left Peter on his own, defenceless. Hearing the chairman's patronising dismissal of me he must have realised that none of the old codgers, or even the younger more progressive partners, was in the least interested in his new initiative. He was sure now to be forced into 'submission', to use the word with which the chairman had so contemptuously described his proposals.

At half past five, after the meeting disbanded, he walked into my office. 'Couldn't make them see sense, the old fools. I thought we put up a nigh on irrefutable case. Didn't succeed, but we can't be accused of not trying. Thanks for your support.'

'Maybe if we'd had more time. The chairman completely threw me with that question. I'm sorry, I was struggling.'

'No, no. You put up a good show. Wasn't your fault their ears are stuffed with cotton wool. Cotton wool in their heads too, most of them. We may have lost today, but the issue won't go away; what I was saying makes sense, we both know that.'

'Is it going to make a big difference? In terms of what happens here, I mean.'

'To me personally it will. Hard as it is to believe, the old codgers have somehow managed to run rings around me. What annoys me is that clients were drifting elsewhere before I joined the firm and shook things up! If they think that they've got away with today's little exercise in crushing my ideas they're in for a few surprises. What I could do with now is a pint. Expect you could too. You deserve one.'

Severely battered by the events of the day, what I wanted to do was to go home for a simple meal, and go on to meet Tom as usual on a Friday night. Given the extent of the disaster which had befallen Peter, his request was impossible to refuse.

We met at reception at six-thirty and walked out into one of those powerful winds that sends papers and food packaging flying up into the air between tall City buildings. He marched me past three pubs, doubtless wanting to be far enough away from the office to reduce the risk of bumping into anyone we knew.

Eventually we headed for the run-down dingy little pub where I had been taken ages ago to see the female stripper. A handwritten notice told us this form of entertainment continued, but fortunately it had finished at three o'clock. There were perhaps half a dozen people in the bar, drinking and talking quietly in the half-light. He bought the first round and we sat at a small square table against a wall, squinting at each other past yellow wall lights set too low down.

'Fancy the old codgers getting the better of me like that. A couple of them encouraged me, probably leading me on for their own devious reasons. That merger has done some good, but evidently it wasn't enough to shake most of them out of their usual do nothing attitude.'

‘They stuck together, when the crucial moment came.’

‘Damn right they did. Nothing to be done about it now. Bloody firm. Whenever you try to achieve something there are always a dozen buggers trying to hold you back. Easiest thing is to let them all go to ruin in their own chosen way. Not only have they thrown out my ideas for the Institute but they’re trying to ship me off to the States. You know I had a spell there some time ago?’

‘Yes, you told me about it. How long would it be for?’

‘At least a year. Have to get used to the idea, I suppose, try to see it as an opportunity. Right now it seems more like a punishment. They’re an ungrateful lot of bastards. I don’t suppose any of them has a clue how much effort and sheer determination were needed to pull off that merger. I gave everything I’d got to achieve that. Honestly thought I’d begun to make a difference. They won’t get the best of me that easily. Time is on my side, they can’t cling to their lackadaisical old ways forever.’

Drinking so early in the evening on an almost empty stomach began to affect my head. Peter’s need to unburden himself was understandable, but he showed no concern for my situation. Friendship with him was always friendship on his terms. In this ritual commiseration over pints of beer it fell to me to buy the next round whether I wanted another drink or not. Up at the bar I asked for a packet of crisps and a packet of peanuts, hoping that food would prevent my head from becoming worse.

‘We’re out of stock.’

‘Do you have any food at all?’

‘None. We’re having trouble with our supplier. I should have some in on Monday or Tuesday.’

‘I’m starving,’ I said, paying for the beers.

Peter overheard this exchange. ‘People like that make me sick,’ he said when I returned to the table. ‘They don’t deserve to be in business. They could easily go to a supermarket and buy half a dozen packets of nuts and crisps, how much initiative does that take?’

We consumed our second pints at a much more comfortable pace, while he speculated about the effect of his new job on Caroline, saying that she ought to have a good chance of finding work in New York. I listened and nodded, encouraging him to do most of the talking. After about an hour he was less agitated, and my hopes of escape rose when he seemed to be running out of things to say.

‘What a way to start the weekend! That’s enough of my troubles. What about you? What’s happening to you these days?’

‘Oh, nothing much.’

‘Still living in Chiswick, on your own?’

‘Yes, I’m still on my own.’

‘Anyone special at the moment?’

What would he think of my relationship with Tom, so utterly different from his socially approved marital status? ‘There is someone, a boyfriend. We’re doing all right.’ If he knew what Tom did for a living he was bound to sneer. Instead I talked about Andrew, how he was building up his business in *Ferns and Foliage*, about the nursery in Buckinghamshire and how he was hoping to expand onto land adjoining the site.

‘I admire his type. They’re resourceful and energetic. What he does is small scale, they’re living above the shop types of business, but he has the satisfaction of being his own man. Nobody is going to be able to pack him off to the States when he doesn’t want to go.’

All this time I was watching the level of beer in Peter’s glass, matching my speed of

drinking to his, hoping that soon we would finish our drinks and I would be able to go home. When his glass was empty, before I could stop him he was on his feet and at the bar ordering refills. On his return he said he was awfully sorry but he would have to go soon and we would have to make these the last beers, as though our being there had been at my instigation, not his.

Finally we left, a stomach too full of beer doing nothing to ease my hunger. The rush hour was over, but my train was full and I had to stand all the way back to Chiswick. My mind churned over all the events of the day, the alcohol jumbling everything up. Peter's support had helped my progress in the firm so much, his rapid downfall made me wonder about my own future. I had climbed to a level from which it would be difficult to go higher. Should I start looking for a better paid job elsewhere? Had the time come for me to make a complete change to something where I would no longer be vulnerable to humiliation by elderly accountants who considered themselves my superiors?

Having left the flat that morning feeling nauseous, I returned to it with a headache. If Tom and I went as usual to the Beckford Arms I would have to avoid drinking more alcohol. In the hope of mitigating the effects of the beer I made myself two thick slices of toast, liberally spread them with jam and washed this inadequate meal down with instant coffee.

A shower made me feel much better, and refreshed I noticed for the first time that there were two messages on the answering machine. Both were from Tom, the first asking me to call him back, the second saying: 'Hello Mark, been trying to reach you. Expect you've been out wining and dining in expensive restaurants all day as usual. I've got bad news: Andrew's been taken ill, he's had a blackout. It's quite serious, they've taken him into hospital. I went in to see him but they only let me stay a few minutes. About to get myself something to eat. See you in the Beckford Arms later. Bye.'

CHAPTER 6

Andrew's 'blackout' had been caused by a subarachnoid haemorrhage, a leakage of blood from one of the small arteries which supply the brain. He had been helping to lift a large container of plants at *Ferns and Foliage* when he collapsed. The garden centre's manager was summoned and, unable to bring him back to consciousness, called an ambulance. Andrew had come round to some extent by the time the ambulance arrived, but was dazed and unable to stand, and was taken into hospital for tests and observation.

On Saturday morning Tom took him a few personal things from Biddulph Mansions and some business papers, while I spent the morning in Chiswick looking after domestic essentials. In the late afternoon I went to the hospital, finding my way to Andrew's ward under the many signs for medical departments such as *paediatrics* and *haematology*. I looked nervously at the beds on either side in the open part of the ward but could not spot him and began to wonder if he had been moved; then I found him in a partitioned corner at the far end where he had a little more privacy than most. He looked weak and vulnerable, but showed no other signs of illness or injury. Hearing my deliberate cough he looked up, and after saying hello made me smile at my own awkwardness by asking *me* how *I* was.

'Sorry, I'm not used to these places. Tom told me a bit about what happened – you had a blackout.'

'They've diagnosed a subarachnoid haemorrhage. I had one before, a couple of years ago. A small blood vessel here,' he pointed to the back of his head, 'has burst. It's not something that's associated with age particularly, they're puzzled by it. Bring that chair over. Sit down.' His eyes were clear but he was slurring his words slightly.

'Are they looking after you in here?'

'I think so. They're busy all the time, but no doubt they give me as much attention as my case requires.'

Two hospital consultants had talked to him about the possibility of an operation to close off the small artery which had haemorrhaged. They were waiting for test results before deciding whether to go ahead. 'Perhaps my age will make them decide against it. Take my advice, Mark, never be ill. Tell me, how is everything? You look tired.'

'Tough day at work yesterday.' This was hardly the time to tell him my troubles. On his bedside table was a card with the message *Hope You Are Feeling Better Soon*, and beside it a small amber bottle with a fancy label. 'You've had a card already.'

'Yes, have a look.'

The picture showed a thatched cottage with a front garden full of flowers, a little over cute, and inside written with a green felt tip pen was the message: *Rub in a little of the sandalwood oil from time to time and think of me - or someone better!*

'The bottle came with it?'

'Aromatherapy oil. Smell it.'

I carefully unscrewed the cap and sniffed the contents. 'That is nice, a lovely smell. I'm afraid I haven't brought anything. Who sent you this? A secret lover?'

'If only. You're not so very far out though – why shouldn't you know. I've had a regular weekly appointment with a masseur for quite a while. He does offer aromatherapy, but my motives for seeing him were rather more basic. Don't look so shocked.'

'I wasn't. Surprised, that's all, you've never mentioned him.'

'Perhaps not, but I wasn't intending to make a secret of it. Paying for sex... but what are the options, at my age, if you still have the urge? Any sort of outlet, let alone a relationship, involves time, effort, and money. The arrangement was honest and straightforward, more so than a lot of supposedly respectable marriages are. It suited us both, there was mutual respect. I rang him to say that I would miss this week's appointment and that the illness was likely to prevent me seeing him for some time. So he came to visit and brought the card and the bottle of oil. Tell me what's wrong with that.'

'Nothing. You assume I'm prudish. I'm not. I've done things I wouldn't boast about, far more dubious than going to a masseur. What counts is how you thought of each other. Such a nice gift, he must like you a lot. Have you tried the oil?'

'No, you're supposed to dilute it. Bit awkward in here.'

I put the card and phial back on the cabinet. 'Is there anything you want me to do at *Ferns and Foliage*?'

'You're busy already. My staff will cope, they'll probably do better with me out of the way. Perhaps one thing, if you can find the time.'

'Of course.'

'As a precaution, could you get a form from the bank so that you can become one of the signatories for cheques? Be an idea to make Tom one too.'

'You're beginning to worry me now.'

'I'm not in any danger, no more than we all are, but we have to be sensible. Cheques require two signatures. At the moment there's me, the garden centre manager, and the chap who keeps an eye on the flats for me and helps me with paperwork. Another couple of signatories will make sure we're not caught out. If you don't mind doing it, that is. I shouldn't ask; you're under pressure at work already.'

'I'm honoured to be asked. What's the best way of arranging it? If you gave the bank a ring on Monday to let them know, I could pick the form up on Tuesday lunchtime and we can sort out the signatures in the evening. You're sure there's nothing else?'

'No, Tom gets me everything I need, don't you worry.' He smiled and pushed himself a little higher onto the pillows. Only fifteen minutes had passed and already we seemed to have run out of conversation. Unable to think of something better I said, 'This is quite a novel experience for me. I've only been into hospitals two or three times in my whole life.'

'You've never been seriously ill? You're lucky. Another advantage in life?' He sometimes liked to remind me that, whilst he had been born into a poor family, my circumstances had cushioned me from hardship.

'No. Sprained my ankle once, but they didn't keep me in. Other than that, been to visit someone in hospital a couple of times.' To make my good health seem less exceptional I added, 'Tom has never been seriously ill either.'

'Your parents, you mentioned a car crash...?'

'My sister and I were taken to the hospital, but they'd been killed outright; they had no need for visitors.'

'I'm sorry, don't mean to...'

'It was so long ago. I was still at school at the time, studying A-levels. An aunt and uncle on my mother's side took us in. They did their best for us, but they had a child of their own. We had a miserable couple of years. You can imagine how we felt. Their little girl put up with us and we put up with her, treading carefully all the time, avoiding arguments, being artificially nice to each other. I suppose she didn't want us in her house any more than we wanted to be there. The alternative, had they not taken us in, would probably have been a

children's home of some kind, so we had reason to be grateful.'

'But not like being with your own Mum and Dad. Quite a setback at the age of what – seventeen?'

'Fortunately money wasn't a problem. My father worked for an insurance company and had taken out maximum cover. They were tough times for us even so; my life has not been all ice cream and expensive toys. I don't think I stopped feeling miserable until I went to university. In a way life started for me again there.' Andrew was looking towards me, but although his eyes were fully open they seemed unfocused, giving the impression that he was no longer listening but engaged on some other theme or memory of his own. 'Sorry, I must have told you all this before.'

For about a minute he did not move, as though he had forgotten I was sitting by his bed. He returned from his reverie and said, 'You did tell me once before that you lost your parents in a car accident. Must have been very hard. Unhappy memories – not always a good thing to go back over them.'

This was the wrong time for me to be talking about a fatal accident. 'That one disaster apart I have to own up to a good start in life, middle-class parents, no major accidents or major illnesses. Although actually I did have a bump in the car yesterday.'

'In that priceless Mercedes? Was anyone hurt?'

'No, a stupid low speed collision. My fault.'

The clinking of cutlery and crockery at the other end of the ward told us that food was on the way. 'I'd better go. Sounds like supper.'

'Don't let that worry you. You may get a cup of tea if you're lucky, although I can't promise it, they watch the pennies on food. I've never taken out private health cover. I suppose that firm of yours has fixed something up for you.'

'Well... yes. You might be able to get a private room here, the charge may not be all that much.' The smell of onions and gravy drifted into the cubicle. 'What were we talking about?'

'The accident – the collision. The other driver was all right?'

I mistakenly assumed he was asking about my parents' accident, not my bump in the Mercedes. 'Cuts and bruises. That was what seemed so terribly unfair, he killed my mother and father and got away with minor injuries.'

'Ah – I meant your collision yesterday.'

'Oh that, sorry. No, a bit of damage to the cars, not much.'

'You never told me your parents' accident had been so... traumatic.'

Desirable as a subject or not, my parents' deaths had cropped up again. 'Yes, it got on the front page of the local paper. A stolen car with the police in chase went through a set of red lights straight into them. My parents' car was pushed off the road, bounced down an embankment, turned over, and smashed into a garden wall. The bodywork was mangled. We were told they wouldn't have suffered. The car thief who killed them is probably out of jail by now, the bastard.'

When I looked back at Andrew his eyes were wide open and he was staring up at the ceiling. 'Sorry Andrew, are you OK? Shouldn't have been talking to you about all that, not here.' He continued gazing fixedly upwards. 'Andrew, Andrew,' I said more loudly, worried that he might be having another attack. He seemed not to hear me, and in a panic I hurried over to the auxiliary nurse who had brought supper. She scurried away to the office at the other end of the ward to seek help.

A stocky nursing sister came out to examine Andrew, her white tunic stretching over her substantial bosom. She leant over the side of the bed, her chest pressing down on the

bedspread. In a high pitched coquettish voice she asked: 'And how are you feeling now my darling?'

His lips moved slightly as he whispered something to her. She took his pulse, concentrating on her watch for the required minute, then released his wrist. 'Food is on its way. Try and manage some, even if you are tired.' She looked up at me and said, 'Shall I leave you to say your goodbyes?'

Hastily doing as she suggested I followed her down the ward until she stopped at the door of the office. 'Will he be all right?'

'He seems a bit tense; he's had several visitors today, probably been very tiring for him.'

'Something seemed to happen, he was all right, we were talking normally... then he seemed much worse.'

'Ups and downs, you have to expect it. We are checking him every half hour for observation, so we will know if anything is wrong. His pulse was a little bit fast, that's all. I expect the last time you saw him he was fit and active. Sometimes simply being in a hospital bed makes people seem very poorly. Bit of a shock for you seeing him like that?'

'Yes, that may be it.'

'Maybe do you good to have a cup of tea or something. There is a visitors' refreshment room on the ground floor. Are you a relative?'

'No, a friend, the family is not close.'

'How long will it take you to reach home?'

'An hour perhaps.'

'If you like you can ring to ask how he is when you get back. There's no need, as I say, we are checking him every half hour, but ring up and ask for me if you're still worried about him.'

Tom and I went to the hospital together the next day. In contrast to me he was relaxed and talked easily with Andrew about his friends and staff at *Ferns and Foliage*. He teased him about being examined by attractive young doctors and being lifted out of bed by muscular male nurses. The place seemed to stifle my ability to make conversation. Andrew asked Tom to put off whatever work he had planned for the coming week to run errands for him, bringing him paperwork and doing miscellaneous jobs for *Ferns and Foliage*.

Towards the end of his week in hospital for observation he was conducting business from his bed using a mobile 'phone. He was forced to stop when the senior consultant recommended surgery, and booked the operation for the next day. Arrangements were made for him to recuperate in a nursing home near Eastbourne in the hope that getting him away from London would force him to rest, but after a couple of days he had Tom driving up and down to the south coast with correspondence and was ringing his staff several times a day with queries and to ask for progress reports.

At *Ferns and Foliage* the manager, whilst knowledgeable and competent, insisted on sticking rigidly to his contracted hours. Except for essential cover for sick absences and unforeseen crises, Andrew disliked paying overtime, believing that bonuses based on profits were the best way of rewarding staff for good work and flexibility, whereas regular overtime encouraged people to work slowly and take unnecessary time off sick. He was worried that the manager would use his absence to change working practices, and persuaded me to go in a couple of times a week on the excuse that he wanted me to ensure the paperwork was well maintained and check on stock levels.

The manager knew about the new arrangements for signing cheques and understandably resented my interference. He occasionally made mildly critical remarks, for instance when I

rather stupidly asked why it was necessary to stock a dozen different types of fertilizer, he said contemptuously, 'Your trouble is you don't know your chrysanthemums from your dahlias.' The criticism was largely justified, and for him to voice his irritation was better than letting it fester into a grudge. Even Tom knew more about plants and the uses of the various packets and bottles of stuff on the shelves than I, and sensibly explained that whether so many different types of fertilizer were necessary did not matter much; the garden centre, like shops of all kinds, stocked whatever would sell.

Andrew's illness, or rather the lack of his company, exposed a weakness in our relationship. From my very first visit to the Beckford Arms, Andrew and I had been the great talkers, discussing everything from the price of crisps to the dangers of global climatic change, while Tom put in a few comments here and there. Since Andrew no longer came to the pub regularly Tom and I were spending more time on our own together. Some of his habits of speech began to irk me: his use of 'ain't' instead of 'haven't', usually followed with another negative as in 'ain't got no time for them' or 'ain't never been there'; his 'going for a quiet drink' in the Beckford Arms even though the pub was often noisy and overcrowded; and the way he called his clients 'gov' on the 'phone as though trying to ingratiate himself by being obsequious.

When he wanted he could be surprisingly articulate. In the early days when we were getting to know each other he told me about his childhood, for instance how he, his brother and a couple of friends used to play at tying each other up with bits of rope they found in an uncle's garage. They would take it in turns to be the 'captive', submit to being tied up and left for five minutes alone in the pitch dark to try to struggle free, sometimes succeeding before the others came to release them, sometimes not. Their escapades sounded imaginative and exciting compared to the games my sister and I used to play in the back garden, never far from parental eyes.

Telling one another the interesting bits from our past lives could not sustain conversation between us forever, and new topics became harder and harder to find. We shared our friendship with Andrew, our visits to the swimming pool, and the sexual side of our relationship, but had little else in common. Looking back, that we should have made the effort to find new interests we could enjoy together is obvious, but what happened was if nobody came over to talk to us in the Beckford Arms we would more often than not run out of things to say. When we were apart I often thought of him with affection, but much the same was true of Andrew, and at times it seemed to me that my sexual relationship with Tom and my friendship with Andrew were not separate things but a sort of combined 'affair', the physical part of it being with Tom and the meeting of minds being with Andrew.

After he returned from convalescence Andrew worked much as before on weekdays, and we resumed our practice of meeting for dinner on Sundays, all three of us taking our turn to be host, but he rarely joined us in the Beckford Arms. Most evenings in the pub other regulars chatted to Tom and me and helped prevent too many long silences, but in Andrew's absence the time often seemed to pass very slowly. Annoyingly, if Tom fancied someone new who turned up in the bar he would unashamedly liven up. 'Look at that one,' he would say admiringly, pointedly lusting after another man in front of me. What might go on when we were apart did not bother me. Going into the homes of gay men to do work, and living so conveniently near the Beckford Arms, he must have had many opportunities for casual sex. Having him as my boyfriend left me with no hunger for anyone else, but it would not have been a great surprise to me if he did not feel the same and picked up someone now and again. Monogamy is not common among gay men, and attempts to force anyone into it are bound to

fail. Tom was not foolhardy, and if he was having casual sex would take precautions. If he occasionally went with someone for fun, the less I knew about it the better.

On a Friday night a few weeks after Andrew's return from Eastbourne the entire gay population of London seemed to have invaded the Beckford Arms. When we arrived all the tables were occupied and the crowd at the bar was four deep. The barman explained while serving us that another gay pub a couple of miles away had closed for refurbishment.

The din of music and conversation was so great that we had to shout to be heard. Even to stand in one place was impossible, as we were constantly jostled by other customers fighting their way to the bar or the toilets. Hot and uncomfortable, I was about to suggest we finish our drinks quickly and leave when a black man I had never seen before shoved himself between Tom and me, confidently put an arm around him and kissed him full on the lips. Tom pulled away, shook his head and said, 'This is not a good time.' The man looked round at me, then back at Tom who half nodded, and went off to the other end of the pub.

I turned to face Tom, waiting for an explanation.

'What can I say? You saw what you saw. It wasn't anything. Let it go, Mark, something made me go for it that one time, maybe I shouldn't have but I did. The thing was a one-off.'

'A handsome man. How long has this been going on?'

'There's nothing going on. That once, I admit to; let's say I made a mistake. He would have to turn up here. I sort of let myself fall for it the once, wasn't like we even spent a night together.'

'You expect me to believe that?'

'Because it's true. If something is true, you should believe it. Give me a chance.'

The intense rush of anger and jealousy made me want to march out of the pub without another word and go back alone to Chiswick, but to give way to this surge of emotion might damage our relationship permanently. Given a little time my feelings would moderate. Then, after thinking calmly, I would decide what to do. If this incident, and all the other trivial annoyances and disappointments of the past, outweighed my positive feelings, clearly the time had come to bring our affair to an end. We stood silently in the congested bar avoiding each other's eyes. A friend came over to chat, unaware or pretending to be unaware that anything was wrong.

When the pub closed we went back to Tom's flat and climbed into bed together, knowing the sex would be spoiled by my restrained anger and his guilt. For the rest of the weekend we were polite towards one another but far from happy, avoiding a row but not really wanting each other's company. At dinner on Sunday we tried to appear friendly to avoid embarrassing Andrew, and somehow maintaining the semblance of normality completely neutralised my feelings of resentment. The incident had confirmed my suspicions about Tom having casual encounters, but nothing important between us had changed.

Ironically since he was at fault, the incident led him to decide to break off with me. A few days later, when I hoped that we would be able to put the tiff behind us, he told me a friend had persuaded him to go up to Manchester to work on the construction of a new shopping centre. Top rates of pay were on offer because the project was behind schedule. Guessing that this was an excuse to finish the relationship, and hoping to make him tell me so unambiguously I asked directly, 'Are you going because of what happened in the pub on Friday night?'

'No, it ain't that. This is my chance to make some real money. With some savings behind me maybe I could be somebody, build up a business for myself even.'

'Will you be back at weekends?'

‘Sundays is when they pay the best overtime rates. There should be a good few weeks’ work up there. Won’t know exactly until I get there.’

If not goodbye forever, it was goodbye for an indefinite period. ‘When are you going?’

‘Probably go up tomorrow. Might as well get started.’

Although we brought each other to perfunctory orgasm in bed that night, we gave each other little pleasure. Two days later I tried his portable ‘phone number, but one of Andrew’s staff at the garden centre answered. Tom had used that ‘phone since we first met, but now had left it behind because it belonged to *Ferns and Foliage*. He had denied me even the pleasure of wishing him well and saying that if we bumped into each other we should say hello and be friends.

Andrew invited me to a restaurant for dinner the following Saturday, saving me the misery of not knowing what to do on my first Saturday night without Tom for over a year. He told me that Tom had travelled up to Manchester by train, had kept on the flat above the garden centre, but he had heard nothing more from him.

The next weekend I went to visit my sister and stayed overnight. Of my previous social life, prior to my affair with Tom, there was little to go back to. Old friends had, not surprisingly, found others to have meals with or go with to concerts or the theatre, and I reconciled myself to being on my own much more. In gay pubs and clubs picking anyone up somehow proved impossible for me, and my expeditions ended, however late the hour, with my return to Chiswick alone.

My friendship with Andrew survived; he and I occasionally went together to see a film or a play, and we continued to have Sunday dinners together. Neither of us mentioned Tom.

Some time ago he had talked about everyone’s life having ‘compartments’, for instance home and work being largely separate, and that division being a good thing because if events in one compartment went badly wrong one could still be happier in the others. Yet despite the fat salary, the high-flown job title and the Mercedes, aside from my friendship with Lizetta, work at Lindler & Haliburton gave me little satisfaction. The technical role, which had engaged my mind with system innovations and new user demands, was largely behind me and my days were now mainly taken up with trying to match budgets and expenditure, with staff issues, endless paperwork and interminable meetings. An unsettling prospect loomed ahead: that my career would end the way my old boss’s had, and after decades of resentment I would take early retirement, thankful to escape the pressures of the job and the patronizing attitudes of the partners, to be replaced by someone younger, keener, and more up to date.

A family man, assuring himself that such a sacrifice at work was worthwhile for the benefit of his offspring, could perhaps accept life on these terms, but for a gay man – childless – it would lead to a growing sense of dissatisfaction, of having expended all those years to gain material wealth but no happiness. Were not the newspapers endlessly running stories of rich show business stars and heirs to fortunes driven, despite their money, to self-destruction?

If I was no longer with Lindler & Haliburton for money and the conceit of working for an established City firm, then what was I there for? What were the rich rewards for? To keep me miserably alive? And the more the years crept by and my abilities were worn away in the firm’s service, the harder it would be for me to switch to something new.

CHAPTER 7

The daily onslaught at work prevented me from brooding, but the true nature of the change from being half of a couple to being what might optimistically be called *unattached* or *available* became clear within a week. The word *desperate* might be a better one for my state of mind. Tom, evidently, had tired of me, but my notions before his departure that I might be tiring of him had been delusions.

At Lindler & Haliburton a myriad of technical and staffing issues filled my days and left me tired in the evening and at weekends. Peter's absence in the US made work more predictable, probably less stressful, but less interesting too. He was anxious to keep up with office politics and retain as much influence in the firm as possible, and we exchanged e-mails every couple of weeks.

He flew back to London for the quarterly meetings, and on the first of these return visits invited Lizetta and me for lunch. Caroline and Vincent, a new client he had recruited at the last Hotel and Catering Exhibition where the firm now had a small stand, joined us at the restaurant. At first Vincent's presence puzzled me, business lunches with clients usually being separate events from social meals with colleagues or friends. Momentary but very expressive eye contact between him and Lizetta after we had ordered our meal revealed that to her he was more than a business client with us to be entertained. He was not a handsome man, balding and a bit overweight, but he had a warm friendly smile and an easy confident manner.

Later, when we were on our own, she pretended that their affair was my responsibility, saying that they would never have met had I not encouraged Peter to involve the firm in the Exhibitions. They lunched together a couple of times and arranged to meet for dinner a couple of weeks later, and after it she took him back to her flat. He ran a management consultancy specialising in work for the tourist industry and was married, but not – according to Lizetta – happily.

Caroline, wearing a charcoal business suit tailored perfectly to her figure, sat next to me on my right. Events at the *Hotel des Amis*, now over a year ago, were clearly forgotten. After the first course she took my hand in hers for a few moments and said she thought it was unfair that so many good-looking men were gay, blatantly teasing Peter by making up to me in front of him. Pleased to be able to make a fresh start with her I made ambiguous comments about not wanting to be stereotyped and saying that, like a lot of gay men, I found some women very attractive. For a while Peter ignored us.

As usual he dominated the conversation. He pressed Lizetta for information about the old codgers and whether any of them was planning retirement. He had heard that one of them was going to hospital every week for outpatient treatment. 'Anything serious?' he enquired, obviously hoping that it was.

'That's not for me to say, or for you to ask,' Lizetta answered.

'Oh come on, what's ailing him? Gout, heart condition?'

'None of those things.'

'What is it then? Bladder?'

'You won't get anything out of me. You may as well drop the subject.'

'We've eliminated a few things. What's left? Cancer? Come on, we're all dying to hear the grisly details.'

Caroline intervened. 'Lizetta is quite right to say nothing. Anyway Mark and I don't want

to hear about all this, and I'm sure Vincent doesn't either.'

'Bah! All right, let's hear from one of you then. Mark, sitting there flirting with my wife, what's happening to you in that fast moving high-tech world of yours?'

'For some unknown reason the IT Unit's work has been remarkably stable for the past month or two,' I said, daring to hint that his absence might be the cause.

'You sure? In the States change, not stability, is normal. Except for the very biggest partnerships which have their own IT consultancy arms, the middle-rankers are shutting down their own IT Units and contracting the work out. Could be the new trend, saves employing a gang of expensive technical experts who claim they have to be there for reasons nobody else understands. If it's happening in the States, won't be long before it happens over here. Maybe you should think about a move to one of the companies taking on the work. Jump aboard now before the bandwagon starts rolling.'

This warning may have been typical Peter bravado, but there had been a few articles in business computer magazines recently about companies doing exactly what he described. City firms were constantly being reorganised, merging, or shifting away from old static markets into new expanding ones. We had to adapt in a world of frequent reorganisation where people often changed from job to job. 'Thank you for raising the subject,' I said ironically.

Caroline came to my aid: 'The demand for IT staff is as high as ever, at the moment they're the last people who should worry.' She looked directly at Peter. 'Would it be possible for us to act as though we have come out to enjoy each other's company over a meal, not to bully everyone into submission?'

'Hmph! What are we going to talk about then? Shopping?'

Vincent diplomatically began an anecdote about a recent assignment his company had completed. The owner of a guest house in a small Midlands town had asked them to recommend ways to improve business. The consultants who went to investigate discovered that he created problems for himself by finding fault with his guests and constantly putting them right, but was completely unaware that by doing so he was putting people off. The man boasted about getting the better of his guests, proudly telling of an occasion when shopping in the local supermarket he saw a couple of his clients buying food; he followed them back to the hotel and used a shortcut to sneak in through the back entrance to await their return. As they came in through the front door he challenged them by asking if they knew that guests were not allowed to take food up to their rooms for environmental health reasons. When they pretended not to have any food with them he asked to look in their bag.

Vincent's gentle humorous manner, the way he smiled and chuckled as he spoke, infected us all. The guest house proprietor, he said, also had a dog, a neurotic terrier that would growl and snap at people at the front door. In the breakfast room he allowed it to pester hotel guests for titbits. The dog would alternately whine pitifully and growl, and if anyone was brave enough to proffer a scrap of food it would snatch suddenly at their fingers leaving teeth marks on their hand. The most difficult thing about the assignment was finding a way to explain to the owner, without causing offence, that he himself was the cause of his lack of bookings.

Vincent's genial way of speaking made even Peter relax. Nevertheless the remarks about the possible new trend in computer services were probably right. Why should an outside company not be hired to replace the IT Unit, much as *Ferns and Foliage* were contracted to supply the decorative plants? Whether such a change would be beneficial, no one could know for sure until afterwards. Yet if rival firms began to put out their IT work Lindler & Haliburton would almost certainly follow their lead.

The following Sunday in Chiswick I mentioned the subject to Andrew over dinner. 'What

would happen to your job in practice?' he asked. 'Presumably the company that took it on would need experienced staff and you could find a job with them.'

'Possibly, yes. And someone at Lindler & Haliburton would be needed to deal with the contractor, making sure a good service was being provided, costs were tightly controlled, authorising necessary changes and so on. But that would be a less senior job than the one I have now. Otherwise it might mean redundancy.'

'It could be your opportunity to make a real change. What sort of redundancy payment would they give you?'

'I don't know. Redundancy is always a risk in the City. Worrying about it could make you neurotic. You'd never withstand all the pressures if you let vague doubts about the future get to you. The firm's IT Unit is actually quite efficient. The current arrangement may well be the most cost effective.'

'Maybe, but you'll have a major influence over any decision. With Peter out of the way you can probably make the arguments for and against look as good or bad as you want. Is there anyone except Peter who knows enough to challenge you?'

'He's not completely left the scene, and he could be back in a year's time. Contracting out the IT services could take longer to arrange than that.'

'You must control developments as far as you can. The big questions are do you really want to make a complete break and go into business for yourself, and, if so, doing what? A hotel for instance?'

'You're going miles and miles ahead of me. Why a hotel, except that you're keen on the idea? Another job that makes use of my current skills might be the best thing. Anyway, what about the people who work for me?'

'They'll find other work, or take redundancy like you.'

'That may not be so easy for some of them – they're not all ideal employees.'

'You and that friend of yours in Personnel will do what you can for them. You have to think of what's best for you. Even the flowers in the meadow compete with one another to have room to grow.'

The possibility of me setting up a small hotel had somehow become an occasional topic for speculation. Perhaps I had unintentionally encouraged him in the idea by telling him about Georges and the *Hotel des Amis*, and about a weekend I had spent in Brighton some months after starting work with Lindler & Haliburton, driving down in the then newly acquired Vauxhall to stay in a pleasant bed and breakfast that advertised in the gay press. Nothing exceptional happened, but somehow everything was so enjoyable, the guest house proprietors were friendly, and for once, there and later in a gay bar, I fell easily into conversation with interesting people. I picked up a handsome, sensitive, intelligent Canadian in a club on the Saturday night, – only a one-night stand but somehow an exceptionally happy, satisfying one-night stand – and in the morning when we sat together at the breakfast table, the man who served us discreetly pointed out, with a gentle encouraging smile, the note at the foot of the breakfast menu saying that additional meals would be charged at so much per head.

But opening a guest house was perhaps, for me, merely a subject for amusing discussion, an imaginary escape route when pressures at Lindler & Haliburton were heavy, no more than an occasional pleasant day dream. Providing somewhere to stay that was comfortable and clean for gay men visiting London, making them welcome and hearing something of their lives was appealing, but new businesses set up by inexperienced people usually fail. There was a high risk of bankruptcy.

Yet the idea must have begun to take hold. At the last Hotel and Catering Exhibition a

fresh-faced young salesman in a brand new suit persuaded me to buy a subscription to the trade magazine *The Caterer and Hotelkeeper*. If what lay ahead for me at Lindler & Haliburton was what had happened to my old boss in the IT Unit, a growing dissatisfaction which worsened with age, even festering into bitterness at wasting my life there, a radical change now while most of my working life still lay ahead would make sense.

Peter gave me another little stimulus to think about my future by sending me a copy of an article from the *Wall Street Journal* extolling the virtues of corporations concentrating on their 'core business' and contracting out most of their support services. Not surprisingly the author was a director of a company which provided office services and computer systems to several major US corporations, and predictably he made all he could of the benefits whilst skimming over potential drawbacks. In a clever piece of low key marketing he concluded that such arrangements might not suit everyone, but recommended that all organisations, private and public, evaluate the use of outside service companies *as an option*. How difficult it would be to argue against that, and once an evaluation began the door would be open to persuasive people such as himself.

Peter's motive was not one of animosity towards me – he was careful to explain that he wanted me to be aware of the trend rather than be surprised and overtaken by developments – but what if he was discussing the subject with others in the firm? The same day, as though collaborating with Peter to spur me into action, Andrew rang to suggest having another look at Goodmans Villa, the house he had taken me to see almost two years ago. It was no longer on the market but he thought if we approached the owner she might be willing to lease it to us.

'What started you thinking about that place again?'

'I happened to pass it the other day and rang the estate agent for a chat. There would be no harm in making a few enquiries. If we could get a lease on it for say ten or twenty years we should be able to make it pay.'

'There's still a job for me here at the moment. Maybe the hotel is a long way in the future, something for my retirement.'

'What harm would there be in having another look at the place, if I can arrange it? If you don't want it maybe I could raise some money and let it out as flats. That's what it's being used for at the moment.'

'London is full of flats and hotels. What's special about that particular house? Why now?'

'Why not now? We may be able to do a good deal on the house. There is an impasse between the property company that has bought up half the neighbourhood and the owner of Goodmans Villa who doesn't want to see them tear it apart. If she would give us a long enough lease at the right price, we could make a viable business out of it. There's nothing to lose by going to see it again. Since we last went the flats have been re-let, but the agent will take us for a look round.'

He seemed determined, and no good reason to refuse came to mind. After fixing a date for the visit he surprised me further by saying that Tom would be back and suggesting he come with us. He knew the circumstances of our break-up, and should have been aware that I would be reluctant. With sham indifference I said, 'Why should he want to come? He's not interested in buying it, is he?'

'He could be useful – his practical experience of plumbing and wiring – but if you'd rather he didn't come...'

Giving away my hurt feelings I said, 'If he's working for you again and you really want to bring him I suppose it's your decision. Maybe I'm the one who doesn't need to be there...'

'Don't think too harshly of him. Tom's no saint, but the two of you can be friends, can't you? Put up with him for my sake, even if he's out of favour with you.'

The estate agent arranged to collect us from the garden centre by car. Arriving fifteen minutes early, I found Tom and Andrew together in the staff room upstairs and responded sullenly to Tom's greeting, avoiding looking at him. To my annoyance, Andrew excused himself saying he had to make a 'phone call, leaving Tom and me together sitting beside the table used by the garden centre staff during their breaks.

'You been all right?' he asked.

I would have preferred silence. 'So-so.' Making an effort to be polite I asked: 'How was Manchester?'

'Did OK, plenty of work.'

Annoyed even more by his casual manner I said pointedly: 'I tried to ring you.'

'I was staying in a caravan on the site, working every day except two. It wasn't easy to get to a 'phone. Hardly saw Manchester, none of the gay bars, nothing like that.'

'They wouldn't let you out to send a postcard?'

'Wasn't like that.' He looked up, his face miserable. 'I thought about calling you but wasn't sure what to say. You might have been angry with me.'

What was he talking about? 'Why should I be angry with you?'

'Andrew's told me things. I thought you ought to have a chance to find somebody who would be more like your sort of people.'

Had our break up come about because of some off-hand remark of mine to Andrew about Tom and I not having all that much in common? What could Andrew have said to him? 'What do you mean, my sort of people? What sort of people are they?'

'You know what I mean. This isn't easy for me.'

'Do you think it's easy for me?'

'You don't know, Mark, you don't know half of it.'

'Half of what?'

The estate agent's arrival brought this awkward exchange to an end. We went down to the car, and I sat in the passenger seat to avoid being next to Tom, with whom I now felt absolutely furious. Had he ditched me over some stupid misunderstanding? A lack of shared interests was something we could have done something about. We could have increased the stock of things that we had in common by going to new places and finding new interests together.

When we reached Goodmans Villa and walked up to the front door he hung back. In the hall a scattering of advertising pamphlets littered the floor. The agent, Andrew and I stepped over them, but he stopped to pick them up. I watched him, thinking: you fool, what are you doing that for, picking up other people's rubbish?

He straightened up abruptly, almost as though he had heard my thoughts, and returned my gaze, making me ashamed of thinking of him so sneeringly. What good would come from being angry with him? If there had been a failing it was probably mine. Why had I not talked to him about finding more activities we could share, rather than complaining to Andrew about us not having enough in common? For all the differences between us, Tom was in every way my sort of person, and should never have been allowed to doubt it.

He was looking around the empty hall wondering where to put the papers he had collected. I went over to him, took them from him, tidied them into a neat bundle and put them at the side of one of the stairs.

He avoided looking at me, but my eyes were now constantly drawn towards him. He must

have showered and shaved immediately before coming out. His black curly hair seemed light and fluffy, and his denim shirt curved over the contours of his muscular shoulders. He wore new jeans, and my fingertips could almost sense the rough texture of the dark material.

I turned away from him, reminding myself we were there to look at the house, and tried to act calmly and sensibly. My hunger for him had become too strong; it engulfed me. Standing close to him made me sweat and tingle inwardly. My hands seemed to develop a will of their own and wanted to reach out to touch him. Paying attention to what Andrew and the estate agent were saying was impossible.

After a brief look around the ground floor, where the tenant was out, we descended the dark staircase to the basement. The 'garden' flat remained unoccupied and had deteriorated since our last visit. When the agent opened the door at the top of the stairs the smell was awful, much worse than before. In a corner of the back room were a twisted pile of bedding, two large holdalls packed to bursting, an orangeade bottle half full of dubious liquid and some festering take-away food cartons. The lock and security bolts of the door to the garden had been forced, bare wood showing where the frame had split apart. The person who had been dossing in the room was absent.

'You'd think one of the tenants would have let me know about this. One of them must have seen or heard something. I suppose now I'll have to call the police.'

Tom said: 'No, don't do that, what harm's he done? There's no call for that.'

Andrew agreed: 'He's right, what are the police going to do about it? They can hardly put a twenty-four hour watch on the place.'

The agent shook his head. 'I'm thinking about insurance. If there's any damage, if he – or they – cause a fire or steal anything from upstairs, the insurers will want to know that the police were informed straight away.'

'The insurers will know only what you tell them. Tom will put the man's things outside and board up the door; we'll check tomorrow to see if he's moved on. If not we'll let you know and you can call the police.'

The agent shrugged. 'If you're volunteering to do the work...'

'Yes,' Tom confirmed, 'you forget about it. I'll bring some polythene sheeting, put the bedding and the holdalls outside and cover them up, and I'll make the garden door secure. That'll be the last of him.'

We moved on to the front basement room where black mould had spread extensively over the walls. 'Is anything being done about the damp?' Andrew asked.

'No. To tell you the truth I've been meaning to sort this garden flat out but haven't got round to it. The damp proofing specialists are pretty good these days. They'd have a damp course put in and the replastering done in two or three weeks.'

Tom disagreed: 'We're not talking damp courses here. The soil at street level must come up four or five feet on the other side of that wall. Depending on how bad it is they might have to dig a trench outside, install a waterproof membrane and improve the drainage.'

'There isn't a problem here. We can get a free quote for the work from a specialist who'll provide a twenty-year guarantee. Damp proofing is routine these days.'

We returned to the less sticky air of the ground floor and continued upwards. On the first floor, as with the ground floor rooms, having furniture in place gave a much better idea of their size. Each of the main rooms was big enough to divide into two twin-bedded hotel rooms with en suite facilities.

On the next floor up we met the tenant, a middle-aged woman who showed us her flat and talked all the time. She ushered us into the bathroom and said to the agent, 'I know I

mentioned it last time you came, but I'm sure the toilet is leaking. I've put a mat around the base but it's always wet.'

'As I told you, someone will be coming to look at it.'

Looking at the lavatory I thought I could see a fine crack running down the pedestal beneath the glaze, and bent down to look more closely. A few drops of moisture were visible. Tom came up beside me, standing so close that his hips were a couple of inches from my face. Turning my head slightly I could see the brown leather belt threaded through the loops of his jeans, and his shirt creasing where it disappeared into the waistband. My pulse quickened and my face flushed. The others had moved out into the hall.

After straightening up I felt dizzy. The very molecules of the air around me seemed energised by his presence. My state of arousal must have been visible. He said hoarsely but softly: 'I think something's give way.'

'What?'

'The toilet bowl or the connection with the drain. Something's give way.'

'Oh... Not very nice.'

'It's not healthy. That estate agent wants shooting.'

Going in front of him on our way out of the room I paused deliberately, making him bump into me. 'Sorry.'

'S'okay,' he said softly. The smile he gave me, my first for so long, told me that his mood too had lifted. We followed Andrew and the agent back out onto the landing, where we paused at the foot of the narrow twisting staircase leading to the attic. From above came a familiar old piano tune from the twenties or thirties. 'Sounds like they're in. Do we need to bother with the attic rooms?' the agent asked.

'A quick look,' Andrew decided. Tom and I followed, and I could not resist putting my hand on top of his on the stair rail as we went up. He looked back and smiled again. How desperately I hoped his desire for me had rekindled. Halfway up the bare wooden stairs was a tiny bathroom somehow squeezed into an area below part of the roof. At the top was a small square of landing barely big enough for two to stand, with the doors of two bedsits on either side of it. The agent knocked at the one on the left, but the sound reverberated so much that the doors on both sides opened in answer. On the right was a Middle-Eastern looking man of about thirty with a thin line of black moustache, and at the door on the left stood a boy who looked too young to be living on his own.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you, lads, can we just have a quick look, if it's not too inconvenient?'

The boy went back into his room and the music ceased abruptly; Andrew and the agent followed him, while Tom and I accepted a gesture of invitation into the room opposite. Text books with scientific diagrams were strewn around the table and bed, and on a cabinet was a partly disassembled computer. The tenant was unsmiling, resentful of our intrusion, and we glanced quickly around, directing our eyes upwards towards the ceiling as though checking for damp.

'Something wrong with the computer?' I asked.

'I'm studying computers and electronics. Imperial College.' After a pause he added 'Darren has been playing his music very loud, sometimes in the night.'

'Darren?' He must have assumed I was someone to whom he could make a complaint. 'Very late? Did it keep you awake?'

'It makes it hard for me to study.'

'Did you ask him to turn it down?'

He didn't reply, but stood looking at us, obviously wanting us to go. 'Sorry for disturbing you.' Tom followed me out onto the landing.

The room opposite was smaller, perhaps only half as big. We could see Andrew sitting on the bed talking to the boy. The ceiling sloped down so much that he would have banged his head if he had sat up in bed suddenly in the night. The bed and a small bedside cabinet took up about half the floor space, and against the opposite wall was an ugly old fashioned wardrobe. In between was a little corridor of carpet. A chair, a wash basin and a small table with an electric kettle and a cooking ring occupied the space under the window. The boy had covered the walls of the room with posters, mostly of rock stars, but there were a few of American blues singers, Elmore James, John Lee Hooker and Bessie Smith. The indicator lights on his compact stereo system flickered to music that we could no longer hear. Andrew was interviewing him.

'I think I know where you mean, a hamburger bar on the corner near the Underground station isn't it? How long have you been there?'

'Since I came to London; about four months.'

'And before the hamburger place, where were you?'

'I was at a school.'

'Did you finish your exams?'

'No, I left.'

'Ah – and where was this?'

Tom and I glanced at each other, and then at the estate agent who raised his eyebrows. We all three stared in concert at Andrew trying to make him look round. He ignored us for several minutes before raising a hand in our direction, palm open, as though trying to deflect our collective gaze.

'And how have you found the big city?'

'It's great. I could make some tea or coffee if you like. I've only got paper cups though.'

'From work? Paper cups are fine by me,' Andrew said.

The estate agent looked at his watch. 'Sorry, Andrew, I have to go back to the office. Darren, what's that I can see moving about over there?' He nodded towards a small aquarium that stood on the bedside cabinet.

'They're my terrapins.'

'You're not allowed pets. You've been told.'

'They don't disturb anyone. Nobody knows they're there.'

'They're against the rules. They'll grow too big for that tank. Then what's going to happen? You'll have to—'

Andrew interrupted him. 'Oh, if need be I expect I could find a place for them at the garden centre.' He turned to the boy. 'You could come in to feed them. Surely there's no harm in them staying where they are for the moment. You're right, we ought to get moving. Thanks for letting us see your room. Can't say I eat a lot of burgers, but I hope we'll see each other again sometime.'

At the estate agent's office we had coffee while we looked at architects' drawings of the house and at a file containing various leasing agreements and other papers. Andrew asked if there had been any more interest from the property company.

'As before they seem to be stalled. They own the terrace and most of the mews, which have all been converted into modern flats, but if they could develop the whole site including Goodmans Villa and the adjoining house, with some new building at the back, they might have another thirty or forty units. The owner's stubborn, they've offered the old lady well

over the market value, but she won't let them gut the place for sentimental reasons. You stand to do very nicely out of a lease if she'll agree to one. When she dies, the heirs will probably want to sell up. They might buy the lease back from you at a premium, but whatever happens you should get a good return on your investment. You can't lose.'

'We've been thinking of turning it into a guest house. Renovation costs will be substantial, the place has been neglected for years. We need to have a shot at a business plan...'

When we were nearly ready to leave Andrew rang the garden centre to ask one of his staff to collect us. He had himself dropped off first at Biddulph Mansions, reminding Tom as he got out of the van of his promise to board up the basement of Goodmans Villa. We continued on to Tom's flat, not needing to tell one another in words that we were impatient to make love. As soon as we were through the front door I wrapped myself around him. He pushed it shut and pressed me against the wall, leaning his weight against me and holding me tightly as though to stop me getting away. When he released me a little I edged sideways towards the bedroom; he weighed down on me again, rubbing himself against me but keeping me trapped against the wall, as though I had been trying to escape. After two more of these pretend captures and releases we reached the bedroom doorway.

As I stepped backwards into the room he pushed me onto the bed and lay on top of me. A minute later he left me briefly to relieve himself. Longing for his return I rocked myself slowly from side to side, this latest brief absence, after so many weeks apart and the hours of anticipation while we looked over the house, an agony. My desire for him was so intense that if he had spread his shirt and jeans out on the bed for me I could probably have made love to them.

CHAPTER 8

Having warned me of the trend towards buying in computer services from specialist companies, Peter expected me to resist any attempt to close down my unit should one of the younger more forward looking partners, or even one of the old codgers who had been tipped off about the trend by a friend at his club or on the golf course, suggest it.

He knew nothing of Goodmans Villa or Andrew's ideas for a gay hotel. That I might want to relinquish the income and status of my position in the firm to set up a small business had probably not crossed his mind. The happiness brought me by Tom's return helped my decision. Giving up Lindler & Haliburton for Andrew's world of small independent gay businesses would surely show that there was not some other social group who were 'more my sort of people', prove the depth of my commitment and strengthen the bond between us.

A software supplier I regularly dealt with was also in the business of running computer facilities for other City institutions. I told my contact there that one of the younger Lindler & Haliburton partners was rumoured to be thinking about contracting out the work of my unit. This was untrue, but he passed the rumour on to his colleagues, and before long they began lobbying several of the partners to be allowed to bid for the work. Peter need never know that his warnings had helped contrive my exit from the firm.

In return for my co-operation in the process that would bring about my redundancy – and for anyone to take over the work without my help would have been extremely difficult – I was promised a substantial 'severance' payment and a huge bonus based on anticipated cost savings over the first five years of the change. The partners may have genuinely believed that the savings dangled before them by the company hoping to take over the work were realistic, or in the increasingly bitter internal politics at Lindler & Haliburton, Peter's enemies may simply have thought it worth paying a substantial sum in order to be rid of me, one of his main supporters. Had he been present he might have prevented the change, but since he was in exile, other than harrying me by telephone and e-mail to put forward the arguments for keeping the IT Unit as it was, there was little he could do. I pretended more and more to be disillusioned because, after all my work over the years, the partners wanted to call in outsiders to replace me and my carefully selected team. Misleading Peter in this way might be disloyal, but he had had my past hard work and support by way of repayment for the help he had given my career. The time had come for the account to be closed.

My disillusion with Lindler & Haliburton and work in the City increased by the day. Things that had once impressed me, the huge sums of money appearing on balance sheets, the senior staff meetings and conferences in prestigious office buildings, the business lunches, all the outward show of City affluence, ceased to attract me. My hopes and ambitions lay elsewhere. My years of work there came to appear as a necessary period of labour undertaken in order to win my independence.

Having recently invested in the Buckinghamshire nursery, Andrew had no capital available to invest in Goodmans Villa, but he played a major role in obtaining the lease. The old lady who owned it depended on income from the flats to pay her nursing home fees. The flats were deteriorating and becoming more and more difficult to let, and she could not afford extensive renovations. He went to see her, and she welcomed the proposal to take the house over for use as a hotel. Her solicitor was in favour, and the hotel, or rather guest house, that had for so

long been a vague possibility became the subject of contract negotiations. After several meetings we agreed on a lease for ten years with options for two five-year extensions.

The draft business plan for the first year, drawn up with Andrew's help, was guesswork. We estimated the likely charge for a night's stay using advertised prices at other hotels and guest houses nearby, calculated potential annual takings and set them against running costs. Profit or loss depended on our assumptions about the level of bookings, something we would not really know until the hotel had been open for a year or more. Lizetta's boyfriend, Vincent, helped us with the figures and encouraged us with statistics about rising demand for hotel rooms in London.

Arrangements to take out the lease on Goodmans Villa, like the contracting out of my work at Lindler & Haliburton, went on for month after month. As the opening of the hotel came closer, going into the office every day became an agony. The snobbery, the competitiveness, the hand-stitched suits, ostentatious motor cars and business lunches were now loathsome to me. That world, in which general social good meant nothing, where men were ranked entirely according to money and position, now seemed horribly obsessed with the superfluous and pretentious.

Events seemed to progress under their own momentum. Andrew guided me through the stages of agreeing and signing the lease for the hotel, giving the existing tenants notice, arranging for the conversion work, clearing the hurdles of planning permission and having the business registered with the authorities. At Lindler & Haliburton I gave opinions on the papers and memos dealing with the hand-over of the IT Unit, and attended meeting after meeting at which long lists of queries about costs, timings and terms of contract were examined and weighed from every imaginable viewpoint. Seven months passed as item by item all the uncertainties were resolved. At last two crucial documents, the contract for the firm's future computer services and my formal acceptance of redundancy terms, were ready for signature.

Except for my friendship with Lizetta, the break from my old working life was to be total. Because she was also friendly with Peter and Caroline I held back from revealing my plans for the hotel until the key documents were signed, and she knew only that Vincent had been giving me some advice about setting up in business. When I made critical remarks one day over lunch about the firm wasting money on extravagant perks she said, 'You really have had enough of the place, haven't you? I'm sure you could have put a stop to them contracting your work out if you'd wanted to. My opinion of the firm has gone down too, especially since I've met Vincent. He gets on by being considerate and constructive, whereas at Lindler & Haliburton there is so much personal antagonism; everyone is becoming more greedy and grasping.'

When eventually I did tell her of my plans for the hotel, asking her to promise not to tell Peter, she was surprised and delighted. A week before the party to celebrate my departure from the firm, I invited her, Vincent, Tom and Andrew for a meal at a recently opened French restaurant. She had met Tom briefly once before, but knew Andrew only from what she had heard me say about him.

We all arrived at the restaurant together. The waiter who showed us to our table was relaxed and friendly, but by mistake he gave us menus that were entirely in French. Tom, embarrassed and threatening one of his moods, tucked his elbows into his sides and his face took on a rock-like expression. Somehow Vincent did what I had never succeeded in doing: he laughed him out of it. 'Oh blimey, might have known, hope one of you knows what all this means. Last time this happened to me we all ended up eating some sort of stomach-churning

casserole, tripe and goose gizzards or something unmentionable.'

'Don't worry,' Lizetta said, 'Mark speaks fluent French.'

'Might have known, bloody know-all.' Vincent's choice of words may have been confrontational, but his tone of voice was warm and gentle. 'Come on then mega-brain, what's it say?'

Tom started to laugh, very quietly at first, but he couldn't stop himself. When I began to translate the menu he laughed even more, as though instead of saying *Lamb Steak with Rosemary Jelly* or *Sliced Duck Breast* I was reading out a series of extremely funny one-line jokes; Vincent started laughing with him, and Lizetta and Andrew were soon infected too. Keeping my face straight, I continued, looking up and glancing around the table occasionally, trying to look mildly put out. A concerned waiter came over to offer us copies of the menu in English. Lizetta coughed and swallowed to regain control of herself and asked him for a bottle of mineral water. Pouring this out and sipping the contents they recovered themselves sufficiently to decide what to order.

On the phone the next day I mentioned to her how fortunate we had been to have avoided one of Tom's moods. She said, 'That's one of the great things about Vincent, he has the knack of putting everyone at their ease. Doesn't matter who he meets, a car park attendant or a captain of industry, a few minutes later he'll be chatting away with them as though they're close friends.'

On my last day at the firm I had to return the Mercedes. My Chiswick flat had been sold by then and I had moved into the newly damp-proofed and renovated 'garden flat' of Goodmans Villa. Waking up on my first Monday morning, with no congested journey to work to endure, no need to observe a rigidly imposed pecking order, and no senior partners to answer to, I revelled in the fresh, new, as yet unblemished world of being my own boss in my own guest house. I had never felt happier.

The decorators would not finish their work on the upper floors for another fortnight, but otherwise the hotel was ready for its first guests. Tom had completely rewired the building, and a small company he recommended did the rest, ripping out the old partitions and installing new plumbing and fittings to create twelve double en suite rooms. The cost of the lease and all the work had absorbed my savings, the generous pay-off from Lindler & Haliburton, and the proceeds from the sale of my Chiswick flat. Andrew had to guarantee an overdraft at the bank to provide me with cash for running costs.

As well as being my living accommodation, the basement housed two big commercial washing machines and a dryer. The breakfast room, lounge, kitchen, and a little office were on the ground floor. Breakfast and Sunday dinner would be available, and for other meals guests could use local restaurants and take-aways or the Beckford Arms, all within a few minutes' walk.

The landlord at the Beckford Arms introduced me to an old friend of his who managed a long established gay hotel, Housmans Hotel, near King's Cross. During several evenings in the pub and a couple of meals together he talked to me about the business, advising that as an absolute minimum the hotel would need a part-time cook for breakfasts and at least one part-time cleaner. Over the years he had had lots of interesting people come to stay, actors, musicians and visitors from all over the world. He told me about a married man whose wife tracked him down to the hotel and screamed accusations of perversion and betrayal at him in the hall, about a masseur who booked a room for a week and had to be asked to leave when client after client came in asking for him, and about guests who seemed to think sex with the hotel's staff was included in the price of the rooms. He gave me lots of tips, for instance

always to confirm times of arrival and departure when taking bookings, and how to deal with allegations of theft from rooms and the various ruses used to evade payment. The thirty-four rooms of his hotel were, he claimed, occupied most of the time; he offered to refer clients to me when he was fully booked, and I promised to do the same for him if Goodmans Hotel was successful.

He came to see it when the decorators had finished, and as we stood outside looking at the restored and repainted stucco facade, the tidy garden, and new signs in gold lettering on a green background big enough to stand out, but not so big as to look like advertisement hoardings, the appearance of the premises filled me with joy. Everything was the way I wanted it.

Except, that is, for one thing: the tenant in the attic. Andrew had befriended the gawky boy he was so taken with when we inspected the house with the estate agent. According to him Darren was sensitive and intelligent, and his having been abandoned by his parents to fend for himself in London was disgraceful. He would, he said, happily have found somewhere for him himself, but Darren was not earning enough to pay for a self-contained flat, and at his age with his boyish appearance and trusting nature he was too vulnerable to be pushed out into the risky world of multi-occupied accommodation. There was no question that his circumstances were very hard, and although letting him stay meant having him occupy what could have been another hotel room, albeit up three flights of stairs, Andrew had helped me so much in setting up the hotel his arguments were difficult to reject.

At weekends he took Darren on trips to museums, gardens, art galleries, the theatre, classical music concerts and jazz clubs. When he proposed taking him to Paris for a few days Tom and I were seriously worried that he was becoming infatuated, but he dismissed the idea, saying that he was old enough to be Darren's grandfather and that there was nothing sexual about their friendship. On a cold day seeing them leave the hotel together that was what they looked like, a grandfather and grandson going out for the day, Andrew white haired, well wrapped up in a thick overcoat, scarf and gloves, the boy in jeans and a T-shirt, or on wet or extremely cold days draping himself in one of the lightweight but ludicrously long raincoats that were a teenage fashion at the time.

At first, I suspected that Darren was simply flattered at being treated so generously by a rich older man, and that his claimed interest in the places Andrew showed him was largely a pretence. However, given the chance, he would detain Tom and me for half an hour with detailed reports on their expeditions to Kew Gardens, Greenwich Observatory or some other attraction, and after hearing several of these enthusiastic accounts I had to accept that he was genuine.

All the same, however much pleasure Andrew derived from his company, in the first days of the hotel he was an unwanted complication. He kept his room clean and tried not to be a nuisance, but would ask me for advice about all sorts of things, about opening a bank account or going to some club or other he had heard about. Returning from the burger bar sometimes he would interrupt me in the kitchen or the office with some mildly amusing story about the people he worked with, referring to his place of employment by derogatory names such as the grizzle-in-a-bun bar, the dieters' disaster, the nutritionists' nightmare and the odious offal outlet. He had taken this dead end job shortly after arriving in London because he was down to his last few pounds, and passing by on his way to the Underground saw a placard in the window advertising for staff.

Tom was much better than me at dealing with him, warning him to be on his guard against strangers in case they tried to take advantage of him, telling him that he was a bright kid and

ought to be thinking about his future. One night when we were lying in bed holding hands after sex Tom told me a little of the boy's background.

He had run away from his home in Twyford after making a pass at a friend one night when staying at his house. The supposed friend recoiled; Darren's parents, who were the religious type, were told, his relationship with them deteriorated and he ran into trouble at school. On his way home one afternoon he was punched and kicked by a gang of three bullies. Believing his parents were against him and having no confidence in his teachers, he evaded awkward questions about his bruises by saying he had fallen off a wall. Feeling there was nobody he could trust, early one morning he packed a bag and left.

Tom's and Andrew's appeals made me more sympathetic towards him. Once the larger of the two attic rooms was redecorated I helped him move his things into it and kept his rent the same as before. His old room became a store-room for linen, cleaning materials and a couple of spare mattresses. In return he pressed me to let him help in the hotel, and I asked him to cut the grass and keep the gardens tidy.

The next day he created a neat border for shrubs inside the front garden fence. His spindly limbs worked the spade so skilfully that he had obviously learned how to dig somewhere, probably by helping out in the garden at home. Nearby a little collection of plants in plastic containers was lined up waiting to be planted. When I asked how much they were going to cost me he said they were a present from Andrew. He spoke so anxiously, an abandoned kid desperate for reassurance and support. What could I do but smile and say, 'You're making a good job of that,?' He smiled in return, a little embarrassed by the praise, and returned to his task.

Over the next few weeks he brought in window boxes and ornamental containers, planted them up and nurtured them conscientiously. To encourage him I told him to bring his laundry down to the basement once a week and to help himself to breakfast and whatever food he wanted during the day from the kitchen. He always looked for me to let me know whenever he was coming in or going out, and I came to quite like seeing his skinny figure appear at the kitchen or office door several times a day. Andrew's foundling, with his pet terrapins, had successfully established himself in the attic of my hotel.

CHAPTER 9

To bring in customers I placed adverts in the gay press for 'London's newest gay hotel', set up a site on the Internet, and sent nearly two hundred e-mails to gay organisations. When the momentous occasion came that the first ever guest stepped over the threshold, suppressing my excitement I pretended to check the hotel diary for the booking, took him up to his room, wished him a comfortable stay and told him that breakfast was available from seven in the morning. Alone in the kitchen afterwards I leapt up and waved my fists in the air. The hotel was in business at last.

About a month later my friendly welcome to those arriving was well rehearsed, and as people were leaving I would wish them a pleasant journey and say I hoped they would stay with me again the next time they came to London. A few guests hinted that the rooms were expensive, but others who visited London regularly on business were positive about booking again, and after a few months in business I would know if prices needed to be adjusted up or down.

Adapting to a situation in which everything not done by my part-time staff had to be done by me was not easy. If the cook was off, making the breakfasts, serving them, and preparing the morning's bills was almost unmanageable even with the hotel only half full, and I had to take on a student as a part-time waiter. When the cleaner was off, there were potentially twelve bedrooms to 'do', including twelve en suite lavatories, a taste of drudgery which may have been morally good for me but was something I loathed.

Encouragingly, bookings grew; one morning my contact in Housmans Hotel rang to warn me he had given my number to a group of six men from Newcastle. 'They're a bit rowdy,' he said. 'If you accept the booking put them close together, they're forever going in and out of each other's rooms. Make sure they know what time you want them out on the last day. Getting them to leave on time has not always been easy.'

Minutes later a man with a deep voice and a strong Geordie accent telephoned asking a series of quick fire questions: did I have three double rooms available, how far was the nearest Underground station, would they be able to get in easily late at night, and how much were the rooms? He reproachfully drew in his breath when he heard the cost.

'That's quite a bit more than we were paying at King's Cross.'

'The rooms are a good size, they're comfortable, they all have en suite facilities, and this area does cost a bit more. What time would you be leaving on Sunday?'

'We should be gone by dinner time, lunch time as you call it down south; our train back home is a bit after five. What makes you ask that?'

'I usually let the rooms midday to midday, but you could have until four o'clock say, I'll still have time to put the rooms to rights before the next people arrive.'

'Just one more question. I take it you have no objections to, I don't know how to put it exactly, what you might call *continentals*.'

Puzzled I said, 'Doesn't matter to me where you come from.'

'It's not that, we're all from Newcastle. There's a particular club we go to, if you get my meaning.'

'Sorry, I'm not with you.'

'It's a bit difficult to say over the phone,' he said, evidently expecting me to read his mind.

'All denominations, races and nationalities are welcome, if that answers your question.'

'Well it does sort of.'

His booking meant displaying the *No Vacancies* signs in the windows for the first time, and their arrival marked the end of the quiet manageable first months of business, and the beginning of a much busier and hectic phase. For the first time I experienced how exhausting and unpredictable running a hotel can be.

When they appeared in the hall, nothing about their appearance or speech explained the mention of *continentals*. Voluble lusty lads in their twenties and thirties, they might have been mistaken for a party of football supporters. As I reached out to take their room keys from the rack one of them asked where the hotel register was. They had already supplied a full list of names and addresses by post with their deposit, but before I could tell them there was no need to sign the register two of them spotted it on the hall table.

'There it is!' The whole group rushed towards it, pushing and shoving each other in a playful scrum, shouting 'I'm next,', 'Come on now, I've got my pen ready here,' and 'The last one to sign has to carry everyone else's bags up to the rooms.'

They had come down to London determined to have fun, which to them meant drinking heavily, having casual sex, and maintaining their incessant loud and excited banter. When talking they often spat out their words like bursts of fire from a machine gun. They seemed to know every gay venue in London and what sort of crowd it attracted. They joked and teased each other tirelessly, involving anyone else in the vicinity in their foolery. They were always lively, often amusing, occasionally very funny, and in their regional dialect sometimes completely incomprehensible to anyone but each other.

I took them up to the second floor to show them their rooms. They followed me into the first, all of them crowding in after me. 'This one is at the front of the house,' I said.

'We're at the front of the house now, lads,' a Geordie voice imitated.

'Toilet and shower are through here.'

'Toilet and shower through there.'

'First time I've noticed an echo in the room. Will this do for two of you?'

'Will this do for two of us? Was that an echo, or might it have been a parrot? Very high class – we'll have to take our shoes off before we get into bed here.' The impudence came from a tall redhead, who stood in front of me with his shoulders back, his stance revealing a slight paunch. When I turned to move on to the next room they crowded around the door, blocking my exit. 'Excuse me, if two of you would like to see the next room...'

'Come on now, don't block the door, let the man through.' They inched apart slightly, making room for me to squeeze between them. The whole group followed me into the next room, the sound of their voices ever louder as we progressed. One of them picked up a wrapped condom from the glass shelf above the wash-basin and asked, 'How did you know what size to get us?'

The redhead answered for me: 'Worried it'll be too big for you?'

'Too small!'

'All talk!'

When they had seen the three double rooms they argued about who was to share with whom. As rude accusations about personal habits echoed around the floor I put the keys in the doors and turned to go downstairs. Darren was coming up towards me. 'Sounds like a coach party,' he said.

'Yes.' We could hear the Geordies hauling their bags around, presumably having decided who was to sleep where.

'I'm not working tomorrow evening or Sunday afternoon. I could help out, if there's anything you want doing.'

'Let's see how it goes.' He climbed past me onto the landing, where one of the Geordies spotted him and signalled to the others. Suddenly silent they emerged from their rooms to watch his skinny figure climb up the next flight of stairs. 'Where on earth did you get that?' the redhead asked, his blue eyes open wide.

'He helps out here, with the gardens mostly. Sorry, you won't be seeing much of him, he has a full-time job in a burger bar.'

'Never mind his work, I think I'll follow him up. There's plenty I could do for him right now.'

'The top floor where he lives is strictly out of bounds.'

He looked at me questioningly. 'There's no signs saying private or staff only.'

'No, there are no signs, I prefer to tell people personally that the top floor is out of bounds.'

'Do you live up there with him?'

'I'm not sure what it has to do with you, but no, I'm in the basement flat.' When I continued on my way downstairs he called after me, 'One thing before you go, pet, if you're feeling a bit lonely during the night or finding it difficult to sleep, just come up and knock at any of our doors, you'll be made very welcome I can assure you.'

'Thanks, I didn't realise I looked that desperate.'

'I saw it as soon as I set eyes on you, man.'

'You won't be out clubbing at night then?'

'You're right there. You might do better giving us a knock during the day.'

Looking as uninterested as possible I said drearily, 'Thanks so much for the invitation.'

'Well take advantage of it, man, and I'm not just saying that to get you to take something off the bill.'

On their way out that evening they found me in the hotel's little office under the ground floor staircase and asked for directions to a club popular with men from South-East Asia. They were particularly keen on Chinese men, referring to them as *continentals* as a kind of joke, having overheard someone in a bar use the word by mistake instead of *orientals*.

'Do you get many Chinese or Japanese coming to the hotel?'

'No, not so far. Perhaps I'm not advertising in the right places.'

'A house like this full of Chinese boys would be paradise. They have such lovely oval eyes and soft smooth golden skin. You won't find anything more lovely to touch. Why go all the way to Hong Kong or Thailand when you can pick up what you want here in London?' The group had been coming to London for years for what they unashamedly called 'dirty weekends'. The redhead had once lived-in as a trainee chef with one of the big hotel chains 'down south', actually in Stevenage. On his days off he and a gay friend used to travel to London, stay out all night at the clubs and take the first train back in the morning. Eventually he returned to Newcastle to work in the students' restaurant at the city's university.

They asked me about eating locally, and ruled out the nearby curry house, recalling a previous time when the effects of Vindaloo and pints of lager had ruined their hopes of picking up *continentals* that night. I mentioned that the Thai restaurant had a couple of very attractive waiters, warning that some of the food was extremely hot, and they decided to try there.

My plans for the evening were to eat a take-away meal that Tom would bring in and, if the hotel was quiet enough, to escape the premises by going to the Beckford Arms for an hour or so. We were seeing much more of each other than when I was living in Chiswick, but the

established pattern of spending Friday, Saturday, and Wednesday nights together continued. Sunday lunch with Andrew was now always at the hotel. We had briefly discussed the possibility of Tom moving in with me, but both of us were used to our independence and were afraid that being constantly together from necessity might be bad for us.

With the hotel full, leaving it unattended for over an hour to go to the Beckford Arms was a little risky, but most of the guests had gone out for the evening and were likely to return late. All had keys to the front door, the *No Vacancies* signs on either side of the ground floor bay window would put off anyone who might pass by looking for a room, and a notice on the office door gave my mobile 'phone number in case of an emergency.

To my annoyance when we returned from the pub we found a note on the hall table asking for two full breakfasts to be taken up to a first floor room in the morning. The two men who had taken it had public school accents, were very well dressed, and were probably accustomed to larger hotels staffed to provide room service. They had not asked about having breakfast in their room when I told them that breakfast on Saturdays was between eight and ten-thirty in the breakfast room. Leaving me a note like that was presumptuous. Tom suggested taking them up a couple of bowls of lukewarm porridge with skin forming around the edge, but I wrote a polite refusal on the foot of their message explaining that there were insufficient staff to serve breakfast in the rooms and pushed it under their door.

The next morning Tom woke me as he climbed out of bed, his stronger build as usual causing the mattress to quake underneath me. The time was twenty past seven, and unable to lie in bed at weekends as I used to in Chiswick, my best hope was to steal another fifteen minutes' sleep as he dressed and went up to make coffee for us in the hotel kitchen.

My snooze was short-lived. When he opened the door at the top of the stairs a loud Geordie voice reverberated down from the dining room: 'Have you been having a lie-in, pet, we've been waiting here for half an hour?' The words penetrated my semi-conscious mind, and, worried about leaving Tom to cope, I got out of bed and dressed. Of all the people at the hotel, the Geordies were the last I would have expected to be in the breakfast room first thing on Saturday morning. Upstairs, sprawling over half the tables, I found my six Newcastle guests with four strangers, three of them decidedly Chinese or South-East Asian. 'There's our man,' said the redhead, 'things'll get moving now.'

'Breakfast is not until eight on Saturday, it says so on the back of the door to your room.'

'We've not long got in. We brought a few lads back from the club, we'd like to buy them breakfast too, or we can share out what you've got for us if that's a bit awkward, just let us have some extra cups of tea or coffee.'

'If you want extra breakfasts you're welcome to have them, the menu tells you what they cost. I'll put out fruit juice and breakfast cereal and you can make a start with that, but if you want cooked breakfasts you'll have to wait half an hour.'

'We're starving hungry, pet – but we've all day, there's no hurry. You carry on in your usual business, we don't want to put you out.'

By the time the cook came in at quarter to eight Tom had taken them pots of tea and coffee, and I had started mushrooms, sausages and bacon cooking on the stove. Darren looked in at the kitchen as usual to let me know he was going off to work. When he passed the door of the dining room on his way out I heard the red-haired Geordie waylay him: 'Well now, you're not being sent off in the morning with no breakfast, surely. We've a cup of tea or coffee for you here, come and sit down next to me.'

'No thanks, I'm in a hurry, going to work. I have coffee and a bacon roll there.'

'It's a great shame, you having to rush off at this hour on a Saturday morning. Tell you

what, if you fancy a bit of a night out tonight, you could come to this terrific club with us. Plenty of lads your age go. There'll be a stripper. You'll enjoy yourself no end.'

'I'm not sure...'

'Well see how you're fixed. We're up on the second floor, or if you're passing the lounge about six or seven we'll likely be in there. A lad like you ought to enjoy a bit of life on a Saturday night.'

Having devoured their full English breakfasts, the Geordies and their friends all retired to the three second floor rooms. On their way up they encountered the two men who had requested room service making their way down. The staircase to the first floor is much wider than those above, and the Geordies, pulling the *continentals* into line and moving to the sides of the steps made a narrow corridor for the two men to pass through, trying to play the same trick they had played on me when they forced me to squeeze through them as they crowded the doorways to their rooms. 'Come through now, don't let us hold you up,' the redhead called.

'No, you're the majority, you come up first, please.' Wisely the two men from room four resisted the invitation and backed away from the ten-man gauntlet waiting on the stairs.

I shouted from the hall, 'Either go up or come down, you'll cause an accident, fooling around like that on the stairs.' They yielded and resumed their way up.

I apologised to the two men for the obstruction, showed them to a freshly laid table in the dining room, and said I hoped they weren't offended by my note about not providing room service. 'We would have quite liked to have taken breakfast in bed, but we quite understand,' was the slightly cool reply.

In the afternoon at about four o'clock one of the Geordies, a brown haired man I had not heard speak before, reappeared in the hall, unshaven, dark shadows under his eyes, having quickly pulled on a T-shirt and trousers. 'We've run out of tea things. Could you let us have a few extras?'

All the rooms have their own tea and coffee making equipment. I gave him a tray with extra supplies, including sachets of coffee and China and Indian tea bags, four extra cups and some biscuits. 'Your visitors, they look to me like orientals, not continentals.'

'Don't be silly, man. We're all oriented the same way, that's why we're staying in a gay hotel.'

'What about cleaning your rooms?'

'Don't worry about that; where we come from we only make the beds at Christmas and Bank Holidays. You don't really need to when you sleep in your clothes.'

'You might like to mention to the others that if you want dinner tomorrow it's served from two o'clock. You'll probably eat on the train or when you reach home, but if you do want the meal you need to tell me tonight.'

Their next appearance was well after six in the evening, when they met in the lounge to plan the night's activities, their loud voices audible everywhere on the ground floor. I went up to empty their waste bins and hastily tidied their rooms. Darren came looking for me to say that he would not be joining Tom and me in the Beckford Arms that night.

'You're not going out with them are you?'

'They're going for a meal first, but I'm meeting them afterwards to go to this club with them.'

'Be careful. They'll have your trousers down.'

He pulled his tongue out at me. 'No they won't. They like Chinese boys.'

Knowing that their taste was not as specific as he thought I tackled the redhead in the hall

before they left: 'Darren tells me you're taking him to a club. He's very young. Are you sure he's going to be all right?'

'This is a more of a social type of club, not the sort of place where they're ripping each other's clothes off. You can't expect to keep a boy like that tied to your apron strings, pet. Don't you fret now, the lads know your boy's not on the menu. No man, it's the *continental* lads in the club that need to worry; some of them can expect to be making close acquaintance with Newcastle private parts tonight.'

I cooked a prawn, mushroom, and vegetable stir-fry for dinner for Tom and myself. He had worked all day installing new bathroom fittings in a nearby flat; I had not been out once. We were both too tired for the Beckford Arms and spent the evening watching television. My last chore was to take out the food needed for Sunday dinner from the freezer to defrost overnight.

In the morning as soon Tom began to move I got out of bed and dressed. We went upstairs together and found three of the Newcastle group in the dining room, sprawling on their chairs reading Sunday papers. 'Are the others still out partying?'

'No, they've gone up to bed. They don't have our stamina. Two of them are Mackem boys anyhow. You don't expect Mackems to keep up with Geordies.'

'Two of them are what?'

'Mackem boys, it's a Geordie expression for someone from Sunderland. Have you never been outside London, man? Even people from Durham know that.'

'No orientals this morning?'

'Oh there were *continentals* last night all right. I met this beautiful Chinese boy from Hong Kong, he was a real golden boy in every sense of the word. I wish I could take him back up north with me. A couple of nights in the London clubs leaves you a bit tired, mind; I don't know how people living down here cope with it, all the activity night after night.'

Tom, not having entirely grasped the humour intended by their use of the word *continental*, said, 'Mark's already told you, a Chinese boy is an oriental, not a continental.'

'Ah – and if he's an oriental, what does that make me, an occidental?'

Not understanding, Tom shrugged and pulled a face. 'What d'you mean, doesn't make you anything, does it?'

'I'm no accidental, my parents intended me, I was planned.'

'What about Darren?' I asked. 'Did he get back all right?'

'He was having a great time. He's got a lovely way of moving his limbs around, that boy, last we saw he was dancing with someone. They probably left together.'

'You took him to the club; you should have made sure he got home safe,' Tom said, irritated.

'He was enjoying himself. We weren't going to spoil his chances. What are you, his godfather?'

'If he'd been with me I'd have took proper care of him.'

'Well take him to the club yourself next time then.'

We assumed Darren had returned during the night and gone safely up to bed. After giving them breakfast we ate our own lighter meal in the kitchen. They finished and went up to their rooms long before anyone else came down. The well spoken couple from room four came down at the latest possible moment, a heavy fog from over indulgence the night before robbing them of their customary polished manners. They knocked a full glass of orange juice over the table, lamely trying to dab the spillage with serviettes until I brought them a clean

table cloth.

Sundays can be tiring because clearing away after breakfast can take until eleven, leaving only a couple of hours free before preparations begin for the main meal of the day in the afternoon. With the cook and a part-time waiter hired in for the afternoon, the main meal was just manageable. I helped out as needed, showing people to their tables and going round later to ask if the food was all right. Tom, Andrew, and – when he was not at the burger bar – Darren, sat down with me to eat at what we called our ‘family table’.

That day Tom was working in the morning because he wanted to finish off tiling a bathroom wall. He went home to change out of his working clothes and collected Andrew from Biddulph Mansions. At one o’clock I rang Darren’s room but got no answer. If he was not back in time for dinner Andrew was sure to ask what had happened to him. Half an hour later, puzzled more than worried, I went up to check, letting myself in with my pass key. Everything in the room was tidy, the bed made and the curtains open, the only evidence of life coming from the terrapins. I gave them a little food from the tub next to the tank and watched them paddle around excitedly in their few inches of water.

Downstairs the smell of meat roasting in the ovens permeated the ground floor, while the cook could be heard chopping vegetables in the kitchen. The waiter was laying tables with fresh linen and cutlery from the big corner cupboard, attractive in his white shirt and tight black jeans.

From the little office where I was preparing bills for guests who were leaving that afternoon I heard Andrew and Tom talking in the hall, and stepped out to see an other-worldly looking Andrew, his white hair glowing in bright light from the open door behind him. In his arms he held an enormous flowering plant in a brass container; peering through the foliage he said, ‘I was thinking of putting this on the hall table. Have you a cloth or a mat of some sort to put under it?’

A couple of transparent plastic file wallets from the office were the nearest things to hand. ‘It’s a beautiful plant. What is it?’

‘A phalaenopsis, a type of orchid.’ Above the vigorous green plume of leaves rose seven or eight flower stems, each displaying more than half a dozen butterfly-like blooms, the outer parts of the flowers paper white, the middles patterned with rich purple spots deepening towards the centre. ‘I hope it won’t be in the way,’ he said modestly.

‘It’s wonderful.’

Tom straightened one of the leaves which had become creased up against the wall. ‘Perhaps I should rig up a little shelf or bracket for it somewhere.’

‘Are you lending it to me?’

‘If it won’t be in your way. The blooms will last a few weeks with any luck, I’ll take it back to the nursery once they fade.’ He rocked the container from side to side to test its stability, then pinned the leaf Tom had straightened out to the notice board with a drawing pin. ‘I expect it will be all right like that while we eat.’

The dining room was filling up and we went in and sat at our table. When the first course arrived, as expected Andrew commented on Darren’s absence: ‘Darren not joining us today?’

‘No sign of him yet. He went to a club last night.’

‘He’s not working today, is he?’

‘No. He went out with the people staying on the second floor.’

I got up to show some guests to their table, hoping he would forget the subject for a while, but as soon as I sat down again he asked, ‘The people Darren was with, are they back yet?’

‘Yes, they had breakfast first thing and went up to their rooms to sleep.’

‘Have you asked them about him?’

‘Yes. He was fine the last time they saw him. There’s no reason to think he’s gone missing.’ The words ‘gone missing’ were the worse I could have chosen, sure to exacerbate Andrew’s concern.

‘What were they like, these men he went out with?’

‘Northerners down for the weekend, good company for a night out, I expect.’

‘Not those Newcastle louts that Tom told me about? You haven’t let him go off with *them*.’

‘I didn’t *let* him exactly. He doesn’t ask my permission before he goes anywhere.’

‘Well can’t you speak to them again? One of them must know something about what’s happened to him.’

Whatever I said now was probably going to worry him more. The Geordies had told Tom and me all they knew about Darren’s whereabouts earlier. As our main course arrived at the table, to appease Andrew I said, ‘They’ll be asleep now, they’ve been out all night. Let’s give them an hour or so.’

We ate in near silence, and after consuming my last few mouthfuls under Andrew’s relentless stare I went into the office to ring each of the three second-floor rooms in turn. They sounded half asleep, promised to be ready to leave on time, but as expected none of them had any additional information about Darren.

Glumly I reported back that there was no further news, adding that at least none of the Geordies had noticed anything amiss the previous night. Andrew pursed his lips but did not speak. After several minutes’ silence, Tom, unable to bear the tension any longer, said, ‘Saturday night, Andrew. The boy’s been out enjoying himself. You know what lads are like, this morning he’ll be sleeping it off somewhere.’

Andrew responded in a chillingly calm voice, his articulation so precise and controlled that he might have been intoning a prayer: ‘And this afternoon too? There is a question of responsibility here, Tom. The boy is eighteen. He should be attending school, not scraping a living in some noxious kitchen. His parents have behaved abominably toward him. The question now is what are we to do about his disappearance?’

His use of the word disappearance made me wince. Darren’s absence was spoiling the whole afternoon. Tom fed the growing air of crisis by offering to go to look for him. As he could have been anywhere in London, and only thirteen or fourteen hours had passed since the Geordies had seen him enjoying himself in the club, this seemed an extreme over-reaction. ‘He might be anywhere. While you’re chasing around looking for him he’ll probably stroll in as though nothing has happened. He’s not been gone long enough to justify making a fuss.’

Tom shrugged his shoulders. ‘If it will help the offer is there. I could go to the club, the Beckford Arms, that burger dive, anywhere he might have gone, and ask if he’s been seen.’

The suggestion of a possible course of action relaxed Andrew a little. ‘Good thinking, thank you, Tom.’ He looked reproachfully at me. ‘Perhaps I am making a fuss about nothing, let’s hope so. We’ll leave things for a little longer. Couldn’t we make a few enquiries by telephone?’ He added: ‘We don’t necessarily have to go chasing around.’

The appearance of the red-haired Geordie in the doorway enabled me to escape. In the office he settled in cash for all of the group, leaving me with what was meant as a humorous jibe: ‘We’ll maybe give you a ring next time we’re planning a weekend. We were quite happy at King’s Cross and it’s not so dear, but you probably need the custom more.’

One of the men from room four, who had also come down to settle his bill, was standing waiting his turn to pay in the hall. As the Geordie walked past him he looked as though he

was struggling not to flinch. 'Sorry to keep you,' I apologised, 'and sorry again about not being able to bring your breakfasts up to your room.'

'Not at all, a misunderstanding. Don't want to hurry you. You're busy this afternoon,' he said with a thin smile.

He might not be complaining, but the prospect of him and his friend coming to stay again seemed poor. Defensively I said, 'The guest house has been particularly bustling this weekend. It's usually quieter than this. Hope you haven't been disturbed too much.'

'The room was very comfortable, thanks. I suppose you can't pick and choose your clients.'

When I returned to the dining room, Andrew was still fretting about Darren. 'Would it be worth going up to the boy's room to look around? There might be something that would give us a hint...'

'I've been up once to feed his terrapins. There was nothing unusual; what about his right to privacy – are you proposing that we search his things?'

'Well what do you suggest? You seem very negative.'

'We shouldn't—' over-react, I was about to say, but a loud crash in the hall followed immediately by a loud Geordie oath prevented me. Tom, Andrew and I hurried out. The orchid had tumbled from the table and lay scattered in pieces over the tiled floor, the brass container lying on its side near the front door. One of the Geordies, a heavy bag in one hand, stood by the hall table looking horrified.

'I'm right sorry, I had my bag on my shoulder, I must have caught it as I turned round. It was a lovely plant. Before you say anything, let me pay for the damage.'

'It wasn't even my plant.' I looked across at Andrew, who stood by the door looking open mouthed at the wreckage, his face alarmingly red. He waved a hand helplessly towards where the torn fragments of plant lay. 'Oh, good god, how on earth... it can't be? How could someone have...?'

The couple from room four appeared at the top of the stairs with their luggage, looked askance at the scene in the hall below, and walked down at a stately pace, determined that nothing should prevent their escape from the mayhem of the hotel.

I took the Geordies into the lounge out of Andrew's way and told them it would be best to make their way out quietly and leave us to clear things up. When their taxi arrived to take them to King's Cross they meekly picked up their bags and left.

Tom helped pick up handfuls of soil and pieces of plant from the floor, at first shoving bits of it back into the pot anyhow. Oddly his clumsiness seemed to calm Andrew, who remonstrated mildly, 'Not like that, Tom, you know how it should be done, the compost and rooty bits at the bottom, green leafy bits sticking out at the top,' and he knelt down to demonstrate. 'That's better, good lad, you've got the hang of it now.'

The accident took his mind off Darren. Perhaps we are capable of worrying about only one thing at a time. Having cleared up in the hall, back at our table again we talked about plans for the coming week, and an amiable mood took hold at last despite the trials of the afternoon. Half an hour later Andrew was much more relaxed. When he was preparing to leave for home I said, 'This has not been the happiest of afternoons at Goodmans Hotel.'

'Oh, no, no, you've given us an excellent meal, and nobody could complain the afternoon was uneventful. Don't worry about the plant, I was thinking of splitting it up anyway. You will let me know as soon as you have some news of Darren, won't you?'

CHAPTER 10

By Monday morning well over twenty-four hours had passed since the Geordies had seen Darren dancing with a stranger at the club. Andrew's accusatory words from the previous day, 'You haven't let him go off with *them*,' came back into my mind again and again. Every time the 'phone rang I expected to hear his voice anxiously asking for news. During a lull in the morning's activities, having got no answer from the extension in Darren's room, I went upstairs in the unlikely hope that he might have crept back in the middle of the night and had not heard or was ignoring the call.

Of course he was not there. Guiltily I eased open the shallow top drawer of the chest of drawers where he kept personal papers. The biggest stack was correspondence from the 'music club' from which he sometimes bought records. There was also a bundle of assorted envelopes with handwritten addresses and Twyford postmarks, probably from his parents. They should have been the ones to worry about him being missing after a night out, not me. Nothing in the drawer was likely to reveal what had happened to him, and uncomfortable about prying into his papers I slid it shut.

Pointless speculation began to plague me. He was unlikely to have run away, abandoning his personal correspondence, a wardrobe full of clothes and his terrapins. He looked so young; what if the police had raided the club and were holding him, suspecting he was under age, or if he had become involved in some more serious offence? Yet they would have had to allow him to make a telephone call. Suppose he had been attacked, or badly injured in a road accident, perhaps even killed? How long was it sensible to wait before ringing the police and hospitals to ask about him?

In the next hour or so several people 'phoned to book rooms, and then Tom called to say he had dropped Andrew off at the hospital for an outpatient appointment; he had already contacted the burger bar and asked for Darren, saying he was a friend, and been told that Darren was due in but had not turned up. At Andrew's insistence he was checking with me, although he did not doubt I would have let them know if the boy had come home. His call made me more anxious than ever, and after it, whenever anyone rang, I expected to hear a nurse or a policeman giving me bad news.

The cleaner was not in that day and the morning chores kept me busy, but my concentration was poor and I absent-mindedly threw some sheets over the second floor bannisters without looking, barely missing a guest on the stairs below. A few minutes later the 'phone rang again and to my relief I heard Darren's voice, nervous and pleading: 'Hello, Mark, it's Darren.'

'Where have you been?'

'I'm at Turnpike Lane Underground station. I don't think I've got enough money for the fare back.'

'What happened to you?'

'I'm sorry, I will tell you, something awful happened. Is it all right for me to come back?'

'Yes. Get a taxi if you have to, I'll pay for it. Are you okay? Andrew was so worried about you yesterday.'

'Yes I'm okay, but could you ring my work to say I'm sick? I was supposed to go in this morning.' He refused to put me to the expense of paying for a taxi, and had enough money for

one bus fare which would get him as far as Housmans Hotel. To avoid him having to walk from there I rang the manager and arranged for him to lend Darren the Underground fare home.

I rang the burger palace with the old excuse for absence of an upset stomach. Andrew, presumably still at the hospital, was not answering his mobile 'phone and I left messages on it, at the garden centre and on his answering machine at Biddulph Mansions, then rang Tom, who insisted on coming straight over. When he arrived he had worked himself into a temper and was talking about 'teaching that boy a lesson'. His annoyance was understandable, but we had yet to hear what had happened, and even if Darren was at fault sympathy and understanding were probably called for. Punishing him in some way for going missing might drive him away completely. 'And that's what you've come here to do, is it, teach him a lesson?'

'Andrew's got enough on his mind with the hospital. He's been worried sick about him. He's not going to get away with this.'

'We don't know what's happened yet. Why don't you leave it to me to sort this out? You coming in here making threats is not going to help.'

'Don't you accuse me of making fucking threats. What I said was teach him a lesson.'

'What's the difference?' For perhaps a minute we stood looking at each other, afraid of the angry exchange developing into a serious row. To end the stand-off I softly proffered a single syllable which could not be interpreted as antagonistic: 'Lunch?'

'What?'

'Should we have some lunch?'

'All right. Thanks,' he said with difficulty.

We were eating in grim silence when Darren arrived, deep shadows under his eyes and a bruise on his left cheek. Tom put down his knife and fork, looked at him angrily, but said nothing.

'What happened? Have you been fighting?'

'No. I will tell you, but can I go and clean up first?'

'All right. See you in twenty minutes, half an hour?'

He left the room. Across the table from me Tom was losing the struggle against his temper; under his shirt the shoulder and arm muscles were flexing as though his big hands were about to lash out, his physical strength becoming all too evident. I said, 'We ought to let Andrew know he's all right.'

This diversion worked momentarily. 'He's probably still at the hospital. You know how they keep you waiting at those clinics.'

'I could leave another message at the Garden Centre in case he calls there first.'

He realised that the mention of Andrew was an attempt to divert him. He glared at me as, trying to appear innocent and unconcerned, I put another fork-full of food into my mouth. 'All right,' he said, 'I'll leave the boy to you, you can *have* him, if that's what you want. I'm going.'

'Don't, please don't.'

'I might as well go back to work. Fuck you. I said you can *have* him, that's what you want, isn't it?' He stood up and put on his coat. 'Fucking bastards,' he shouted to nobody in particular as he stomped out down the hall. This was the angriest I had ever seen him, yet despite the intensity of his feelings, he had been able to back off.

My immediate task was to find out from Darren where he had been for the past two nights, and fifteen minutes later I took a pot of coffee and his favourite snack, bacon sandwiches, up to his room. The shower was running as I passed the little bathroom under the roof and I

went on up to sit and wait for him to emerge. He appeared after a few minutes, covering himself with a towel, and was drawn to the tray of food by the mouth watering smell. 'Bacon sandwiches, thanks Mark, I'm starving.'

Uninhibited by my presence he threw the towel onto the bed and put on a pair of clean white underpants. I had seen him nearly naked before at the swimming baths; his calves were about as thick as Tom's forearms, the flesh so scanty that the knobs and indentations of his bones were visible. As well as the bruise on his face he had another, bigger and more lurid, on his right upper arm. On his neck and stomach were half a dozen or more red scuffs and abrasions, which could have been caused by a fall or a fight. As a way of starting conversation I said: 'I fed your terrapins. I hope they're all right.'

He put down his sandwich and went over to them, turning his back to me and bending slightly over the tank to look at them.

'They look fine,' he said straightening up. 'Thanks for feeding them. It's time I cleaned them out.'

'Coffee?'

'Thanks.' He took his mug, had another bite from the bacon sandwich, and began to dress.

'Did someone hurt you?'

'No, I fell over a table and banged my head. The bruise looks horrible, doesn't it?'

'You went back with someone?'

'Yeah. I meant to come home straight after... I intended to come home yesterday, honestly.'

'You've been away for two nights, we were worried. You don't have to tell me what happened.'

'I want to tell you. But it's embarrassing.'

'We're friends, aren't we? Come on, you can trust me.'

The Geordies, he said, having taken him into the club, were soon engaged with a group of young Chinese men and forgot him. For a while he simply stood against a wall and watched what was going on from the shadows, but seeing other men dancing on their own, or at least with nobody in particular, he summoned up the courage to join in. A man in his twenties looked across, smiled, and made his way over to him. They said hello, danced together for a while, went to the bar for drinks, chatted, then danced again.

A little later Darren offered to buy fresh drinks, but his new friend promised to get something much better than alcohol. He disappeared in the direction of the toilets for a few minutes and came back with some tablets. Darren paused and looked at me.

'Did you take any?'

'Only one.'

'What was it?'

'It was hard to tell in the lights of the disco. He told me they were speed... they looked sort of blue-grey. He said everyone was taking them. He worked as a courier with a holiday company and he said people partied all night on them, not only in London, but in Majorca and Ibiza, everywhere. He said at some places the so-called "straights" were really disgusting, much worse than gays ever were, got smashed out of their heads at beach parties, would do anything, strip off and do filthy things to each other with bottles while the others watched.'

'He didn't play any part in these goings-on himself, of course. What were our Newcastle friends doing while you were being offered drugs?'

'They were there. They weren't interested in me. They were too busy with Chinese and South-East Asian boys. Everyone down there was taking something.'

'Not everyone. You can get a buzz from the music, the atmosphere, being with a crowd of

people looking good and enjoying themselves. Anyway, so you went back to this courier man's flat?"

'Yeah. Not right away... everyone was having a great time, we danced and talked a bit more and – got a bit close. He asked me back to his flat, where he gave me this mug of Irish coffee that was really strong, but he'd put something in it.' In the sludge at the bottom of the mug were the remains of two capsules. He challenged the man, but he immediately snatched the mug back and emptied the dregs down the sink. Darren was confused about what happened next. He could remember falling over and hitting his head on the table, and being helped into the bedroom where they had sex.

'Was it full sex?'

'What do you mean?'

'Did you take precautions?' He looked down at the floor. 'Did he use a condom?'

'He had condoms. When I went back with him I didn't know what he was like,' he said, not looking at me.

'Oh god.' How could he have let a stranger take advantage of him like that? 'It's all right. You're not to blame.'

He had slept, and woken in daylight, his head throbbing, his limbs shaking, his bruises and his back passage hurting. He found the man having breakfast in the kitchen, asked for directions to the nearest Underground station, but let himself be talked into waiting until his new acquaintance had washed and shaved and they could go together. The walk, however, ended not at the Underground station but at a nearby pub, where the courier said he had to go inside for a few minutes to meet some friends.

Darren felt ill and did not want more to drink, but followed obediently into the pub where he was told that what he needed was a 'morning after special', a concoction of tomato juice and spirits that helped stop his limbs shaking and made his stomach and head feel better. He sat quietly, bothered by the noise and the smoke-laden atmosphere, not thinking clearly. Confused and lacking will power he allowed himself to be taken back to the flat again along with several of the man's friends.

For their Sunday dinner they ate triangles of tomato-stained pizza followed by chocolate biscuits, and then watched a film on television. They drank beer and smoked cannabis for some hours, listening to music when the film was over, until at around seven o'clock all but one of the courier's friends left.

A couple of times he stood up intending to leave but let them talk him into staying on. They promised him they would be going out themselves soon, would take him to the train station, and to appear friendly asked him a few questions about himself, claiming to know people in the tourism industry and in television who could help him find work. Then the courier and one of his friends hauled Darren into the bedroom, drew the curtains and forced themselves on him.

'Did you struggle, ask them to stop?'

'They made me go with them, I didn't want to. This friend of his wasn't very clean.'

'Did they force you to have sex?'

'They didn't threaten me with a knife or anything.'

Whatever his experience before that Saturday night, his innocence was gone now. 'Are we talking about oral or anal sex here, Darren?'

'Yeah.'

'Which? Both?'

'Yeah.' When they had finished abusing him, drunk, drugged, and exhausted he rolled

himself up tightly in one of the sheets and lay on the floor by the wall where he slept. The next morning, his body was sore and aching. He hunted around the room for his clothes, dressed, crept out and used the toilet. The courier was in the lounge watching television, and Darren ran past the room door, down the stairs and out into the street. A terrified old lady he stopped near the end of the road gave him directions to the Underground station. From there he rang me.

Since he had not been threatened, tied up or locked in the flat, what he had gone through sounded as though it fell short of kidnapping and rape. Certainly he had been taken advantage of, but he had not put up physical resistance. Slipping capsules into his coffee was a nasty trick, but he had no witnesses or evidence to prove it had happened. If he had not wanted to take part in later events, why had he not walked out, and why had he gone back to the flat a second time? However confused and unsure of himself he was, surely he could have slipped away from them in the pub, or run off in the street on the way back to the flat? 'Do you want me to call the police?'

'What for?'

'What you've described sounds like you were drugged and raped. What if the next boy they pick up is even younger, the drugs and alcohol prove too much for him, and instead of bruises and a sore backside he ends up in hospital? You're sure none of them hit you, held you down, used force on you, threatened to get you if you told on them?'

'No. Nothing like that. What was I supposed to do? He seemed nice when we were in the club. How was I supposed to know what he was really like?'

'He tricked you by putting drugs in your coffee. He's going to get away with it unless we do something, isn't he?'

'Don't call the police, please. They'll call my parents.'

How would the police react, confronted with his story? The chances of proving a case against anyone were poor. Even if the men were found and questioned they would certainly deny doping the coffee and claim Darren agreed to the sex. Although a lot of the time he appeared very much a boy he was not under age.

'Okay, let's leave it at that for now. There's quite a bit of work waiting for me downstairs. Will you be all right on your own for a while?'

'Yeah, I'll be fine.'

In the evening he rang the burger bar to say he was feeling better and arranged to go in to make up his hours. Tom called to apologise for losing his temper and for what he had said earlier.

'An instance of bad boys getting all the attention and good boys resenting it? Don't worry, it's forgotten.'

'You're too easy on me. I was angry, all the worry about Andrew and Darren and everything, but I would never have hurt him, you know that. Shouldn't have took it out on you.'

'Strong feelings... it's okay, really.'

Though Andrew rarely joined us in the pub since his illness, we arranged to meet him there that evening so I could tell him of Darren's adventure without the interruptions inevitable at the hotel. He and Tom listened eagerly, and agreed with me that, there being no evidence of rape, contacting the police was not appropriate, in fact they seemed surprised the idea had occurred to me. Andrew had other thoughts about what we should do: 'If he had been under age the police might have acted, they would have had a reasonable chance of getting a conviction. He's back and he's safe, that's what matters. The next step is what we

must concentrate on.'

Tom offered to go looking for the courier and 'give him a fright' if he found him. 'That's not a bad idea, but it isn't what I had in mind. The boy's future is what concerns me. However you may be right, someone ought to let the bastard know that boys like Darren may have friends who don't like them being used as sex toys.'

This sounded dangerous to me. 'Remember there was a group of them. We may end up being the ones who are given a fright.'

'I'll have some help with me. Someone has to try to stop the filthy bastard.'

'You're both right. If you go up there, Tom, you'll have to back off if there is the slightest hint of danger. Anyway that wasn't what I wanted to talk about. First, we should fix up for Darren to have a medical check. Since I'm so familiar with hospital routines these days I'll make an appointment and take him to the clinic.'

Second, we need to turn our minds to the long term, to improving his circumstances. That's where the real problem lies. He's bright, talented, but he's in a dead end job, he's drifting. Unless we do something about it, how long will it be before he lets himself be led into another sleazy mess? There are plenty of others like our friend from the club, and worse. We need to give the boy a sense of purpose in life, a reason for turning away from that sort of nonsense.' He looked directly at me. 'I know you have your hands full with the hotel at the moment, but the business will soon settle in, and you're the one who can make a difference here.'

'So this has become *my* problem now, has it?'

'The fact is the boy relates to you, he looks up to you, he listens to what you have to say. That wretched job of his is half the problem. He ought to go back to his studies. We could get him into a college of some kind. I could take him on part-time at the garden centre, he has a real feel for horticulture. Look how well he's done with the gardens and the container plants at the hotel. Even better, you could take him on. You would be able to fit his hours around attendance at a college much more easily. All that changing beds and vacuum cleaning you do, you should spend more time managing the business, taking a broad view of how it's developing. Yes, that's the answer, don't worry about money, we'll sort something out between us.'

I was annoyed by the way Andrew was planning a new role for me in Darren's future. 'Why me? You're the one who befriended him, took him out to concerts and all sorts of places. I let him stay on at the hotel because you wanted me to.'

'Don't get angry with me, please. I'm asking too much of you. Let's forget the whole business, it would be an imposition. I shouldn't have mentioned it. This is what happens when heterosexuals breed irresponsibly, leaving others to cope with the problems of their offspring. We'll talk about something else. Tom, what about that new ventilation equipment I want installing in the nursery. No desperate rush, but are you likely to be able to make a start in the next few weeks?'

Andrew had steered the conversation exactly as he wanted. Having successfully planted the idea in my mind that Darren should work at the hotel, he had given the appearance of backing away from it by saying, 'Let's forget the whole business.' We both knew that it was anything but forgotten. He had already begun to soften my resistance by holding out the prospect of delegating some of the hotel chores to Darren. Soon he would inveigle Tom into helping his cause, and gentle persistent pressure from the two of them would wear me down.

Tom persuaded his older brother to join him on a trip to Turnpike Lane to confront the men

who had taken advantage of Darren. His brother was a thick set man with cropped hair who could intimidate with a concentrated look of hostility, his eyes glaring and his lips tightly set. On Tuesday they set off in one of the *Ferns and Foliage* vans, collecting Darren after his early shift in the burger bar, to drive up to the house where he had been molested. From the passenger seat he watched the two brothers go to the entrance, ring the bell and thump the door. There was no answer from the upstairs flat, and all they learned from the couple on the ground floor was that the occupant spent a lot of his time away. Tom said they were looking for a boy who had gone missing, and that they would keep coming back until they got some answers.

They went on to the pub Darren had been taken to, where they ordered a coke for him and pints of beer for themselves. They asked the barman if he knew a courier for a holiday company who did the Spanish resorts. He shrugged, 'This is not what you'd call a regulars' pub, we do a lot of passing trade.' Tom's brother leaned over the bar and beckoned him closer. 'Reason we're looking is he's been taking advantage of under age boys, know what I mean.' He stared menacingly, waiting for an answer. Darren sat nearby on a bar stool with his coke. He told me afterwards he felt too embarrassed to move, and desperately wished the fire alarm would go off or something else would happen to bring the excruciating scene to an end.

Unnerved by the intense hostile stare, the barman said edgily, 'Can't help yo,u mate, there are a few regulars, but so far as I know none of them works as a courier. Most of them keep their selves to their selves. This is a busy pub evenings and weekends, you get all sorts. I hope you find him. He'll be barred from here if we know who he is, you can be sure of that.'

Customers at three of the pub tables were subjected to the same growled questions by Tom and his brother, not from any expectation that they would admit to anything, but in the hope that word of the visit would get back to the culprits. The brothers left the pub looking as though they would throw a punch at the smallest provocation. Whether word of this performance ever did reach those it was intended for we never found out. To Darren's great relief, and mine, there were no further trips to Turnpike Lane.

At the hotel out of politeness I asked Tom's brother if he wanted to stay for dinner, but he refused saying plausibly there would be a meal waiting for him at home. I saw him to the front door, and before leaving he fixed me with his unsettling gaze and said tauntingly: 'I hope you're the one who's the woman, and not him.' Giving me no chance to respond he turned quickly and walked briskly down the path, not seeing my angry grimace.

Furious, I told Tom what he'd said. 'You shouldn't take no notice of him. He's a piss-taker, always has been.'

'I suppose you can't pick who you have as a brother.'

'He didn't intend to be insulting, he wouldn't understand a remark like that was going to cause offence. He thinks he's funny. Take no notice of him. He ain't worth it.'

The more important activity following Darren's ordeal was to coax him back into the education system. Lizetta occasionally arranged courses for new recruits to my old firm, and was the obvious person to ask about his chances of a place in college. We met for long lunches together every month or so, usually in busy moderately priced restaurants in town. When I mentioned Darren she immediately wanted to know what he had been studying at school, an obvious question but one that had somehow not occurred to me. Reproachfully she said, 'People find it a struggle to get back into education once they've dropped out. Does he want this badly enough to keep it up for a year or more? If you want me to help him things will have to be gone into properly.'

She suggested I bring him along to lunch so she could meet him. Andrew had been encouraging him to think about a career and, predictably, had suggested horticulture. When I told him about Lizetta he brought down some of his old school work to show me, neat life-like drawings of fungi and painstakingly detailed illustrations of plant cell structures. His teacher had given him good marks for the work. 'You really are interested in plants, aren't you? You haven't got all your old school work up there, have you?'

'No. Biology was my best subject. Most of my school work is still at home in Twyford, if they haven't thrown it all out.'

His father, before he turned to religion, used to take him on walks in the countryside and had taught him about the wildlife in hedgerows and ponds, and from an early age he had helped in the garden and on the family allotment. He had built on this knowledge in class. Knowing he was still in touch with his parents from the letters in the drawer in his room, I asked if he was thinking of going back to collect the rest of his things. 'My sister will collect some stuff for me, what's the point in me going back? All they're interested in is banging tambourines for Jesus.'

'They're your mum and dad. You ought to go back to see them sometime.' Our discussion was interrupted by the sound of the reception bell. In the hall was one of the Chinese men the Geordies had brought back with them to the hotel. Cheung was about Darren's age, very cute with a small slightly upturned nose. One of them had given him a Newcastle telephone number, but when he tried it he found it was the number of a mini-cab firm. He wanted me to give him the correct number or an address.

The mini-cab number may have been given deliberately to fool him into thinking more than a night's sex was on offer; if a boyfriend, or even a wife, answered a 'phone call or opened a letter from him serious problems might ensue. When I refused, he looked so unhappy that I agreed to forward a letter for him, on the assumption that the redhead, to whom I had sent confirmation of the booking, would pass it on to whoever in his party was so sorely missed after one night of love. I sat my visitor down at the kitchen table with writing paper and an envelope from the office.

Darren remembered Cheung from the club and made him a mug of tea, which he drank while writing several pages in a close regular hand. When the letter was finished they chatted for a while in the hall until Darren had to go to work, and they left the hotel together.

The redhead rang me a few days later to thank me for forwarding the letter, but said that although they would be happy to see any of the Chinese boys again the next time they came down to London it would be unfair to encourage them to expect anything more than another one night stand. The 'phone number, he said, must have been a misunderstanding of some sort; they did use one particular cab firm regularly, and perhaps Cheung had seen the number written down somewhere and wrongly assumed it was a home number.

He claimed that none of them would have tried to mislead by giving the impression of wanting to keep in touch. He also asked after Darren, and I said he had had a terrible time with someone who picked him up, and that he had been in real danger, but had managed to escape without coming to permanent harm.

'We were all worried about him on the train home. He's a clever lad, he'll learn how to look after himself. We've all got ourselves into dodgy situations when we were younger. I'm sorry if we let you down there.'

That chance meeting at the hotel was the beginning of a relationship between Darren and Cheung. A couple of weeks later they arrived together at the Beckford Arms on a Friday night. I was late, having been delayed by unexpected arrivals at the hotel, and found them

laughing and joking with Tom at the bar. We all returned together and Darren took Cheung up to his room, the first time, to my knowledge, he had taken a lover up with him. Perhaps, after all, some good might have come from his visit to the Geordies' favourite club.

Following Darren's weekend escapade in Tottenham, for a few weeks life at the hotel settled reassuringly into steady profitable business. Goodmans Hotel had, so far, escaped any of the horrors of which my friend at Housmans Hotel had warned me; there had been no fraudulent payments, nobody had suffered a heart attack, there had been no fights and no vandalism. Then one morning a guest on the first floor came looking for me in the kitchen to complain he had been woken by a disturbance in the room above. He said someone up there must have gone berserk. There had been an almighty crash, followed by scraping sounds and thuds and bangs that went on for half an hour or more. The noise stopped eventually and he went back to sleep.

I leapt up the stairs to the second floor, fearing that taking in two men who had arrived without a booking had been a dreadful mistake. The door to their room was ajar. A loud knock produced no response, and when I tried to push it open it would not move. Lifting it up by the handle with difficulty I eased it open inch by inch. A toilet stink hit me as I entered the room. The upper hinge had been wrenched away from the door frame, and carefully leaning the door against the wall I turned around to face a scene of devastation.

The twin beds had been thrown onto their sides and the mattresses and bedding were strewn higgledy-piggledy across the floor. The dressing table was leaning acutely, its once square angles now grossly distorted, the drawers tossed about the room, the mirror broken, half of it lying in pieces on the floor. The television lay face down, the tube shattered and the back dashed into splinters; the kettle, tea and coffee-making things had been flung down on top of it.

Two inverted 'V's of damp on the wall and dark patches on the carpet showed where the men had urinated. The light fittings, broken and torn away, were hanging by their wires. In spray paint on the wall, above where the heads of the beds had been, was the outline of a giant erect male organ with the obscenity 'SHIT SHAGGERS' scrawled in thick marker-pen below it.

The major cause of the stench lay in the tangle of crumpled bedding on the floor. They had defecated on the white cotton of my sheets. With the room's en suite toilet a few yards away, the action demonstrated real malice. The mess on my bedding appalled me more than all the other damage. As I opened the windows to let out the stink the braided curtains seemed to hang with chaste disapproval over the devastation below.

The perpetrators of this outrage had doubtless made their escape before the house stirred. The prospect of cleaning up what they had left in the sheet made me nauseous. I stood at the window for several minutes inhaling fresh air, watching the boughs of the street's plane trees swaying in the breeze. In the hotel downstairs activity would be continuing as usual; the cook and waiter would be busy with breakfasts, and people checking out that morning would be asking for their bills. If I went down to normality now the smell and the mess in the room would be waiting to be dealt with, and would be constantly on my mind.

With no rubber gloves to hand I gingerly lifted up the soiled bedding, keeping my fingers clear of its repulsive contents, and manoeuvred the faeces towards the toilet. After flushing the excreta away and putting the soiled linen into black plastic sacks, I washed my hands, flushed the toilet a second time and washed my hands again, hoping to make doubly certain that every last trace of the filth had gone. On leaving the room I carefully edged the door

closed, hiding the devastation from other guests who might pass.

I called the police, and during a lull in breakfast activity took the part-time cook and waiter up to see the damage. Sharing the horror with them helped me a little, but at ten-thirty they went off duty leaving me on my own. Darren had left for an early shift at the hamburger dive, the cleaner was not due in that day, and there was no answer to my 'phone calls to Tom or Andrew.

I apologised to the guests who had heard the disturbance, saying this was the first time there had been any trouble and that the hotel was normally very quiet. Fortunately none of them made a fuss. When everyone had gone, various hotel duties kept me occupied for a time, but after putting the last of the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher I sat miserably in the bay window of the dining room waiting for the police, wishing merciless vengeance on the pair who had vandalised my room.

People hardly ever come to the hotel without having made a booking, but expensive bags and new leather jackets gave the impression that the two men had money. My little dial-up unit for checking credit cards had cleared the one they proffered as valid. Nothing about them made me suspicious. The police would no doubt check and discover that the credit card had been stolen, and that the names and addresses they gave were false. A few hundred pounds' worth of damage was unlikely to merit much of an investigation. Like the men who had abused Darren, they would go unpunished, free to gloat over their actions.

Two officers arrived an hour and a half later, a man and a woman. They spent about twenty minutes in the hotel examining the wreckage and making a few notes. Having a police car outside and officers in the hotel was not likely to encourage business, and at first they put me on edge by looking at the rack of leaflets and cards for gay clubs and organisations in the hall. The female officer asked with what looked to be a forced smile how many people had been staying last night, and if the hotel guests were exclusively male. At first I feared prejudice and was expecting hostile questions about the nature of the business, but she reassured me by saying that the hotel was in the right area, in easy reach of quite a few gay pubs and clubs.

The male officer used his radio to check the credit card number and the address the two vandals had given, and minutes later received confirmation that they were fraudulent. They asked me not to clean any glass surfaces, cups or similar objects until the fingerprint specialist had come, and said they would send me a letter with an incident number for my insurers as proof that the crime had been reported.

After the police left, the prospect of going back up to the vandalised room for a fourth time that day was too unpleasant. The best thing would have been for me to have gone out for an hour to walk in the park or do some shopping, but as the fingerprint expert was on his way I had to wait in. As the cleaner was off duty his chores fell to me, but unable to face doing the rooms I moped around in the kitchen.

The fingerprint specialist arrived shortly before mid-day with his little case of equipment, but he found no prints that could definitely be identified as belonging to the wreckers. Presumably thinking already of another more important case, as he was leaving he asked if any cars had been stolen in the area recently, giving me the impression there was little chance of my pair of vandals ever being caught.

Tom came over at lunchtime as soon as he picked up my message, and ran ahead of me up the stairs to see the damage. The earlier overpowering stench had gone, but even with the windows open the room smelt of urine. He carefully inspected the wreckage, asking rhetorically several times, 'How on earth could anyone do something like this?' He hugged me protectively and said, 'You must feel as if you've been punched in the face. If I get hold of

them I'll tie them to the back of the van and drag them round the streets.'

Although the room looked a complete wreck, he thought most things could probably be repaired or replaced reasonably quickly, and pointed out that the effects could have been worse if they had ripped out bathroom fittings and caused a flood, or smashed the windows or knocked holes in the partition walls. He suggested fixing the things that could be done quickly first, and then when he had worked for about an hour would break for a cup of tea and assess what remained to be done.

Leaving him to repair the damage, I found the energy to make a start on the hotel rooms, having to skimp because there was so little of the day left. After an energetic hour I went down to the kitchen, switched on the kettle and put some raspberries with vanilla ice-cream into three little glass dishes.

When Darren came back from work he joined Tom and me for this little treat, after which we all went up to the vandalised room. It already looked much better than before. Tom had removed the pieces of broken mirror and righted the dressing table so that its angles were square again. He had put the beds back in place and rehung the door. The remaining obvious signs of damage were the graffiti, still obscenely prominent, and a light fitting which was too twisted out of shape to repair. He had removed the broken television to a cupboard on the landing.

'I'll paint over that obscenity on the wall, but I'm not sure what to do about the carpet.'

'I suppose I'll have to throw it out.'

Darren offered to try to clean it. 'It's only a bit of weewee. If we get it down into the garden, I'll give it a good hosing down and use carpet shampoo on it. You shouldn't have to throw it away.'

'You're an expert on cleaning carpets now are you?' I asked. 'How long do you think it's going to take to dry?'

'It's worth trying.'

He and Tom rolled it up while I went for two black plastic sacks to put over the ends so they would be able to carry it without getting urine on their clothes. On my way back to the room I noticed the window on the stairs was open. 'I hope you're not intending to put it out through there.'

'No, of course we're not. We wanted some fresh air.'

They slid the bags into place and began to manoeuvre the carpet down the first flight of steps, Tom going first, having to walk down backwards. Darren followed him looking as though he might collapse under the weight. Seeing him struggle I tried to help by supporting the middle. When Tom reached the open window he said: 'Right, one, two, three, now!'

He heaved his end up and out, while Darren ran towards me shouting, 'Look out Mark.' Tom energetically shoved the carpet through the window until the force of gravity took over and it plummeted out of sight, hitting the ground with a loud thud. I looked down at the two of them in exasperation as they leaned out to see how it had landed.

'Yeah, wow!'

Tom turned to look at me. 'Wonder how that happened,' he said in mock innocence.

'What if it hit something, or someone, on the way down?'

'I made sure the area was clear before we let it go. If we pushed hard enough it was bound to fall clear of the house. It's flattened a bit of grass on the lawn, that's all.'

Darren ran off down the stairs, and we watched him unroll the carpet onto the concrete outside the kitchen. He uncoiled the garden hose and began drenching it thoroughly. In the room Tom showed me where he had glued together the split wood of the door frame,

explaining that he had used longer screws than before to make sure the hinges would hold. Then he tested the door to show that it would open and close properly. 'You try it,' he suggested.

I stepped forward, turned the handle, opened the door wide, then gently shut it again, letting my hand rest on the handle. 'Seems to be okay.' He was standing directly behind me, very close, smelling faintly of aftershave or cologne. He reached forward and put his hand over mine, pressing downwards until the latch clicked; in concert we opened and closed the door again. Our shoulders touched, and the side of his chin brushed against my cheek as he leaned against me. I turned round in his arms to see that his face, like mine, was full of smiles. There was something we could do together to purge the room of the desecration it had suffered. We locked the door in case Darren came upstairs looking for us.

CHAPTER 11

Darren and I were to meet Lizetta at a Belgian-style mussels and chips restaurant near Blackfriars Bridge. To make a good impression on her he wore the new suit Andrew had bought him and a shirt and tie. He did not have to dress up for lunch with Lizetta, but this was his first opportunity to show off his new clothes.

He looked different; his long bones did not seem nearly as knobbly as they did in his usual jeans and T-shirt. Nobody seeing him now would assume he was doomed to a lifetime of clearing tables in a fast food outlet; the impression he gave was of being a young man with prospects.

He was nervous, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, evidence that he was taking this opportunity seriously. I glanced at him now and again as we waited for the bus to Blackfriars, trying to accustom myself to his changed appearance. 'Do I look all right?' he asked.

'Yes. You look good in that packaging.'

'Is my hair all right?'

'You're fine. We're going for a friendly chat over lunch. It won't be like an interview. You can relax – well don't be too relaxed – you know what I mean.'

'What is she going to ask me?'

'The things that we've talked about. She'll need to know what subjects you were doing at school, what's happened since, what you're interested in. Talk to her naturally, as though you were speaking to Andrew or me, you'll be fine.'

During the past few weeks Andrew had been pressing him ever more strongly to return to his studies. He had been over to Biddulph Mansions half a dozen times to talk about catching up on the exams he had missed and what kind of career in horticulture he should aim for. The possibility of giving up the burger bar to work part-time at the hotel had yet to be mentioned to him, but as Andrew anticipated my reluctance had dwindled away and I began to think it might work out quite well, making me less dependant on casual staff and freeing me from some of the routine work. Andrew gently nudged us into a closer friendship, asking for my opinion about how his future might develop, and deflecting some of the questions Darren asked him, for instance about how long a college course was likely to last, onto me. The boy became more anxious to please me than ever. When he was not on morning shift at the burger bar he would help clear up in the breakfast room and kitchen, and he had begun learning how to key in data for the hotel's accounts. There was no doubt that, working for me part-time, he would be a great help.

We travelled into central London on the upper floor of a bus, something I had not done for years and years, although it would have been quicker to ask Andrew to have one of his staff drive us up. The presence of other passengers made it difficult to talk, and a drab day made London's streets look their least attractive, but in those early months of being indoors in the hotel for so much of my time any opportunity to get out and do something different was enjoyable.

Lizetta was sitting at the restaurant bar sipping a Campari. She smiled warmly when I introduced her to Darren, and when we took our places for the meal I sat beside her so that they were facing each other. 'Have you been to this type of restaurant before?' she asked.

‘No. First time.’ His voice wavered slightly and for a few moments I was worried that he would panic and, struggling to find something to say, would launch into one of his revolting tales from work about hypodermic needles being found in a staff locker or maggots wriggling around in the rubbish bins. His brow furrowed as he looked at the menu. I asked, ‘See anything that appeals to you?’

‘I don’t really know what to choose.’

Lizetta said, ‘Have the Moules Marinière with chips. I love them. You’ll be able to say you’ve eaten the classic Belgian mussels dish once, even if you never come here again.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I’ll have. Will it be all right if I have mineral water to drink?’ He looked up; his face, far from showing panic, was full of youthful innocence, as though to drink anything other than mother’s milk was an adventure for him. I gave him a reassuring smile and hoped Lizetta would not think he was putting on an act.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I think we deserve a glass of wine each. We’ll have a bottle of water too. I’m sorry, Mark, I ought to let you decide.’

As she was doing me a favour by seeing him, the meal was to be my treat. A waitress keyed our order into a little hand-held unit and pointed it towards an infra-red receiver in the ceiling, sending the details electronically to the kitchen. While we waited for our food Lizetta explained a little about her job as personnel manager, saying that she quite often arranged courses for new recruits in the firm.

She mentioned West London Tertiary College, where she knew some of the staff, and thought some of the courses might suit him. As though everything was settled he said, ‘Yeah, is it fairly easy to get to? Would I be able to cycle there?’

‘Possibly, but first of all we need to look at the prospectus to see if it’s right for you. They have a selection procedure you would have to go through. We may need to consider other colleges as well. WLTC do run a course approved by the Royal Horticultural Society, that was partly why I mentioned them. You would have to finish your school exams and get good grades to get a place on it though. You’re interested in gardening, Mark tells me?’

‘Yes. At the hotel I planted out the gardens and some containers for the porch. Andrew, who runs the local garden centre, has taught me loads. He lends me his books, he’s got hundreds of them.’

‘Have you had practical experience apart from the gardens and containers at the hotel?’

He said he had learned at home from his father, where they had grown vegetables as well as ornamental plants. Our waitress interrupted with three large bowls of mussels in their shells and golden chips on side plates, leaving hardly any space for glasses of water or wine on our compact table. As we began to eat, to impress us he told us the two palm trees in tubs on either side of the restaurant entrance had the botanical name *Trachycarpus fortunei*, that they were hardy outdoors in sheltered places in England, and that the palm tree whose name he liked even more was *Phoenix dactylifera*, the date palm, but it could not withstand frost and needed to be grown in a greenhouse. He spoke of work being done at the Buckinghamshire nursery on crossbreeding plants to produce new hybrids with a bigger range of flower colours and to improve disease resistance.

When he and Andrew lapsed into discussions about plants my mind tended to switch to other things, but listening to him in the restaurant articulating multi-syllabic botanical terms he seemed to be really knowledgeable. Lizetta asked him about house plants, which ones would be best in bright positions and which in shade. He thought for a few moments before answering, recommended half a dozen for each situation, and offered to photocopy a list from one of Andrew’s books for her. ‘Thank you, that would be really useful. Would you like to go

into the same line of work as Andrew?’

‘Andrew might give me a start, but there are botanical gardens with full-time employees doing scientific work. They may not pay all that well, but if something interests you, that’s more important, isn’t it?’

All the while the ill-constructed pile of empty mussel shells on his plate was growing and beginning to look as though it might collapse over the table. Lizetta, who had been neatly sliding one empty shell into another as she ate, rescued him by scooping the top of his stack onto her own plate. He looked towards me for reassurance, and as he was a slow eater and might start to worry about falling behind I said, ‘You seem to be getting on well with those, Darren. Take your time, we’re not in any hurry.’

For dessert we ordered ice cream, and he informed us that vanilla flavouring comes from the dried seed pods of the orchid *Vanilla planifolia*, a native of Mexico.

Lizetta said, ‘Many people find it hard to get a start in their chosen career. You think Andrew might take you on at the garden centre when you finish your course? That might be a good way to start.’

‘He would employ me now if I really wanted, but if you want to be a botanist you need qualifications. Working in the garden centre would be all right, but I’d like to do something more scientific if it’s possible. Andrew told me not to expect too much in case things didn’t work out, but that I had to try.’

‘That’s good advice.’

She promised to send him a prospectus from WLTC, and for the last quarter of an hour we let him relax while she brought me up to date with news of Peter’s impending return from the US. She feared he had not forgiven the old codgers for excluding him from their inner circle, and was worried he would return intent on making trouble. Again she spoke of being unhappy with Lindler & Haliburton, saying that the ever increasing demand for cost-cutting left people feeling that their best was never good enough.

My image of the firm had changed completely over the last few years. More than six months had passed since my escape. My eight years work there had provided money and management skills which were essential to me in setting up the hotel, but there was nothing from that world that I missed, and that so much of my life had passed in that environment now seemed strange.

We left the restaurant and walked across Blackfriars Bridge to the underground station, where Lizetta caught a train back to the building that was once so familiar to me. Darren and I caught the bus home. He asked me if I thought he had made a good impression. ‘You presented yourself very well. I’ve been under-estimating you. What made you ask about cycling to college?’

‘I won’t have much money if I’m only working part time. I could pick up a second-hand bike and save on bus or train fares.’

‘That’s good thinking.’ The price of the meal the three of us had eaten would probably be enough to pay for a second-hand bike. If he started at WLTC, I could give him a bike as a present. Tom would be able to find out what sort to get him, and for once I would have arranged something for him without having to be prompted by Andrew. ‘Did you have a bike when you were at home?’

‘Yeah. It was my brother’s really; he let me have it for ages, but he sold it eventually because he needed the money.’

‘I didn’t even know you had a brother. You ought to go back home, one day; let everyone see that you’re all right.’

'I have written to them. Maybe I'll go if I pass my exams, if I'm doing well, I'll go to see them for tea or something, just to show them. You know why I had to leave, don't you?'

'Not really. Tom said something about a school friend making trouble for you.'

He confirmed, giving a lot more detail, what Tom had told me. The other boy had been his best friend, who he often sat next to in school, their shoulders or legs lightly touching. Some of his friends had talked about secretively 'doing things' together, and when Darren was invited to his best friend's house to watch a film on television and stay overnight, he was expecting them to experiment. However when he put his arms around his friend in the bedroom the boy pulled away and caused an uproar.

The lad's father had rung Darren's home and he was taken back in shame. His parents made his life unbearable. They would not let him go out on his own except to school and made him go to their Evangelical meetings, which he hated. The minister there told him to pray for forgiveness, and when he refused his father asked the family doctor to make an appointment for him with a psychiatrist. His friend told other lads at school what had happened, and on his way home one evening a group of three bullies lay in wait, pinned him to the ground for half an hour, punched him in the face, blacked his eyes and cut his lip.

His parents did not even ask how his injuries had come about. A concerned teacher did, but Darren was too ashamed to tell the truth and said he had been walking along the top of a wall by the railway and fallen off. The bruises from the attack had not fully healed when a row with his father escalated into a fight. He was knocked to the floor and his father, having won this contest, gave him an ultimatum: see the psychiatrist or leave the house. A few days later he packed a bag, withdrew what little savings he had and left for London.

He stayed in a cheap bed and breakfast place for a few days, saw an advert for the room at Goodmans Villa in the estate agent's window and took it because it was the cheapest he could find. A day or two later he passed the hamburger bar and saw their notice advertising for staff, went inside and started work straight away. Until he met Andrew, Tom and me, coincidence and misadventure had become the determining influences in his life.

Lizetta rang me the day after the meal to say she had spoken to one of the lecturers at West London Tertiary College and had arranged an interview for him. 'He's lovely, isn't he?' she said. 'You're so lucky. The gorgeous Tom *and* him, it isn't fair.'

'My relationship with Tom and my relationship with Darren are completely different.'

'I know that, silly. He adores you though, doesn't he?'

'Does he?'

'Of course he does. He was glancing across at you hoping for signs of approval all the time. He worships you.'

'It's cupboard love. How's Vincent?'

'He's fine. We manage to see each other almost every week. Only for lunch sometimes, but we see each other.'

'He doesn't deserve you.'

'I wish you'd tell him that.'

When Vincent and I last spoke he mentioned the possibility of me advising him about upgrading his company's computer system. That had been weeks ago, but what with the hotel being busy and sorting out Darren's future I had not been in touch with him since. With Darren helping at the hotel fitting in a few days at his offices might be practicable, and I suggested she bring Vincent to the hotel for a meal one day.

'Thanks, that would be nice, but you know how difficult things are, when we have an

opportunity to be together we need to take full advantage of it.'

'You've never actually seen the hotel, have you? You could retire to one of the hotel rooms after we've eaten.' The thought of making love to Vincent in one of Goodmans Hotel's rooms appealed to her, and she agreed to speak to him.

They came a couple of weeks later, and as I was hoping he asked again about upgrading his office systems, and rang a few days later to fix a date for me to come to assess what would be entailed. Indirectly their visit to the hotel led to something else that was less welcome. Not only did Vincent book me to look at his company's systems, but he also asked Tom if he would do some work on his family home in Amersham. He had a builder putting up an extension, and wanted Tom to keep an eye on the work at the same time as boarding the floor of the loft and repairing some dilapidated fences.

At first Tom balked at the long journey, but Vincent talked him round. 'Come up and have a look. It's all a question of money, isn't it? All we need to do is agree a price that makes it worth your while to put up with the travelling.'

Their arrangement brought about the first significant disruption to my new pattern of life at Goodmans Hotel. One of the labourers working on Vincent's extension told Tom about a major building project in Portsmouth town centre. As when he had gone to work in Manchester, electricians were wanted urgently and premium rates of pay were offered. The lure of extra money was difficult for him to resist, but for me his absence would be hard, not only because he would not be around when something needed fixing in the hotel, but because being with him meant so much to me.

Hoping that Andrew would sympathise and might be able to talk him out of going, I arranged to call at Biddulph Mansions on the pretext of discussing the arrangements we were making for Darren, who by this time was working for me at the hotel and shortly to begin his studies at WLTC.

The flat had been redecorated since my last visit, and in place of an illuminated glass showcase of orchids at one side of the chimney breast was a Victorian bureau with marquetry decorations and inlaid brass borders. 'Something of an impulse buy,' he said. 'It fills the space nicely.'

'What happened to the orchids?'

'Oh, they're up at the nursery. A display like that needs a certain amount of looking after, and I'm supposed to be easing up. The hospital have decided my priorities now are a low fat diet and light exercise.'

We talked about how Darren would cope with being in a classroom after such a long break, and how to organise his time so that he could tackle the curriculum. The plan was that he would relieve me by taking on hotel chores for twenty hours a week, as well as providing cover at reception during some quiet periods. In return he would be paid the going hourly rate for the twenty hours, and for the rest would have his room and food provided free. If this proved too demanding for him, Andrew would reimburse me the cost of bringing in staff from Housmans Hotel or other local part-timers to take over some of the work.

Before I was able to turn the conversation to Tom's impending departure, Andrew surprised me with a completely unexpected announcement: 'I had another reason for asking you to come over. This is bad timing, but putting it off won't make things any easier. The doctor is insisting that I cut my activities drastically, reduce my workload to the bare essentials. The trouble is while I'm here with the garden centre on my doorstep, staff ring me up all the time. Whenever a gardening magazine or a seed catalogue comes through the letter box I can't resist comparing products and prices. Passing an office block makes me wonder if

there might be a chance of business for *Ferns and Foliage*. I need to get away, to take a long holiday, without a mobile 'phone bringing me queries about some special offer or other from one of the wholesalers. What I wanted to ask is this: would you be able to keep an eye on things for me, much as you did while I was in hospital that time?"

'There wasn't much for me to do except bring you a few papers, and presumably you won't want that. Without meaning to be rude, I'm sure your businesses will run well enough if you go away on a week or a fortnight's holiday.'

'I'm thinking of taking quite a long break. I've relatives in New Zealand on my mother's side. There was a cousin – elderly now of course – who I saw quite a lot of when I was a child. She has heart trouble, has been quite ill. It would be nice for me to see her again, while there is still time. You can get airline tickets that allow you to make intermediate stops, and I may as well use it as an opportunity to see a bit more of the world.'

'So how long are we talking about, a month or more?'

'Hard for me to say at the moment. I've never even met some of the younger family members, they were born out there. Depends how we all get on. You might need to give, say, one day a week on average to my affairs. You won't have to do any of the day-to-day management, there are competent people doing all of that. What I need is someone to keep a check on everything, make sure the takings are going into the bank and the stock is not going missing, that sort of thing. We can come to a similar financial arrangement to the one we agreed for Darren. You can charge me for the cost of any staff you have to bring in because my interests are keeping you from the hotel, and I expect to pay you something for your services, of course.'

His intention to be away at the same time as Tom worried me much more than the financial arrangements. He was my main source of advice about all kinds of things connected with the hotel and my personal life. This was the first time, as far as I could remember, that he had ever mentioned any family, and definitely never relatives in New Zealand.

'If it will do you good, of course you should go. Not a good time from my viewpoint, but nobody could argue that you don't deserve a really good break. I'm honoured you've asked me to look after things while you're away. Of course I will help out. Delighted to.'

'Sleep on it. Let me know if you feel it's too much to take on.'

'How have you been lately? You've been looking okay.'

'Not bad. My blood pressure's still high, but nothing that can't be managed if I'm sensible – by which they seem to mean eating dull food and accepting retirement. I can't sit around doing nothing. Maybe this trip will be the answer, for a while.' My guess was that he was holding something back, and if he was seriously ill to whine to him about Tom's planned absence would be inconsiderate.

Tom was the first to leave. He said he would miss me, promised to keep in touch at least once a week, and we talked about him returning to London for a few days if the work lasted for more than a fortnight, and of me travelling down to Portsmouth if the hotel allowed. Leaving Darren in charge, I went to Waterloo Station to see him onto his train, and waved to him through the window while walking along the platform to keep him in sight for as long as possible as the train pulled out.

On the evening before Andrew was due to set off on his trip he took me to a fashionable new restaurant in a converted building which had previously been a fire station. In the enormous room where the fire engines had once been garaged, dozens of miniature spotlights now shone from chrome fittings suspended below the dark ceiling, the white table cloths and cutlery

gleaming brilliantly under their light. Waiters in maroon waistcoats and white aprons scurried back and forth between the tables and the long marble topped bar, behind which could be glimpsed the bright fluorescent lights of the kitchen.

We were shown to a table beside a wall of half-mirrored glass installed where the old fire station doors must have been. All of this fashionable restaurant's waiters were good-looking young men, two of whom took turns at attending to us, pulling our chairs out, unfolding and handing us our napkins, and opening out the menu folders before us with an open palmed gesture of encouragement as though, otherwise, we might have sat staring blankly into space.

In my previous life at Lindler & Haliburton the ostentation might have impressed me, but that evening I could not relax. The sparseness of the room with its scrubbed brick walls and bright pinpoint spotlights, and the ritual created around the simple acts of sitting down and ordering dinner, were too contrived. A traditional Sunday afternoon meal with Tom, Darren, and Andrew around our 'family' table at Goodmans Hotel would have been far more enjoyable.

Andrew's manner did not help: his voice was low and tense, as though he was afraid his words would echo from the high ceiling of the cavernous room and reach the ears of strangers. We talked at first about business, going over the arrangements he had made with the managers of the garden centre and nursery, with the bank and his solicitors, all of whom had been informed in writing of the role I was to play during his absence. He proposed to keep in regular contact with a weekly 'phone call, but said he would be happy to leave all necessary decisions to me. He wanted to concentrate on making the most of his holiday. As well as New Zealand he spoke of possible visits on his way back to Australia, Singapore, Thailand, and perhaps Egypt and parts of Europe.

As our meal progressed the waiters pampered us, replenished our glasses whenever they were half empty, asked more than once during each course whether everything was to our liking, and twice swept the table linen with a little silver device for collecting crumbs. They walked straight-backed, bending forwards to put dishes down on our table with a flourish as though making a presentation of them. The whole performance was annoyingly pretentious. Tom was right to be uncomfortable in such places.

'You'll be away forever if you're going to visit all those countries.'

'Who knows? A couple of weeks away may turn out to be enough for me and I'll cut the whole thing short. Nothing's booked except the flight out and a night's hotel accommodation in Wellington. Everything else will have to be arranged as I go. My airline ticket gives me freedom to roam.'

After a dessert of pancakes and ice cream flavoured with chocolate and coconut our two waiters brought us coffee and cognacs with a sliver of bitter chocolate each. When they had gone Andrew stared at me, his eyes sharp, his face very flushed. He coughed to clear his throat, straightened himself up in his chair and grasped the edge of the table with both hands.

'It's no use putting this off for any longer. It is the most difficult thing I have ever had to say to anyone. There's something I simply have to tell you. It's about Tom. I don't know how to start, this is bound to come as a shock. We should have told you ages ago. There was never any intention on my part or his to deceive you, but there seemed to be no easy way, and as time went by you and he seemed to be getting on so well – why should something from the past be allowed to ruin it all?'

One of the waiters approached, probably intending to ask if we were enjoying our coffee; with a sudden shake of my head I sent him away.

'I'd better come right out with it. The main reason he went to Portsmouth was because he

saw someone he recognised at the hotel.' He stopped and looked at me, waiting for a reaction. What could he possibly have to tell me that I did not already know about Tom? Had some previous lover turned up threatening to make trouble? I swallowed my cognac, paused, and took a sip of coffee. 'Tell me.'

'Did you ever think it odd that Tom should work for me when people in his line are usually self-employed? The fact is I took him on because he had been in prison. He needed a bit of help to get started when he came out.'

'Prison? He was in prison?'

'He stole cars. Over a period of time, a number of cars. Believe me, I hadn't the least idea of what happened to your parents until long after you and he were – had become a couple. The first you told me of it was at the hospital, do you remember? I was quite ill at the time; hearing about it almost made me have a relapse. Otherwise perhaps I would have handled the situation better, but what good would it have done to have told you at that stage? Why should you ever have to know? If we all knew the worst about each other, could we ever bear to be in the same room with another human being? The two of you were so good together, why risk spoiling it?'

'He was a car thief, is that what you're telling me?'

'Before you met him. Years ago.'

I was so badly shaken for a while I could not speak. Eventually I said, 'You say he recognised someone at the hotel?'

'One of your guests had a son who was in the same jail.'

'So a client at my hotel was a heterosexual ex-convict, is that what you're saying?'

'Some gay men do have children. It was his son who was in jail. I had to tell you because of the worry that you might learn of it in some other way. He might have said something to you about having seen Tom before. We couldn't risk you hearing about all this from a stranger.'

'Why didn't Tom have the guts to tell me himself?'

'This hasn't been easy for him. When he went up to Manchester that time it was because he felt guilty, but he couldn't bring himself to confess to you, he thought you would end the relationship if you knew. Of course he could not really run away from the problem. He couldn't stay up there forever and forget about you. He came back and your feelings had not changed, you still wanted each other. He's been terrified that you would find out. I'm sorry. We were wrong to keep it from you, badly wrong, but we never intended you any harm.'

'What do you expect me to do? You know what happened to my parents. You only get one set of them, and when they're gone they're gone. You bastards.'

'Tom has never killed anyone. He had nothing to do with what happened to your parents. You've every right to be upset but don't to be too harsh.'

'Does he know that you're telling me now? That you're sitting there admitting everything has been a deception right from the start?'

'There was no intention to deceive, never. The situation is hard for us as well, for Tom particularly. We spoke on the 'phone before I came out tonight. He was so miserable; he was talking about disappearing for good, whatever that may mean. This has been an awful shock for you. Give it some time.'

'You're always telling me to give things time. What difference will time make? Will it make Tom any less of a bastard?' Andrew's face was very flushed, and concern about his health helped me hold my feelings back. 'Let's not say any more. You go and get ready for your holiday, and I'll go back to the hotel. We'll just finish it there and talk about business in a week's time by 'phone as we planned.'

'The three of us, you, he and I, we've come so far together. We've meant such a lot to each other. We're all prone to error, anyone can fall...'

'Please stop, or I'm going to say things I'll regret. The situation is bad enough without you making it worse with excuses. Leave it there, please. If you don't mind, Andrew, I'd like to go back to the hotel.'

He called for the bill. An hour seemed to pass before we were able to leave the table. We found a taxi, but did not speak to each other until it drew up outside Goodmans Hotel. 'I could cancel the holiday, if you think that would be best. The flight tomorrow is booked but I could miss it; I've been selfish, the timing, the way this has come out, I've made a complete mess of it.'

'No. Go ahead with your trip. Depriving you of your break won't change anything, will it? You've made all the arrangements, you'd lose your money if you cancel now. Let's not discuss this any more tonight, let's do what we planned.'

'A final word. Tom looked to me for advice; he did what I told him was best. If anyone is to blame it's me.'

'I'm going, Andrew. I don't want to hear this. We'll stick to what we planned. That's as much as I can do. Leave it there, please.'

I climbed out of the cab, shut the door and walked up to the hotel without looking back. Darren sat at the kitchen table making notes from one of his text books and eating a bacon sandwich. He must have read in my face that something was wrong; he put his sandwich down and stood up. How was I to tell him that Tom, one of the people he had relied on and trusted, was in reality someone from whom he should have been protected?

'I'm back. Any problems?'

'No. The people you were expecting have all turned up. I took two telephone bookings; one is a regular so I said be sure to let us know if you change your plans, the other was someone new who will confirm by letter. How about you? Are you okay?'

'Yes – why shouldn't I be?' I looked at him, standing in front of me, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, his face full of concern. 'You know, don't you?'

'Only since yesterday. Andrew made me promise not to say anything. It wasn't my place to anyway, was it?'

'No, it wasn't. Looks like I'll be relying on you more than ever.'

'Can I make you a coffee or anything?'

'I think I'll go straight downstairs. You'll be going up to bed soon, I take it?'

'Yeah.'

I went down to my flat, poured myself a large vodka and put on the television, switching from channel to channel, unable to find anything to engage my attention. After ten minutes I turned it off and tried to read a magazine, but couldn't concentrate. Thoughts about how Tom and Andrew must have conspired to keep the truth from me kept going around and around in my mind; I could picture them whispering together, deciding on what lies to tell me if I asked awkward questions.

At times Tom had boasted about working for well-to-do clients who went out leaving him on his own in their houses and flats; if they had known the truth about him they would not have let him through the door. If Tom alone were at fault that would be bad enough, but Andrew, who had been the major influence on me in setting up the hotel, who had encouraged me to give up my career for a new more open and honest life as a gay businessman, had been party to the deception.

At least he had done me a favour by persuading me to let Darren stay on in the attic and

work for me part-time. All his other actions now seemed suspect. Had he been manipulating me all along to suit his own purposes? Even the meal we had eaten earlier that evening was in a way part of the conspiracy, timed immediately before his departure so it would be difficult for me to withdraw my promise to look after his business interests. How could I ever believe anything he said to me again?

Memories of Tom's actions and words crowded into my mind. The long history of our relationship was rewritten as incident after incident had to be re-evaluated in the light of what I now knew. So that was why he reacted so awkwardly when he first saw the Mercedes. What was that expression he had used? *Crated for the Costa*, that was it! He had slipped unintentionally into the language of a car thief. His disappearance up to Manchester, for which he gave the touching explanation that he wanted to give me a chance to find someone 'who would be more like my sort of people', was in fact an attempt to break things off with me before I found out about him.

My thoughts grew wilder and wilder. In the restaurant I had already drunk far more than usual, but in desperation I poured myself another large vodka and drank it while undressing and getting into bed. The alcohol did not send me to sleep but muddled my thoughts even more. A miscellany of loosely connected memories paraded through my mind: a conversation I once happened to overhear in a second-hand market in which a trader said that half of the stuff on the stalls was probably stolen; Tom's flat and his odd collection of second-hand furniture – what luxury it must have seemed after a prison cell; a horrible story Andrew had once told me about someone he used to work with forging orders from a pharmacy for controlled drugs, who was caught and had hanged himself at the police station. Endless unconnected thoughts and impressions tumbled through my consciousness, a kind of mental landslide crashing through my brain.

After an hour I still could not sleep or even lie still. I opened my eyes, watched the luminous dial of the clock for ten minutes and got up again. I felt thirsty and made myself a cup of tea. Taking it over to the window I pulled back the curtain to look out into the street. It was deserted. What did I expect to see out there in the middle of the night? Tom breaking into one of the parked cars?

Then I remembered once before gazing out into the darkness of an empty road. After my parents died, from the bedroom window of my uncle's house, night after night I had stared out into the shadows, wishing that some mysterious means of escape from my unhappiness lay hidden in the darkness, or that a miraculous saviour might somehow materialize in the eerie glow of the street lights.

Then, as now, my inability to sleep would not excuse me from the demands that the next day would bring. I went back to bed, and some time after five o'clock the need for slumber finally quietened my turbulent thoughts.

CHAPTER 12

Andrew's revelation about Tom's past demolished the illusion that I had escaped from the ruthless culture of City opportunism into a new sunlit world of honesty and fraternity with other gay men. All the warmth and colour my new life appeared to contain had existed in my imagination; the reality was as cold and grey as concrete. Rather than being a place of openness and honesty, concealed motives and deception were as pervasive at Goodmans Hotel as they had been in the 'straight' world I had left behind. Those life-changing decisions to accept redundancy and buy the lease on Goodmans Villa were not, as they had seemed, informed judgements made from sound knowledge and understanding, but reckless gambles based on false information.

However foolish the change might have been, it could not be reversed. The hotel had to be run, as did Andrew's businesses. Hard work would provide me with a diversion from self-pity and constant suspicious thoughts about everyone and everything around me.

Even to speak to Tom on the 'phone was unbearable, and when he rang the day after that dreadful meal with Andrew, in a calm deep voice I said 'I have nothing at all to say to you,' and when he began to plead I repeated the words and hung up.

Andrew's first call from New Zealand came over a week later. With a determined effort to avoid making accusations, I asked politely about his journey and we discussed his plans for the week. My good opinion of him had been shaken, but his personal qualities and achievements in life had to be balanced against the way he had misled me about Tom. His failing health and the need to ensure his staff would continue to have jobs to go to were good reasons for moderating my antagonism towards him. If only for their sake, I would fulfil my promise to check that his businesses were run properly.

Darren made allowances for my low spirits. He did not take offence at my constant grumpiness. I suspect he had warned Cheung about my state of mind, because although I was as curt with him as I was with everyone, he always greeted me with a smile and tried to make conversation, asking after my health or whether the hotel was busy. They avoided displays of affection for each other in front of me, perhaps afraid of reminding me of my own freshly acquired solo status, but passing the lounge one day I saw Cheung affectionately pat Darren's backside as he reached up for a book from a high shelf. Well, enjoy the fascination with one another before it fades, I thought cynically.

My general disillusion was such that even the hotel guests appeared in a different more suspect light. What secret anxieties and guilty yearnings lay hidden behind their masks of cheerful greeting and warm words? This jaundiced outlook lasted for a week or more, but some inner mental process gradually drew me back towards equilibrium; something in my make-up seemed to refuse to allow me to be permanently miserable.

The arrival of an attractive couple from South Wales, one dark and one fair, helped along my progress towards a less negative frame of mind. As soon as I saw them I could tell they were having an affair. The way they stood side by side, their arms almost but not quite touching and the way they glanced lovingly at each other made it evident that they doted on one another. My first reaction was to think they were making fools of themselves by openly showing their infatuation, and to wonder how long it would take for the unpleasant side of their natures to spoil their illusions about each other, but for three days their obvious affection

did not waver. My envy of their happiness grew stronger and stronger, until my sourness towards them seemed unreasonable even to me, since they had done nothing to deserve my sneering thoughts. Then I felt ashamed of my attitude; my feelings of misery and frustration were, after all, not of their making.

On the last morning of their stay they had not come down by the time breakfast was over, presumably tired by sight-seeing during the days and late nights in the clubs. The cleaner reported that he had left their room untouched as the door was locked and they did not respond to his knock.

At two o'clock they had not emerged and I went up to check. The door was still locked and there was no answer to my gentle tapping. I used my pass key to let myself in. In the semi-darkness, covered by a sheet, they lay together in the twin bed nearest the window, their limbs wrapped around each other. One of them was breathing slowly and heavily. Only their heads and one foot protruded from the sheet, a corner being wrapped around the ankle.

Neither of them stirred. I could not resist gazing down on their unconscious figures, working out to whom the exposed foot belonged from the way they lay beneath the contorted sheet. How fortunate they were, sleeping contentedly in each other's arms. If they could lie so happily together, so clearly a couple even in sleep, what was wrong with me?

A growing sense of guilt about spying on them broke the spell cast by their sleeping forms. What was I doing there, sneaking around in their room while they lay clasped together in sleep? What if one of them woke, discovered me and thought I was there to steal from them? I crept out, shutting the door with hardly a sound, and stole away the mental image of them lying together under the crumpled white sheet.

They came down a couple of hours later and looked in at the little office to pay their bill, completely unaware of my intrusion. We shook hands and with genuine warmth I wished them a good journey home and hoped they would come back to the hotel the next time they visited London. If Goodmans Hotel provided a comfortable and welcoming place for men like them, surely it was an enterprise I could feel pleased about.

Relentless sexual frustration was a daily reminder of my return to single status. After the long period of regular love-making with Tom my appetite was strong. Irrepressible urges began twisting my thoughts, imbuing everyday social and business contacts with lewd sexual connotations. My mind constantly saw in others the persistent lust that was swamping me, and almost any vaguely attractive man in almost any circumstances became, to my imagination, a potential debauchee.

For a time I thought that an outlet for my desires might be found among the hotel guests, but any kind of sexual involvement with them threatened to cause awkward complications. How could the commercial part of the arrangement be kept separate from the sex? Might a man refuse to pay for his room after having slept with me, hoping that embarrassment and fear of being accused of selling sex would prevent me pursuing the debt or calling the police?

Even if nobody tried to get out of paying for his stay, word would surely spread. In gay bars when Goodmans Hotel was mentioned people might say, 'Oh yeah, stayed there, had the manager.' What if Darren realised what was going on and followed my example? My intention was to run a clean comfortable hotel, not a brothel.

One Friday night, when Darren was at the club with Cheung, I ventured out to a bar in the West End to look for a pick-up, leaving a note with the number of my mobile 'phone pinned to the office door in case of emergency. There were three or four men drinking on their own among the crowd, and after conversation developed with one of them I brought him back to the hotel. Reluctant to let him know anything about myself, rather than going down to the

basement flat I pretended to be one of the guests and took him up to a vacant second floor room.

As we were unaccustomed to each other physically the sex was rather clumsy, but becoming intimate with a stranger again after so long was exciting, and the pretence of being a hotel guest added an element of adventure to what might otherwise have been a fairly uninspiring one night stand.

Had he wanted a telephone number, my mobile 'phone would have allowed me to keep any subsequent meetings from Darren, but we parted without either of us expressing any interest in meeting again. I wondered what he thought of our night together, whether he was simply content with having sex with me once, or if he had found I was not at all what he wanted and gone away disappointed.

That one night apart there never seemed to be time for me to go out looking for pick-ups. The only aids easily available to assuage my desires were magazine pictures of naked men and my own hands. The satisfaction was meagre compared to holding a lover in my arms. Sometimes alone in bed at night I imagined the hotel rooms above me writhing with acts of love, while I lay alone in the basement like a wretched doorkeeper, not permitted to share in the pleasures of the house above.

Of all the gay men around me, the one who might have been my choice for starting a new relationship was the manager of the garden centre. He was seven or eight years older than I, and not 'with' anyone as far as I knew. Darren had been over to his small terraced house to see the long narrow garden almost completely taken up by a series of ponds where he grew aquatic and marsh plants. He was fit, even-tempered, intelligent, and had the great advantage of not looking at all like Tom.

Andrew sometimes described him as an excellent employee, praise which contained the implied criticism that, however well he did his job, he was unwilling to commit himself beyond his contracted hours or show the broader interest that might have made him a potential business partner. To a lover this characteristic might have been welcome – workaholics do not have much time to devote to relationships.

Unfortunately my ignorance of gardening irritated him and he had never been very friendly towards me. Whenever he and Darren talked they would litter their conversation with multi-syllabic horticultural terms and discuss esoteric subjects such as biological methods of pest control. My attempts to contribute to discussions of this kind only made me seem stupid. Once he forced me to admit that never in my life had I planted seeds, waited for them to germinate, and watched the plants go on to develop flowers or bear fruit.

Darren, in contrast, never criticised me and was my constant support. As he gained experience he took on more and more responsibility for the hotel. He had settled in well at West London Tertiary College, took Cheung up to his room for the night once or twice a week, and helped me get out for an hour in the evening now and again by arranging for me to meet them both in the Beckford Arms.

He was fond of telling me horrible stories about people treating one another dreadfully or about human cruelty to animals. One story was about a group of lads at the seaside who caught crabs and mutilated them by poking them with iron rods, breaking off a leg or a claw, and another was of a rabbit-hunting expedition he was persuaded to go on when he was about twelve years old to a warren not far from Twyford. He thought they were going to look at the rabbits, not to kill the poor things. To his horror the boys he was with lit petrol soaked rags in front of some of the burrows and tried to blow or waft the smoke down into them. This attempt to drive the rabbits out of the safety of their earthworks failed, but they caught one

that ran straight towards them when fire from their rags spread through the long grass where it was hiding. He watched as the others surrounded it and battered it to death with lumps of wood.

He passed on to me other grim stories that originated with Andrew or Cheung, probably thinking that they would comfort me. In a curious sort of way they did. However bitter my feelings about Tom, and however sad the evaporation of my imagined wonderful new life at Goodmans Hotel, my misfortunes were not nearly as bad as being set alight or beaten to death with sticks.

The work on Vincent's computer network, arranged when he came to the hotel with Lizetta, also helped divert me from gloom. The project engaged my mind for one day a week with new people and brought some of my old technical expertise back into use. His staff were all 'straight', but none of them was put off when he introduced me by saying that I used to be the computer manager in a big accountancy firm and now ran a gay hotel.

By doing this he saved me from worries about 'coming out'. His staff were used to meeting gay men when they were out on consultancy assignments in the hotel and tourist industry, and were far more interested in asking me questions about my business than they were in talking to me about their own computer system. They were not particularly interested in specifics about Goodmans Hotel, but liked to speculate on the extent of the market for hotel rooms for gay men in London, how many of the guests were business visitors and how many were holiday makers, whether demand was growing, and if there was potential to develop package tours to London for gay visitors from the provinces and abroad.

They gave me copies of a few reports they had produced for owners of small hotels to show me how they advised on ways to increase profit or reposition a business in the market, and talking to them gave me a wider view of the tourist industry and made me feel less trapped by my circumstances. Andrew had begun with one modest shop. Why should Goodmans Hotel not become a base from which to expand?

After my work on enhancements to the computer network was finished Vincent asked me to help for one day a week on a large contract with a US tour operator. The corporation was introducing a range of 'themed' holidays in Europe aimed at middle America, and one of these, to be called 'The Essential Scotland', was to be based in a large Victorian hotel in Dunblane. Vincent's company had been hired to produce ideas and costed plans to make this 'Essential' experience a success.

The project's objective did not appeal to me greatly. The 'Essential Scotland' the US citizens from middle America were to experience was to consist of coach trips to Loch Lomond, excursions during the day to castles and other historic or quaint places, and evening entertainment with bagpipes and Scottish dancing. However, helping to plan the activities did not mean I had to like them, and when the two full-time consultants assigned to the project spoke to me about it with an irreverence that would have horrified the US client, it seemed as though it might be fun.

We held meetings to develop our proposals and present them to the corporation's European representatives, but the work was interspersed with scurrilous suggestions, such as providing tartan baseball caps decorated with haggis feathers, or putting items such as Texas style grouse-burger with French fries on the dinner menu.

At the third of the meetings I attended we were joined by the group bookings manager from the hotel in Dunblane. He had a high-pitched voice for a man and rather camp mannerisms, but made it clear he was not gay by pointedly mentioning a girlfriend several times. Since he was someone I could never imagine myself having more to do with than

necessary, I hoped he was not going out of his way to announce his heterosexuality because of some curious notion about me being interested in him.

The lampooning of the US visitors and Scottish customs might have been inhibited by his presence, but we tested his ability to take a joke by asking him during a coffee break if he thought it would be possible for a baseball match to be included in the Highland Games to help the US visitors feel at home.

'They can have a day's cattle rustling included if they're willing to pay for it,' he answered. 'You'd do well to give some attention to indoor events and entertainments. A wet day will spoil any outdoor excursion, no matter how fine the views when the weather's clear. Have you considered movies with a Scottish theme? Give the Yanks a bunch of heather, plenty of photo opportunities and a tin of shortbread and they'll probably be happy enough, as long as we can keep them entertained.'

His sense of humour was fine, but at times he tended to be hectoring and argumentative. Vincent's two consultants went up to Scotland several times to see the Dunblane hotel and discuss local arrangements with him, and they said he was domineering towards his staff. My commitments in London made the trip impossible for me, but they brought back photographs which gave a fair impression of the place, inside and out, and of some of the nearby attractions, a golf course, a local salmon stream and a distillery.

As long as the hotel and Andrew's businesses were trouble free, working a day a week for Vincent was manageable. However, tiredness after a couple of months of this workload was inevitable, and a few weeks after the turn of the year an incident at the garden centre put me under real pressure.

The manager rang me late one afternoon to tell me that a member of his staff had run off with the day's takings. Leaving the hotel unattended I hurried over to find him talking to two heavily built men near the cash desk. They looked unlikely customers for winter flowering plants. They stopped talking as I approached and stood glaring at the manager across the counter. Since I'd gone over straight away his casual dismissive greeting, 'I'll join you upstairs in a second,' annoyed me.

I went up to the little staff room to wait. When he came up I asked, 'Who on earth were they?'

'They came in by mistake. Seem to have been given the wrong address. Anyway, about the theft, sorry to drag you over here. He's got away with the best part of the day's takings. Fortunately I'm always taking money out of the cash drawer and putting it away in the safe, but he timed his move well.'

There was a self-contradiction in these statements. If he frequently removed money from the cash drawer the best part of a day's takings would not have been there to be stolen, but this was not a good time to query the inconsistency. 'Who did you say took the money?'

'You always were straight to the point! You've probably guessed already. It was Jamie.'

My question was an obvious one to ask, hardly 'straight to the point', and why should he think I had guessed Jamie was the thief? 'Have the police been in yet?'

'Police? No.'

'How long is it since you called them?'

'What's the point in bringing them into it? We won't be seeing that money again. We'd only be making unnecessary trouble.'

'We can't pretend that nothing has happened. The insurers will want to know that we've notified the police. Unless he's spent it all already we may be able to get back what's left.'

'We won't see any of the money again, you can forget about that.'

'It isn't our money to forget about. The insurers will want details, the loss will have to be shown as a debit in the accounts.' This was standard practice, and my tone was not provocative, but he lost his temper.

'Don't make things harder for me than they are already. I'll make the money up out of my own pocket if you're that fussed about it.'

'I'm not "fussed" about anything. This is Andrew's money. What do you think we should do? Let people steal whatever they want from him and do nothing about it?'

'What Andrew said to me was that you would be keeping an eye on the books. He didn't say you'd be coming in interfering with how I run the place.'

'You asked me to come over because of a theft. If you're running a business and someone steals a significant amount of money, why would you not inform the police?'

He looked at me contemptuously. 'You don't know anything about this business. You were just some sort of computerised accountant before Andrew helped you set up that hotel.'

His mouth, which had never shaped itself into a smile in my direction, was spitting at me now. Had he always disliked me? I could overrule him and call in the police myself, but doing that would antagonise him more, and if he walked out the effect on the business would be far worse than the loss of a day's takings.

'Thanks for telling me what you think of me.' I said. 'All right, you're the one who knows all about the business, you decide what to do. We can't pretend the money is still in the till. Somehow or other the loss has to be covered for the accounts. Other than that do whatever you like.'

'I told you. I'll make the money up out of my own pocket. Forget it.'

'What did you call me over for if you intended to cover it up?'

'I don't know.'

We were silent for a minute or so, searching for a way to discontinue hostilities. Tentatively I asked, 'Do we have a home address for Jamie, maybe someone should call to see if...?'

'Yes, he lives in one of Andrew's flats. Let me deal with it. You're acting for Andrew, so you had to know what happened. It's best for me to sort it out. Thanks for coming over, but you don't need to do anything.'

'If that's how you want it.' I left the shop insulted and offended. Evidently his occasional critical comments, for example that I did not know my daisies from my dandelions, had not been mildly humorous reproofs but were signs of serious dislike. How totally misconceived my earlier thoughts had been about us perhaps being compatible in a relationship.

The next morning he had recovered his temper and rang in a conciliatory mood wanting to tell me more about the theft. When he called I was about to set off for Vincent's offices and had to put him off until the evening. He was locking up when I arrived at the garden centre, and he took me upstairs where he made a pot of tea. We found it difficult to know how to start, and uncomfortably I asked, 'Have there been any developments?'

Ignoring my question he said, 'I know what you're thinking, but there's been nothing between Jamie and me for a few months.'

'There was something between you, earlier?'

'Everyone knows there was.'

'Everyone who works here, maybe. I didn't. If Jamie was around we said hello, that was about it. No one ever said anything to me about... you and him.'

He looked at me doubtfully. 'You'd better hear the whole story. Andrew will have to know sometime, one way or another.' He had grey shadows around his eyes and looked miserable.

Knowing nothing of my problems, as well as resenting having to report to me while Andrew was away, he probably imagined me having a contented comfortable life, smugly looking down on those who were less happy.

'Talk to me then. Andrew always speaks well of you. We'll do the best we can, he can't expect more than that.'

'I'm sorry for dragging you into all this. You really didn't know about Jamie and me?'

'No.'

'I shouldn't have spoken the way I did yesterday, the situation is driving me nuts. You remember the two men who were downstairs when you came into the shop? They were trying to make trouble. The whole mess had got beyond me by the time I came up here to see you. All of this is my own stupid fault. You knew Jamie – enough to say hello to, you said?'

'Yes.'

'He was an old flame. We hadn't seen each other for years and years, and one night we bumped into each other in a club, and... things started up between us again. He was out of work. I took him on as favour.'

'And he's let you down rather badly?'

'Yes. A couple of months is about the longest my boyfriends ever last. The sexual interest waned, but we hadn't fallen out or rowed. We carried on being friends and his work was okay. The first signs of a problem came a few weeks ago when he began to slip out more and more frequently to the betting shop.'

He worked in a betting shop before I took him on. People in that line usually stay in it. I should have suspected something. If we hadn't been sleeping together maybe I would have made a few 'phone calls and checked him out more. Suppose that's what happens when it's not your brain that's making the decisions.'

'We all fall into that trap. A winning smile robs us of all our powers of judgement.'

A little more relaxed now, he nodded. 'Thanks for saying that. It's the sort of thing Andrew would have said. There's more. Jamie ran up gambling debts, and the two men who came into the shop yesterday were looking for him. They were threatening to make trouble unless I gave them his address or paid what he owed.'

'He's the one who got himself into a mess; if he came to us, told us he was in trouble... we might be able to help... but as things are...'

'The two men who are after him came back to the shop today, asking where they could find him, talking about him owing money. They stood staring at the till.'

'What did you do?'

'Told them if he owed money it was nothing to do with the business, that he'd disappeared.'

'Is there much cash here now – if they tried to break in?'

'No, not even in the safe. I took everything down to the bank last minute. We've got a good alarm system, with an automatic dial up to the police. It's not like a jewellers, there isn't a lot of small high value stuff on the shelves. You don't get dodgy people in the pub coming up to you and asking if you'd like to buy a nice garden trowel or a bag of potting compost, do you?'

'Actually, no one has ever offered to sell me anything in a pub. Must be something about me.'

'Or the pubs you go to. What will you say to Andrew?'

'Probably nothing. The loss of part of a day's takings won't ruin the business, why detract from his holiday by worrying him about it?'

For a while we chatted about Andrew's holiday and speculated about how much longer he was likely to be away. We were interrupted by the sound of someone banging on the shop door and the display windows below us. Downstairs through the glass of the door we saw the two thugs, who even if we were hidden by the darkness of the shop would have seen the upstairs light and deduced that someone was in. We opened the door a few inches, each of us keeping a foot planted firmly against it. They glared at us through the gap.

'You know why we're here. This is our third call. Your time's up. The cash, or the address of the man who owes it, now.' They leaned hard against the door; we pushed back, barely able to resist.

'Like I told you this afternoon, the man you're looking for has left. He used to work here, but not any more.'

The taller of the men tried to force his boot into the space between door and doorframe. They were likely to win the struggle eventually because of their greater weight. In a drawer under the counter was a remote control unit for the shop's alarm system, but it was impossible to reach it without giving up our defence of the door. I had my mobile 'phone with me, pulled it from my pocket, and held it up high where they could see it.

'You're making threats and demanding money. Fuck off, or it's the police, now.'

One of them took a step back, then threw all his weight against the door, but we held it firm. 'You fucking queers,' he snarled. They backed off and walked to their car, parked across the road. We watched them drive off, then locked up, turned off the upstairs lights, and from the first floor windows checked again they had gone. The garden centre manager's car was parked at the back, and after double checking all the doors and windows we set the alarm system and he drove me the short distance back to the hotel.

'Will we get out of this alive?' I asked.

'Good job you were there. From my point of view that is, not from yours. During opening hours there's always two or three of us on the premises, so it's not that easy for them to make trouble. Thanks for backing me up tonight. Don't worry about it, it's my problem.'

Had I not been so tired, anxiety over what had happened might have kept me awake, but in fact I slept deeply and hated having to get up early to help with the breakfasts. A week or a fortnight in Sitges or Mykonos would have done me good. Casual sex with another tourist or a local man wanting a good time would have refreshed me and made me feel less sexually frustrated. Perhaps those few days, which now seemed an age ago, with Georges at the *Hotel des Amis* were the best that life would ever offer me by way of a relationship. If only other people were as straightforward and good natured as he and his mother had been. Maybe holiday affairs were a sort of fertile terrain between the frost-hardened wilderness of casual sex and the treacherous precipices of long term relationships.

A chance for a break did come, albeit in a rather unpleasant way, and only for a weekend. At one of the meetings about the Dunblane project that the Scottish hotel manager attended we discussed itineraries for coach trips, some of which were to include lunch near Inverness. He said that the waitresses at a particular restaurant were 'fine Highland girls in traditional dress' and were sure to cheer up the menfolk.

'Well, not all of the menfolk,' I remarked humorously.

'Oh now,' he said loudly, 'I've been forewarned about you; some of us would prefer not to hear about certain kinds of behaviour, thank you very much.'

One of Vincent's consultants said, 'Mark's a good colleague, we all know he's gay, do you have some kind of problem with that?'

'Excuse me, it isn't me who has the problem. I think you'll find your US client, who is

footing your bill, would be none too pleased to hear an avowed homosexual is working on their project. Organisations that provide family holidays for middle America support traditional conservative values, and quite rightly so in my opinion.'

With difficulty we returned to the business of the meeting, but the incident reminded me of all the past consternation and confusion over 'coming out' at Lindler & Haliburton. Even here, with colleagues who were gay friendly, prejudice had infiltrated. Whatever my problems at Goodmans Hotel, having my own business had saved me from being plagued by discrimination.

I mentioned his outburst to Vincent later in the day. 'He's completely wrong about the client. Our contract with them has an equal opportunities clause which covers sexual orientation. The subject was specifically raised by them in discussions, and they asked for assurances that our policy matched theirs. He is the one who is out of line, not you. You're not going to be put off by him, are you? Do you want me to speak to him?'

'No, but Lizetta often says that companies are usually quite happy to adopt equal opportunities policies, but whether their doing so has any real effect is difficult to determine....'

'Don't give up on account of this. That bigot will have won if you do. Give it another month or so. Look, for god's sake don't say a word about this to anyone here – my wife meets me at the office sometimes – but Lizetta and I are hiring a cottage up in Scotland in February. Why don't you come and stay with us for the weekend?'

Vincent's support did make me feel better. Nothing might come of his hoped-for weekend away with Lizetta, but the invitation to join them was kind. 'A break would be nice, but wouldn't I be rather in the way?'

'Nonsense. You've played host to us at the hotel, if you spend a weekend with us we'll be taking our turn, that's all. My main problem is coming up with a good excuse for the wife.'

On the occasions when he and Lizetta had come to the hotel for Sunday dinner he told her that he was meeting a business associate at the airport, but a convincing excuse for a whole weekend away would be far more difficult. The affair sometimes seemed terribly precarious. At the hotel they ate Sunday dinner with Darren and me, and then spent a few hours together between hotel sheets, twice in one of the guest rooms and once, when all the rooms were taken, on the futon in my flat downstairs, like a couple of teenagers with strict parents making love at a friend's house.

CHAPTER 13

Lizetta rang me at the hotel to confirm Vincent's tentative invitation. He had a project meeting at Dunblane arranged for a Thursday in mid-February, and despite the likelihood of colder weather in the North had hired a cottage near Perth. She planned to fly up to Edinburgh Airport where he was to collect her in a hired car. They hoped to have the rare luxury of four nights and three whole days together, returning to London on Monday morning.

She dismissed my concern about being a nuisance. 'The cottage has three bedrooms and two rooms downstairs, so we won't be sitting on each other's laps. If you come up it will be the first time Vincent and I will have been staying together somewhere and been able to have guests. You can bring your own transport, or hire a car up there, you won't have to spend more time with us than you want to. Why don't you ask Darren to come? Vincent likes him. He's so sweet. You can't possibly be bored if he's around.'

'Who's going to look after the hotel?'

'Close it for the weekend.'

That was out of the question. Half the rooms were already booked, and except for dire emergencies closing was something that had to be planned months in advance. If we were to go, staff would have to be brought in from Housmans Hotel or the garden centre to provide cover. However my last real holiday had been over a year ago, and Darren had not left London since the summer when he had a day's outing to Brighton with Cheung; a weekend away would hardly be an extravagance.

We set off before daylight on Friday morning in the newest of the *Ferns and Foliage* vans, the garden centre manager having filled the fuel tank for us the previous day. By the time we arrived Lizetta and Vincent would have had the cottage to themselves for twenty-four hours. We were comfortable and warm in the front of the van, and early enough to avoid the rush hour traffic on our way out of London. As the early morning light strengthened, seeing the motorway stretching into the Chiltern hills ahead of us, with Darren sitting beside me listening to music on his personal stereo, my hopes of an enjoyable trip were good. Even if the weather prevented us from going out much we would surely find enough to do for a few days in the cottage or in Perth. The escape from the constant demands of the hotel would alone make the expedition worthwhile.

We stopped for lunch at a motorway service station, two men, one nineteen and the other in his mid-thirties, descending from a white van with *Ferns and Foliage* painted on the sides. Darren looked good in his yellow padded coat and white jeans. He mattered to me now. The qualities Andrew had seen in him straight away, his independent nature, his fresh inquisitive mind, his loyalty and honesty, had become precious to me. Even watching him eat, seeing his bony jaw move rhythmically as he chewed his food, now gave me pleasure. He was a slow eater. During meals I would pause now and again and wait to avoid him having to rush to catch up at the end. He always stirred the sugar in his tea or coffee with excessive thoroughness, the spoon tinkling against the side of the cup for nearly a minute, an oddity of behaviour that made me smile.

Three more hours of driving took us into Scotland and we paused once more, relieved to step out of the van, straighten our backs and exercise our legs. We bought hot drinks in the

café, where a noisy group of half a dozen boys and girls of his age who loitered around a couple of tables looked across at Darren a number of times. He used the toilets before we left and one of the girls stopped him with some query or other on his way back.

‘An admirer?’ I asked as he climbed back into the van.

‘After something you wouldn’t approve of. What kind of place have you brought me to, women accosting me for drugs outside the toilets?’ They were probably bored local kids who had driven up to the café in some battered old car or cadged a lift and were hanging around in the hope that something exciting would happen.

Wanting to talk I said, ‘She *might* have been after something else. How do we know you’re not bisexual?’

‘How do we know you’re not?’ He had become good at turning questions back on people.

‘No, tried it. Women don’t do it for me. The attraction isn’t there.’ He grinned and put his earpieces in again and went back to his music.

We drove on for another couple of hours, crossed the Forth Bridge, and followed the motorway all the way to Perth, arriving in darkness at the cottage. Vincent was ready for us with a humorous greeting at the door. He raised a hand and said, ‘One minute,’ then turning his head called inside: ‘Were you expecting two gay boys this evening, Zetta?’

‘Are they nice looking?’

‘Not bad.’

‘Well let them in then.’

The ‘cottage’ was actually a gaunt three bedroom house at the end of a short terrace on the outskirts of the town. What happened next rather countered the effect of Vincent’s warm welcome. He took us upstairs while Lizetta prepared the evening meal. They had taken the largest bedroom at the front, and he showed us into the one at the back, a reasonable size, furnished with an old fashioned chest of drawers, a fitted wardrobe and a double bed. ‘Not up to your standards at the hotel, but will it do for a couple of nights?’

‘Bed looks comfortable. This do you, Darren?’

‘Yeah, it’s fine.’

Still carrying my bag I left Darren to settle into the room and paused near the top of the stairs, waiting for Vincent to show me the third bedroom. He followed, looked at me and smiled uncertainly, confused by my actions. He had evidently been expecting us to sleep together.

‘Is there another room? Lizetta did say there was plenty of space.’

He blushed and stumbling over his words said, ‘Yes, erm, wasn’t sure what you’d... should’ve asked Zetta, didn’t think, through here...’ He took me into the box room, as small as that little room in the attic of Goodmans Hotel where Darren had been living when we first found him.

‘This will be okay for me.’

‘Bit small, really ought to have...’ He coughed and went to fetch sheets and blankets from the airing cupboard before hurrying away downstairs.

Darren came in, saw me holding the bedding and tried to take it from me. ‘You should take the bigger room. You’ll feel claustrophobic in here.’

‘No. Claustrophobia is not one of my problems. For once you have the bridal suite. Really – it’s not worth arguing about. We’ve only been here five minutes and we’ve already embarrassed Vincent. Don’t say anything when we go downstairs.’

After unpacking we went down and found him sprawled on the sofa, arms stretched out and legs wide apart, watching rugby on the television. ‘Sit down,’ he said, nodding towards

the one armchair. 'Come and sit over here, Darren.' He straightened himself up on the sofa to make room and handed him the TV remote control. 'You're probably not interested in this, find yourself something you like. I'm sure there'll be at least one gardening programme on.'

Darren, instead of changing channels, muted the sound and asked, 'How do people get to make gardening programmes? Do you have any idea? They may be all right as entertainment, but most of them tell you hardly anything, and what they do tell you is stuff you know already, like sprinkle some seeds on the soil and cover them up. Do they make a lot of money out of it, those presenters?'

Vincent at first tried to dodge the question by saying that careers advice was Lizetta's field, but quickly recovered his credibility by suggesting Darren ask one of the lecturers at the college about contacting the BBC or one of the TV companies. The exercise might, he thought, be made into a project that could be marked as part of his course work.

Seeing that Lizetta had begun laying the table, I went to help. Our meal consisted of a traditional broth followed by sole bought from a fishmonger in Perth that day. Vincent repeatedly topped up everyone's wine glass, opening a third bottle as we helped ourselves to pudding, with the result that when Darren stood up from the table he was slightly drunk and staggered backwards. He offered to help me clear away, but worried about breakages I persuaded him to sit and relax with Lizetta and Vincent.

When I went to join them in the lounge, Darren was perched on an arm of the sofa holding a glass of whisky.

'You'll have a hangover in the morning.'

'No I won't.'

Vincent said, 'My fault, for encouraging him, a glass of malt whisky on his first ever night in Scotland... was it the wrong thing to do?'

'No, of course not. I'm tired after the drive. Take no notice of me.'

Darren held the glass out towards me with a quarter of an inch of whisky remaining. 'Do you want to finish it? It's too much for me really.'

'No, you deserve a glass... well, let me taste it.' After I had taken a sip Vincent coaxed me into accepting a glass of my own, dribbling into it such a tiny quantity of malt whisky that to refuse would have been rude. We watched TV and saw a late weather forecast that threatened overnight snow, then went up to bed. Darren thumped up the stairs in front of me and crashed into his room.

In the morning he had a definite aura of wanting to be left to nurse his headache, but Lizetta helped him recover by giving him fruit juice and a cooked breakfast. He helped her clear up in the kitchen afterwards, whilst Vincent continued his policy of letting others do the housework. A couple of times Lizetta called on him to do something for her, to empty the kitchen waste bin and to lift a heavy bag of potatoes, and I realized that they were enjoying playing the traditional roles of man and wife. To an extent Darren and I found ourselves acting the roles of the children, two good boys who offered to help lay the table, clear away and wash up. They referred to us as *boys*, as in: 'You *boys* go off on your own if you want to. You're welcome to join us for a look around the town, but do whatever you *boys* feel like doing.'

Three or four inches of snow had fallen during the night. I was not particularly keen to take the van into Perth after so many hours at the wheel yesterday, and we all travelled into town in Vincent's hired car. We stopped first at some gardens which Darren said were famous for rhododendrons and varieties of heather, but hardly anything of the plants could be seen under the snow. Vincent had one of those expensive cameras with all sorts of settings and

attachments and took photographs of us beside an ornamental shelter, and asked Darren to photograph Lizetta and himself together.

Later we stopped the car near the sea so that Vincent could photograph a couple of men fishing from a pier in defiance of the icy wind. A little further down from where they sat waves crashed violently against the curved arm of the harbour. Vincent took ages finding a viewpoint which would enable him to picture the fishermen with a cascade of surf in the background; he showed Darren the camera's features and let him take half a dozen or more shots, while Lizetta and I watched from the warmth of the car. Despite having children of his own, Vincent was clearly unable to resist Darren's appeal; it was as though he gave off some kind of pheromone that made us all want to play at being a parent to him.

We wandered around the town looking at restaurants and going in and out of various shops. Lizetta bought a tartan scarf for herself and a doll in traditional Scottish dress for a niece, and I bought an attractive glass jar of wrapped sweets that would look nice on the hall table back at the hotel.

We went back to the cottage with our purchases, and in the evening returned to town for dinner in a restaurant where mounted heads of deer stared down at us from the walls. After the meal Lizetta and Vincent drove straight back to the cottage, probably intending to make full use of their double bed, and Darren and I walked around the frozen streets until we found a pub that looked comfortable and not overcrowded. Having brought the van down for the evening I had to restrict myself to soft drinks because of driving back. The other customers were regulars with pints of ale who watched football on the large screen TV and took little notice of us. After an hour we had had enough of the place and went back to the cottage, letting ourselves in quietly so as not to disturb Vincent and Lizetta. For the same reason we were reluctant to turn on the television or listen to music, but we made ourselves coffee and chatted in the kitchen.

'Do you think they're about the same age?' Darren asked.

'I don't know exactly. Lizetta must be nearly forty. He's probably a bit older.'

'Do you think it matters, people being a similar age?'

'Some women seem to be happy with men a lot older than themselves. The same doesn't hold true for most gay men, unfortunately. Youth counts for so much; however well you take care of yourself you slip down the league table as you get older.'

'That's true for being picked up in a bar. But in a relationship, could it work between men of different ages?'

'A long term relationship? Anything's possible, but the bigger the age gap the harder it becomes. A man who looks good for forty-five will quite likely be losing his hair, have wrinkles and be putting on weight at fifty-five. What do you think his chances are of holding on to someone ten or twenty years younger?'

'You don't think it would work out, then?'

'Everyone's different. How would I know? Boyfriends let you down, one way or another. Casual sex after the *n*th time makes you feel like a sexual automaton. With your interest in plants a relationship with a tree might not be a bad idea. A big strong oak would never let you down.'

'You can't have sex with a tree.'

'Don't be too sure. Some people probably manage it. Things are different for "straights". They produce children, the next generation, and that creates the need to stay together and excuses all their shortcomings.'

'Gay men can have children, through an arrangement with a lesbian couple, say.'

‘Yes, but that’s much more difficult than being a “straight” at a party and falling into bed with someone of the opposite sex while drunk. How did we get onto this?’

‘We were talking about age differences. In a relationship.’

‘Oh yes. What about Andrew and you?’

‘You know he wasn’t interested in me in that way. Because he took me to all sorts of places some people might have thought he was, but he never expected sex as a pay-back. He wasn’t like that.’

‘He took you to Paris once. Most people would assume you were...’

‘They’d be wrong. We shared a twin-bedded room and he saw me coming out of the shower naked. He just smiled and looked away. He told me he liked treating me. I gave him a reason to see places he’d not visited for years and years and would never have gone to on his own. Getting away from business did him good.’

After finishing our coffee we went up to our separate rooms. Randiness made going off to sleep difficult. How easy it would have been to quietly slip across the landing, gently open Darren’s door and whisper the words ‘Are you awake?’ into the darkness. Could we not, this one night, so far away from our familiar surroundings, extend our friendship by giving one another a little sexual relief? In asking about age differences in relationships, had he been hinting that he would be receptive? Yet, if we did go to bed together, would we be content with one night only? What if he expected a new phase in our relationship to begin, while my feelings towards him remained unchanged, as they surely would. He did not arouse in me that overwhelming mix of intense emotion and physical desire that gives rise to a love affair. Cheung was probably a much better boyfriend for him than I could ever be. To *have* him sexually, feeling as I did, would be to take advantage of him; the bedroom door remained closed.

On Sunday morning, undeterred by more snow, Vincent was keen to head inland to a little town called Pitlochry, and if the road was clear enough to continue up to the mountain pass of Killiecrankie. Part of his reason for wanting to go there was to investigate the area as a potential stopping point for coach excursions from Dunblane, and we were all in favour of an outing of some kind. Snow lay on the roadside verges and surrounding fields, thickening as we drove on towards the mountains, Darren and I following Vincent’s hired car in the van. The sky was clear and the forecast promised a sunny day, but at the Killiecrankie Visitor Centre a keen wind made us shiver as we left the safety and warmth of the vehicles.

From the car park a footpath, lightly covered with snow, led uphill through some woods. Lizetta and Darren wanted to walk, but on the assumption we would not venture far on foot in such cold weather I had brought only my town shoes and would have to stay behind. In his usual helpful way Vincent offered to keep me company and suggested that he and I take the van to a pub we had passed on the edge of the town, leaving them the car to drive down later. ‘A lot of these country places won’t serve food after two, so we’ll be able to make sure of having a few sandwiches for you when you turn up,’ he suggested.

Feeling had already gone from my feet by the time we reached the van, and I jiggled them up and down on the floor to restore the circulation before setting off. As Vincent had foreseen the pub did not serve food after two, but the landlady willingly wrapped plates of sandwiches in cling-film for us to eat when we were ready. We settled at a table near the radiator. ‘It is cold,’ he commented. ‘You’re not the outdoor type really, are you?’

‘Something of a city boy, that’s true. I’m not that bad, my shoes were the problem, not an aversion to exercise.’

‘Walking is a hobby of mine, but I have to confess to an ulterior motive. It gives me an excuse to get away from the family for a few days. For years I’ve met up with a group of old school friends, six or seven of us, to go walking in the countryside. Several of us invent additional outings from time to time and provide each other with alibis so we can get away from home for other purposes. That’s how this weekend was possible. Not that I’m proud of the deception. Things at home have not been easy since my boy with Downs Syndrome was born. My wife has to do most of what’s necessary for him. Her outlook on life has changed; she lost interest in the physical side of our relationship after he was born.’

‘Must be very difficult.’

‘Zetta’s been marvellous. She never complains about the problem of finding time to be together. I’m sorry about the misunderstanding over the bedroom when you arrived. She left it to me to sort out the upstairs for you. Were you offended?’

‘You weren’t to know. You did the sensible thing really. If we were in the habit of sleeping together it would have been pointless to have made up both beds.’

‘Thanks. Seeing you and him together I can’t help being envious. My lad can be quite sweet in his own way, but the scientific names of plants will never come tripping off his tongue like they do off Darren’s. You must be very proud of him. He worships you, doesn’t he?’

‘He means a lot to me. At least you have children of your own. Thanks for letting him have a go with your camera yesterday. I hope he didn’t use up all the film.’

‘He’s welcome to use as much film as he wants. He knew all about shutter speeds and lens apertures already; he’s a bright lad. All of that roll of film has to be used this weekend, or it will have to go into the developer’s partly blank. My wife would start asking awkward questions if she saw any of the shots taken up here. I’m supposed to be in the Lake District.’

Ten minutes later a call on Vincent’s mobile ‘phone interrupted our conversation. Despite his well prepared alibi, he was not to have an uninterrupted break from family responsibilities. His wife was calling to ask him to go back early because one of his daughters was feverish and had to be taken to hospital. He could not expect her to look after a sick daughter and their son on her own. He had to go back. His usual optimistic outlook on life momentarily faltered. He had wanted so much for Lizetta and himself to enjoy a weekend away like any ordinary couple, and felt guilty about letting her down. ‘How much more of this can Zetta be expected to stand? You won’t let this spoil things for you and Darren as well, will you?’

‘No, don’t say that. It’s been a good break for us. It has for you, you’ve only lost part of today, you’ve been with Lizetta for the best part of four days. You’re disappointed, naturally.’ We discussed whether she would want to return to London with him, but thought if she was willing it would be best for the three of us to stay on at the cottage for another night. When she and Darren joined us in the pub half an hour later, looking extremely cold, he did not mention the problem until after we had eaten. She was calm, betrayed no sign of jealousy, and said sincerely that she was sorry his little girl was ill and hoped she would be better soon.

As we drove back the traffic increased, the clear weather bringing people out for the afternoon. He rang the airport from the house to rearrange his flight, packed hurriedly, and left us after holding Lizetta in his arms for several minutes. She hid her disappointment, smiling and laughing as we whiled away the rest of the afternoon talking and playing Scrabble. Between games she asked Darren about how he was doing at West London Tertiary College, and if he had joined the Gay Soc.

‘The Gay Soc. is useless. The two people who run it hold a meeting once a month that nobody else goes to. Anyway, I have a boyfriend. Cheung.’

‘Oh yes, I remember. Are you in love?’ He blushed and hid his face behind his hands,

laughing and embarrassed at the same time.

‘They’ve lasted about six months now, so there must be something to it. They see each other – what – a couple of times a week?’

She could not prise anything more out of him about Cheung, and the conversation drifted onto office politics at Lindler & Haliburton. She was becoming more and more unhappy there, and told me I had been lucky to get out when I did. A kind of civil war had broken out, with Peter and his supporters battling to break the old codgers’ grip on the firm. Staying aloof from the dispute was almost impossible. Antagonism was so deep that simply using the lift had become hazardous: at every stop there was a risk of someone from the opposing side getting in, and people who had known each other for years stood inches away from one another in hostile silence. Sick absences and resignations had more than doubled, putting yet more pressure on those still at work.

She was thinking of moving on, and had been discussing with Vincent the possibility of working for him. His company was not big enough to need a full-time personnel manager and she would have to take on other consultancy or administrative work as well. ‘At least I’d see a bit more of him. Do you think I’d make a consultant? You got on all right, didn’t you?’

‘Except for that incident with the homophobic Scot. No reason why you shouldn’t. I’ve found it a very worthwhile experience. I’m only there one day a week on the Dunblane project, which is probably bigger than most. I think a lot of the assignments are much smaller scale, a few weeks on projects in modest hotels. Full-time, the pace may be wearing, but a mix of consultancy and personnel work might be a good combination for you.’

For dinner we finished up the odds and ends of food that had accumulated in the fridge, and after watching TV for an hour and a half went upstairs, each of us to our own rooms, all of us probably wishing we did not have to sleep alone.

Cheerful as ever the next morning Lizetta sat between us in the front of the van on the drive to Edinburgh Airport. She hugged and kissed us both at the boarding gate when we said goodbye, and Darren and I returned to the van to begin our long drive down to London. ‘She really loves him, doesn’t she?’ he said, as we picked up speed to take our place amid the stream of vehicles on the motorway.

‘Hard to say. What is all this about being in love?’

‘Was the firm like that when you were there?’

‘Not as bad. There were clashes – it was a competitive place – people don’t leave their bad habits and problems behind them at the reception desk when they come into work. In any organisation where hundreds of people are thrown together day after day you get little cliques forming, trying to outmanoeuvre each other. Some people seem to thrive on it. Perhaps I did. I’ve changed.’

Traffic reports on the radio told us that roads south of Edinburgh were clear of snow, and we escaped the motorway for a while by driving down on the A7 to Carlisle. On a quiet stretch I let Darren, who had yet to pass his driving test, take the wheel for about twenty minutes, but traffic built up and when light drizzle near Langholm made visibility difficult, I thought it best to take over from him again.

In the Midlands we were caught for miles in a long crawling tailback caused by a serious accident. We knew we were close to it when we saw cars in front being directed onto the hard shoulder to pass the blocked carriageways. We turned our heads, as everyone does, to see what we could of the crash. There were three mangled cars, one of them lying on its roof, and a van very similar to our own lying on its side near the central barrier. Fragments of glass,

plastic and unrecognisable bits of vehicle littered the tarmac. Paramedics were putting a stretcher covered in a dark red blanket into the rear of an ambulance.

A few seconds later the carnage was behind us and the road ahead fairly clear. Darren twiddled the controls of the radio, switching from station to station until he found a news report, the announcer saying in a voice of practised concern that a man and a woman were thought to have been killed and a number of people seriously injured. We sped on south, keeping our place in the long lines of traffic stretching ahead and behind, glad to be with the fortunate majority whose journey had not been violently cut short. Darren put in the earpieces from his portable stereo and became absorbed in his music, leaving me to concentrate on the drive.

My absence from Goodmans Hotel for four days proved that it could operate perfectly well without me. The deputy manager of Housmans Hotel, except for a few hours off during the quiet periods of early afternoon and late evening, had lived in on duty the whole time. He brought me up to date with which rooms were occupied, and showed me a substantial amount of cash that had accumulated in the desk drawer. After we counted this together he said he had one last thing to report, that someone had called to see me, had not wanted to leave his name but said he would call back. He ended his long stint of being on duty with the words: 'Not complaining, but it will be a relief to be able to go out with a few friends for a quiet drink tonight.'

On Tuesday morning, as I put out the rubbish for collection, a sweet scent from one of the winter flowering shrubs planted by Darren perfumed the air around the gate. Looking back at the hotel, the paintwork on the facade still fresh, the business again seemed to me to be all that I could have wished it to be.

This feeling of self-satisfaction lasted until Tom's brother came up to me outside the newsagent's a few hours later. He had had his hair cut shorter than ever and I was not sure who he was until he started to speak. 'Oh good,' he shouted, 'lucky I saw you, I called in at the hotel the other day but you was out.'

'Did you?'

'Yes. What's happened to Tom? What's he doing down in Portsmouth?'

'Working, so far as I know.'

'There's plenty of work for him round here. What's he doing down there?'

'Don't know. We're not seeing each other.'

'What's that supposed to mean, not seeing each other?'

'If your brother hasn't told you, why do you expect me to?'

He frowned and looked down. 'You've always been a stuck-up bastard. I never had nothing against you, you know.' He waited for me to speak, but wanting the encounter to end I remained silent.

'What's happened? Don't you two like taking each other's pants down no more?' With that aggravating remark he turned and swaggered off down the street.

I paid the paper bill, but the amount of cash still in the desk drawer made a trip to the bank essential. All of the garden centre's vans were in use that afternoon, and despite a light drizzle I set off hurriedly on foot, with just enough time to get there before the doors closed. The money was clutched under my arm in an old portfolio too tattered and scruffy to look as though it contained anything worth stealing. The quickest route, about twelve minutes' walk, was to turn left out of the hotel, across the road and through a mews, then along a tree lined avenue leading to the High Street.

I was striding along beneath the trees when one of the two thugs who had been harassing the garden centre manager crossed over from the other side, moving rapidly towards me. His appearance in the road ahead might conceivably have been a coincidence, and I turned to cross to the other side in the hope he had not recognised me, but the second man was coming up from the opposite direction. Unless someone came out of one of the houses or the parked cars my situation was hopeless. Having reached the opposite pavement I walked close to the house railings and looked at the ground. They ran towards me, and the taller of them pushed me against the railings and grabbed the portfolio whilst the other kept look-out.

'I'll take that, you fucking queer.'

Clutching the bag to my side with my left arm I gripped it tightly with both hands. Twisting round with all my strength I succeeded in wrenching myself and the portfolio free, but the second man saw me break loose and ran over, grasped the collar of my coat and punched me in the face. My legs gave way and they dragged me back to the railings, but my grip on the money did not loosen. The first man put his hands around my neck and tightened his fingers until I could hardly breathe.

'I've got the bag, there's money in it, let's fuck off out of it.'

'He might have something else on him.'

'He won't have piss all. Smack him and dump him.' A final blow to my face sent me reeling through a gate and down the steps to a sunken area in front of the house. An excruciating pain shot through my right leg when I tried to get up; my jaw hurt, and when I tried to call for help all that emerged was an incoherent bellow. Light rain continued to fall, wetting me and the unswept concrete on which I lay. After some minutes a red umbrella appeared high above me, and a woman's face peered down over the railings. 'Are you all right?'

Raising myself on one arm, I uttered a desperate groan. 'Shall I come down?' She made her way to the steps and was soon kneeling beside me, protecting me from the drizzle with her red umbrella. Dirt on the concrete where I lay was turning to a thin layer of mud. 'Should I call an ambulance? Or I've got my car here, I could drive you to the hospital. What's the best thing to do? I'll take you, if you're up to it.'

'My leg hurts.'

'Can you move your toes?' She touched my ankle as I wiggled them inside my shoe. 'Your leg's not broken, you've probably sprained a muscle.' Taking my arm at first gently, then pulling more firmly she helped me to my feet. She was quite strong, but my lack of co-ordination made it difficult for me to keep upright. 'You can walk on that leg but keep your weight off it,' she said, evidently not aware that walking involves shifting your weight from one leg to the other. I wiped my face with my free hand and saw fresh blood on my fingers. 'Don't do that,' she ordered. 'You'll make yourself filthy.'

Somehow she hauled me up the twelve steps, pausing for a second or two on each of them. 'That's it. Keep your weight off that leg.' We were both exhausted when we reached the top, where she propped me up against the railings. 'Wait here, I'll fetch the car over.'

She tried to hand me the umbrella, but somehow it slipped out of my fingers and she took it with her; the cold rain helped to clear my head and I breathed deeply several times. Parked vehicles prevented her from driving right up to the kerb, but she steered me between them to reach the passenger door. She had spread a sheet of polythene over the seat to protect the upholstery. 'I'm a carer,' she said as she released the handbrake. 'Must have been a terrible fall you had, or were you mugged? Use some of those tissues to dab your face.'

'Mugged. Yes. Thank you. Thank you very much for helping me. Need to get the police.' Blood and dirt from my face soaked into two of her fancy lilac tissues.

‘Getting you fixed up is the most important thing. Best to get the hospital to ring the police. Afraid I didn’t see anything. Happened to hear you groaning as I walked by. I’ll leave you my telephone number all the same. Did they take much?’

‘Some cash. Quite a bit of cash.’

At the hospital a doctor, having satisfied himself that my pulse was strong and that nothing was burst or broken, a nurse cleaned and dressed my wounds, lent me a crutch and sent me to sit down to wait for the police. Keeping my pact with the garden centre manager, when they arrived I said nothing about Jamie and his gambling debts, and told them only that I had seen the two men hanging around in the neighbourhood and that they might have noticed me coming and going from the hotel. The two officers were obviously pressed for time, and after contacting Darren to arrange for him to collect me they left, promising someone would be in touch.

When he arrived Darren looked around the room at the dozen or more patients but did not immediately recognise me. Cautiously, discovering how to stand and move with the aid of the crutch, I made my way towards him. Twice he surveyed the room without spotting me, at last identifying me as I hobbled closer. Tactlessly he said, ‘God, you look terrible.’

A taxi took us back to the hotel. My face was horrific. The flesh around my right eye was badly marked, blood had flooded the white of the cornea, my lower lip was swollen, and a dark grey bruise covered most of the left side of my face. A thin white dressing of some kind had been stuck over a cut under my chin. I would have to keep myself out of sight of the hotel guests as far as possible.

Anxiety was as much a problem as my physical condition. What if the two men returned? They had not been to the garden centre since that night when they tried to force their way in after it had closed. They might have come upon me in the avenue by coincidence, or they might have found out that I ran the hotel and been looking for me. They might be outside in the street at that moment watching and waiting. Suppose that, flushed with success after tackling me on my way to the bank, they were to come into the hotel demanding money?

When the second floor room had been vandalised, awful though the incident had seemed at the time, nobody was physically injured, and Tom had turned up after a few hours to sort out the mess. Now only Darren was around to help. What if the thugs attacked him?

Needing to rest I hobbled down to the basement where I made myself a hot drink and lay down, cautiously trying to avoid the most sensitive of my sore spots. My thoughts returned again and again to Tom. Had he been there, how much less desperate things would seem. Putting the receiver down on him like that when he rang from Portsmouth had been so final; it had been unfair after we had been together for so long. By nature he was completely different to the thugs who had attacked me. He might once have stolen cars, but he would never have deliberately hurt anyone. On the few occasions when he had been verbally aggressive, he had apologised freely afterwards. How hard the confinement of prison must have been for him, accustomed to moving from site to site for his work. Whatever he might have done in the past, what was the sense in our being apart now? Judging him so harshly had rebounded on me. The result was that I had made my own life a misery.

Yet to call him up because I was in a mess and needed his help would be humiliating. Later, after I had recovered, we would be able to talk on equal terms. Would he want to talk to me? He might have come to think of himself as the injured party in our relationship. He had had nothing to do with my parents’ death; he had never done me any harm. All I had against him was that he should have told me about his conviction, that was all. He had served a prison sentence for what he had done; what gave me the right to punish him a second time?

If we were to get together again, surely being honest with each other was the way, not for me to start out by concealing my vulnerability and weakness from him. The sooner he knew what had happened to me, the better my chance of getting him back. At last I did what I should have done that evening when Andrew had revealed their secret in the restaurant: I called Tom on his mobile 'phone. When the ringing tone stopped I heard his voice for the first time in months.

'Hello Tom, it's me.'

'How are you doing?'

'Something terrible's happened.'

'I heard. You've been mugged. Darren's just been on the 'phone. Is there someone there to look after you? I'm sorry, Mark, this is all my fault.'

'Of course it's not your fault. Darren rang you?'

'There wasn't any harm in it, Mark. He's rung me a couple of times to keep me in touch with things, that's all. He wasn't being disloyal to you or nothing. Thank god you've rung anyway. Shall I catch the train? Only take me a few hours to get back to London.'

'No, you don't have to do that, your work down there...'

'Doesn't matter. I'll tell them it's an emergency. If you'd like me to come.'

'Yes, I really would like you to come, but you don't have to rush, don't cause yourself problems. I look ghastly. Horrific.'

'You shouldn't talk about yourself like that. I'll go down to the station and call you from there. Won't be long mate.'

Bringing him back was as easy as that. An hour later I struggled upstairs and sat in the office reading the newspaper, waiting for him to arrive. A dozen times I heard the front door open and looked up full of hope, only to be disappointed by the sound of one of the guests making his way upstairs. At last there was a loud knock and his voice called down the hall: 'Darren, Mark, anyone about?'

Darren answered from the kitchen: 'He's in the office.'

Tom came and stood in the doorway. 'What are you doing in here?'

'Waiting.'

'Oorph, look at you. You should be in bed.'

'How have you been?'

'Don't worry about me.' He helped me to my feet. 'Can you walk all right?'

'Hobble. I can hobble.' We each put an arm around the other, and moved in a four-legged shuffle to the top of the basement stairs.

'All right, you can hang on to me but stay behind me, we don't want you falling down stairs.'

CHAPTER 14

One effect of the assault was that my work on the Dunblane Spa project came to an end. Some figure work already in hand could be finished on the computer at Goodmans Hotel and relayed via the internet to Vincent's office. My multicoloured wounds were a good excuse to drop out of the face to face meetings arranged for the coming weeks with the US client. Vincent, typically, was kind and considerate. He said he hoped we might work together on another project in the future, that anyway we would be seeing each other socially before long, and that if I needed help he could send one of his people down to the hotel for an hour or two, though with Darren, Tom and the garden centre staff nearby there was no need for me to take up the offer.

The ugliness of my injuries was not the sole reason for quitting the project. With the end of the tax year looming there was plenty of paperwork for me to do at the hotel, and I wanted time with Tom to re-establish the old feeling of closeness we had known before our break-up. I skulked around in the background keeping out of sight of the guests as far as possible, and at the garden centre everyone followed the manager's lead in making a fuss of me. He felt responsible for the mugging, and sent over three huge flower arrangements for the hotel with a card signed by all the staff. A well intentioned lady from the local Victim Support Group rang to offer sympathy and asked if she could do anything, but of Jamie and the two thugs who had attacked me we heard nothing more.

Tom rang his employer in Portsmouth with a story about having to stay at home because his mother was seriously ill. Within a few days he was working for local householders again. The old reassuring routines of our lives reasserted themselves, although having come so close to permanent break-up we were very careful to be considerate towards one other. My sense of having been wronged by him had completely gone. If he had hurt me by keeping his past a secret, my putting the 'phone down on him when he rang from Portsmouth with those pompous dismissive words 'I have nothing at all to say to you' must have hurt him; and on my part the hurt had been intentional.

He showed no sign of resentment, and was as helpful as ever with fixing things in the hotel. When Darren mentioned a patch of damp in the little bathroom under the roof, he went up to investigate and concluded that rain-water was seeping in. The pain in my leg had more or less gone by then and we took a step ladder and some tools up so that he could look for the leak from inside the loft. He hauled himself up through the hatch and I handed up a torch, trying to protect my eyes from the falling smuts. A trap door led out onto the flat roof above the bathroom and when he opened it daylight came streaming into the roof space. 'Come and have a look,' he called down.

Always nervous of ladders, I climbed another step up and peered into the loft. A layer of black dust coated the fibre-glass insulation between the joists. 'Shouldn't you be wearing a face mask?'

'Come on,' he said, ignoring my question, forcefully grasping my left arm and pulling me upwards, giving me no choice but to scramble after him, using my free hand to grab joists and rafters to steady myself. 'What about my leg?'

'You'll be all right.' He gripped my hand firmly to help steady me and guided me towards the hatch. 'Come and look over here, you can see for miles. Stand on the joists, not the

insulation, otherwise you'll make a hole in the ceiling.'

'I have been inside a loft before. All this dust is awful.' The trap door was set in the slope of the roof, about a yard above the flat metal-covered area above the bathroom. He stepped out backwards, holding onto the sides of the hatchway as he lowered himself down over the slope. Balancing with difficulty on the joists I began to follow, but when I backed out of the opening my foot did not reach down far enough for me to stand on the flat surface below, and fear of falling made me freeze. He grabbed my legs. 'Come on, I've got you, let yourself slide down, you won't fall.'

Somehow or other I slithered down. He left me kneeling terrified by the hatch and went to the edge of the roof, where he stood like a mountaineer looking out from a rocky crag. Recovering my nerve with a few deep breaths, I stood up and took cautious steps towards him, and looked down into the Mews and the row of long thin gardens behind the terraced houses. We were no more than four or five feet higher up than if we had been in Darren's room, but that extra height was enough for us to see over the top of the nearby roofs. Row upon row of grey slate showed the extent of the Victorian suburb, and in the distance we could see the dome of the Royal Albert Hall and the Imperial College Tower.

This panorama, not visible from any of the windows of the rooms below, was completely new to me. The view was not one of London's finest, the City's office towers being hidden by a block of flats. Expanses of grey slate roof predominated in other directions, but the escapade of climbing out there was a good example of how much fun life could be when Tom was around. Without him I would probably never have gone up there to look.

Had anyone at street level seen us, standing with our arms around one another, they would have thought us oddly affectionate for two workmen up on a roof. A car turned under the arch at the end of the mews; it stopped at a doorway and a couple emerged to unload shopping from the back, absorbed in what they were doing, unaware of us watching from above.

He turned to examine the roof. 'You can see where the water's been coming in. Over here, look.' He pointed to where the edge of a metal sheet covering the flat roof on which we stood had lifted to make a small gap.

'Doesn't look much. Are you sure that's it?'

'Pretty sure. Can't see anything else that might be causing the leak. I'll flatten it, stick it down, and we'll see if that sorts it.'

We had yet to talk about his car thefts, but we both knew that the subject was too important to ignore. In the early days of our relationship, in the pub, over meals, lying together after sex, we had told each other all the significant events of our lives. Now whenever we passed a Mercedes, a Jaguar or another expensive car in the street we were reminded that part of his life remained secret from me. We would glance sideways at one another, knowing that we could not put off discussing the subject for much longer. However difficult talking might be for him, until we did my not knowing would remain a barrier between us.

Understanding one another completely, absorbing everything we possibly could about each other, was essential. More than once, after listening to part of my life story, he had said, 'I know how that must have made you feel. Sometimes it's as though what's happened to you has happened to me.' I felt the same about his experiences; sharing our pasts was as important as the physical pleasure of making love. How could we be truly close, think of ourselves as a couple, or expect to know what the other would want even when we were physically apart, until the gap was closed?

The subject raised itself when the hotel guest Andrew had told me about, the one who had visited his son in the same prison as Tom, reserved a room again. In a quiet voice I mentioned the booking to him. He was silent for perhaps half a minute. 'Probably turn out he won't even recognise me. Just coincidence that he saw me at all in the visiting room, we never spoke.'

'If you'd rather, I could cancel, say we've had a flood or something and suggest he tries Housmans Hotel. If you're unhappy about him coming.'

'No, there's no reason to do that. Wasn't exactly my finest hour, you can understand me not wanting to be reminded of it.'

'You don't want to tell me about it?'

'It might have been worse than you think. You've probably got enough of an idea of what that kind of life is about from what you read in the papers.'

'It's part of you. But if talking about it is too difficult...'

'All right.' We took beers into the empty breakfast room and sat opposite each other in the bright light of the bay window. We were committed now, but for perhaps a minute he sighed and shuffled in his chair.

'We're not talking about a one-off mistake here. There's things I've done that even Andrew doesn't know about.'

'Trust me.'

'The start of it all was way back, when I was still at school. I haven't spent all my life thieving, and what there was is all behind me. It was another life.'

'You got into trouble when you were a kid?'

'We got away with it. Maybe it would have been better if we hadn't – might have put us off.' He and a school friend had begun stealing when he was fourteen. They used to go out trying the door handles of parked cars and taking things from inside any that had been left unlocked. They took cigarettes, sweets, and small change which they spent in amusement arcades. One day they saw a leather jacket on the back seat of a car and broke a side window to get it; it was too big for either of them and they sold it for a few pounds to a friend's brother. They became more determined, made forays into new areas, and by smashing car windows greatly increased their haul. The first time a car alarm went off they ran off in opposite directions, but after triggering two or three they realised that nobody took much notice and that the best way to avoid attracting attention was to cross the street and walk calmly away.

Later they began joy riding, forcing or breaking windows to get into older cars that were less well secured, driving them for a few miles, and ripping out the car stereo systems. They went out at night, wore dark clothing and gloves to make themselves less noticeable and varied the times and the places they targeted. They were twice spotted by someone who gave chase, but they ran fast enough not to be caught.

'Didn't your parents ask what you were doing?'

'They thought I was out with my mates. In a way I suppose I was. Why should they worry? I wasn't pestering them.'

'They must have wondered where your money was coming from.'

'A couple of times I said I was doing jobs for a friend's uncle, someone they didn't know, clearing out the garage or helping in the garden.'

'They should have taken more of an interest in what you were getting up to.'

'I ain't blaming them for what happened. They brought me up to know the difference between right and wrong. What I did was down to me. They don't even know I was sent down. My Mum and Dad never had any trouble with the law, nor has my brother. They'd be

ashamed if they ever found out.'

'You kept everything to yourself, even from your brother?'

'He may have suspected something, but he's the last one to tell about anything like that. You'd never hear the end of it. He might look like a hard case, but he's completely straight. In some ways you've got a lot in common with him.'

'Thanks a lot.' The comparison was, I guessed, meant to be teasing. It lightened the mood, and I was glad he felt comfortable enough for a little humour. What I wanted was an understanding of that part of his life, not some sort of confession. 'I meant to tell you about him coming up to me outside the newsagent's a week or so ago asking what you were doing in Portsmouth. I just told him that we'd split up, nothing else.'

'Good, thanks for keeping it quiet. Anyway to account to my family for my time inside I made up a story about finding some work up north. Because Andrew helped me by letting me have the flat above the garden centre and giving me work when I got out I didn't have to go crawling back to them for help.'

'So, you were stealing from cars and joy riding when you were a kid.'

'We weren't that bad, not compared to some kids who smash up cars and set fire to them. Me and my mate never did serious damage. Joy riding was a fantastic thrill. When the most you'd ever done is drive a few hundred yards round the back of some flats in the family motor, jump-starting one that you'd broken into and whizzing it round the streets was terrific. We never went far in them, the owners would've got their car back in a day or two. All they had to do was replace the glass and fix the wires back in the ignition. We were kids, we were just messing about.'

He and his friend fell out a couple of times over money, but want of cash and hunger for excitement brought them back together again. When they left school Tom found a job as a trainee electrician and his adolescent spate of law breaking came to an end. He took driving lessons, saved up enough to buy his own car and lost touch with the boy he used to go stealing with. Gay pubs, clubs, and sex provided him with thrills of a different kind.

He had shown me photographs taken after he first started work, including images of him with his first boyfriend, a lad as thin as Darren who worked in a department store. Tom told his family he was gay and took the boy home several times, but after four or five months they split up. His parents and brother tried put pressure on him, saying that he was not really gay and would forget about men if he made a proper effort with a steady girlfriend. Dejected and mistrusting his own feelings, he followed their advice and found a girl whose company he enjoyed, but in bed he could perform only by imagining he was with a man. In a supermarket where he had gone alone one day an attractive man looked at him a few times as they passed in the aisles. He responded, they spoke and went back to the man's flat. Holding a male body in his arms again made it obvious to him that with the girl he was merely pretending. He told her he had found someone else and escaped his family's influence by moving out to a flat of his own.

For a while he indulged in a life of one-night stands. One of his pick-ups took him home to an enormous room packed with all sorts of goods: cameras, laptop computers, portable phones, records and stereo equipment. The property was stuffed into bags and suitcases, piled up on the floor and poking out from under the furniture. The explanation given, that all these goods had been bought cheap from car boot sales and charity shops for resale at a profit, was not convincing and Tom rightly assumed they were stolen. He saw the man again by chance; this time was with friends, in a gay pub in the West End. They were guarded in what they said initially, but more alcohol made them incautious and they soon revealed that they were all

living outside the law – thieving, buying and selling stolen property, or supplying drugs.

Through them Tom met a car thief who was heterosexual but who used the group to help dispose of property he had stolen from cars. Tom told him about his schoolboy activities, was impressed by the man's tales of stealing cars to order for wealthy villains, and fascinated to hear about new gadgets for overcoming the latest locks and alarms. He learned about falsifying documents, and of a garage workshop under a railway arch where number plates were changed, chassis numbers removed, and vehicles re-sprayed. Wiring houses seemed dull in comparison, and when the man invited him to go along one night to see him in action Tom could not resist. New cars might come with better locks and security devices than before, but inventive thieves quickly developed ways to overcome them.

'But you didn't go only the once?'

'You get sucked into these things. Eventually I gave in my notice at work. That little crowd of thieves thought doing a regular job was pathetic, that slaving away day after day made you a loser. They were full of excuses for themselves. The truth was most of them didn't have the mentality to hold down a job. Looking back the thing that attracted me was not that they lived by thieving, but that they were fun to go out with. If I'd stuck to having a drink and a laugh with them, no harm would have come out of it.'

'Why didn't you?' I asked softly.

'If you've developed a knack of some kind you like to make use of it, especially if you get a thrill out of doing it. There was one day we went out looking for a particular motor, and we found one in this pub car park, no surveillance, no one about. My mate asked me to try to open it, first one I'd tried since I was a kid. I was into it and driving away in about two minutes. The alarm went off, but the music in the pub was so loud they wouldn't have heard it. The adrenaline was pumping, the old excitement was back. It was as though that motor wanted me to have it.'

A bragging edge had come into his voice, but hindsight reminded him of reality. 'After I was nicked, the police talked about reducing the charges against me to "being an accessory" if I told them who we'd been supplying the cars to, but I couldn't turn in people who'd trusted me. Anyway, my share from that first motor was more than I could earn in a month at work, even with maximum overtime. Things went on from there. What happens is once you start thieving you want to save all your energy and concentration for the next time you go out after a motor. A straight job gets in the way. How much more do you want to hear?'

'I'm not sure. Was there anything particularly important? Any highlights?'

'Highlights! Low lights and low life, more like. There was one that stood out, since you ask. Once we were looking for a Jaguar and spotted the right model being driven into a large car park near a shopping centre. Two attendants in a hut were collecting parking fees and raising and lowering the barriers as cars came in and out. I jumped out of the van, followed the driver of the Jaguar on foot into the shopping centre, and saw him join up with a group of people at a pub for lunch.

Meanwhile my mate parked the van in a street about half a mile away, found an old car nearby that was easy to steal and drove it into the car park, collecting a timed ticket on his way in. He joined me in the shopping centre, we checked that the owner of the Jaguar had sat down to his meal, and made sure there were no police or other security to worry about. We returned to the car park and my mate gave me the ticket he had collected when he parked the old car. Next, as a diversion, we set off two car alarms on the other side of the attendants' hut to where the Jaguar was. My mate walked out of the car park and back to the van. While the attendants were still busy on the other side of the car park, I cracked the electronic code

for the Jaguar's locking system and got the car started. A few minutes later when one of the attendants returned to the hut I drove up to the barrier, showed the parking ticket, paid the fee and drove out.'

The exhilaration of exploits like this came to an end when he was caught with stolen property. When the demand from the garage for cars dried up, as it did from time to time, Tom and his partner resorted to taking goods from vehicles. They once raided a beauty spot in the Yorkshire Dales where ramblers parked before setting off on a popular country walk. Twenty or thirty cars stood on a wide grass verge, and left behind in them absent-mindedly or because the walkers decided they had too much to carry, were items of clothing, camping equipment, tools, maps, books, and in the boot of one car, a holdall full of erotic women's underwear.

They sold off this loot to people who ran car boot stalls, friends of friends, anyone they thought they could trust, usually for about a tenth of what the items would have cost to buy new. Despite shifting all they could through their contacts and giving away or dumping unsaleable items, the volume of goods grew and grew until two lock-up garages they rented were cluttered with male and female clothing in all sizes, with luggage, stereos, records, a comprehensive collection of road atlases, and all sorts of junk.

His associate was caught in a BMW he stole from outside an empty office block in Ealing, unaware that it had been stolen four days earlier by another thief who abandoned it when he realised it was running out of petrol. Searching the flat where Tom's associate lived, the police found an old receipt for rent for the two lock-up garages and decided to have a look at them. They found Tom packing a video camera, a dozen Ordnance Survey maps and several items of clothing into a holdall. They took him to the police station, questioned him and charged him.

'You could have said you didn't know where the stuff came from, that all you did was help to sell it second-hand.'

'Who knows what he might have told them about me? The best thing you can do at the police station is to keep quiet. Looking back on it, lifting all that gear was a mistake. If they hadn't found the lock-ups all they could have done him for was taking and driving away one motor. They wouldn't have had nothing on me. The money we got for all that stuff was hardly anything, and finding buyers for it was a lot of hassle. Our real money came from the cars. All that bloody junk made it obvious how much thieving we'd been doing. They made it sound as bad as they could at the trial, said we were habitual criminals, had refused to co-operate with the police, made us out to be a couple of real villains. Basically that is the job of the prosecution isn't it, to paint you as black as they can? We were guilty after all. We both got sent down. He came off worse because of previous convictions.'

'Is he out yet?'

'He must be out by now. He wrote to me once from prison. I wrote back, said I was working again and was going completely straight... permanently. Wished him all the best obviously. The one good thing to come out of the whole bloody mess was that the police brought Andrew to the station to see if he'd recognise either of us. His car had been stolen a couple of days earlier and he'd seen someone hanging around at Biddulph Mansions. We weren't responsible, but Andrew did recognise me, we'd met a couple of times in the Beckford Arms. He asked the police about my trial and wrote to me in prison suggesting I got in touch with him when I came out if I needed any help. After all he did for me I wouldn't ever do anything bent again. It would be like throwing it all back in his face. I wouldn't want to anyway, it's not part of my life that I'm proud of.' He stopped and sat back in his chair.

'Is there any more?' I asked.

‘Details, if you want if you want to hear them. That friend of mine from school I told you about has been in loads of trouble since. I’ve told you how it was. You’re shocked, aren’t you?’

‘A bit. By how much and how long... No, that isn’t what I wanted to say. I’m glad you’ve told me. Thanks for making yourself go over it all again. What matters is that you’re here. I missed you, you know, really missed you.’ I went over to his side of the table, leant over him, stroked his head and kissed him, reassuring him that my feelings for him had not weakened.

CHAPTER 15

Telling Andrew of my reconciliation with Tom when he next rang was so great a pleasure that, after putting down the 'phone, I was a little saddened by the thought that such intense feelings of happiness could not be sustained for ever. Not wanting to detract from the good news I said nothing about the mugging. A comment he made, that the spell in prison had completely demoralised Tom, did not affect my elation at the time, but remembering it later made me aware there was still one corner of Tom's life he had kept from me. Eager still for complete disclosure of everything, I raised it the next time we were alone together. At first he tried to laugh the subject off by saying the trouble with Wormwood Scrubs was that it was full of villains, but I persisted: 'Would you simply rather not talk about it?'

'You might have something there. Prisons are places where all sorts of horrible things go on, Mark. You don't want to hear about all that.'

'Not if you find it too difficult to talk about.'

He looked at my expectant face and shook his head. 'All right, if you must know, I was banged up on this wing with hundreds of men, two to a cell, with a lot more experience of being inside than I had. There's all sorts in there, but not many you'd choose as friends. Don't know why but for some reason this screw decided to give me a job mopping a landing and staircase. If you're lucky you get rewarded with a little bit of money you can spend in the prison shop, extra underwear and socks, and a chance to take a shower when the bathroom's not crowded. Little things, like being able to use the pay 'phone and buy tobacco, are really important in there, when all you've got day after day is the same faces, the same walls, the same horrible cheap food, your limited little routines week after week. A lot of the other cons don't like it though, they think you're collaborating with the screws doing a job like that, demeaning yourself, becoming part of the system, so you get snide little remarks from them as you pass by.

You have to put up with that, but there was a lot of drug dealing going on in the jail. I kept clear of it, but there was an evil bastard called Stomper. Stomper was his nickname, he had a reputation for using his boots on anyone who crossed him. To him ordinary cons like me were there to be used. First of all he tried to pressure me into having stuff brought in by a visitor, threatened to put me in the hospital wing otherwise. I faced him out. He threatened all sorts of things, planting stuff on me and tipping off the screws, having me beaten up, having someone with AIDS stab me with a hypodermic. He was determined to get something out of me, one way or another, probably more to show his own importance than anything else.

One day he cornered me in this quiet little area in front of the bedding store where there was no surveillance. He had one of his gang with him holding a broom handle sharpened at the end. They looked like a couple of overgrown school kids, pair of fucking twats. People like him are evil, they could do any sort of damage to you and walk away happy, whistling to themselves. He gave me three choices, have my eyes and god knows what gouged out with the fucking sawn-off broom handle, get him some drugs, or suck him off.

To some extent I felt it didn't matter what happened to me any more, and part of me was shit scared. So I sucked him off. Three times he cornered me, the fucking cunt. Anything else you want to know?'

The intensity of his voice told how bitter these memories were. I gently patted his lips with

two of my fingers, and lightly kissed the corners of his mouth. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have...'

'Maybe I should have taken the beating. Humiliating myself like that.'

'Whatever you did it would have been awful. At least you still have two eyes to see the world with. Did he know you were gay?'

'It's hard to keep secrets when you're with other cons who are watching you twenty-four hours a day. They notice how you react when a big pair of boobs turns up on the TV. There's such a close atmosphere in there. Everyone is looking for some way of scoring little advantages over everyone else, sometimes you get the impression people are talking about you, but maybe they're not. They probably all thought of me as another small time con doing his bird, another loser. Trouble is if you cross someone like Stomper, you're the one who's going to end up worse off. He's got too many people who owe him favours or are scared of him. If you want full remission you have to keep yourself away from trouble and put up with being treated like dirt.'

'Sorry, I didn't want to make you relive the worst moments of your life.'

'You're the only person I've ever told about Stomper. For a while I used to dream about tracking him down and causing him serious injury, but something like that will take over your life and ruin you if you let it. In the end the best thing to do is to force yourself to forget about it.'

His experience of the criminal 'justice' system appalled me. What right had a judge or magistrate at his trial to inflict punishment of that kind on him? Was being forced to have sex with a man like Stomper regarded as fair redress for the crime of stealing cars? If I had known him then, been to visit him in jail, and he had told me what was going on perhaps I could have done something to stop it, or more likely like Tom himself would have been powerless against a system governed by rules and customs that were strange to me.

What purpose had been served by delving into that awful time in his life? What we needed to do was to forget old miseries and think about future happiness. The hotel would soon have been open for business for a full year, and a party to celebrate would give us a positive event to plan for and look forward to.

When the boisterous Newcastle group who had come down to London last May rang to make another booking, the Saturday night of their stay seemed a good time to hold it. Their last visit might have ended awkwardly, but they had intended no harm, and with the six of them present a party would never be dull. Andrew, having at last decided he had spent enough time looking up family members in New Zealand, was due back. He would probably not want to stay to the end of the kind of party I had in mind, but was certain to enjoy getting together with all his friends for the first hour or so. His return journey was to begin with a flight to Thailand, not so much because of the country's sexual enticements, but with the intention of visiting some of the famous temples.

The sort of party I wanted was one that would fill the house with clamour, a huge *mêlée* of people all talking energetically, drinking, dancing, attacking the food like a flock of starlings, flirting, acting the fool, and being found in dark corners in the embrace of someone they had met only half an hour before; the sort of gathering at which people forget who was drinking from which glass, mislay items of clothing, and when they want to leave have difficulty locating whoever they came with; the sort of Saturday night party from which it takes most of Sunday to recover.

Tom and Darren were keen, and we compiled an invitation list, including everyone working at *Ferns and Foliage*, friends from the Beckford Arms, and a few of Darren and Cheung's friends from the club. Assuming that some of those invited would not come, but

that others would bring a partner or a friend, we planned to cater for around fifty people. Coping with a hotel full of guests at the same time would have been difficult and I turned down further requests for bookings for that weekend.

Darren suggested making the Far East a theme for the evening, and Cheung offered to borrow Chinese lanterns and other decorations from his family and friends. A week before the party, he and Tom went off to the West End together and returned with a van full of coloured paper lanterns, decorative banners and film posters depicting martial arts stars flying through the air. Cheung also knew of a wholesaler where we could buy South-East Asian food and drink, and with his help we stocked the hotel freezers with satay, pancake rolls and stir-fries to enable us to provide everyone with hot food from the hotel kitchen. He took all three of us to a shop in Soho where we bought richly coloured silk shirts and trousers of lightweight cotton in a style that was fashionable in Hong Kong at the time.

On the Thursday we began to prepare the ground floor and basement, which would provide ample space for fifty or so guests to mix freely without being cramped. To avoid trouble developing behind locked doors and the risk of damage to the hotel rooms Tom constructed a temporary barrier at the top of the stairs to the first floor with an improvised chipboard door allowing only those with a key to reach the rooms above.

Unwanted chairs, tables and breakables were carried up to safety beyond this barrier, and the hotel lounge was cleared for dancing; a sound system for the evening was put together by combining some of Darren's stereo equipment with some of mine, enabling him to switch seamlessly from one music track to another. An eight-foot long banner depicting a monstrous serpent-like dragon hung down into the hall from the bannisters at the top of the stairs. Four enormous waist-high pots with lids, decorated with an elaborate floral pattern in soft pink on a white background, stood in the hall, looking alarmingly fragile but actually fakes made of tough plastic, so light they could be picked up in one hand. Cheung took the lid off one, lifted it up to reveal that it had no bottom, put it over his head and pretended it was stuck. Darren, of course, had to follow his example, and the two of them staggered around calling, 'Let me out! Let me out!'

The Newcastle visitors arrived on time on Friday afternoon, and as on their last visit created a rumpus in the hall by bolting for the table where the hotel register lay. They defaced a page and a half with comments such as: *Open a whole year and still a virgin; I hope you've changed the sheets this time;* and *Full massage available in basement, cheap rates.* In revenge, instead of showing them to their first floor-rooms I took them up to the second floor, stacked with furnishings from downstairs, and pretended they were to sleep there, only relenting after they began reorganising some of the clutter so they could get to the beds.

Later in a more sensible mood they asked how business was doing and about Darren, and one of the quietest of the group told me he had been offered a better job at his firm's warehouse near Heathrow Airport and might be moving to London. He came down to the office while the others settled in upstairs wanting to talk about finding somewhere to live. I had a software package with detailed street maps and printed out some pages for areas near Heathrow, and accessed some internet sites advertising property for sale and to rent, showing him how much higher prices were in Chiswick and Richmond than in districts closer to the airport. He thought his employer would help with the cost of his move, but not with the cost of accommodation, and was worried that high prices would leave him worse off than he was in Newcastle. He was uncertain too about how he would fit in at the Heathrow warehouse.

I printed out several pages of property details for him, and for a few minutes we chatted about his firm. Then he said, 'By the way, thanks for sending on to us that letter from the

Chinese lad last year. I was the culprit who fobbed him off with a mini-cab firm's telephone number. Bit of a mean trick, I admit. Can't speak for the others, but with me it's not just the sex. I really liked him. The others have been teasing me about it ever since. I would have written back to him if I'd known there was a prospect of me moving down here, but at the time there seemed no point in encouraging him. You can make your life a misery, pining away in Newcastle for someone who's living down South. The others take the piss out of me for being too romantic. It is stupid, when you think about it.'

'Don't you have Chinese men in Newcastle?'

'Yes, but none that are interested in me.'

'When Cheung came to the hotel after your last visit I wasn't sure who it was he wanted to get in touch with, but he was obviously smitten by one of you. He's Darren's boyfriend now, has been for quite a while.'

'Missed my chance then.'

'Seems like it.'

An e-mail from Southern France arrived with the disappointing information that Andrew, who the last time he rang had progressed as far as Tunisia, would not after all be back for the party. He was not a fan of e-mail, and must have persuaded someone at his hotel in France to send it for him.

On Saturday afternoon and evening we prepared the food, covered it, and laid it out in the dining room. We put out wine, spirits and cans of beer and cleared the few remaining furnishings from the lounge to make it ready for dancing. Breakables and my personal papers from downstairs were locked away or moved to the second floor for safety, making the basement rooms a quiet area for people to escape to or use as a route to the garden and fresh air.

Cheung took Darren off to visit one of his female cousins who made him look amazingly Chinese by dying his hair jet black and making up his face with mascara, eye shadow and gentle touches of colour. By seven o'clock everything in the hotel was ready and the four of us hung around in the kitchen waiting for the first guests to arrive. Fascinated by Darren's changed appearance, Tom and I could not stop looking at him.

The Geordies came down wearing oriental-style straw hats in the shape of flattened cones, each of a different colour. This was a fairly minimal amount of fancy dress, but seeing all six of them together the effect was striking. When they saw Darren in his make-up, wearing his silk shirt, they could not resist the urge to touch him and he had to slip behind Tom and me to escape.

The first party guests came shortly after eight, and at around ten o'clock they were arriving in numbers. While Tom and I cooked the hot food, the Geordies, wanting to help, volunteered to answer the front door bell. Unfortunately they had not previously met most of the people on our list of guests and let everyone in. Tom and I tackled several little groups neither of us recognised who were helping themselves to food from the dining room, but the first lot claimed to be friends of Darren and Cheung from the club and the others said they had been invited by someone they knew at the Beckford Arms. The impression seemed to have gone around both places that everyone who turned up would be welcome.

A quick head count revealed that about seventy people were there, and more were arriving. To try to get the intruders to leave would probably have caused mayhem, and a lot of people had brought food or drink with them; rather than get into arguments about who had a valid invitation and who did not, we decided to do our best to cope with all comers.

The dining room, kitchen and lounge were soon congested and the din grew louder and

louder as everyone competed to be heard over the voices of those around them. People standing in the hall were constantly being jostled this way and that by others who were passing through. We encouraged them to go downstairs where there was more space. By half past twelve more than a hundred people must have been present. Fortunately no more were arriving, and one or two who planned to be up the next morning had left. The food had all gone, and the manager of the garden centre volunteered to go to an all-night supermarket to buy more. Tom and I raided the hotel's stocks of bacon and sausages, and when the bread, crisps and cheese from the supermarket arrived we put everything out on trays and were mobbed when we carried them through to the dining room.

On the ground floor the air had become heavy with a complex and suffocating odour, a mixture of cooking smells, sweat, deodorants, cigarette smoke and a hint of cannabis. Going into the lounge to open a window I saw that a couple of dancers had lowered two of the big imitation Chinese pots from the hall over their heads and shoulders. My guess was that a couple of Cheung and Darren's friends from the club were playing this prank. Unable to see where they were going they were inevitably bumping into one another and into others on the dance floor. The decorative surface of the pots was almost certain to be scratched, but even if I had to pay for them the sight of two enormous rose-on-white pots dancing together was probably worth the money.

After opening the window I noticed Darren standing beside the stereo equipment looking intently through the dancers to the back of the room. Following his gaze I saw Cheung and the Geordie who was thinking of moving down to London wrapped around each other. Darren saw me looking and hurried from the room. I followed him into the hall, down the basement stairs and out into the garden. The air was cool and fresh after the pungent smells of the house. Breathing deeply I walked down the path looking for him. The flower borders and the grass of the lawn were easily visible in the lights of the side street, but I could not see him anywhere. A sweet smell of oranges was coming from the white flowers of one of the shrubs he had planted. An area at the side of the garage lay in deep shade; was he hiding from me there in the gloom, wanting to be left alone?

The tinkle of breaking glass made me look back towards the house. Someone leant out of the kitchen window to look at the broken fragments of a wine glass on the concrete below, then turned back inside. I made my way over to pick up the shards. As I was about to go in to get a dustpan and brush I heard Darren's voice coming from above me on the metal fire escape. 'I'm up here.' He hurried down the steps. 'Well, you saw.'

Not sure how to respond, I said: 'I wanted a breath of air. The room was so stuffy.'

'We both saw who Cheung was having sex with.'

'They weren't "having sex".'

'I don't care. He can have all six of them, if that's what he wants.'

'Things aren't as bad as that. Maybe it's my fault. I thought the Geordies would help to liven up the party, I shouldn't have let them book...'

'What are you talking about? You accepting a booking from the Geordies is not the problem. If you're serious about someone, you don't abandon them when you're out together because you see someone else you fancy, do you? He's not serious about me. He's never introduced me to his parents, not even as a friend. We see each other here or at the club, never on his home territory.'

'He helped us with all the decorations for the party. He got his cousin to make up your face. You need to make allowances, you have to give it a chance to come good.'

"Give it a chance to come good", you're starting to talk like Tom. It's up to Cheung, isn't

it? You saw in the lounge how much he thinks of me.'

'What do *you* want?'

'What I can't have. Let's go back inside. This is a celebration of the hotel's first year, remember? Many happy returns. Sincerely, I'm not being ironic, many well deserved happy returns.'

'Thanks. Shame that Andrew's not here.'

'He wouldn't have stayed long, not with the place packed out and all the noise.'

When we re-entered the house there was no sign of Cheung or the Geordie. Darren and I joined the dancers, but his energy made me feel lumbering, and when a friend nearer his age from the Beckford Arms came over I left them to dance together. A little later Tom found me putting empty bottles into a rubbish sack in the kitchen, and putting an arm around my shoulders said, 'Come on, you're wanted in the dining room.'

'Trouble?'

'No, but be ready for anything.' We squeezed through the crush of people in the hall, and as we entered the room, which was dimly lit by a single table lamp, I was met by all six of the Geordies who were standing just inside the room. 'Here you are at last, pet. We've a little treat for you.'

They switched the dining room lights full on. The remains of the food had been cleared away and the tables rearranged into a block in the centre. The party goes, rounded up by the Geordies, lined up in rows three deep at one side of the room, and when everyone had found a place two young men of about Darren's age emerged from behind an improvised curtain at the far end, completely naked, each holding a roll of coloured paper. They began their performance by lodging the rolls of coloured paper between their buttocks and carefully setting light to the opposite ends with a cigarette lighter. Once the flames had caught they dropped the lighter and ran around the tables, flames and smoke trailing after them. They had to run fast enough to prevent the flames singeing their flesh whilst maintaining a grip on the end of the roll of paper, but managed this feat without apparent difficulty. They laughed and called out to each other, 'Help, my bum's on fire.'

I was handed a bucket of water with which to chase after them, and I played my part as well as I could, splashing at their backs to put out the flames and occasionally flinging a few drops of water at people in the audience. The crowd cheered, whistled and shouted as cameras flashed all around us. After five or six circuits of the tables the boys slowed down, allowing me to catch them and extinguish the smouldering paper. We discarded the charred remnants and they embraced and caressed me, sandwiching me between them, while the audience clapped, whistled and called for an encore. Seeing Darren watching from the doorway, I broke away from them and pulled him into their embraces. After a few moments I waved Tom over, and we kissed and held each other, leaving the two boys with Darren.

After that climax the party slowly wound down. At half past three we began to ask people if they would like to share taxis home with other guests, and arranged cabs for those who did. Others took the hint that the time had come to leave, and by half past four less than a dozen determined revellers remained. We stopped the music. The garden centre manager volunteered to stay until the last of the hangers on departed, allowing Tom and me to go to bed, and we tiptoed up past the Geordies' rooms to the second floor for a few hours' sleep among the clutter of furniture, too exhausted to make love.

Two weeks after the party a letter arrived from France with the news that Andrew's travels had been curtailed by another subarachnoid haemorrhage. He had been admitted to hospital

in Montpellier and, following treatment, transferred to the Grand Hotel de Luzenac in the Pyrenees, one of those French spa establishments that is a mixture of hotel, nursing home and medical centre.

When, on my fourth attempt, the staff allowed me to speak to him by 'phone, in a frail voice he told me he was feeling much better but was not fit to travel. The hotel had a fine conservatory where he spent much of the day, and he said he would love to see us if there was any possibility of our getting away.

Arranging cover at the hotel for a few days was not too difficult, but flights to Toulouse were fully booked and we had to fly to Marseille, where we would have to hire a car to drive to the Grand Hotel de Luzenac.

After we landed, going through the airport checks and picking up the car took over an hour and a half. I drove us out of the airport, but Tom was soon keen to experience the novelty of driving on the right and going anti-clockwise around roundabouts and took over the driving.

Our plan was to break the journey with an overnight stay in Montpellier, and on the way passed vineyards and shallow expanses of water where pink flamingoes waded. When we arrived we found a regional trade fair in progress and most of the hotels were full. The Tourist Information Office eventually located a large room with three beds in a hotel three kilometres from the centre, and we let ourselves be persuaded that three of us sharing a hotel room for one night would not be too great a hardship.

After freshening up we drove the three kilometres back into town, parked the car in an underground car park and joined the crowd strolling around, absorbing the atmosphere of Montpellier's busy streets and admiring attractive well-made goods in shop windows. We sat down for a drink at a café with a great block of tables spreading out into the main square. Smartly dressed people, strolling or hurrying, made their way across in all directions, and we slipped briefly into a holiday mood. Neither Tom nor I wanted to abstain from alcohol that evening and in order to have aperitifs and drink wine with our meal we drove back to the hotel to eat.

Madame made a fuss about us not having reserved a table for dinner, having said nothing about the need to do so when we took the room. When I shrugged and said we would go back into town her attitude changed immediately and she showed us to one of two unoccupied tables at the far end of the restaurant. Another table remained vacant all evening; she must have been one of those people who enjoys being difficult.

Our waiter was an elegant young Latin type. Darren was keen to try out his school French, and asked me to confirm that it was right to say *c'était très bon* to him when he took our plates away after the starter. Subsequently he said *merci beaucoup* at every opportunity, and the waiter began smiling and paying him unnecessary attention. We all had cheese after the main course, and after having hurriedly served Tom and me, he took great trouble over serving Darren, saying a little about each of the half dozen different cheeses available. Darren could not understand him and I had to translate, but they continued to smile at each other, hardly noticing Tom or me.

'He's gorgeous,' Darren said when the waiter had finally served him.

'Never mind "He's gorgeous," have you forgotten why we're...?' I stopped short because Tom gripped my right leg forcibly just behind the knee, causing a sharp pain.

'You be careful,' he said to Darren softly. 'We don't want you catching no French diseases.'

'I'm not stupid.'

There were more meaningful little smiles when the waiter returned with coffee. Strong

though it was, Darren downed his in two gulps and left us to go to look at a map of France on the wall near the restaurant door. After a minute or two our waiter went over to him and began pointing to places on the map, casually resting a hand on his shoulder. 'That's my boy,' Tom said.

'He's not your boy. You shouldn't be encouraging him. We're supposed to be here to visit Andrew, not to sample the local talent.'

'What about you leaving him with those two nude lads at the party?'

'That was all part of their act. It didn't lead to anything.' 'Let him have his chance. He ain't got nobody now Cheung's took up with that Geordie again.'

He was, of course, right. Darren must have been undergoing that torment of sexual frustration that comes from being suddenly deprived of a regular lover. He and the waiter arranged to meet after the restaurant closed at a café nearby called *Le Sportif*, and when he returned to the table to tell us where he was going all I could do was to repeat Tom's advice to be careful, and to make sure he had enough money to pay for a couple of drinks.

Tom and I had beers in the hotel bar before going up to the room. After some rather uninspired sex, he fell asleep immediately, but I lay awake worrying about Darren. A couple of hours later he crept in and undressed, scarcely making a sound, while I pretended to be asleep. Over breakfast Tom was certain to ask him how he had got on, and I would sit there squirming with embarrassment, hoping Darren would answer as briefly and vaguely as possible, wanting to give him all kinds of advice about the dangers, muddle and disappointments of life, but having to keep my paternalistic thoughts to myself.

In the morning, to my relief, when Tom asked, 'Get on all right last night?' he answered 'Okay,' with a shy smile, and that was all that was said. After breakfast I telephoned the Grand Hotel de Luzenac to confirm that we were on our way. They left me holding the line for more than five minutes, then asked me to report to the medical reception desk at exactly two o'clock. Irritated at being required to keep to such a precise time I asked what would happen if we arrived on our visit after two, only to be told that we could visit at any time but an appointment had been made for us at two with a doctor who spoke very good English.

We drove through vineyards in hilly terrain for an hour, staying with the motorway which took us up towards the Pyrenees until we turned off near the town of Carcassonne to climb into the mountains. As we followed the directions given to me earlier, the territory looked increasingly unpopulated and remote, until suddenly the imposing facade of the Grand Hotel appeared as we swung round a steep bend, the road continuing up to Luzenac to the right. To the left of the hotel an energetic river rushed down a narrow gorge.

The doctor was mainly concerned that we should not try to persuade Andrew to travel back with us. She said that his last seizure had been severe, causing paralysis on his left side, and that although out of hospital he was still in need of special care. In time he might improve sufficiently to return to London, but given his age we should not expect too much. The best thing for the present was for him to stay where he was; they understood his medical needs and were able to call in specialists if they were needed.

At last we were shown into the *salon*, a large communal sitting room on the first floor, where Andrew was waiting for us. He sat in a wheel chair and looked terribly thin and fragile. A broad smile reassured us that the illness had not left him dispirited. He put out his hands towards us in greeting. 'You all look so well! How good to see you!'

We went over to him, touched his hands, and kissed him very gently on his cheeks. Tom rather clumsily asked, 'How are you Andrew?'

'How am I?' He paused, shook his head, and said, 'I'm like an old wreck held together by

lengths of thin twine. Not beaten yet though. How was the drive up here?’

He told us to help ourselves to soft drinks from a sideboard. Behind the hotel, in the extensive gardens, the river had been dammed and diverted to form pools for bathing. ‘After we’ve had our drinks perhaps we could take a walk,’ he suggested, ‘if you don’t mind pushing my chair. The native flora is interesting, you probably saw something of it from the car, and of course there is the river. The water has a high mineral content and is supposed to contain a special type of algae that cures skin diseases. Nothing that will do me any good, unfortunately. Having the conservatory and the gardens to sit in is the great benefit of this place for me.’

We showed him photographs from the party, and he asked us about his staff and friends from the Beckford Arms. We said nothing of Jamie or about me being mugged, and noticing that we avoided mentioning any problems he said doubtfully, ‘Wonderful how smoothly everything runs when I’m not there.’

‘There’s nothing that’s worth worrying you about, really. They miss you at the garden centre, naturally, but they’ve got used to me and my naivety about horticulture. They didn’t have much option. The garden centre manager was a bit resentful of my interference at first, but we’re friends now.’

After we had talked for perhaps an hour we all went outside for some air. I wheeled Andrew to the lift, through the conservatory, down a ramp and into the gardens. Tom and Darren went off to look at a tributary stream that tumbled over rocks down a gully under the road, leaving Andrew and me on the broad central path. ‘Sit down here for a while,’ he said as we approached a bench. ‘Let’s talk now we have a few minutes to ourselves.’

The gardens were quiet and deserted. ‘Do they still use these pools?’

‘Yes, they have two or three sessions a week when little groups come to immerse themselves in the water. You must tell me honestly now, how do you feel about the hotel? Are you sorry you left your career in the City?’

‘No, I never belonged there. If the hotel had not provided a way out, something else would. The only question was when and how.’

‘And you and Tom?’

‘We’re fine. We know the worst about each other now, and we’ve never been better.’

‘The relationship has survived, then, despite everything, you’re still a couple. Not having known that kind of closeness to someone is one of the things in life I regret. That and not having children maybe.’ He spoke softly, his eyes sharp and clear under his fine white hair.

‘You would have made a terrific father.’

‘Families are just the result of basic animal instinct, aren’t they, dressed up as some kind of morally sound purpose in life? Of all the family groups you’ve encountered, how many would you volunteer to join, assuming that you could? Not many, I’m sure. Better like this, with friends with whom you have things in common, not stuck with people you don’t get on with because you happen to be related. Tom was always so sure you were exactly what he wanted. I’m enormously glad that you’re together again.’

‘And he’s what I want. Our being so different is part of the attraction. Our personalities complement one another.’

‘Good. That’s how it should be.’

‘You must have felt drawn to him, to have helped him when he came out of prison.’

‘There’s a sort of honesty about Tom, despite the car thefts. He’s practical, suspicious of things that seem too clever or too good to be true. He sees the quality of the joinery when we’re admiring our own reflections in the gloss paint.’

‘Yes. Doesn’t stop him picking up other men from time to time though, does it?’

‘Does that make you unhappy?’

‘No. It’s part of his nature. I don’t think about it. Actually I am a bit worried about Darren. You know he’s split up with Cheung. Last night he picked up the waiter in the hotel. I’m not saying he shouldn’t have, but...’

‘Difficult time for him, you’re right. Not sure what you or I can do about it though.’

‘He might listen to you.’

‘But what is there I can say? He’s grown up so much since I last saw him, not that many months ago, but he has grown up. It may have been selfish of me to get you to bring him here. This isn’t a place for someone of his age. I wanted to see him, once more. If you and Tom were able to come again that would be nice, but maybe choose a date when he’s otherwise engaged, sitting his exams or something.’

‘Of course we’ll come. What’s it like for you here? Can you talk to anyone?’

‘Oh I have a phrase book, and quite a few of the people speak some English, one or two are very good. We get by. I watch the gardeners from the conservatory and exchange the occasional word with them. There’s even a male nurse who flirts with me a little, at least, that’s what I like to think he’s doing. In one way my luck has held out, the holiday insurance is paying for all this. Everything I need is here. Take my advice, if your going to be ill, come to France. I’ve been lucky in life really – yes it would’ve been nice to see through another expansion of the business, but you have to let go at some stage. Remembering all the good people I’ve worked with at the garden centre and *Ferns and Foliage* gives me a lot of satisfaction, and for the future you and Tom will be there to steady things and keep the businesses running properly.’ He looked away from me, back towards the conservatory. ‘You know what I tell my fellow patients here when they brag about their relatives? I tell them I have good people in London to take over from me, that’s what I say to them.’

We talked about his travels until Darren and Tom joined us, when all four of us set off again down the path, Tom pushing Andrew this time, while Darren and I hung back to let them talk privately. At the end of the garden Tom and Andrew stopped to wait for us; when we caught up Darren produced his camera and had us pose for photographs, balancing it on a rock and using the time delay to take one with himself standing behind Andrew, and Tom and me at either side of his chair.

We took a more winding path back, and by the time we were approaching the conservatory Andrew was beginning to look tired. We passed a round pond with a raised stone edge where golden carp swam among water lilies. ‘This is one of the places I like to sit during the afternoons, here or in the conservatory, depending on the weather. There’s a little patch of waste ground over there covered in wild flowers that I’d like to show Darren, if you wouldn’t mind waiting for us for a few minutes in the *salon* on the first floor.’

Tom and I did as he asked. In the *salon* we watched a nurse help an old lady with a stick make her way very slowly, careful step by careful step, to a chair by a window. We had spent little more than two hours with Andrew, but we sensed that our intrusion into the quiet closed world of the Grand Hotel de Luzenac was drawing to an end. The major purpose of the place was obvious. The reason we had seen so few of the patients was that frailty kept them to their rooms. No doubt, as Andrew had said, a few people came in the belief that the waters had curative powers, and a few perhaps came for a period of convalescence, but when the time for the majority of patients to leave the establishment came, they would not be going because their health had been restored.

Tom and I went to the window at the other end of the room and looked out over the roof of the conservatory. Darren was wheeling Andrew back from the patch of wild flowers, and

they stopped near the pond. He positioned Andrew's chair so that when he sat on the stone edge they faced each other. They talked, unaware of us looking down on them. Tom put an arm across my shoulders and pulled me closer. In the garden below us Andrew was saying goodbye to his *protégé* for the last time.

The End