

Bowled Over

by

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Alex is having a bad day. A social hermit in a big city, his routine, orderly life is about to be disrupted. This is a story about chance encounters, and finding love. It is entirely fictional; none of the characters or events are real. Most of the places are fictional too.

It was another of those days; the ones where everything you do turns into a bag of worms. I had quoted ninety five pounds to replace a pressure pump and had already spent a hundred pounds on materials, and now had to go out and spend more because a fitting had broken. Worse, I had sliced open a knuckle. I swore under my breath and rummaged in my toolbox for some insulation tape to try and stem the bleeding.

By the time I had found a replacement fitting all the parking spaces had been filled and so I had to park two blocks away from the client's house. I stepped on dog poop while lugging my tools back to the car, and must have missed some when I scraped it off on the kerb. The stench was awful and the traffic was backed up.

I decided to duck out of traffic and pulled into the underground parking lot of a mall I had never visited before. I used a stick and the half bottle of water I had left in the car to clean the sole of my boot, and went in search of a cafe. I saw a chemist and went in to get some Savlon and micropore tape for my bleeding knuckle, then went to the public toilet, cleaned myself up a bit, cleaned and taped my knuckle and resumed my search for a decent cafe.

The woman came out of nowhere and sent me flying just as I emerged from the passage to the ablutions. I ended up face down inches from an escalator. I felt hands trying to lift me and heard someone saying sorry. More blood; from my nose and mouth this time.

"Fuckit," I muttered on my hands and knees, "This really isn't my day!" My lip felt all wrong.

“I’m so sorry!” A woman’s voice, “It’s all my fault. I’ve called an ambulance.” A hand appeared in my field of view with a wad of tissue paper, “For the blood.”

I took the tissues and pressed them against my nose, which was throbbing painfully. I probed my teeth with my tongue, and couldn’t find anything broken, but the inside of my lower lip was torn and really sore. I managed to get to my feet with the woman holding onto my arm to steady me. She was small, but surprisingly strong.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

I looked at her, but didn’t answer. My mouth was full of blood and my face was bloody sore.

A few people drew closer, asking if we needed any help. Someone handed the woman her shopping bag, which she had dropped when she cannoned into me. She thanked him, and let go of my arm.

“I called an ambulance,” she said, “They should be here soon. I’m so sorry, I was in a hurry and didn’t see you.”

I nodded and took a couple of steps away from the escalator, as more people came up on it, they were all staring at me.

“Look, I really need to go,” said the woman, “The ambulance should be here soon...”

“That’s not likely,” said a voice, an older sounding woman, “The traffic isn’t moving out there.”

“Oh God, I am so late... I have to run,” said the little woman. She opened a purse and pulled out a card, holding it out to me, “That’s me... just send a message when you can, I’ll pay for everything, but I really have to go now.”

I nodded and put the card in my back pocket, then turned and made my way back to the toilets. I examined my face in the mirror. My

nose was out of alignment. I grabbed hold of it, pulled down and to the left, then grabbed the sink, thinking I was going to pass out.

Somebody came out of one of the cubicles and made a beeline for the door, looking scared. My lower lip was three times it's normal size. I gently pulled it down; it was cut but didn't look too bad. I had blood on my shirt, so took it off and rinsed as much blood off in the sink as I could, then wrung it out and tried to dry it under the hand dryer.

That's when the police came in.

Talking with a sore and swollen lower lip is not impossible, but it is not fun. I ended up being taken to the Mall's security office and waiting while the police checked the mall's CCTV footage. It took forever and by the time they were satisfied that I had not assaulted anyone, it was eight PM and the mall was closing. I had not eaten at all, and now had a stinking headache to go with my sore face and growling stomach.

At least the traffic was not as bad. I got home, threw all my clothes into the washing machine, made myself some scrambled egg, showered and went to bed feeling very sorry for myself.

I decided to wear a face mask for the next few days, and managed to get by without talking too much. I used up two tubes of bonjella to numb my lower lip, and paracetamol took the edge off the pain in my nose, which was fine after a few days. I couldn't tell the woman that I was OK as I had washed her card with my jeans, and hadn't read it.

By the weekend my lip was OK, and I managed to enjoy a hot cup of cappuccino and a steak and salad. I wrote off the incident as the sour cream on the top of a really bad day and more or less forgot about it.

Five or six weeks later, I was called back to the same client's house to replace a door lock. The client was out but the apartment block caretaker was there. It was a fairly easy job, and on my way home I pulled into the same mall parking lot and decided to do some

shopping. I used the same public toilet to wash my hands then went for a walk to familiarise myself with the mall. I found the Sainsbury's and then walked back to a cafe I liked the look of; Dillon's, on the top floor, ordered a cappuccino and a chicken salad and got out my iPad and started proofing the last chapter I had written.

The cappuccino came and I was making some corrections when I became aware that someone was at my table. I looked up and saw a woman looking at me. There was something familiar about her. I removed my earbuds.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"You are a hard man to find," she said, "You didn't call me."

I recognised her voice - the woman who had tripped me the last time I had visited the mall.

"No... I um... washed your card by mistake," I said, getting to my feet. I was about to apologise, but stopped myself. She was frowning at me.

"You must be angry with me... For running off like that."

I shrugged, "You apologised at the time," I said, "I'm not sure it would have made much difference if you had stayed; the damage was done."

"The centre manager said the ambulance didn't arrive till after you had gone, that the police had been called and took you for questioning..." she looked concerned, "You didn't go to the hospital, I checked with A&E."

"No, I went home. It had been a long, bad day," I said.

"But your nose and teeth..."

"Are OK now," I said. The waitress brought my salad and asked if I wanted anything else. I told her no.

“Do you mind if I sit with you for a while?” asked the woman, “I came for a coffee and sandwich and when I saw you ...”

“Sure, feel free,” I said.

The woman put her coat over the back of a chair and went to the counter. She returned a few minutes later. I removed my earbuds and closed my iPad.

“I’m interrupting,” said the woman, “I’m sorry... again.”

I shrugged, “Interrupt away,” I said, and put some food in my mouth.

“I’m Cathy,” she said, “The duty manager said that you refused to tell the police your name...”

“Alex,” I said, “It was none of their business and they didn’t ask nicely.”

Cathy gave me a nervous smile, “The thing is, I feel dreadful. It must have hurt and... well, wasted a lot of your time.”

“Shit happens,” I said, “I don’t suppose you intended to trip me.”

“It was still my fault...I should not have been running like that.”

“Yes, it was your fault, but it is over and done. Did you get wherever you were rushing to in time?”

Cathy nodded, “Yes, thank goodness, but only just. Well, I am relieved that you are OK, will you at least allow me to pay for your food? It’s the least I could do.”

“Sure, if it makes you feel better,” I said.

“It will help,” she said, “Do you often come here, to Conley Mall?”

I shook my head, my mouth was full. The waitress delivered her coffee and sandwich.

“I work here,” said Cathy, “At HSBC, I was rushing to meet the Cash in Transit crew, the vault locks at six PM and I very nearly missed them. I would have been demoted at the very least... and I’ve only just been promoted.”

I didn’t know what to say, so forked some more lettuce into my mouth.

“What do you do Alex?” Cathy asked, “For a living I mean.”

I was still chewing, which allowed me time to think. Not that there was much to think about, “I’m a handyman, I suppose,” I said, “And I write stuff.”

“Write stuff?” she asked, “Like DIY articles?”

I laughed at that and choked on something, it was a while before I could speak. Cathy had gone as red-faced as I felt and kept apologising.

“It’s OK, You needn’t apologise,” I finally managed to tell her, “No, I don’t write anything useful, though now you suggested it, I might try. I write fantasy... swords and dragons sort of stuff.”

“You are an author?” She sounded impressed.

I shook my head, “No, they get paid, I’m just a writer.”

“Are you published!” she asked.

I shook my head again, “Not really, it’s on line, a web page. I have exactly ninety two readers at the moment.” I laughed, “I check every day and will celebrate with a bottle of wine when I reach a hundred.”

“I could be number ninety three - what’s your web page?”

“[AJBergFantasy.com](https://ajbergfantasy.com),” I said, then spelled it for her. “There’s no fee.”

“You could do Patreon or something like that,” she said.

I shrugged, “There’s a PayPal link for donations. I don’t really write for money, it’s just something I like doing. What do you do for fun?”

Cathy went red again, then smiled, “I don’t ... well, not for the last few years, but I used to like drawing. My idea of fun now is sleeping in on a Sunday and bingeing on chocolate.”

“Work can be like that,” I said, “Sucking all the fun out of life.”

“I enjoy my job,” said Cathy, a touch defensively, “It’s the commuting I don’t like. Two and a half hours a day, six days a week, and that’s the minimum. It wasn’t so bad when I could get a seat on the train and read or catch up on correspondence, but the trains to Overbury are so full these days. Do you commute?”

“No, I don’t think I would cope with that. I’ve got a place with no view, but it’s very convenient.”

“You must be doing well to afford somewhere in the city,” she said.

“It’s very handy, but rather basic,” I said, not wanting to explain too much, “Overbury was a village the last time I was there, which must have been at least twenty years ago.”

“I’ve only been there five years,” said Cathy, “But there are new buildings going up all the time. It’s basically an extension of the city.”

“So what do you do at the HSBC?” I asked, “I don’t think I have ever met a banker before, not socially anyway.”

“Oh, I am just a deputy branch manager, one of four in this Branch, the most junior one,” she said, “It’s mainly clerical work, checking on transactions and that sort of thing. I like being organised, and that seems to be a good trait in banking.”

“I’m sure it is,” I said, “But things have changed a lot. I can’t remember the last time I went into a bank. I do most of my banking from home or at an ATM now.”

“Where do you bank?”

“Halifax,” I said, “I don’t even know where the nearest Halifax branch is here. I opened my account in Colchester over twenty years ago.”

“There’s one in Edison Street,” said Cathy, that’s about a kilometre from here.

I heard a buzz and Cathy fetched a phone from her bag, looked at it, frowned and put it back in her bag. “Work,” she said, “So much for my afternoon off.” She twisted in her seat and gestured to the waitress for the bill, “Well Alex, I am glad that you are OK and relieved that you are not angry with me. It has been nice meeting you, but I had better go now.”

She wrapped the remains of her sandwich in a napkin, and paid the bill with a card, then waggled her fingers in farewell.

I checked that night, and had a ninety third subscriber, Cathy Wentworth.

The next two weeks were busy, my biggest client, Caliper Insurance, wanted heat pumps installed in all their offices and asked me to find a suitable supplier and installer and get quotes for installation and submit a proposal. Finding a supplier was the easy part, working out a plan for removing the existing heating systems took most of the time. When it was done, I took five days off and drove to Wroxham in the Norfolk Broads. I rented a tiny two room house, with a great view, which was perfect as it rained almost every day. I had bought enough groceries to last two weeks. The WiFi was not as good as I had in the City, but it was good enough, and I managed to proof and upload three new chapters. I generally don’t read the comments on the web page, but I answer all the emails that get through the filter that the moderator set to remove any abusive content. Luckily I didn’t get many emails, but there was one from Cathy Wentworth.

She said she had really enjoyed the first book, and had just downloaded the second one. She also said that she had enjoyed meeting me and said she hoped to bump into me for coffee again.

I wrote back and told her I had managed to escape from my cellar in the city and was enjoying a rainy week in Norfolk, and sent her a photo of the view from the sitting room. I also told her that I liked to include the names of my readers in stories, and asked if she would be OK with being a character. I had actually written half a chapter with the new character, Cathy, the mysterious blonde, grey-eyed rider that confronted my main character. She had already captured the assassin he had been tracking, and was taking him back to claim the bounty on him. I sent a copy of the text to Cathy, telling her it would be in book twelve, which probably would not be ready till the end of the year.

I had decided to learn to skip - it had been my New Year's Resolution, and I had even brought a skipping rope. It was still in the plastic heat shrink wrap I had bought it in.

There was just enough room to skip on the patio, and I found skipping was a lot harder than it looked. Eventually I found a YouTube video that helped, and I managed to skip about ten jumps before getting the rope tangled around my feet. I decided to try skipping every hour, and to do fifty jumps each time. It really got me sweating and panting.

I was surprised to get a response from Cathy on my last night at Wroxham, she said she would love to be a character in my story, and sent a picture of a drawing, in coloured pencil, of a woman, Cathy, and recognisably her, wearing brown and green riding leathers with a sword in her hand as she held the door to her room in the Inn open, behind her a shadowy manacled and gagged figure glared up from the floor. The assassin she had captured. It was the scene I had described and sent to her.

I was blown away by the drawing. She was really good. I wrote back and told her so. I also told her that I would be back in the city

in the morning and planned on having breakfast at Dillon's at around nine before stocking up on groceries for the weekend. I added that I did not know if she worked on a Saturday, or even if she was able to come for a coffee if she was working.

I was back in the city by six, having woken at one AM and deciding to go as I didn't think I would get back to sleep. I had done all my laundry, cleaned and tidied, showered and could easily have made myself breakfast at home, but decided to go to Dillon's anyway. It was the sort of place I liked to sit and write in. I had not received an answer from Cathy.

Dillon's was surprisingly busy when I got there at about a quarter to nine, I was lucky to find a table; it was in a corner. Cathy turned up before a waiter came to take my order. She looked very different in jeans and a sweatshirt.

"I only just saw your email," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the hubbub, "It's quite loud in here today."

"I wasn't sure if you worked on Saturdays," I said, "It's good to see you."

"I work two Saturday mornings each month, sometimes three. It's only half day, and casual wear. Reconciliations and that sort of thing. I can't stay long, twenty minutes max."

She asked for cappuccino and a croissant, I ordered an omelette with cheese, mushroom and bacon.

"How was your holiday?" she asked.

"It was good, it rained every day, which was OK. I learned to skip."

"You what?"

"I learned to skip," I said, "It's hard work. Good exercise in a small space with minimal equipment."

“I haven’t skipped since junior school,” said Cathy laughing, “I don’t think I could now. Yoga is my thing, when I have time.”

“I used to run a bit and swim a lot, but now I mostly just walk. I haven’t swum since the pandemic. I don’t even know if the pools are open again.”

“All the bank staff used to have gym membership, there was a gym on the lower level here, but it closed during the pandemic. I only ever used the stationary cycle and Nordic walker, but I enjoyed it. Now I come to Dillon’s and spend money on food I don’t need.”

A woman approached the table and Cathy smiled up at her.

“This is Gwynn from the bank. She has started reading your books as well. Gwynn, meet Alex.”

Gwynn was a bit older than me, I’d guess mid to late forties. She had a soft Welsh accent and was reluctant to sit with us, saying she hadn’t wanted to disturb us.

“I just wanted to meet you and tell you that I am enjoying your book,” she said.

She waved goodbye and went to the counter.

Cathy’s cappuccino and croissant came before my omelette, she was just about finished when my omelette arrived.

“I have to get back to work,” said Cathy, “I enjoyed meeting you again... have you any plans for the weekend?”

“Tomorrow I have some work, but nothing other than grocery shopping planned for today,” I might just sit here and write for a while before I go to Sainsburys.”

“Do you like movies?” asked Cathy, “There’s that new film, ‘Everything everywhere all at once’ or something like that showing today at two...”

“Here, I mean in this Mall?” I asked,

“Yes, it’s quite a nice cinema, I can get tickets, I get a discount.”

“OK, that sounds fun... I think. I haven’t done cinema for... since well, several years now.”

“I go at least once a month, usually on a Saturday, and I pig out on Maltesers and popcorn.”

“I’ll get my shopping done after I’ve eaten, then come back here and write,” I said, “See you when you are ready?”

Cathy smiled, “OK!” She left some money on the table for her cappuccino and croissant.

I was back at Dillon’s at eleven, having taken my groceries home and getting the bus back to Dillon’s. Two buses actually. I should have walked.

I was deep in my book, writing, earbuds in and a cappuccino going cold on the table. I don’t know what made my look up. Cathy was sat watching me. I decided that I liked the way she looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I was in another world.” I removed my ear buds and closed down my iPad. “Are you all done for the day? Is it movie time?”

Cathy smiled, “It was nice, watching you write,” she said, “It’s far too early for the movie - I was thinking of going for a walk...”

“Walking sounds good,” I said, “May I come with you?”

“There’s a nice park two blocks away,” she said.

“Martin Luther King park,” I said, “I maintain a couple of houses that overlook the park. It is nice.”

Cathy wanted to know all about me, “Your ‘About the Author’ bit on your web page is pretty thin,” she said, “I want to know more about

you, what with TikTok now being blamed for brainwashing us, how do I know that you aren't a Chinese or Russian agent trying to brainwash us with your writing?"

"What do you want to know about me?" I asked, "I am not a very interesting person.

"Well, let's start with where you come from," she asked, "You said you came to England when you were eighteen, where from?"

"Zimbabwe," I said, "twenty three years ago."

"So now I know your age as well," she said, "What brought you here?"

"An aeroplane," I said, "This isn't fair, I think we should exchange information."

"Well, I was born here... OK, not here but in this country, in Sussex, near Chichester, and you are ... five years older than me," said Cathy, "What about your family? Are they still in Zimbabwe?"

"No family, I had a Great Aunt in Colchester, but she died when I was eight, I don't remember meeting her."

"Oh I am so sorry, I didn't mean to ..."

"That's OK, I was raised in an orphanage and enjoyed my childhood very much, I came here to join the British army, did twenty two years in the Royal Engineers and then got myself work, fixing things in the big city of London. Life is good." I smiled, "Your turn."

"Mum and Dad are still alive and live in Nutbourne, near Chichester in Sussex, I have a twin sister Sophie, she works on cruise ships, a Purser, mostly in the Caribbean. We get on better at a distance. There is currently no man in my life."

"Same for me, no men at all in my life, not currently, anyway."

“Oh God, you aren’t gay are you?” asked Cathy laughing, “Not that there’s anything wrong with gays, it just that I was thinking about kissing you!”

“That would be nice,” I said, “Being kissed I mean, I think being gay could be quite painful... for a man anyway. The thought brings tears to my eyes. Don’t think I’m tough enough.”

Kathy burst out laughing again, “I’m too embarrassed now.” She said, “And I don’t think I am gay either.”

“Well, it’s probably not so painful for women,” I said, and took her hand, “I’ll keep a hold of you, just in case.”

I liked the feel of her hand in mine.

“How is it that a bloke like you is still single in his forties?” She asked after a while.

“I don’t know. I never was much good with relationships. Too institutionalised I suppose,” I said, “It used to worry me, but I just sort of accept it now.”

“Are you a drinker, smoker?” she asked.

“I drink, but don’t smoke. Don’t like beer much, gives me gas, but cider and spirits are OK every now and then, can’t abide drunks.”

“I like wine, mostly, and occasionally have been known to get sozzled,” she said.

“I’ve had some wine that I liked, but am no good at choosing a good wine. Can’t stand sweet wine.”

“Drugs?” said Cathy.

“No thanks,” I replied, “Don’t need them.”

“Well,” said Cathy, “Can’t think of anything else to ask you.”

“What about mental illnesses and diseases?” I asked, “You haven’t delved into them yet.”

“Well, you look healthy enough,” she said, “Are you?”

“As far as I know,” I said, “What about you? No relationships issues I need to worry about?”

Cathy shook her head, “Not for a while now,” she said, going red, “I was a bit naive, I suppose, and got into a relationship with a guy, who turned out to be married... it got very messy and nasty. Put me off men for a while, and, I don’t know... life, work... I suppose I just got used to being single.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“It gets lonely sometimes...” she squeezed my hand.

“It does,” I said, “But this is nice... walking with you, holding hands, thinking about kissing.”

She laughed and went very red, “We don’t have to kiss.”

“People might see!” I said, “So, is Sophie an identical twin?”

Cathy nodded, “She is, but most people can tell us apart quite easily, our personalities are very different, and she has a tiny tattoo, she touched her collarbone, “Just here, of a swift.”

“It must be weird to look at some one else and see yourself,” I said.

“We hated each other for years,” said Cathy, “From the age of twelve till ... well we hide it better now. It really upset mum and dad.”

“There were twin brothers in my first unit, when I was in training,” I said, “They were identical twins, but they were also very different personalities and one was left handed and the other right handed, but they got on well with each other.”

“My mum and her twin sister are very close,” said Cathy, “But they aren’t identical twins.”

She told me that her mother had been a librarian, but was now retired. Her dad, an electrical engineer, had worked for the Electricity Board till it was privatised, after which he taught at the Havant polytechnic.

“Dad doesn’t want to retire... though he can afford to. He doesn’t have any hobbies and says he would probably die of boredom after six months. Mum volunteers at the local Hospice, taking books and reading to people in terminal care.”

“You mum must be a strong person; there is no way I could cope with people who are dying.” I said.

Cathy turned to look at me, “Why not?” She asked. It seemed to bother her.

“I just can’t deal with the emotion, I think. I’m a coward.”

Cathy snorted, “You were in the army... so that doesn’t make sense.”

“There are cowards in every army,” I said, smiling, “But seriously, I would rather be in Afghanistan than work with dying people. I had a hard time visiting mates in hospital, even those that were going to make full recoveries... I just don’t have whatever it takes to deal with that sort of thing.”

“Too much empathy,” said Cathy, “You identify too much with their suffering. That doesn’t make you a coward.”

I shrugged, “I prefer dealing with problems I can fix. Apparently that’s bad for relationships.”

“How so?” asked Cathy.

I wished I had not spoken, and changed the subject, “I was really impressed with your drawing, did you study Art?”

“I did in school, up to A levels. I’m glad you like it. Do you mind if I put it on the web page when you upload that story?”

“No, that would be great,” I said, “I was hoping you would allow me to use it in the story. I can’t afford to pay you, but it would be your work, and credited to you.”

“I would like that,” said Cathy, “Would you like me to do more drawings?”

“Would you like to do that?” I asked, “I can’t draw to save my life, or play music - my biggest regrets.”

“I can play the recorder..., well, I used to play the recorder at school. God, that was years ago. I had almost forgotten. Sophie was the musician though, she can pick up practically any instrument and play it. I felt so useless next to her, so I never really put much effort into playing.”

“There was a boy at the orphanage like that, he was amazing. I keep expecting to hear that he is a famous pop star. He used to write songs as well, Dennis Cholwe.”

“Do you keep in touch with any of the people from your childhood?” asked Cathy.

“I used to write to one of the priests, but he died a few years ago. There were a couple of guys I was good friends with, but they were adopted a few years before I left. I think they preferred not to remember being orphans... they stopped writing pretty soon after leaving.”

“What sort of music do you like?” asked Cathy.

“Wow... well, I suppose I like what I like. I’m not sure about genres really, I mean, I don’t follow top of the pops or go to concerts, but I like music. Different music for different moods I suppose. Jazz - I

like most of the Jazz I've ever heard. I love Soweto Jazz, there are some classical things I like, but I can't really name them. I loved Fiddler on The Roof, with Topol and Barbara Streisand, Queen, Abba, Kris Kristofferson, Bowie ... I love Bowie, Cat Stevens, Simon and Garfunkel, Santana... sorry, I'm not very good at remembering names but..."

"Well, it sounds pretty much like what I like, though Sophie was the one for concerts and top of the pops and all that stuff. Eclectic ... that's me. Are you into things like Star Trek and Doctor Who?"

"I loved them when I was younger," I said, "Especially Doctor Who. What about you?"

"Oh I love Doctor Who, but I was never that taken with Star Trek. I don't really watch much on the Telly these days, not even the news. I prefer to check for news online now. I do like cinema though, it's my end of the week treat."

"Favourite films?"

"Wow, now that is a huge question. I like so many. Anything with Liam Neeson, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise..."

"Anything?" I asked, "I couldn't bring myself to watch Tom Cruise in the Jack Reacher film."

"Is that the one based on the books by Lee Child?" asked Cathy.

"It is, Jack Reacher is supposed to be six foot four and they cast Tom Cruise, who is a great actor but he's shorter than me."

"I didn't read any of the books, but the movie was OK."

"I liked the books, they do what a good book should do, in my opinion, they entertain me and take me out of my little world for a while."

"So what's your favourite film?" asked Cathy.

“That changes, but I could watch some films over and over again, Fifth Element, Love Actually, While you were Sleeping, The Big Lebowski. I am a bit of a movie slut, but I generally don’t like horror, though I like all the Alien and Predator films.”

“You like Love Actually? Me too. I’ve never heard of While you were Sleeping and the Big whatsit.”

“The Big Lebowski,” I said, “It’s a weird one, but I love it. I have a huge collection of DVDs.”

“I spend a fortune on Amazon and Netflix,” said Cathy, but I usually fall asleep and miss most of the film. It’s a bad habit.”

We talked about films and characters that we liked for so long that we missed the movie. I didn’t mind and Cathy didn’t seem to. We ate at Dillon’s instead.

Cathy asked me what I thought about the Harry Potter films and books and JK Rowling.

“I really enjoyed them,” I told her, “The books as well as the films. I read one of her books she wrote under another name, it was OK, but nothing special. The Harry Potter books were just brilliant. I love the way she created a world right under our noses. It’s such fun to think of wizards and the like being here among us.”

“What do you think about all the fuss being made about her views on the LGBT community.”

“I can’t see what the fuss is about, to tell you the truth,” I said, “I only read what people said about what she had said and didn’t hear or read anything on the subject by her, but it sounded reasonable to me.”

“So you think that trans women should not be allowed to use female toilets?”

“I don’t really care who uses which toilets,” I said, “But I think that people who do care should be allowed to have their say. At the end

of the day it is about feeling safe to say what we mean and not feel threatened by it.”

“What about the convicted rapist, who wants to go to a female prison because he now wants to be identified as a woman?”

I nodded, “I heard a little about it and I really don’t know the details, but if he is a she....I mean, you know, with a vagina instead of a penis, then why not?”

“But a trans woman, who still has a penis must go to a man’s prison?”

“I suppose so, unless they have special trans prisons. Gay men have been sent to prison with straight men for .. well forever. I’m guessing that there are a proportionate number of lesbians in female prisons. Prison isn’t supposed to be convenient,”

“I’m not sure I agree with you,” said Cathy, “Prison should be safe for the prisoners.”

“It should be, but more importantly, it is supposed to keep the general populace safe from convicted offenders,” I said, “I worked in a prison once, and it was my job to make sure the prisoners didn’t harm each other or themselves. It is hard work.”

“Prisons are supposed to rehabilitate offenders, they are supposed to come out better than when they went in,” said Cathy, quite hotly.

“I am sure some do, but I suspect it is only a minority. From what I am told, prisons are generally over crowded and underfunded. It’s expensive.”

“Which prison did you work in? When?”

“The Military Corrective Training Centre, just after I made sergeant,” I said, “There was a strike by remand prison officers, so the military prison staff were sent to civilian remand prisons and people like me were drafted in to cover at the military prison in Colchester. It was quite an experience.”

I told her how it worked and how those sent to A wing; offenders who would return to their military duties after serving their sentence, usually got rapid promotion because of the training they received in the prison, and how strictly we, the prison staff, were monitored. I told her that it helped me to realise that properly managed and motivated soldiers would be less likely to end up in prison.

“I never really thought about the military before,” said Cathy, “It is a whole different world, a bit like JK Rowling’s Wizarding community, right here under our noses. Do you miss it?”

I shook my head, “No, not really. I was happy enough while I served, but I still have nightmares about being back in the army now. It wasn’t tough exactly, but it is a very different way of life.”

“What do you think about the war in Ukraine?” asked Cathy.

I didn’t want to answer that. “It sounds like hell,” I said, “And I don’t understand why NATO and Europe are not doing more.”

“You think UK should go to war against Russia?” asked Cathy, clearly shocked.

I nodded, “Isn’t that what history has taught us? If Russia wins in Ukraine, do you really think that will be the end of it?”

“But people will die, Russia might attack UK!”

“People are dying, and this is what our armed forces are for, this is what NATO is for.”

“Ukraine is not a NATO member state or part of the EU,” said Cathy.

“No, it is not, but Ukraine is a democratic country, bordering NATO countries and they have asked for help after being attacked by a superpower. We should do more to help.”

“Would you want to fight there?”

I nodded, "I do not want to fight there, but if I was called up to fight there I would go. I feel guilty that I can't bring myself to volunteer for their foreign battalion."

"You must be crazy, it's not your fight!" said Cathy.

"It's everybody's fight. Better to end it quickly," I said.

"Were you in Afghanistan and Iraq?" asked Cathy.

I nodded, "And the Balkans, which is the only place I think we did any good. We certainly haven't done the people of Afghanistan or Iraq any favours and Libya is a total disaster."

"There is still tension in Kosovo," said Cathy.

I nodded, "The Serb nationalists are very pro Putin, and hoping that the war in Ukraine will divert attention away from Kosovo."

Cathy looked at her watch, "I had better go Alex, I'm sorry we missed the movie, but it was great to chat."

She insisted on paying her share of the meal, which was fine by me. I walked her to the bus stop, and got a kiss on the cheek. I walked to my basement wondering if I had put her off with my stupid opinions.

I was up early on Sunday, and got through all the checks and servicing I needed to get done by three PM. I stopped at the Link Centre on my way back and managed half an hour in the pool, which completely exhausted me.

The first half of the week was busy, but not remarkable in any way. I managed another swim at the Link Centre and struggled even more than I had on Sunday. On Thursday I had nothing to do, so went to the Link Centre early, and had an hour in the pool. I decided on breakfast at Dillon's and drove to Conley Mall. It was eight AM and Dillon's was just opening. I got myself a table in the corner, ordered a cappuccino and an omelette with extra bacon, plugged in my ear

buds and lost myself in the fantasy world I had created, while listening to Gordon Lightfoot on Spotify.

Gwynn approached when the waiter brought my omelette. She had a coffee in a paper cup, but sat, when I stood and invited her to join me.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” she said, “Are you writing more stories?”

I nodded, “Yes, I write in fits and starts, when the inspiration finds me. Usually I spend most of my time proofing and rewriting things but every now and again I have an idea and try to get it down before I lose momentum. I hope you are still enjoying my books?”

“Oh yes, I am, I’m on book four now, The forest of Cladraen,” she smiled, “I’m getting quite fond of Yeland,”

“Can I use your name in a story?” I asked, “I like to include my readers names.”

“I read that in the chat group,” said Gwynn, “Cathy Wentworth says you don’t read the chats... you should you know. Mostly people say really nice things about the stories.”

I nodded, “There’s a moderator who removes any abusive content,” I said, “I do read emails and answer them if I can, but I’m not ready for daily criticism, good or bad. So... may I use your name?”

“Can I be a villain?” asked Gwynn, “Someone with a quick sword and a sharp tongue, I don’t mind being killed, as long as it is while trying to do something spectacular.”

I laughed, “Alright, it might take me a while, but I’ll let you see it before I upload it to the web page.”

“Can I tell people that you are going to put me in your story?”

“Yes of course,” I said, “It will probably be book thirteen, I am almost finished writing book twelve.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. So you have three more already written that you haven’t published?”

“Almost three,” I said, “But proofing takes a long time, much longer than writing.”

“Well, I will leave you to get on with them. I really am enjoying reading your stories. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” I said, getting up as she rose to leave. She really seemed very shy.

I had finished my omelette and was back into writing mode when Cathy turned up.

“Sorry to disturb you,” she said, “Gwynn said you were here and I didn’t want to miss you.” She put a large A4 envelope on the table, “I can’t stop and chat, I just wanted to leave these drawings with you.”

I got a kiss on the cheek and she was gone. It was very quick, I hadn’t even removed my earbuds. I felt a huge sense of relief that I hadn’t chased her away entirely with my weird opinions.

I went through the drawings and recognised the scenes immediately. I liked the way she had portrayed my characters, though it wasn’t exactly the way I had imagined them. I saw that she had pencilled the book, chapter and page details for each scene on the back of the drawings. I sent her an email immediately saying that I liked them very much and asked her if I could upload them to the stories.

I lost the thread of what I was writing and after waiting for a response from Cathy and then realising that she probably would not access her email while she was at work, I paid and left, and drove back to my basement.

I had a small project, making a bathroom cabinet that I hoped one of the tenants at Shakespeare Mews would buy. The crappy

laminated chipboard one in her bathroom was about to fall apart. I got on with that, and had it finished by five PM, then took the bus to the Link Centre and managed a good swim. I decided to walk back to the basement; long walks often help me to get back into the right frame of mind for writing. I stayed up till midnight and finished the book.

I was kept busy all day Friday and through the weekend dealing with a cock-up at one of the old Caliper Insurance offices in Shoreditch. I got my van clamped by an over-eager security guard, which cost me seventy five pounds, which I billed to Caliper Insurance, as I had been parked in their parking area. I was quite happy, despite the clamping, as I had earned a pretty penny over the weekend.

I saw a message from Cathy when I got up just before midday on Monday. She had asked if I was free for lunch on Saturday.

I wrote back apologising, and telling her I had been working non-stop in Shoreditch from early Saturday morning till past midnight on Sunday night, and had only just woken up. I sent my mobile number and suggested that she use WhatsApp to message me for more prompt responses. I showered and walked to Conley Mall for lunch and stayed there till five PM proofing book ten and hoping that Cathy would message me.

From Dillon's I went to the Link Centre and had a good swim. I walked back to my basement, and fell asleep in my recliner while proofing.

I got two hundred pounds for the bathroom cabinet and was commissioned to make another one, the same design, for their "Sussex House."

The contractor that had caused all the trouble at Shoreditch, decided that they were not prepared to remove the old oil-fired boiler from Caliper's Catford offices. Rather than get into a dispute over breach of contract, I decided to do the work myself. I needed help and found someone who had posted an advert on Facebook saying they were looking for hands-on experience after completing

a B-Tech course at Clapham, but they lived in Sherwood Estate, which was a few blocks from my basement. I sent a message agreeing to meet at the Costa at the Sherwood Estate shopping centre.

Dale, turned out to be a she, and looked fifteen but said she was nineteen. She looked like a handful, but was polite and agreed to a try out.

Dale was waiting on the pavement outside the Sherwood Estate Asda at five thirty AM on Wednesday morning. She had a travel mug with what smelled like good coffee in it and hardly spoke a word all the way to Catford.

Dale had brought a few tools, though I had told her it wasn't necessary.

More than half the offices at Caliper's Catford office were archives. I took Dale with me as I went from office to office explaining to the staff what we were going to do, before heading down to the basement.

I'd got all the tools and equipment ready, and took the time to explain to Dale what we were going to do. She was beginning to look a bit bored and I asked her if she had ever dismantled a boiler before. She shook her head and I told her about the fire and damage that had happened at Shoreditch.

By lunch time Dale was swearing and sweating like an old hand. She certainly wasn't frightened of hard work. I told her to take an hour and a half off for lunch, while I continued to work.

"You not having lunch then?" she asked.

"I'll eat tonight, after dropping you off," I said, "I only eat once a day, usually."

She looked me up and down, "Well you look OK on it, especially for an older bloke, I'll eat after work as well. Do you mind if I fetch a coffee though? Do you want one?"

The contractor had quoted three thousand pounds to do the job in two weeks; ten working days. Dale and I had the job done and the site cleaned up in six days. I paid Dale a thousand pounds, almost three hundred pounds more than the hourly rate we had agreed.

“Thanks Alex,” she said after climbing out of the van when we reached Sherwood Estate, “I enjoyed working with ya, give us a call if you need any more help? I don’t mind hard work as long as it’s honest. I can do other stuff, a bit of woodwork and electrical, even done some building work - just a skivvy, mixing mortar and hod work. Not bricklaying or plastering or anything like that.”

I thanked her and realised that I had enjoyed working with her.

I didn’t get any more writing done during the next week either, as I was kept busy. Sometimes it happens that way. I think I found it more difficult than usual, because I wanted to spend more time at Dillon’s, hoping to meet Cathy.

I finished quite late on the Sunday night, determined to take Monday off and looking forward to a breakfast at Dillon’s and catching up with some writing. I was up at five and had swum for an hour before getting back to my basement just after seven, just as the post was delivered.

A bloody summons to the small claims court, Nigel Ferris was claiming that I had fraudulently cancelled his contract in order to do the work myself - removing the old oil-fired boiler from Caliper’s offices in Catford. I was still muttering and feeling murderous by the time I got to Dillon’s.

I tried to put it out of my head, but was struggling to concentrate. Cathy did come in, with another young woman and a man. She smiled, waggled her finger in greeting and mouthed “meeting” at me, as they sat at a table in the middle of the cafe, about three tables away from me.

I turned up Leo Sayer and concentrated on writing, and didn't notice them leaving. At around ten thirty, I decided that I had had enough. I was on my way out when Cathy came in.

"Oh... you are leaving," she said, "I was about to grab a coffee, and hoped you were still here."

"May I sit with you?" I asked, "I've had my fill of coffee for the day."

"Please do...I have missed you," she said.

"I've had a lot of work recently," I said, "It happens sometimes. I was hoping to have today off, but I had better go and see a lawyer. I got a summons to the small claims court today, for Thursday."

"I'm so sorry!" said Cathy, "Is there something I can do to help?"

I smiled, "Thanks, I feel better about it already. I don't suppose there is much anyone can do. I've attended the small claims court before, but just for training. I hate wasting time, which is what this will most probably be."

"Do you have a good lawyer?" she asked.

"I don't have a lawyer, as such, but I sold a bathroom cabinet recently to a lawyer who has offices close to this Mall, I think. Same street anyway. I'll ask her for advice."

"I saw that you uploaded the artwork I gave you," said Cathy, "And wrote a lovely thank you note. You should read the chat log - lots of people are talking about the last book you uploaded, I don't read them through in case there are spoilers, but it looks as if they enjoyed it."

"I read something somewhere about writers responding to their critics; it was very clever and sort of sums up why I avoid reading reviews and chats about my stories - but I can't recall it well enough to quote it. I just don't have the emotional backbone to deal with the unpleasant comments, so I avoid all of them."

Cathy made a dismissive motion with her hands, “Don’t say things like that about yourself. Just because you care about what people say, does not mean you don’t have an emotional backbone. Nobody likes negative criticism.”

“I think it’s called Vanity,” I said.

“What do you mean?” asked Cathy.

“Caring about the opinions of people you don’t even know is a vanity,” I said.

“Well, I would agree that caring too much about the opinions of strangers is a bit silly, but we all do, really. I would say that good manners is just about caring about how one is seen by others,” said Cathy.

“That’s very true,” I said, wanting to change the subject, but Cathy looked at her watch and got to her feet, saying she had better get back to work. She wished me good luck with the lawyer, smiled, kissed my cheek and left.

I felt all wrong again and then told myself off for overthinking things.

Half an hour later I was discussing my summons to the small claims court with Lynne Cousins. She waved a dismissive hand when I asked her how much her advice was going to cost me.

“I’m in need of a coffee break Alex,” she said, “I can’t represent you at the small claims court in any case. Just tell me what you can and we’ll take it from there, shall we?” She led me into a small meeting room and asked if I would like tea or coffee. They had a pod coffee machine. The coffee was surprisingly good.

Lynn listened then asked me a few questions before asking for a little time to think. She made herself another coffee - I declined one, and sat quietly for a while. Lynn put down her cup and picked up her note book.

“Well, it seems quite straightforward,” she said, “I’ll list the documents you need to make copies of and take with you. Make five copies of each one. One for each of the three adjudicators, one for the plaintiff and one for yourself. Label and number them clearly. When it is your turn to speak, do not get drawn into the plaintiff’s argument. Keep things simple. You provided them with a detailed description of the work that needed doing. Present that document. They responded and their offer was accepted. Present that document. They then wrote to say that they could not do the work ... now this is important. Do not, under any circumstances get sidetracked into the reasons why - they put in writing that they could not do the job that they had agreed to do. Present their letter. You then did the work. You do not have to justify it. You did the work that you had asked them to do after they had agreed to do it and then changed their mind. You do not have any duty to renegotiate with them. They did not ask you to renegotiate. I think if you stick to those facts, the case will be dismissed.”

I thanked her for the advice and the coffee. She smiled and told me to let her know how it went, then showed me out.

I went back to my basement and printed all the documents, stapled and labelled them as she had advised, then spent the rest of the day working on the bathroom cabinet I had agreed to make for her Sussex house.

The Small Claims Court was a surprisingly small and modern looking place. There were four court rooms. I was asked to wait outside court number three when I reported to the front office. There were two people waiting in the corridor when I got there. An Asian looking man, who seemed very agitated and wearing a face mask, and a young black woman, who sat quietly reading something on an enormous phone. At five to nine, two men came and sat a few seats away from me. I didn’t recognise either of them, but suspected they were the plaintiffs as we were the only people sat near the door to courtroom number three. They ignored me.

It was almost a quarter past nine when the door opened, and a grey haired woman poked her head out of the door.

“Mr. Berg and Ferris Contracting?” she asked, looking at us, “We are waiting for you.”

I stood and apologised, the other two men didn't say anything, they just followed me into the room.

There were five people in there, the woman introduced herself, and the other two adjudicators, all King's Councillors, the court recorder and the bailiff. The bailiff was wearing one of those removable casts for a broken leg, and looked more than a little uncomfortable.

Neither of the men was Nigel Ferris. One was his office manager, Brian unpronounceable Polish sounding name, though he had a very London accent and a lawyer, who was told that he could not represent Ferris Contracting in the small claims court. He argued and was told that he could sit quietly and advise his client or be escorted from the court.

Brian unpronounceable, seemed very uncertain of himself and spent at least half an hour working himself up to the injustice of me having the audacity of taking work away from his company. I didn't say a word while he was speaking, but I did find myself getting quite angry and had to work hard at keeping cool, calm and collected. When it was my turn, I found my hands shaking and my heart pounding. I felt like a naughty schoolboy being reprimanded by the headmaster. However, I did as Lynne had advised, I stayed polite and tried to keep a measured and even tone of voice. Brian kept jumping up and interrupting. The Presiding adjudicator, the youngest of the three, calmly told him to sit and let me finish each time. He seemed more amused than annoyed. When I had finished the three adjudicators asked for a few minutes to review the documents I had given them, and suggested that it was as good a time as any for a toilet or refreshment break. I went for a walk but Brian and his lawyer remained in the courtroom.

There were eight or nine people sat at the back of the small court room when I returned. The bailiff with the injured leg had been replaced by a younger one, who had a book of crossword puzzles on her knee.

We all stood when the Adjudicators came back in. The presiding adjudicator asked Brian to take the stand, and asked him some fairly straight forward questions.

“Do you contest any of the documents provided by Mr Berg?”

“Well, I cannot say if they are the same as the documents we have on file, all I can say is that he had no right... no right whatsoever, to do that work himself. It is a conflict of interest as I see it. He was supposed to find someone else to do the work, he just used us to get the costings done and did the work himself.”

“Do you accept that the document labelled by Mr Berg as “C” came from your office?” asked the presiding adjudicator, “It states clearly that following losses incurred on the works done at Caliper Insurance offices in Shoreditch and I quote: “I regret to inform you that Ferris Contractors are unable to do the works at Catford as quoted.”

“Exactly!” said Brian, excitedly, “As quoted! We were not refusing to do the work, we just wanted to revise our offer... I mean, there is a contingency clause in our quotation.”

“Did Ferris Contracting ask Mr Berg to renegotiate the contract?” asked the Adjudicator.

“Well, it is standard practice, especially after the losses we made at Shoreditch. It was obvious that we needed to reconsider.”

“So are you saying you did ask Mr Berg to renegotiate? asked the adjudicator, “A simple yes or no will suffice.”

“It was implied...”

The Adjudicator interrupted, “I must insist that you answer the question with a simple yes or no.”

“Well... No, but ...”

The Adjudicator held up a hand, stalling whatever Brian was going to say. It was all downhill for Ferris Contracting from there on. Brian tried to make a point, which I could not understand, about profiting from the situation. The female adjudicator asked me if I had made a profit on doing the work and I handed over a copy of my job card and invoice, saying I had been adequately compensated for the work I did. The “profit” - or six hundred pounds difference between what it had cost me to do the job and what I charged Caliper had been split between me and Dale. I had charged the same amount that Ferris Contracting had quoted.

I was awarded costs of two hundred and fifty pounds. I went straight to the Link Centre as soon as the paperwork was done, and swam for half an hour. I had lunch in their cafeteria and managed to write two whole chapters before the hard plastic seat got too uncomfortable.

I walked back to Conley Mall and got a card from a gift shop, wrote in it, inviting Cathy to celebrate my court case win with a meal and a movie at Leicester Square on Saturday and left it at the HSBC service desk.

I delivered the completed bathroom cabinet to 3 Shakespeare Mews early on Friday morning with another card thanking Lynne for the legal advice, then went to Dillon’s for breakfast.

Cathy came in for coffee while I was having breakfast, and sat with me.

“I’m good for tomorrow,” she told me with a smile, “Congratulations on your court case. Can you tell me about it?”

I got called out that afternoon - a key had broken off in the lock of an office in Canary Wharf. It took me longer to get there and find parking than it did to remove the broken key, and twice as long to get back to my basement afterwards.

On Saturday morning I walked to the Link Centre and swam for an hour then used a corner of the gym to skip. I was still crap, but getting better. I had been skipping for about ten minutes when I

heard a familiar voice. It took a while to recognise Dale, she was in a Karate suit with her hair tied back.

“Hello Alex,” she said, “I never seen you here before - into boxing are you?”

I laughed, “No... just learning how to skip, for the exercise.”

“You are making it hard for yourself,” she said, “Come onto the mats, and you should wear trainers, or at least socks. Sorry - I don’t mean to be bossy, I teach here on weekends. Judo mainly, but I used to box. Skipping’s good for cardio, but you don’t want to be doing it barefoot on a hard surface - it will bugger up your joints.”

I nodded and walked over to the mats. Dale watched me for a while and told me to keep my elbows in and my hands down. She demonstrated, making it look easy. She probably spent fifteen minutes with me, but it really helped. I managed to skip continuously for over thirty counts by the time I was exhausted.

My shins were agony by the time I got to Conley Mall. Shin splints; I remembered them from my army days.

Cathy was waiting for me at Dillon’s. We took the bus and tube to Leicester square. I told Cathy about Dale teaching me to skip and how I was now regretting overdoing it. She laughed and said she wouldn’t mind learning Judo. We watched the film we had missed, it was pretty good and the sort of film I would have to watch three or four times to understand properly. My legs were agony when I started walking again after the film and Cathy laughed and offered me a piggy back ride.

We spent over an hour deciding where we wanted to eat, and settled on an Italian place that Cathy said she had enjoyed before. I had an Italian version of Chicken Kiev with a salad and she went for a bowl of seafood and pasta that smelled and looked great.

We talked about the film mostly, then went walkabout. She told me stories from her childhood, about fighting with her sister, and taking holidays in places like Paris, Madrid and Prague with her family.

A fight broke out on the pavement, just as we approached Covent Gardens in search of a nice place to have coffee. I pulled Cathy back and behind me, and felt her hands on my back as I warned off a fellow who stumbled towards me, his face ugly with anger.

“Just back off!” I told him, “I don’t want any part of this!”

“Fuck you shithead,” the boy replied, he was probably still a teenager and had blood dripping from his nose.

“Take the fight to someone who wants it,” I said, “You have about thirty seconds before the cops arrive.”

The sound of a police siren seemed to get through to him and he turned and fled.

“Come on, we should go too,” I said to Cathy, taking her hand.

She was very quiet for a while, “I really hate violence,” she said at last, “What is it that makes some people so bloody aggressive?”

“I think it is frustration with their lives,” I said, “And alcohol just releases it.” I realised that she was really pale and frightened. “Are you OK?” I asked, putting an arm around her. She was shaking.

“Sorry, it’s...” she shook her head, “Actually I’m fine. Thank you for getting between me and that ... drunken fool.”

“Can’t you at least pretend?” I asked, “I’m enjoying holding you close.”

Cathy smiled and seconds later we were kissing. A police car passed by with its lights flashing.

We found a cafe that looked OK, but I hardly noticed the coffee. I’m not even sure that Cathy had one. I’m pretty sure she had a massive ice-cream sundae.

“Well, you are a good kisser,” she told me as we walked back towards Trafalgar Square. She was holding me close, and had her hand in the back pocket of my jeans, “So the question is... my place or yours?”

I looked at her her upturned face, “My place is closer.”

“I can feel your heart beating,” she said, “Scared or excited?”

I laughed, “A lot of both ... I feel like a teenager.”

She nodded, and slid a hand up under the front of my shirt, “No flab... nice abs,” she grinned wickedly, “I was beginning to think you were not interested.”

“I... well, I’m not very well prepared...” I managed, before she kissed me again.

Cathy used her phone to call a taxi. I gave the driver my address.

“You live in the Coulsden Centre?” Cathy looked surprised.

I grimaced, “Under it actually. In the basement - the caretaker’s flat. The Centre isn’t residential.”

Cathy asked the Uber to stop outside Boots on Clyde street, and I went in and got some condoms. I was startled at the choices so bought five different packets. Cathy grinned at me as she held open the taxi door. Five minutes later we were outside the tradesmen’s entrance of the Coulsden Centre.

“It’s very grand,” said Cathy looking up.

“Well, it will do...” I told her as I unlocked the door, “There’s no view from my room though.”

We walked across the basement car park and took the stairs down to my rooms.

Cathy looked a little nervous as I unlocked the door.

“We don’t have to do anything,” I told her, “You can have my bed and I will sleep in a chair of you prefer.”

Cathy shook her head and looked around, “You are very neat and tidy,” she said, “It’s a big space.”

“I’m told it is one of my many flaws... being tidy, I mean,” I said, “Do you want a drink... I can do coffee, milk, water or rum.”

“That’s a very fancy coffee machine,” said Cathy, “Does it work?”

I nodded, “Espresso or cappuccino?” I asked, I’m going to have a cappuccino.

“Me too please,” she said, “Do you mind if I nose around and use the bathroom?”

“Feel free,” I said, “You can’t get lost here.”

I made two cappuccino’s and filled a bowl with peanuts, then took off my boots and was searching my DVD collection when she came back into the living room.

“This is a really nice apartment,” she said, “Are you the building caretaker?”

I shrugged, “Caliper Insurance owns the building and I am on a retainer with them as their property maintenance manager for Greater London - this flat comes with the retainer.”

“Nice,” said Cathy, turning on her heel, “You don’t have a Telly?”

I shook my head, then found the DVD I was looking for, “I found the Big Lebowski! Do you want to watch it? Also... I don’t have any sugar or sweetener... sorry.” I fetched her cappuccino and held it out to her. “Peanuts?”

“Thanks, no sugar needed,” she replied taking the cappuccino and a handful of peanuts, “Is the TV in your bedroom?”

I pulled down the screen and pointed at the ceiling, "Projector. Would you like to watch?" I wagged the DVD.

We sat on the two seater sofa, sharing peanuts and sipping cappuccino while watching the Big Lebowski, when the peanuts ran out Cathy carefully placed the bowl on the table next to her, then took my coffee mug and put that on the table too, before unbuttoning my shirt, slowly and deliberately.

"Don't do anything Alex," she murmured, "Just relax, it's been a long time since I had a man to unwrap and I want to savour every minute. Let me do this?"

We walked to Dillon's for breakfast. Cathy hadn't said much. I'd woken at five and was up, showered, dressed and writing when she emerged from the bedroom at around seven, with a sheet wrapped around her. I asked if she wanted tea or coffee and she shook her head and asked if I had a towel she could use. She spent a very long time in the shower, and emerged looking freshly scrubbed and suggested we go to Dillon's for breakfast. At least she seemed comfortable holding my hand as we walked.

It wasn't till after we had ordered, that she looked me in the eye and asked, "So what comes next?"

I had been thinking about asking the same thing.

"I was hoping you would tell me," I said, "Are you having regrets?"

Cathy shrugged, "No, definitely no regrets... I just don't want to ... Well, you are obviously very independent and you might not want..." She shook her head, "I can't think straight."

"That's OK. Small steps are often more effective than large strides."

"I haven't had a relationship, a proper one, for a very long time," said Cathy, "I guess I was wondering if you had, you know, lived with someone ... a lover, I mean?"

I nodded, "Sort of, I had a girlfriend, for a couple of years, nearly three, in Germany. She had her own flat, and I had a room in the mess, but spent most nights in her apartment."

"What happened..." asked Cathy.

I shrugged, "I was sent to Bosnia, Gabby decided to find a replacement bed warmer and repair man."

"I'm sorry... that was cruel of her," said Cathy.

"Not really, Gabby wasn't in love with me, she liked me, but she told me in the beginning that she liked soldiers because they got posted away after two or three years. I felt sad when she moved on, but that didn't make the time we did spend together bad. I'd enjoyed that, and that's what I prefer to remember."

"Did you love her?" asked Cathy.

"I did," I said, "But, perhaps I loved my time with her, more than I loved her... if that makes sense? Right from the beginning I knew it would not last, because she told me so. I wanted it to last forever, and I really enjoyed being with Gabby. She was fun and great company. She was a good time girl, she said so herself. She didn't believe in for better or for worse, in sickness and in health."

"Have you ever been completely in love?" asked Cathy.

I laughed, "Of course, I'm always falling in love, I fell in love with Sandra Bullock when I saw her in *While you were Sleeping*, I fell in love with some of my teachers when I was a schoolboy, I fell in love with an instructor in the military, but she was very gay."

"So you've never had your heart broken?" asked Cathy, her face pale and serious.

"I suspect it was broken long before I took an interest in girls," I said, "I'm used to being alone... that doesn't mean I enjoy it."

"How do you cope... with loneliness?" asked Cathy.

“I keep busy, I read and I write,” I told her, “Are you worried about hurting me, or me hurting you?”

“I really don’t want to get hurt again,” said Cathy, going red.

The waitress approached with coffees and toast. She asked Cathy if she wanted jam or marmalade for her toast. Cathy said just butter was fine and the waitress said she would fetch the breakfast.

“I’m not planning on hurting you,” I said quietly as soon as the waitress was gone, “I’m not doing any planning at all. I like you... I like spending time with you... I enjoyed our night together... a lot!”

“So we are good?” asked Cathy.

“I certainly hope so,” I said, “I know I am an oddball... living in a windowless basement under a corporate banking office and...”

“You aren’t the oddball,” said Cathy, “It’s me... I was worried that you... when you weren’t there when I woke up. I thought perhaps I had been too demanding... she looked away and went red again as the waitress approached with our food.

“You looked so peaceful, I didn’t want to ... well I did want to, but thought it would be rude to shag you while you were asleep,” I said smiling and feeling myself go red remembering the trouble I’d had trying to pee with an erection.

“I wouldn’t have minded,” whispered Cathy, as the waitress approached again with the coffee I had asked for.

When the waitress had gone, I reached out and took hold of Cathy’s hand.

“I’m more than a little rusty at relationships Cathy. I’m not sure I was ever any good at it... but I really like you. I’m a nice guy, not perfect maybe, but you really don’t have to worry about me hurting you in any way.”

Cathy gave me a quick smile, then went red again, “I think most people hurt themselves. It is our insecurities and lack of self esteem that does the most damage to a relationship. Doubts. But trust is important... I find it hard to trust anybody emotionally after my last disastrous relationship.”

“I don’t know much about women,” I said, “But I know a bit about men, being one and having spent most of my life living and working closely with men. Most men find independent women attractive, but very few men are able to cope with independent wives. I noticed that a lot with military men. I don’t know if women are attracted to independent men.”

Cathy nodded and looked into my eyes, her expression serious. For a long time she didn’t speak.

“I’m not a needy person,” she said eventually, “I don’t know if that makes me independent, but I would rather be wanted than needed. When I was younger... when I left home, most boys wanted two things... sex and a substitute mummy, someone to look after them. I think that is why I was attracted to G... my ex, who turned out to be married. He seemed to want me... he didn’t need me, he just wanted me. Perhaps it was a different sort of neediness, but at the time it felt good.”

I nodded, “I can understand that, being wanted is much nicer than being needed.”

“So what about you, Alex, are you attracted to independent women?”

I nodded my head, “I do... it’s flattering to be needed, but flattery gets stale.” I was reluctant to say more.

“Are you talking from experience?” she asked with a strange smile, “I sense you are holding back on me.”

I nodded, “I’ve had a few close calls - women coming on to me because they want something fixed.”

“Does that mean I had better not ask you to fix my bicycle?” asked Cathy, “I was tempted to when I saw your wonderful workshop.”

I smiled, “I’ll gladly help you to fix your bicycle.”

“It’s not broken at the moment, I just had it fixed but I get very frustrated trying to fix it. Bicycles are much more complicated than they used to be, but I saw you have the same stand they have at the bike shop.”

“I had a contract to repair Boris Bikes for a while, but the paperwork took longer than the repairs. I fix and service bikes for Caliper Insurance cycle team and anyone who asks me nicely, but I charge like a buffalo.”

“Can I tell Gwynn ... she bikes to work every day?”

I nodded, glad to have moved onto safer topics.

“Gwynn and I have been kicking around the idea of taking a cycling holiday in Holland in the summer,” said Cathy, “Would you be interested? One of her friends does it every year and organises it for small groups. Apparently it’s great fun and very affordable.”

“I could do that,” I said, “But I don’t own a bike.”

“I think they provide the bikes,” said Cathy, “Gwynn will be able to tell you more.”

Breakfast lasted a long time, after which we walked to and around MLK Park till it looked like it was going to rain.

We spent the afternoon in bed, Cathy shed her inhibitions with her clothes, and was not shy about what she wanted. I found it incredibly erotic. By five PM we were both exhausted.

“I ought to go home now,” said Cathy, “I’m not sure I can walk.”

“Well, let’s see if you can make it to the shower for starters,” I said, “Can I make you coffee and something to eat? I can make an omelette?”

“Just coffee thanks. I have a ready meal defrosted in my fridge at home that I need to eat before it goes off.”

I walked Cathy to the bus stop and agreed to meet her at Dillon’s for breakfast at eight.

I was there early, having been to the Link Centre for a swim. They let me in but said I would have to wait a while before they could take my order.

Cathy suggested I go to Overbury with her after work.

I waited at the station for her that evening.

Her flat was on the fifth floor of an apartment block, overlooking a small park. It wasn’t what I had expected.

“I like simple,” said Cathy, “It’s the biggest difference between me and Sophie, actually it’s probably because of her. She was the untidiest, most disorganised person I knew, and she delighted in ruining anything I liked... so I didn’t collect stuff and locked what I did have out of view and her reach.”

“Your flat makes my basement look cluttered and shabby,” I told her.

“Your basement is much bigger,” said Cathy, “ And it isn’t shabby.”

“You have really nice stuff,” I said, “This kitchen looks like something from Vogue. I love your fridge.”

Cathy smiled happily, “It’s a Smeg; my Christmas present to me. I love it. Now, I have planned a meal, and I need to be left alone to get it right, so why don’t you go and have a long shower. I’ll join you in about twenty minutes?”

“You are the first man I’ve entertained in this flat,” said Cathy when she joined me in the shower, “I hope you like Sushi?”

I wasn’t sure about Sushi, having never tried it before, but I liked it. I really liked the hot green wasabi.

We were both tired and quiet when we took the early morning train and bus into London. I liked that Cathy didn’t like to chat early in the morning. At least not till her second coffee of the day at Dillon’s.

“I don’t know how you cope with that long commute every day,” I said after Cathy had thanked me for coming with her.

“I can’t afford anywhere closer,” said Cathy, “If you hear of anything under two thousand pounds a month, please let me know? Gwynn, got a stunning bedsit for just eight hundred a month last year.. it’s a twenty minute walk from here. I am so jealous.”

“Caliper has some empty flats in Hackney and Shoreditch, I have no idea how much they cost, but the commute is easy, as it is against the rush hour traffic. I can ask about prices if you like?”

“Please do. Since the train strikes, quite a lot of my colleagues are getting a bit fed up with commuting - some have talked about clubbing together to get a house, but I’m not sure about sharing. I like my privacy too much...”

“Well, you are welcome to leave a change of clothes and a toothbrush at my place,” I said. My phone buzzed and I looked at it. A service reminder.

“Thank you,” said Cathy, “But perhaps just for weekends... I... we should just take things slowly for a while, don’t you think?”

“I’m good with that,” I said, realising that I also valued my privacy quite a lot.

Gwynn came in before we had finished our breakfast, and Cathy asked her to tell me about the cycling holiday she was planning in Holland. Gwynn had some brochures in her bag and gave me one.

“This is the general idea, but Hester is still looking into it, there are nine of us interested so far, ten if we include you, Alex. Hester will send more details in the next week or two and then we need to get together, perhaps on Zoom, to make a final decision.”

“Alex repairs and services bicycles,” said Cathy, “I just thought you would like to know that.”

“I’m getting quite good at changing tyres and mending punctures,” said Gwynn with a smile, “But for anything bigger, I’ll come to you.”

I didn’t get to see much of Cathy during the week. We managed coffee together on Thursday and agreed to have lunch at Dillon’s on Saturday.

Gwynn contacted me on WhatsApp, adding me to the Cycle Utrecht group. I decided to get a bicycle and get used to cycling. Something I had not done for years.

Cathy agreed to come with me to Croydon on Saturday, to Mike’s Bikes. It was where I had bought the bike servicing frame and tools, and where most of Caliper’s Cycle team bought their bikes.

A young woman cheerfully helped me to choose a bike. It was a very different beast to the bicycles of my childhood, and an absolute pleasure to ride, though I was sure my bum would take a while to get used to the saddle. I didn’t much like the helmet, but Cathy insisted that I wear one every time I got on a bike. At her suggestion I got two pairs of cycling shorts and a reflective cycling top. The shorts had special padding to reduce saddle pain!

I drove to Overbury from Croydon, and went cycling with Cathy that evening. It was more fun than I had expected.

We were up late on Sunday, and cycled to a pub for lunch. My thighs were cramping by the time we got there, but that might have been from the night’s exertions. I didn’t want to try driving into London in the morning so Cathy came back to my basement with me that night, and brought a bag with some clothes and toiletries.

By the end of May, Cathy and I had settled into a comfortable routine. We usually spent Saturday night at her flat in Overbury, sometimes going out cycling on Saturday and almost always on Sunday - mostly visiting pubs and places of interest. We'd take the last train back to London and spend Sunday to Friday night in my basement. Cathy joined the Links Health Centre and did Judo on Tuesday and Thursday nights while I swam and skipped.

Cathy liked cooking, and gradually took over the kitchen in my basement. We seldom ate at Dillon's, but sometimes met there for coffee after work.

Gwynn invited us to attend a Book Club session in a tiny cafe near her apartment. There were fifteen people crammed in there. Gwynn introduced me as "The Fantasy author Alex Berg", and asked me to answer questions and read excerpts from my first book. Gwynn had introduced Cathy as an artist, who had done illustrations for my books. Cathy seemed to enjoy talking about her drawings and it was not as scary as I thought it would be. I gained twelve new readers. Cathy and I both liked the cafe, and we sometimes spent an hour or two there on the way back from the Link Centre.

The Cycling Holiday was eventually agreed and booked from the fourth to the fourteenth of July. A bus would collect us from Conley Mall at four AM on the fourth of July. One of the bank staff, a very studious looking young man called Jeremy, insisted on taking his own bike, a folding commuter bike with a built in electric motor. The rest of us were happy to spend seven euros a day to hire bikes.

It was fun. Jeremy's bike got stolen on the second day, but he made surprisingly little fuss about it. The organiser, Hester, was brilliant. There were only two couples, Cathy and me, and John and Carol, Carol was the senior branch manager at HSBC Conley Branch, a little deaf, but quite a character. John was a high school teacher. I was glad of all the cycling Cathy and I had done on weekends, as we managed to keep up with the others and didn't suffer like some of the youngsters, who had not thought to get in shape. They were a generally well behaved bunch, even when they had drunk too much. Cathy got quietly furious when a young Dutch woman

decided that she wanted to dance with me at one of the cheese festivals that we attended. We had cycled quite a lot that day; the cheese festival looked more like a beer festival to me, Cathy and I were stood, watching a crowd of people dancing to folksy music, while waiting for Hester and the others before finding a table. Cathy turned to look for the others when a rather attractive woman literally took hold of my wrist and pulled me onto the dance floor. She was tall and strong, and laughed at my expression, saying something in Dutch that I didn't understand.

"I like your beard," she said in English, "I think older men with beards are sexy."

"I'm with someone," I said, trying not to laugh, I think she was a little drunk.

"You look strong enough for two girls," she said, "I don't mind sharing."

Luckily the music stopped then, and I managed to extract myself, but with difficulty.

"What the bloody hell was that all about?" asked Cathy, staring at the woman, who grinned and waved.

"I think she is drunk," I said, "She wanted to dance."

"You don't have to look so pleased with yourself," muttered Cathy angrily.

"I thought it was funny - she probably mistook me for someone she knew," I said, "Thanks for coming to my rescue - not."

"You didn't look like you were resisting much," said Cathy grinning, "Perhaps it's the thing here - grab a hunk and drag him onto the dance floor."

"Ask Hester?" I suggested, pointing. She had found a table and was standing on a chair looking around for her group.

Carol had a bad dose of the squits during the night, probably from eating raw herring at the cheese festival. I gave John some charcoal tablets for her to take and by breakfast I was very definitely in Carol's good books. She and John had booked a train journey and would not be returning to London with the rest of us, but Carol insisted that Cathy and I have dinner with her and John when we were all back in London.

I did not see much of Cathy for the first week after we got back from Holland, even though she stayed in my basement. We both had a lot of work to catch up on, and she was often fast asleep by the time I got in at night. The morning sex was pretty good though.

It was Gwynn that told me it was Cathy's birthday on the 25th of July. Cathy hadn't said a word. We had been invited to John and Carol's house for dinner that evening. Gwynn assured me that Carol knew it was Cathy's birthday, and said that Cathy never made a fuss over her birthdays.

I got her a card and had made her an easel. I took the card with me when we went to John and Carol's house, which was in the grounds of a rather posh old red-brick private school, near Shoreditch. We had taken a Marks and Spencer's hamper with wine, cheese, nuts and olives. Cathy said it was important to never arrive empty handed for a dinner invite.

The dinner was very pleasant, Carol and John had a card for Cathy, and wished her Happy Birthday when we arrived, but didn't make a big thing out of it. I managed to hand over my card without any difficulty and soon we were being regaled by tales of their canal trip. We were back in my basement by eleven thirty, and Cathy got very emotional when I gave her the easel, then told me that she would be going to visit her parents for the weekend. She seemed quite unhappy about it and did not want to talk about it. She definitely did not want me to come with her. The following day was Friday. Cathy packed a bag to take to work in the morning and said she would see me again on Sunday night.

I got on with some projects I had neglected, but felt that there was something bothering Cathy. I went to what we had come to call The

Book Club Cafe - actually Shelby Street Tea Room - for breakfast on Sunday. Gwynn had suggested a breakfast gathering of her book club friends. There were only six of us there, but it was really pleasant and lasted till midday.

I walked back to my basement and did a quick cleaning session. It didn't take long - Cathy was such a pleasure to live with, she was, if anything, even more tidy than I was.

I fell asleep in the living room, and woke at a quarter past midnight. I checked my phone and there was nothing from Cathy. I sent a message asking if she was alright, and it wasn't delivered. At two I went to bed and lay awake worrying for a while. I was awake again at five, and checked my phone. Still no acknowledgement from Cathy. I called her cellphone and got the response that it was not reachable.

I was at Dillon's at eight. Cathy arrived at eight fifteen. She looked uncomfortable as she walked towards me.

"Are you alright?" I asked her.

"Yes, of course I am alright," she said, "I just want a little bit of time to myself."

I sat back down and nodded, "OK... "

"Look, I don't want to make a big thing about it, but I think we should back off a little." She reached into her bag and fetched out the keys I had given her and held them out for me, "I'll call you when I have time to collect my stuff. Do you want me to have your bicycle delivered to your building?"

I took the keys from her, feeling bewildered, but managed to answer quietly, "May I collect my bicycle on Saturday afternoon?" I said, "I could bring your stuff if you like?"

"Yes, five PM Saturday will be fine," she said, "Thank you Alex."

The week was horrible. I could not work out where things had gone wrong. I stayed away from Dillon's and Conley Mall, but went to the Link Centre every night. I didn't look for Cathy there, I was sure she would not bother with judo lessons.

I went to the Book Club Cafe most nights but didn't see anyone I knew well enough to chat with.

My bicycle was propped up against the wall outside Cathy's door, with a note on it, asking me to leave her things by the door. There was a single cross at the bottom of the note, which might have been a kiss or a kiss off.

I left the box I had brought and took my bike. I tried to get back into my routines, but kept finding myself wondering what had happened between Cathy and me. Not knowing was awful.

I spent a night writing and rewriting an email to her, eventually I just wrote:

"You do not owe me anything, but I would really like to know what caused this sudden break in our relationship. Please do tell me?"

I sent it by WhatsApp too, but saw that it was not delivered and guessed that she had blocked my number, so I hand wrote the note and put it in an envelope, which I delivered to the bank the next morning.

On the seventeenth of August, I got a call from Margaret Haddam, the Project Director of Caliper Investment, the parent body of Caliper Insurance. She asked me to come and visit her at the Tower Hotel, she was on a visit from the New York office.

I met her in the Lounge, she saw me first.

"Captain Berg!" she said, getting to her feet. I had forgotten how tall she was, "You are looking well."

“Just plain Alex Berg now, General,” I told her, “What brings you to London?”

She waved a hand, attracting a waiter’s attention.

“It’s not this awful Hotel, that’s for certain, Alex,” she said, “But I was glad of the opportunity, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about; face to face.”

She ordered a pot of coffee from the waiter and waited till he was out of earshot, “I want you to go to Ukraine.”

I didn’t answer, I just listened. Two hours later I was arranging for my tools and personal effects to be put into storage. Twenty four hours later I was on a train heading for Kyiv.

The city was nothing like I expected. People seemed determined to carry on with life as usual. There was an energy there, that was different from the war zones I had been in before, a cold, hard, burning determination.

I was there two weeks before I felt that I was making any headway. The Ukrainians were not exactly unfriendly, but they were wary. I was watched carefully, but eventually they realised that I had no hidden agenda, I was just assessing the buildings I had been asked to assess. Investment properties, I guessed; collateral being offset against the vast sums being lent to Ukraine for their war effort perhaps? It did not matter to me, it was a job, and it was a great distraction from the turmoil I had been going through in London.

It took a month before I felt confident enough to take a bit of personal time. They have great cafes in Kyiv, and excellent coffee. Once I started writing, I found it hard to stop. By the end of the second month I had completed the book. It took me two weeks to proof it all. I uploaded it to the website in the middle of a missile attack. I could hear the booms of Russian hypersonic missiles, but slept soundly after completing the upload.

Two days later I got an email from Gwynn asking what I was doing in Kyiv. Someone had figured it out from the book I had uploaded -

technical things that I didn't really understand. That person had revealed in a chat that I was in Kyiv and apparently there had been a lot of comments generated because of it.

"We have all missed you Alex. Whatever happened between you and Cathy... don't get yourself killed fighting someone else's battles. Come back to London." Gwynn had written.

I wrote back to tell her that I was not involved in any fighting, just doing a job that I was being paid a great deal of money to do, and was not taking any unnecessary risks, and that it was a welcome distraction to my utter bafflement as to what had gone wrong between me and Cathy, but had nothing to do with my relationship with Cathy.

The next day there was an email from Cathy. I was really reluctant to read it, and saved that dubious pleasure till I was back in my room in the basement of the Alexander Guest house at around ten PM that night.

"Dear Alex, Gwynn has offered to slap me if I do not clear up whatever is going on between the two of us. She says that you are in Ukraine and she believes I have driven you there.

I am sorry, if that is the case, and I am sorry that I have not been able to tell you why I have shut you out of my life.

I don't really know what I think or feel. My sister, Sophie, as always had to destroy whatever joy I had. I can't tell you how she manages to get under my skin, because I don't understand it, but a weekend with Sophie and my parents had me going insane, and I don't use the word lightly. You have done nothing wrong Alex. You are perfect and I am just not allowed perfect. As long as I am miserable ... a dull as dishwater nobody, doing a nothing job I will be ignored and allowed to exist.

Trust me when I tell you that you are better off without me.

Cathy
X"

I closed down the laptop and switched off the head torch I had been using, closed my eyes and eventually managed to fall asleep.

The next morning, after having a coffee and pastry for breakfast, I wrote to Cathy.

“Cathy, come to Kyiv. I will be here for a few more months. It is safe enough. Take some unpaid leave. Live your life.”

I didn't expect an answer, so I was surprised, two weeks later to get an email from Cathy.

“Dear Alex, I am at Kempinsky Naral Hotel in Kyiv. The phone doesn't work and my mobile phone is useless here.

Cathy
X”

It took me two hours to find the Kempinski Naral Hotel, which looked as if it had once been very grand indeed. One of the palm trees had been blown out of the ground and a section of the roof was being repaired when I got there.

Cathy looked dreadful. She had put on a lot of weight and her skin was blotchy.

She didn't say anything except, “Hello Alex,” when I found her in the guests' lounge.

I held out my hand to her and asked if she wanted something to eat.

Cathy nodded but didn't take my hand. She followed me out of the Hotel and got into the taxi when I held the door open for her. We had a meal in a weird little cafe/restaurant owned by a Ukrainian Greek couple. Vespa's was one of my favourite haunts, and a five minute walk from the Alexander Guest House.

Cathy answered my questions civilly enough, but as economically as possible. I could not gauge her emotional state.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, as I held a chair for her in the cafe.

“Numb,” said Cathy, “I can’t believe I am in a war zone, having quit my job and given up my apartment.” She turned her head and focused on me, “Now what?”

“Now we eat some food, drink some wine and talk like civilised people,” I said.

“Will you order for me please? I really am hungry.”

I ordered the house Meze - which I think means table, which was basically a lot of snacks, served on little side plates. They just keep them coming till you say “No More,” and I asked for a bottle of house red wine and some water.

Cathy relaxed a little while we ate, I could tell that she was really troubled. She wasn’t the person I knew. Her self-confidence was ruined.

We didn’t really talk about anything, mostly comments about the food and the things we could see and hear.

Cathy really liked the baklava and ate all of it, then apologised.

I laughed and told her that I wasn’t going to eat it anyway, it was far too sweet for me.

“I love the coffee,” she said, “It’s so strong but not bitter.”

“It is good,” I agreed.

“Why did you ask me to come here Alex?” Cathy asked, suddenly very serious.

“I wanted to see you and you seemed unhappy in London,” I said, “Why did you come?”

Cathy looked at me, I thought she might cry, but she didn’t. After a long wait she spoke very quietly, “I don’t really know. I know you

don't like needy people... and I don't even know what I need. I suppose I wanted to see you, even though I know you will not like the person I have become."

"You aren't a needy person," I told her, "Something has happened to you... I don't know what, but you are still the person I knew."

"Do you think I am a wounded bird that needs rescuing?" asked Cathy.

"Perhaps you are wounded," I said, "I don't know how exactly, but you are hurting... I can see that. I'd like to help... if you will let me?"

"I don't think you would understand," said Cathy, dropping her eyes and studying her fingers, "You never had a family, which is sad, but ..." she shook her head, "Sometimes family can be a curse."

I nodded, "No I don't have a family, not parents, brothers or sisters. I read somewhere that friends are the family we choose, and for a while, I had family...you."

"I'm sorry, Alex. I didn't want to hurt you," a tear ran down her face and she wiped it away.

"Talk to me, Cathy, let me try to understand why you are hurting so much. What have you got to lose?"

Cathy shook her head, "I wish I could undo it. I wish I had never gone home... fucking birthdays. I always dreaded birthdays, ever since I can remember. Sophie can always tell when I really like something, and she doesn't rest until it's destroyed. Have you any idea what it feels like to have a sister who is only really happy when she makes you cry?"

"No... it sounds horrible," I said, "I've known brothers who fought each other, it really used to upset me. It seems so wrong. What do your parents think of it?"

"Oh Sophie and I never fight, well not physically... especially not now. Sophie is sick... well she is HIV positive, and she uses it. She

has Mum and Dad around her little finger. They always take her side... especially against me.” Cathy looked up and made a face, “I’m not used to... it seems disloyal to talk like this, but...”

“We are brought up not to tell tales,” I said, “Some call it loyalty. I grew up in an orphanage, I had been there since I was a baby, so it was normal to me. We were told that it was bad to tell tales. Bad things happen everywhere, not just in orphanages. I wasn’t particularly unhappy, but bad things did happen to me as well as others. I never questioned the “No telling rule”, the worst thing you could be in the orphanage was a “tell-tale-tit.” It was the same in the army, and I am sure it is a fairly universal thing.

“When I was about nine, there were a couple of older boys in the orphanage who enjoyed hurting me... but I dared not tell anyone. Even when the priests asked me what happened, I wouldn’t say. One day I had a fight at school... I can’t remember what it was about, but I really went berserk. My anger was way out of proportion. A teacher stopped the fight... she was not from the orphanage, just one of the regular teachers at the local school. She made me stay after school and talked to me. She said that she had noticed that I had become very angry. She said she knew that boys were not supposed to talk about the things that upset them, and she knew I would not tell her if someone was bullying me. But she said that hurting other people wasn’t going to make me feel better, and that I would end up in prison if I didn’t learn a better way to deal with things that made me angry. She told me to write it down, she told me to write down anything that upset me, or made me angry, to write about it, to write about the people who made me angry, or humiliated or hurt me, to write about what I would like to do to them, to imagine my revenge and write it out, and keep writing it out, and reading it, till I could laugh at it. Then I could tear up what I had written and throw it in the latrine.

I thought she was mad, but one night, after two older boys had really hurt and humiliated me, I started writing about it. I wrote in every spare moment I had, I began to enjoy thinking of horrible things to write about those boys, I invented nick names for them, in case anyone found the exercise book I was writing in. I even started reading my revenge stories out loud to some of my friends, it made

them laugh. It worked. I never stopped writing stories... it is how I exorcise my demons.”

“What happened to the bullies?” asked Cathy.

“Oh, one ran away from the orphanage and the other one went to live with some relatives in South Africa, they stopped being a problem soon after I started writing about them. I think I stopped noticing them.”

“Did you thank the teacher who told you to write your problems away?”

“No, but I wish I had. She was killed in a bus accident about a year later.”

“That’s so sad!” said Cathy, “Do you remember her name?”

I nodded, “Constance Njovu,” I said, “She was an excellent teacher too.”

“Connie Njovu is a character in one of your stories!” said Cathy, “I drew her in the scene where she refuses to let Scorby’s pet assassin see Aspen’s child and slams a door on her neck.”

I nodded, “I love that drawing.”

“Did you ever think about starting a family...having children?” asked Cathy, going very red.

“Not really,” I said, “I wouldn’t know how to be a father... though I did think about being a foster parent for a while, providing a home for orphans, but there are strict rules for fostering. I’d have to be married for a start. That’s not likely to happen with my relationship skills.”

“I never wanted children... I hated my childhood,” said Cathy, “I went on the pill at sixteen and had an IUD fitted at eighteen and then had my tubes tied when I was twenty one. The thought of putting anyone through what I went through terrifies me.”

“I can understand that,” I said.

“Sophie says it is selfish of me... that I should have children. She says my parents deserve grand children, and that ...” she shook her head and looked away, “...the thing is, if I did have children, I know she would find a way to make them hate me.”

“It seems to me that you care far too much about what Sophie says,” I said, “Do you like poetry?”

“What?” asked Cathy, looking confused, “Well yes, some poetry, why?”

“I don’t much, well, I don’t understand much of the poetry I have heard, but some of it grabs my attention. I particularly like If, by Rudyard Kipling. Do you know it?”

Cathy shook her head, “I probably read it at school, he wrote Jungle Book didn’t he, and the Just So stories?”

“I think so,

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you;

If you can trust yourself, when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too,

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies.

Or being hated, don’t give way to hating

and yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise.

If you can dream... and not make dreams your master;

If you can think ... and not make thoughts your aim;

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

and treat those two Imposters just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools;

Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,

and stoop to build them up again with worn out tools

If you can make one heap of all your winnings,
And risk it on one turn of pitch and toss,
And lose and start again at your beginnings
and never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can Force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
except the Will, which says to them, "Hold On!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue
and walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, yet none too much

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds worth of distance run;
Yours is the Earth, and everything that's in it
and, which is more, you'll be a man, my son."

Cathy looked at me, "Impressive, I think Joni Mitchell used it in a song."

"Yes she did," I said, "That poem used to be on the wall of my dormitory in the orphanage. I had seen it every day for years and never paid any attention to it till after Mrs Njovu had got me to start writing about the things that made me angry. One day I suddenly felt the meaning of the words, especially the ones 'If you can trust yourself, when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies.
Or being hated, don't give way to hating' - they resonated so deeply with me that I learned every word of that poem."

"I like Desiderata, but don't ask me to recite it," said Cathy, "It helps me to find my sense of worth."

“We need things like that to keep ourselves going,” I said, “Life is a journey to death... it is too easy to get depressed about it, but I for one think it is better to look at Life as a gift. Something that we should make the most of, as it has an expiry date.”

“Sophie...” Cathy shook her head, “I’m sorry - she is toxic and I am going to try to get her out of my head. It’s hard.”

I insisted on paying, “I get paid an embarrassingly large amount of money being here,” I said, “You can pay your share if you get a job.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” said Cathy, “And I am not sure I want to stay here... there is a war on!”

I laughed, “So I noticed. Perhaps you could help me? I am allowed an assistant, I just haven’t got around to getting one yet. Why not try it for a few days?”

“Doing what exactly?” asked Cathy.

“Property surveys, assessing properties in Ukraine that belong to Caliper Investments or which they have an interest in. We don’t have to go anywhere near the fighting.”

Cathy nodded, “I’ve done property audits,” she said quietly, “I’m not very brave you know.”

“You came here,” I said, “That took guts, but we won’t take unnecessary risks, I really don’t have a death wish. I want to stay healthy so that I can enjoy spending all the money I am making here.”

Cathy settled in remarkably quickly. She moved to the Aleksander Guest house, her own room, also in the basement. The work went a lot faster, and Cathy was paid the same rate as I was.

It was hard work, difficult sometimes, but not overly dangerous. We had two scary nights in the basement when some of the Russian rocket attacks came close to the Alexander guest house, but most

of the danger came from damaged buildings and occasionally from unexploded munitions.

We had been working together for at least a month before Cathy kissed me. It was just a friendly kiss, on my cheek, but the feel of it and her hand lingering on my shoulder, really made me feel good.

“Good morning Alex,” she smiled, “I slept like a log last night - did anything happen?”

“Putin hasn’t surrendered yet,” I said, “I didn’t hear any sirens or explosions.” I poured coffee for her, “Did you manage to charge your laptop?”

“Not fully,” she said, “It was forty percent when I looked before coming up for breakfast. I’ll use the bike to charge it tonight.”

Power outages were a nuisance, but we were learning to make the most of what we had. There was an exercise bicycle in the basement, in what had once been the gym, that had been converted into a charging station. I managed to keep my iPad and power bank charged up on it while keeping fit.

By the time we had finished in Kyiv, Cathy was clearly beginning to enjoy life again. We had a last dinner at Vespa’s before relocating to Vinnytsia.

“I managed to speak to my mother last night,” said Cathy pouring wine for both of us, “She can’t accept that I enjoy being here.”

“I thought you had already decided to pretend that you were miserable, to keep your family happy?” I said.

Cathy laughed, “Well, it is working, I suppose. Mum didn’t exactly invite me to come and live with her and dad, but what I really wanted to tell you, is that we spent at least five minutes on the phone and she didn’t mention Sophie once!”

The work was more disjointed after we finished in Kyiv, and we spent more time traveling, which was unsettling. Cathy and I

sometimes shared a room, and once even shared a bed, but there was no intimacy.

By late October, we were finished, and it was time to head back to UK.

“I’m not sure I want to go back to UK” Cathy told me. We were back at Vespa’s again, though not staying at the Alexander Guest house; a CNN film crew had taken all the rooms and had settled in for a long stay.

“What do you want to do?” I asked, “I’m moving back to the Coulsden Centre basement - the accommodation and workshop are mine for the next five years at least, but I’m not certain when I can get my job back. Margaret is busy with something in France at the moment. Perhaps I’ll take a holiday in Capetown. I always wanted to go there.”

“Capetown sounds nice,” said Cathy, “Do you think Margaret will find you another job with Caliper?”

“I think so,” I replied, not wanting to lie, “I can survive on my army pension and savings, but I like having work to do. Not so much a job, as work. I like to be useful.”

“So you do want to be needed!” said Cathy with a grin, “Or is it that you need to be wanted?”

“Oh I still prefer to be wanted, rather than needed.”

“Well, I have tried very hard not to be needy around you, Alex Berg, and I have enjoyed your company very much these last few months. I did need you, and you helped me a great deal. Thank you.” Cathy spoke lightly, but I sensed some seriousness in her.

“You aren’t a needy person, Cathy. You needed very little help and I wanted to help you, but you did all the heavy lifting.”

“We both know that I needed a lot of help Alex, and I really don’t deserve your help... not after how I treated you.”

“Well, I disagree - You made the effort to come here. You decided to stay here. All I did was make suggestions.”

“I was selfish, and I hurt you with my selfishness.”

“You were hurting, Cathy, quite badly broken I suspect, by your sister and parents. You have fixed yourself. Cut yourself some slack,” I insisted, “A lot of people would have turned to drugs, alcohol or even suicide in your situation. Own your strength and courage.”

Cathy shook her head but said nothing. Instead she reached across the table and took hold of my left hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. We sat for a while; not speaking. When Janis came to ask if we wanted anything else I looked at Cathy and she shook her head.

“Nothing, thanks Janis,” I told him, “That was fantastic as ever. Our last meal in Kyiv, tomorrow we leave Ukraine.”

Janis nodded and said something I didn't catch, then scribbled out a bill, which Cathy insisted on splitting. We left a hefty tip. Janis and Ivanka hugged us both before we left.

Cathy took my hand as we walked to our hotel, it was cold and flurries of light snow were drifting down.

“Have you forgiven me yet?” Cathy asked quietly after a while.

It took a few seconds to sink in. I stopped walking when it did and tugged on Cathy's hand. She lifted her head to look at me.

“How can you ask that?” I asked, “You have done nothing that needs forgiving, I thought I had already explained that? I don't blame you for anything... how could I possibly?”

“But you have never... well, you don't seem to want me anymore,” said Cathy, “As a lover I mean.”

“Of course I want you!” I said, “But you... Do you still want me... as a lover, and not just a friend?”

“I came to Ukraine, didn't I?” she said with a small smile, “You have no idea how scared I was, and how much I want you... do you?”

I kissed her and she kissed me back.

“We could have saved a fortune on accommodation you know,” Cathy said when we stopped to draw breath.

We flew to Capetown from Frankfurt two days later, and spent the first two days and nights in the Portwood Hotel, leaving our room only for breakfast after the first night.

We both loved Capetown, and spent two weeks there, enjoying every day before reluctantly flying back to UK to meet Margaret Haddam.

Cathy had spoken with her on the phone, but had never met Margaret. She teased me a bit, before we left Capetown, asking me if the General was the gay woman I had fallen in love with in the army. I didn't rise to the bait, and was looking forward to seeing Cathy's reaction when she met the General.

We met at the Russell Hotel, in the guest lounge. Cathy looked up at the general's six foot five frame, and smiled nervously as she shook the her hand.

“It's nice to meet you at last Ms. Wentworth,” said the General, “We really didn't expect the work in Ukraine to be completed so soon. Thank you.”

“It's nice to meet you,” said Cathy, “I enjoyed the work, surprisingly.”

“Yes, well, it needed doing - the Ukrainians are going to be paying for this war for a very long time, in more ways than one, I am sorry to say.” The General turned to me as she continued, “I don't know how much or little Captain Berg has told you about me, so I will tell you myself, to save you having to guess. Alex saved my life in

Afghanistan. He spent nine hours fighting off militants by himself, after they disabled our armoured car. Both my arms and one leg were broken. He stopped the bleeding, set the broken bones, and took care of me till the cavalry arrived. He used up almost a thousand rounds of ammunition. ‘White British army engineer Sergeant rescues female Black American Special forces Major’ never made the Press, thank God, especially as I had objected loudly to his Rhodesian white racist ass being on an American covert reconnaissance mission.” She laughed her booming laugh, “Life’s lessons are a bitch!”

Cathy paled as she looked at me and then back at the General, “He told me he’d been in Afghanistan... He never really talks about what he did there...”

“Well now you know something you didn’t know before,” said the General, “Alex Berg saved my life, and I thanked him by finding him work in a war zone.”

“It was extremely well paid work,” I said.

“Well it’s done now. I’m sorry Alex, but Caliper Insurance outsourced their maintenance work to Dockland’s Property Maintenance till June the first to cover for your absence, but you finished up in Ukraine earlier than expected... Can you keep yourself out of trouble till the beginning of June?”

“Of course I can,” I said, “Longer if they want to stay with Docklands.”

“No, they want you back,” said the General, “And so do I. I like having you there, so that you are available for when I need someone I can trust for a tricky job. Docklands costs a lot more than you did, and are not doing a very good job. Caliper would consider scrapping the balance of their contract if you want to get back to work earlier.”

“I’ll wait till June,” I said, “I’ve plenty to catch up with.”

“You are Mags the Warlock!” said Cathy suddenly, looking at the General, who looked back at her blankly, her mouth open.

I cringed and felt my face going red.

“You know, Mags... she helped destroy the raider fleet that was threatening the islands off Mornay... she’s tall and black and fiercely loyal to her friends...” Cathy’s voice trailed off as she looked questioningly between the General and me.

“You haven’t read Alex’s stories?” asked Cathy, “He writes really good ones - The Augmentor Series, which starts with Token Resistance... he’s writing book fifteen at the moment.”

The General looked at me thoughtfully, “And I am in the stories... as Mags the Warlock?”

I nodded, “I often use the names of people I know in my stories,” I said, “Sometimes I ask them, but I didn’t imagine you would want to read science fantasy.”

“Which book am I in?” asked the General.

“Partisan,” said Cathy, “I think that is book seven, I have only just finished it. I’m doing illustrations for the books as I read them.”

The General gave me a speculative look, “So where do you sell your books, Alex?”

“I don’t sell them,” I said, “They are free - on my webpage, Ajbergbooks.com, - all one word.”

“They could sell,” said Cathy, “They really are good.”

“Well your secret most definitely is not safe with me, Alex,” said the General with a grin, “You better have written me up good!”

“Its not a secret,” I said, “I’ve been writing for years... since my teens. I’ve got almost two hundred readers now.”

The General's phone buzzed. She frowned as she got to her feet, "I had better go now. I'm in London till tomorrow... call me if there is anything I have forgotten to deal with?"

"I'm so sorry," said Cathy, as soon as the General had left, "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

I shrugged, "Well, I suppose I embarrassed myself there, but there's no taking it back now, is there?" I poured myself more coffee and took another sandwich, "This is a nice hotel. Better than the last one I met her in."

"So what are you going to do until June?" asked Cathy, reaching for a sandwich.

"Well, I've got a lot of writing to proof," I said, "And some tools I want to buy - I have some ideas for improving my workshop. What about you... what do you want to do?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something, and now seems like a good time," said Cathy, "I want to be your agent... to get your books published properly. I've been doing some research..."

"I'm listening," I said, "Tell me more?"

"Well, it was not just my idea...I've been discussing this with Gwynn and a couple of others, I think you met Kevin and Stacey at the book club cafe once. Anyway, we asked around and we sent Token Resistance to several publishing houses... Corner Stone and Red Door Books are interested and want to meet you... and... well, I have been sent two open return Tickets to Osaka, Japan. Simon Ko, the Chairman of Ko Publishing wants to meet you. He wants to make Augmentor Graphic Novels and an Augmentor Virtual Reality Game. Kevin and Stacey suggested them."

My mouth had gone very dry, I reached for my coffee and swirled some around my mouth.

"Osaka?" I said, "Graphic Novels?"

“They are basically comics,” said Cathy, “ But apparently a lot of grown ups read them in Japan and Korea. Kevin says they are quite popular in the UK.”

I laughed, “I don’t believe this, it’s too good to be true,” I said, “Well, as my agent, what do you suggest I do next?”

“Well, perhaps you could book us a room for the night, in this lovely Hotel, while I make some phone calls? I think we should go to Japan first.”

We had two weeks in Osaka, and it was wonderful. Simon Ko was direct and very persuasive. Cathy had asked me not to make any decisions, till I had discussed them with her and she spent a lot of time on the phone talking to people back in UK. Part of me, the cynic, I suppose, thought that it was all too good to be true and that we would end up spending a lot of money on lawyers and getting burned, but we flew back to London exhausted and three million pounds richer.

The meetings with Corner Stone and Red Door Books were a lot less exciting. Corner Stone offered an eight thousand pound advance on Token Resistance with some conditions, mainly that they have some editorial control. Red Door Books politely told me that they were not looking for new science fantasy authors but wished me luck in my endeavours.

Cathy and I met up with Gwynn, Kevin and Stacey at the Book Club Cafe. We spent a lot of time talking about the Corner Stone offer and I agreed to let Cathy deal directly with them. I did not want to rewrite the books, but agreed to look at any editorial suggestions by Corner Stone. Cathy and Gwynn said they were happy to help with reviewing any changes made by Corner Stone. Kevin and Stacey said they would help with proofing any Graphic novel versions, but for a fee.

The first print run of Token Resistance, the novel, came out in mid May, and sold four thousand copies in a week. The first Token Resistance graphic novel came out in Japanese at the end of May and sold eight hundred thousand copies. I spent four days in Japan

posing for selfies and autographing books, before flying back to UK to start “work” on the first of June.

At Cathy’s suggestion, I took on Dale as an assistant. Cathy said I needed someone who could stand in for me while I was doing book signings and interviews.

Kevin and Stacey fell out with each other before the first English language Graphic Novels were released in USA and Canada. Cathy and I travelled to Vancouver for the launch and then San Diego for Comicon.

I got Shingles shortly after Comicon, and spent three weeks feeling sorry for myself in a health resort in Monterey Bay. Cathy had a wonderful time.

The General visited me two days before I was declared fit to travel back to UK.

“So, your books do sell well,” she said, smiling her big smile when I got up to greet her, “You don’t look sick, what are you doing here?”

“Hiding,” I said, “How did you know I was here?”

“My son loves your books, especially now that the graphic novels are out,” she said, “He told me you had gotten sick. Finding you wasn’t difficult.”

“I’m glad he likes them,” I said, “What brings you here?”

“I heard you were sick, and came to see if you needed help,” she said simply, “I do care, you know.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I think the worst is over, the itching is insane, but it is far better than the pain I had to start with.”

“I got shingles when I was trying to get into the Navy Seals,” said the General, “Felt like fire inside my body,” she shook her head, “One of the instructors told me to use hot chilli on the rash - stopped the itch like magic, you should try it.” She held out a paper bag,

“Powdered hot chilli and some coconut oil. Make a paste and spread it on.”

I took the bag, “This isn’t pay back for using you in my books is it?” I asked.

She laughed out loud, her booming laugh seeming to make the windows rattle, “I love being in your book,” she says, “And my son can’t stop telling his pals about it.”

“What’s his name?” I asked, “I’ll send him signed copies. Do you think he would like figurines of the characters? I have a whole box of them I can send him.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked, “He’d love them!” Her face changed, “His name is Berg... and yes, he is named after you, and just so you know, it was Jake’s idea. Maybe you could send him some books too?”

“I’m honoured,” I said, “Thank you.”

We talked for a while, she said she was trying to spend less time away from home now; she resented being away from Jake and Berg. Jake was still at the Pentagon.

I mixed up a spoonful of chilli powder with coconut oil and applied it to the areas of rash on my ribs that I could reach as soon as she left. The relief was instant. It took me a while to persuade Consuella to apply more to the rash on my back. A little went a long way.

Dale was doing well in my stead, and I suspect that she preferred me being away. I still got tired very quickly, and was glad to leave things to Dale.

Cathy arranged a book signing tour of UK, starting three weeks after we returned from USA and Canada. I had caught up on proofing all the stories, and now spent about three hours a day reviewing the changes made by Corner Stone’s editor and reading the English language graphic novels. I was also trying to write... I had not really intended to end the stories, having written them

originally, for my own entertainment, but Corner Stone had convinced me to have an 'ending' every five books. I understood why at the time, but now felt I had somehow been mobbed and overwhelmed into agreeing. It had been relatively easy to choose a suitable 'ending' for the books I had written already, moving some of the plots around, but now I had to think of a suitable way to end book fifteen and it was eluding me.

Gwynn had been incredibly helpful. She had suggested I get someone to make maps, and had found a Romanian in Bath of all places, who drew the most incredible maps. Apparently he/she - I could not tell from the name, Codrin Chernol, persuaded Gwynn to draw up a timeline for the books and index all the characters and places.

Cathy took her role as my agent very seriously, and had taken the train to Bath to meet Codrin the Romanian map maker. She had lost most of the weight she had put on before meeting me in Kyiv, and was doing Judo three times a week at the Link Centre. We had talked about getting back to cycling again, but had not yet done so. Cathy had sold or given away almost everything she had owned, and had admitted to me that she was on the verge of suicide when she got my email suggesting that she come to Ukraine.

I went to the book club cafe after seeing Cathy off at Paddington. I was comfortable there. The owner/manager was a quiet, personable older woman, the girls that worked there were pleasant, I always had the special of the day with a house salad, and was never disappointed with the food, and the coffee was excellent.

Gwynn came in while I was reading through what I had written earlier in the day. I didn't notice her till she sat quietly at the table next to mine.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," she said, when I noticed her.

"I need to be disturbed," I said, "I'm not feeling very inspired at the moment, and would much rather chat with you. I haven't thanked you properly for the time line and index that you did. It's fantastic!"

“Oh I really enjoyed doing it,” she said, “I’m so glad you like it.”

“I love it,” I said, “It really helps a lot. How is life at the bank?”

“Its alright,” said Gwynn, though I do miss Cathy. They’ve laid off three more staff, so it’s a bit like a graveyard in there.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, “Are you worried about your job?”

“No, no, nothing like that... In fact I’ve been rather hoping they would offer me early retirement, but no luck so far. It’s counter staff they are getting rid of... I am busier than ever with the increase in online transactions.”

We talked a while about Corner Stone and the changes they wanted. Generally they made sense, the editor doing my books was a stern seeming young woman, Monica Derby. Cathy and Gwynn both thought that she was a bit rude, but I suspected that she was just not used to dealing with people. She certainly worked hard and kept me busy.

I persuaded Gwynn to stay and have supper in the cafe, I wasn’t really hungry, but had the fish pie and really enjoyed it.

I insisted on paying the bill, and went to the counter to do so, when the girls started cleaning up. Gwynn came with me and chatted with the owner/manager, who she seemed to know quite well. That’s when I learned that the cafe was about to be put up for sale. The owner/manager was moving back to Hounslow to take care of her mother, who was showing signs of dementia.

“It will be such a loss,” said Gwynn, while I walked her the short distance to her flat, “It will probably become another bookmakers.”

I was still mulling over buying the cafe when Cathy called from Bath. She thought it was a wonderful idea and told me that Codrin, was probably a girl, though it was hard to tell. Codrin was on the autistic spectrum and had no apparent interest in working for Corner Stone Publications, but was happy to get paid to make maps for my books as long as she was still enjoying them. She said

it would take a couple of days, at least to work out a contract with Codrin.

The next morning I went straight to the Book Club Cafe when I finished at the Link Centre. They weren't open, but the owner was inside. She let me in when I knocked.

Grace Harrison did not waste time, she listened quietly when I said I was interested in buying the cafe, but did not have a clue how to run it. I told her that I didn't want to change anything but the name - she already knew that we called it the book club cafe.

"Well, I can show you the ropes easy enough," she said, "I just take the money, pay the bills and do the ordering. Hen and Mary run the kitchen and tell me what to get. The girls come and go... I don't pay much but there's never a shortage as long as you treat 'em right."

She introduced me to Henrietta and Mary, the sisters who ran the kitchen. They seemed relieved when Grace told them I wanted to buy and keep the cafe running the way it had been.

"You'll need someone to manage it," said Grace when we were in her tiny office, "It's not hard work, but it's long hours and only one day off a week, so you need someone who lives nearby or who'll live in. A woman, I'd say. D'you want me to find someone? Gwynn might do it."

I sent a message to Gwynn's phone, asking her to meet me at the Book Club Cafe that evening, then went for a very long walk.

I was back at the Book Club Cafe for a late lunch, and told Grace that I had asked Gwynn to meet me there after she finished work. Gwynn arrived at a quarter to five. I left her talking with Grace when the cafe closed at eight PM. She seemed keen on the idea and had agreed in principle, pending talks with Cathy and the HR people at HSBC.

After that, it was taken out of my hands. I did, at least, manage to have some say in the new sign, which Cathy designed. It was strange, suddenly becoming the owner of a cafe with so little effort. I

missed the actual opening party, as I was in Manchester for a book signing event with Cathy.

By the time we reached Edinburgh, I was feeling wrong, “I can’t do much more of this,” I told Cathy over breakfast, “I was signing books and posing for selfies in my sleep last night. My face aches from smiling and I feel like a total fraud.”

Cathy looked alarmed, “I’m sorry... I didn’t realise... I’m not sure... perhaps we can cancel.”

“Relax,” I said, “I’m not circling the abyss or anything like that... not yet, but it dawned on me that I am not enjoying this, or the writing anymore... Writing is becoming a chore... it was always a welcome escape from loneliness and the chore of having to earn a living, but now...”

“It’s OK, I understand Alex... you’ve always been active and, well, I should have seen this coming. I’ll cancel Aberdeen.”

“Don’t cancel anything,” I said, “But no more for a while, OK?”

“OK,” she said, “What about the festival at Haye... do you still want to go there?”

I shook my head, “I don’t even want to think about it at the moment. Sorry... If you have made bookings, don’t cancel them, but I don’t want to be doing any talks or signings after Aberdeen. Please?”

“Simon Ko is going to be at Haye,” said Cathy, “He’ll probably want to meet you, but I can tell him you aren’t up to it, if you like? He’ll understand... especially after you got Shingles. I’m so sorry Alex, I should have taken better care of you. Paid more attention to you and not the bloody publicity.” I could see that she was on the verge of tears.

“Hey!” I said, “Don’t feel bad... that’s my job. I just need to step back a bit. Figure out how I am going to do this. It’s just a readjustment issue, I think.”

“No Alex, it is not. I took you for granted, I forgot that you are a person, not a book writing machine... it was wrong of me.”

“I thought I was your love machine, not a book writing machine,” I said quietly, with a smile on my face, hoping to cheer her up.

“Stop it Alex,” she said, “You are doing it again, putting my feelings first... it just makes me feel more ashamed.”

“Look Cathy, I just wanted to tell you... and now I have, it’s no big deal. Really. Relax. Please?”

I got through the signing and talking at Aberdeen without much trouble, but I felt a sort of detachment. I felt myself withdrawing somehow, it was a mental and emotional thing. At a certain level, I realised I was doing it but it was really much less active than that. I wasn’t “doing” it, I was just not participating in what was happening around me. I even learned to tune out when anyone, usually Cathy, asked me if I was alright. I would smile and nod, but seldom replied.

It was hardest on Cathy, I think. I had two weeks back in London, and Gwynn was up to her eyeballs getting used to running the Book Club Cafe, so she was probably grateful of my lack of active interest in the cafe. Dale had cleverly arranged some certification courses that kept her busy when she wasn’t occupied with Caliper maintenance work or teaching judo.

Cathy arranged for a driver to take us to Haye. She had been up late for most of the week preceding the Festival, and slept most of the way there.

Things got off to a bad start when the Hotel we had booked told us that they had given our room to someone else. I just stood there like an idiot.

Cathy was aghast, “How could you do that? I booked and paid in full three months ago!” she said.

The receptionist struggled to stay calm, "I'm really sorry," she said, clearly unable or unwilling to explain any further, "We will refund you in full, but ..."

"You will have to do better than that," said Cathy, "We are here, bloody tired and the taxi has already left. We have engagements here at the festival, and we have booked and paid for five nights in your luxury suite. I even spoke to somebody here yesterday to confirm..." she waved a copy of the letter in the receptionist's face.

The receptionist looked at me and back at Cathy, before stammering that she would call the manager to sort it out.

I took Cathy's arm as she was about to respond and drew her away from the desk.

"We are going to get a decent cup of coffee," I said to the Concierge, "Please take care of our luggage and call when you have sorted this mess out?"

I asked Cathy to give him a card with her phone number.

"We can bring you a coffee in the lounge?" offered the Concierge.

I shook my head, "No thank you... I need to get away before I do or say something unpleasant."

Cathy looked upset, "Alex, I'm so sorry..."

"It's not your fault," I said, "Best not to stress over it. Come on, let's explore a bit. That was a long trip and my bum has gone numb."

In the end we had coffee, lunch and then afternoon tea before a taxi was sent to collect us, and take us to a guest house twenty minutes drive from Hays. Cathy was furious. I didn't really care.

The guest house was dismal. Cathy burst into tears when we were shown to our rooms - two tiny single rooms. The owner was mortified when Cathy told her that she refused to stay there. The taxi returned while Cathy tried and failed to get hold of the Hotel.

The taxi driver was happy enough, and drove us to Crickhowel, to a Hotel that was actually rather nice.

Cathy went into the bathroom as soon as we had been shown to the room and didn't emerge for half an hour. When she finally came out, dry eyed and drained, she apologised to me.

"You have nothing to apologise for," I told her, "Don't stress out about it."

"It's just that I don't want anything to upset you... especially not at the moment."

"I'm not fragile Cathy. I'm depressed - it is very different. I'm not upset about the mess up with the Hotel. I don't care about it. Really."

"Depressed?" said Cathy, "I don't understand?"

"It took me a while to figure it out... but I think that is what is wrong with me. It happens. I don't know why exactly, it probably accumulates and ... Well, I guess I just have to ride it out. It will not last forever. Sorry."

"Why are you apologising now?" asked Cathy, "I mean, I know all about depression Alex. I spent most of my life being depressed and ... You helped me out of it."

"Helping people helps," I said, "I know that. Look, I'm not a dangerous depressive. I don't get violent or suicidal or anything like that. I just lose interest in life for a while."

"What can I do to help?" asked Cathy.

I shrugged, "I don't think there is anything you can do other than just be yourself. I'm not used to... I've never told anyone before, I mean, there was never anyone to tell really. I don't want to depress you too, I just wanted to explain to you how I feel."

Cathy gave me a hug, "It's OK Alex. Thank you for telling me... I need to get some fresh air... Do you want to come for a walk?"

We walked for a while, then went into a pub. It was quiet and comfortable. We played darts and had a few drinks... neither of us are good drinkers.

"When I'm depressed I find myself obsessing about horrible things, like having cancer or a car accident," said Cathy, as we walked back to the Hotel.

"I just feel that everything is hopeless," I said, "That we start dying from the moment we are born... Life is a steady march towards death, and there is no point getting excited about anything, as all roads lead to the final oblivion of death."

"You don't believe in the afterlife?" asked Cathy, "Heaven and Hell and all that?"

"Heaven and Hell are in here," I said, tapping my chest, "It's how we feel about Life. Depression is a Hell mode... I guess there are several degrees of Hell."

"Have you ever tried taking antidepressants?" asked Cathy, "I was prescribed antidepressants in high school, I pretended to take them and put them in Sophie's food whenever I could. Mum and Dad were furious when they found out. Sophie takes all sorts of tablets now."

"You are quite a rebel, Cathy," I said, "They used to make us take tablets after supper every night at the Orphanage. I stopped taking them when I was around eight, after I overheard one of the priests saying he thought it was wicked to drug us. I used to spit them down the toilet."

"It's not all pointless you know?"

"What?" I asked.

“Life... The steady march towards death. It’s not all pointless. There are moments, bright, cheerful bright moments along the way.”

“I know that,” I said, “But I don’t feel it at the moment... that’s all.”

Cathy pulled me closer as we walked, holding my hand as well as my arm. It felt good.

By morning I felt a lot better. I woke at four and managed to slip out without waking Cathy. She was awake and on the phone when I got back. She looked relieved when she saw me.

“He’s back...” she said into the phone, “I’ll call you back when I’ve discussed it with him...fifteen minutes max. OK.” She ended the call and looked at me, “That was Monica. She booked into the same Hotel as us... would you believe that our room was taken by a woman called Alicia Berg? Monica says she is vile and probably tricked the receptionist into giving her our room.”

“You said you were going to discuss something with me and get back to Monica...?” I prompted.

“Oh yes, she wanted to know if you will be attending the Corner Stone dinner tomorrow night, and if you have any special dietary requirements. I told her that you weren’t feeling great...”

“It should be fun,” I said, “I’m not fussed about the food; if it’s nice, I’ll eat it.”

“It’s a bit formal, I think, there’ll be speeches.”

“I’m up to it, if you are,” I told her, “I’m out of the abyss, I think. Talking to you helped a lot. Thank you.”

“Breakfast?” she asked, picking up her phone and tapping out a message.

“Lead on MacDuff!”

The hotel arranged a taxi to take us to Hays. We spent the morning walking the lines, and went to the Corner Stone tent around midday, where I happily mingled. Monica introduced me to several people and ensured that I was well supplied with coffee as I signed books, posed for selfies and answered questions. By nine PM my feet and lower back had had enough. It was a relief to sit on the covered straw bales and chat with the Corner Stone staff and other authors and agents who had been helping out. I enjoyed meeting other authors and finding that they were just normal people too.

The next day was more of the same, but ended at four PM to give us time to get ready for the Corner Stone dinner.

I felt a bit self-conscious dressed up for the dinner in my Regimental Mess Dress. Cathy was breathtakingly beautiful. The dinner itself was quite relaxed compared to the formal dinners I had attended in the Military. There were speeches, but they were mercifully short. The food was excellent and the wine was pretty good too. Lots of men wanted to dance with Cathy, which pleased her and irked me. I did dance with Monica, who looked great and danced well. She told me that Alicia Berg had tried to get into the Corner Stone dinner as A. Berg, but had been ejected.

Simon Ko had been delayed, having contracted Covid, but he arrived in time for the last day of the festival and looked happy but said he tired easily. We had a quiet dinner with him and two of his associates. The Augmentor VR Game was getting very popular, and he was now publishing the Augmentor graphic Novels in Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese. He wanted me to accompany him to New Delhi, where he was hoping to clinch a deal with Sundip Dave, to print Graphic Novels in Hindi, and Urdu.

I knew that Cathy had wanted to visit India, and interrupted her when she started to explain that I needed to take things easy after getting Shingles.

“Really Cathy, I’m fine. I think a trip to India would be great, perhaps we could take a holiday there afterwards?”

Cathy looked uncertain, but agreed, Simon told her he would make all the travel arrangements and asked when we would be ready to leave. Cathy looked questioningly at me.

“I’m free as a bird, Simon. You guys decide when you want to go and I will be ready.”

“We were thinking of heading back to London tomorrow morning,” said Cathy, “But we have our passports and Covid certificates and all the clothes we need at the Hotel.”

“Excellent!” said Simon, “The Templar Hotel in Crickhowel? We can pick you up there at say... nine thirty tomorrow?”

We flew from Cardiff in Simon’s private jet. Simon had a pilot’s licence, but said he was not feeling up to flying since his recent bout of Covid. It was a long flight to New Delhi, but I had never travelled so comfortably. Simon was excellent company too, an interesting man, who had built up his business from scratch. He was a fantastic artist, and delighted in teaching Cathy some of the techniques he had developed as a comic book illustrator. I think she enjoyed it too.

New Delhi was quite an experience. Sundip Dave was young and super confident. I quickly decided to let Simon do all the talking. We were wined and dined lavishly and spent four days in Sundip’s luxury estate before the deal was signed and sealed. Simon was pleased, and Cathy was still in shock after he left.

“I can’t really think in such huge numbers,” she told me that night, “You are disgustingly rich Alex.”

We spent two weeks on a luxury train, a trip that Sundip recommended, and then another week in Mumbai, doing the Shantaram trail. I didn’t particularly enjoy it but Cathy loved it.

Cathy’s mother had a stroke about two weeks after we returned to London. Cathy had not visited her parents or spoken to her sister since she had visited me in Ukraine, and had limited her contact with her parents to emails and very brief WhatsApp video calls.

“They are my parents,” she had told me once, after what sounded like an unhappy video call, “I know now that they are toxic, but I still care about them... and Sophie. I can’t help it.”

“Will you come with me Alex?” she asked, “I have to go and see her, and I know you don’t like needy, but I’d rather have you with me. Please?”

“Of course I’ll go with you,” I said, “And I’ll even try to be nice.”

“You really don’t have to be nice to them, and if Sophie is there, don’t you dare be nice to her,” said Cathy, adding, with a cheeky grin, “Just be yourself.”

We took the train to Chichester, and I decided I would not be returning by train. Cathy found us a lovely AirBNB apartment close to the hospital.

Her Mum, Alice, was a plump woman. She wasn’t able to talk; the left side of her face had collapsed, as sometimes happens with strokes, apparently. Most of her left side was paralysed, but the Sister told Cathy that it was possible that her mother would learn to use her left arm and leg and even talk properly. She was going to need a lot of help.

I didn’t say much, and allowed Cathy to hang on to me, as she clearly needed to.

Her dad, Mark, turned up about twenty minutes after we had arrived at the hospital. He was clearly put out to see me there with Cathy, but he was polite enough. He was a quietly spoken man, and obviously tired and distressed.

When he asked how long Cathy was staying for, she told him probably a week, perhaps more. He was clearly uncomfortable talking to her in my presence, but Cathy kept a firm hold of my hand the whole time, letting go only briefly when she hugged her mum and then later her dad.

“We need to talk, Cathy,” said her dad when the Sister said we should go as visiting hours were over.

“Of course we do,” said Cathy, “We can talk over coffee at the Bishop’s tea rooms if you like. Shall we walk there?”

Cathy went to use the loo after a waitress had taken our orders, leaving me with her dad. He didn’t waste any time getting to the point.

“I’d rather talk privately with Cathy when she returns,” he said, “This is family business.”

“I understand that Mark,” I told him, “Cathy is my family, and I’ll let her decide if she wants to include me or not.”

He went very red, but didn’t say anything. The waitress was delivering the coffee and tea and scones we had ordered when Cathy returned.

“I’d prefer not to discuss what to do about your mother in front of your boyfriend Cathy. Family business should be private,” He said as soon as she appeared.

Cathy looked surprised and apologised to the waitress, then waited for her to leave before answering her father, “Alex is my family Dad, he picked me up, when you, mum and Sophie had driven me into the deepest gutter of despair. If you don’t want to discuss mum in front of him, then don’t.”

“Mind your manners Catherine...”

“Manners?” asked Cathy, “I was ready to slit my wrists after my last visit home... You destroyed every ounce of self respect I had. I should have disowned you, but I didn’t. And the only reason I am here is because Alex helped me to get back on my feet, he helped me to see my own worth. You don’t have to like me or even love me dad, but if you want my help, you had better respect me and Alex. Is that clear?”

“Your sister would never...” he started, then closed his mouth abruptly.

“No, I am sure Sophie would not... Where is she by the way? When is she gracing us with her presence?”

“I’m sure she will come as soon as she can arrange things,” said her father defensively, “Sophie is a good girl, and she’ll do her duty.”

“I’m sure she will,” said Cathy, “Now... what are you going to do about caring for mum? Have you spoken to anyone from Social Services? They will probably need to visit the house to do an assessment.”

“We... Well, I thought you would come home and take care of her... You gave up your job at the bank, and Sophie says you can get a caregiver’s allowance...”

“I’m not moving back Dad, and I’m not going to be mum’s caregiver. You can do that, you don’t have to work, your and Mum’s pensions are pretty good and you’ve got no debts... have you?”

Her father went very red.

“Dad? What have you done?” demanded Cathy.

“Sophie needed to borrow some money to pay a deposit on a ... I can manage, but not if I give up my job.”

“Bloody Hell Dad! What were you thinking? Sophie earns twice as much as you do...she shouldn’t need... Hang on a minute. What was the money for?”

“A yacht...” Her dad spoke so quietly that Cathy didn’t hear and he had to repeat it, “She was going to buy a yacht.”

“Sophie bought a yacht?” Cathy looked surprised.

“She was going to, but the deal fell through... she could have made a lot of money...it was one of those rich Russian’s yacht, he had to sell it quick before it was impounded.”

“So if she didn’t buy it, you can have the money back? Right?”
Cathy was sounding angry.

Her father shook his head, “Sophie can explain it better,” he said quietly.

Cathy glared at him, but he avoided looking at her.

“Well that will be interesting,” Cathy said finally, “I think I need to take a walk now. Bye dad, don’t get up, I’ll settle the bill.”

“Sorry about all that,” said Cathy, when we had left the tea rooms, “Thank you for being there.”

“I’m proud of you,” I said, “Well done.”

“I’m shaking like a leaf inside,” she said, “But I refuse to let him make me feel guilty again.”

We spent two weeks in Chichester. Alice was not able to talk, but she could write. Cathy was worried that she had brain damage, but the doctor told her that it was more likely that she was in shock and struggling to get used to the partial paralyses. She never acknowledged me, which I thought showed that there was nothing wrong with her brain. Cathy said that mostly, she wrote to to ask when Sophie would come.

Cathy insisted that Mark speak with social services, and arranged for an inspection of their home, then arranged for her mother to be moved to a care home near their home in Nutbourne while the modifications were done to prepare the house for Cathy to live there again. She also helped Mark to apply for a bridging loan using his and Alice’s pensions as collateral. She learned that Sophie had borrowed fifty thousand pounds, to pay a deposit on an oligarch’s yacht that had been impounded by the Bermudan Authorities. Sophie was not responding to emails, or answering her phone.

“I can help,” I told Cathy one night, “I’ve got more money than I ever imagined, and am not really sure what to do with it.”

“Thank you Alex, but no. Mum and Dad both have good pensions and some investments. They told me never to borrow or lend money, and have never lent or given me a penny, but they lent Sophie an obscene amount of money to buy a gangster’s luxury yacht? Sophie, the jet-setting, well-paid, luxury cruise line Chief Purser. If dad wants to keep working, he is going to have to pay someone to care for mum.”

“The offer stands,” I said, “In case anything goes wrong.”

Cathy nodded and kissed my cheek, “If this had happened before I met you, I would have probably resigned from my job, and moved in with Mum and Dad. I would have done all the drudge work, and felt guilty about being resentful.” She shook her head and sat up in the bed, “Now it is different. I don’t feel any guilt, I don’t even feel any sympathy for Mum or Dad. When I worked at HSBC I helped customers in similar situations, total strangers whose finances buckled under the strain of an illness, and I felt more sympathy for some of them than I do for my own mother or father. I keep telling myself that I am just helping them, until Sophie arrives...but what if she never turns up?”

“We could go and look for her?” I suggested, “Can you find out where her ship is headed to?”

“Cuba, according to their web page,” said Cathy, “They have a five day stopover in Havana, they should arrive there on Tuesday morning. I don’t know what the time difference is.”

I looked it up on Google, “About five hours behind us, it is almost six PM there now.”

“So Sophie’s ship should arrive there thirty-six hours from now,” she said, “Perhaps she will fly here from Cuba?”

“Perhaps, but we are done here, and we have never been to Cuba... If Sophie does fly here, that would be a good thing and we could enjoy being in Cuba without her. If she remains in Cuba, you can tell her to take the next flight to UK, and then we can enjoy Cuba.”

Cathy laughed, “I take it that you want to travel to Cuba, should I book the flights now or...”

Cathy booked flights on line, and arranged a taxi to collect us after breakfast and drive us to Gatwick.

Havana was worth the very long flight. We arrived early in the morning, and by ten AM on Wednesday morning we were boarding the SS Pride of Antigua. It wasn't quite as luxurious as I had imagined, and Cathy looked a bit apprehensive as we were welcomed aboard by a very friendly steward.

“Oh yes, I can see the resemblance, madam. Miss Wentworth is probably still in her cabin, I am sure she will be delighted to see you.

We followed him down narrow metal stairs and along a dimly lit passageway. He gave us a reassuring smile before knocking cautiously on a cabin door.

“There are some visitors here for you Miss Wentworth,” he called out in response to what sounded very much like, “Go away!”

He seemed in a hurry to leave, and was gone before the door opened.

Sophie didn't look very much like Cathy to me. She looked ten years older, and positively hung over.

It seemed to take a while for her to realise that it was Cathy. Her face hardened.

“Cathy? What are you doing here... is mum... has she passed?”

“No, mum is alive and asking for you,” said Cathy, “Dad too... they really need you Sophie.”

Sophie looked me up and down, frowning, “And who are you?” She asked.

“This is Alex, Sophie. Are you going to invite us in?”

There was a flash of panic on Sophie’s face before she shook her head vigorously, “No... it’s a mess, a really bad mess. Just give me a second will you?” She closed the door.

Cathy and I looked at each other.

“I think she has company...” whispered Cathy, with a smile.

A few minutes later Sophie came out. She had dressed hurriedly and was clearly out of sorts as she pulled a brush through her hair.

“We can get a coffee in the crew lounge,” she said.

She clearly didn’t want to talk, and led us at a fast pace along a maze of passages. The crew lounge was a lot smaller than I expected.

“You don’t have many crew I take it?” I said. There were less than a dozen grubby arm chairs scattered in a small light green windowless metal box. The barista looked good though, I offered to make coffee and Sophie waved a hand dismissively.

“Knock yourself out,” she said, then turned to Cathy, “So why are you here?”

“We’re on holiday, and I thought I would check on you and ask why you aren’t responding to dad’s emails, texts and calls,” replied Cathy, “You owe him a lot of money, which he really needs now that mum needs caring for.”

“I’m not discussing our family affairs in front of...” Sophie turned her back on me, “What do you mean you are on holiday? Why can’t you help dad with mum... if you can afford a bloody holiday in Cuba.”

“I’m paying for the holiday,” I said, “Do you want a double espresso? Sugar?”

“I was not talking to you,” snapped Sophie, spinning on her heel, “And no, I don’t want a bloody coffee, alright?”

“There’s no need to be rude!” said Cathy, “Yes please Alex, no sugar for me though.” She put a hand on Sophie’s arm, “Now sit down and tell me what went wrong?”

I didn’t want to listen, but it wasn’t a big space. By the time I had finished making two double espressos, Sophie had broken down and sobbed out a story that seemed more self-pity than believable fact to me. Cathy prompted her occasionally, but once Sophie got into her stride there was no stopping her.

I had finished my espresso and was contemplating making more when Cathy stood up.

“Well, we had better go now,” she said calmly, “I’ll call dad and tell him you are too busy screwing and drinking to reply to his messages. I think it’s better to let him know that he is on his own now, don’t you?”

Sophie was on her feet an instant later, her face red and angry and her hands balled into fists, “Don’t you speak to me like that!” She hissed, “You always were an ungrateful, spiteful brat!”

“You don’t scare me anymore Sophie,” said Cathy calmly, “I didn’t realise it till it was almost too late, but you have always hated me. I don’t know or care why, but you hated me, and you set mum and dad against me, you made my life miserable. You stole, spoiled or broke everything of mine that gave me pleasure, and you were happiest when you made me cry. That’s not how family are supposed to treat each other.” She held up a hand when Sophie opened her mouth to speak, “No, let me finish. I won’t be long; I’m

done with it. I don't want to hear from you or see you again. I've done as much as I can for mum and dad. Goodbye Sophie."

She held the door open for me, and closed it softly behind herself.

"I hope you know the way out?" she whispered to me in the passageway.

It took a while to find a crew member, who cheerfully led us to the gangway. We got an outrageously remodelled old Chevrolet taxi back to our hotel. The vehicle looked a lot better than it sounded.

"Are you OK?" I asked Cathy. She nodded but didn't say anything till we reached the hotel.

"I feel bad; I thought I would feel better for telling Sophie how I feel about her, but I just feel guilty," she said quietly, "But it is done now... I can't take it back."

"You probably feel bad and guilty because you don't like being hurtful," I said, "I think you were very careful not to be nasty, and I am sorry you feel bad about it."

Cathy shook her head and arms as if shedding water, "We are on holiday," she said, "Can we try the scuba diving?"

Three weeks later we were back in London, Cathy had really enjoyed the holiday, and learned to scuba dive, para sail and beat me at clay pigeon shooting, despite her never having touched a gun before in her life. She also thrashed me at tennis and mini golf.

A day after we got back, Cathy told me that we had been invited to dinner with Vanessa Steward, a director at HBO, who wanted to discuss movie rights to the Augmentor Series.

The dinner was at a swanky restaurant I had never heard of, in Earls Court. It had all of six tables. I was all set to hate the place, but the staff were so nice and the food so good that I quickly changed my mind.

Vanessa was very personable, and pleasant. She was also quite frank, and told me that she had been asked to speak to us, while visiting a relative in London, as the person who was supposed to do so had been involved in an “incident” and was not able to meet me. She was not familiar with my writing.

“I’m the finance person,” she said, “I don’t usually get involved in the creative side... so please be gentle with me? This is very last minute.”

She had a ream of paperwork that she had printed out and apologised for having to go through it to find relevant information.

Cathy looked a little uncomfortable, “I hope this isn’t interfering with your personal time?” she said, “You did say you were in a London on personal business?”

“That’s OK,” replied Vanessa, “My brother has been admitted to hospital here. I came to check on him - he is out of danger now and should be fine, but I was worried for a while.” She smiled, “Worrying about my brother has become a habit, he was knocked off his bicycle, broken bones and concussion... this is the second time in four years.” She shook her head, then smiled as she found what she was looking for. “Here it is!”

A few minutes later she was talking business, her demeanor completely different. I tuned her and Cathy out, having already agreed to let Cathy do the talking.

I was dragged back into the conversation by the tone of Cathy’s voice.

“... is not likely. I think Alex would prefer to have final say over any script changes.”

“I don’t think HBO would agree to that, not if we have paid for the film rights. We need to have editorial control.”

“What sort of changes are we talking about?” I asked.

Vanessa looked at me blankly. After a while Cathy spoke, “HBO would like to make any changes to the story that they want, it’s one of their conditions apparently.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, it’s fairly standard practice,” said Vanessa, “Films made from books are seldom exactly the same as the books, the story has to be scripted to film format, which in and of itself changes things.”

“I can understand that,” I said, “But you can’t change the story line.”

“Once you have sold the rights, Alex, it is no longer your story,” said Vanessa, “I’m sorry but that is just the way that it is.”

I looked at Cathy, “So, do we need to sell the rights?” I asked.

“What do you mean,” asked Cathy.

“Well, just that... is it something that we need to do?”

“HBO made an offer to purchase them...” said Vanessa, “We are interested in turning your books into a TV series.”

“I understand that,” I said, “But I don’t remember trying to sell the film rights... I have no objection to the books been made into films, but not if it means somebody else can change the plots and characters. Perhaps if I was struggling to feed or house myself or in need of emergency surgery that I just couldn’t afford I might agree to sell my stories without another thought about what is done with them, but at this moment, I have no need to do that. The income from the books and VR Game is OK.”

“We wouldn’t change the characters or plots,” said Vanessa, “We want to make films of your books because the books are popular, we are well aware of how fans can react if the films depart from the books story line.”

“So why would you want me to agree to allow you to make those changes, if you don’t intend to?” I asked.

“Perhaps I can jump in here,” said Cathy, “It’s part of the negotiation Alex. The price goes down the more we say no to, and up the more we say yes to.”

“That makes sense,” I said, “And I will shut up if you can just tell me this... Did we; you or anyone on my behalf, approach HBO and ask them to buy the film rights?”

Cathy shook her head, “Not as far as I know.” she looked at Vanessa, “Were you approached or did you just decide to make an offer?”

“It was suggested that we approach you,” said Vanessa, “HBO is always looking for opportunities.”

“Well, in that case; thank you so much for considering The Augmentor as a suitable investment. It is flattering, and I would like to say, on Alex’s behalf...” she gave me a look, “... as he has agreed to stop talking; that he is interested, and would appreciate your written proposal so that he can get advice as how best to respond.” She smiled, “I hope that is agreeable to you?”

Vanessa laughed, “Perfect. I will get someone to do that.”

“I think it would save time, which I am sure you would much rather spend with your brother?”

“Actually, I enjoyed meeting you,” said Vanessa, “And this restaurant is a lovely surprise too. Baldwin - my brother - can be quite tiresome, so a little break from him was nice, but I guess I should get back to him. Thank you for seeing me.”

We waited with her till her taxi arrived to take her to St Thomas Hospital, then walked a bit before calling an Uber to take us back to the Basement.

“I’m sorry,” I said, as soon as Cathy had put her phone away, “I didn’t mean to undermine you?”

“No, I wanted you to say something,” said Cathy, “I was out of my depth. Sorry Alex, but that felt like an ambush to me... Vanessa seemed nice enough, but I wasn’t prepared for all that detail at such short notice... I think we need to find someone with more experience to be your agent.”

“I don’t think I need another agent,” I said, “Perhaps some legal advice, but there is nobody I trust more than you.”

“OK, I’ll ask around,” said Cathy, “Perhaps Monica can help? Cornerstone must have had other books that became films.”

“If not, we can always ask Simon Yo for advice.” I said, “But seriously - do we need more money? Seems to me I’ve already got more than I can spend in the years left to me.”

Cathy laughed, “There is never enough money - your spending will go up in proportion to your earnings.”

I sincerely hoped not, though I did like the idea of being able to afford a new workshop.

Cathy must have suspected what I was thinking, “I saw it many times when I was in the bank,” she said, “Time and time again, people who come into money, one way or another... mostly they end up spending the bulk of it in record time; the banks have specialists that try and help them to invest the money and limit the damage, but... quite often it’s a waste of time.” Her face changed suddenly, as she realised what she was saying. “I’m not trying to say that you will blow it all... I was just saying... well, make as much as you can while you can. That sort of thing.”

I laughed, “I get it Cathy, it is tempting to spend, spend and spend, but hopefully you will keep me in check. I never expected to be rich, but I managed well enough before my books earned all this money. I sort of feel I will continue to manage.”

“Of course you will, Alex, but while I earn twenty five percent of your book derived income, I want you to make loads more money so that

I can get rich too!” She smiled, “No pressure, but I expect a chapter a week buster!”

Three weeks later we were on a plane to Los Angeles, flying first class much to Cathy’s disgust. We had two days in the city, which I didn’t like much, before being flown to Los Gatos for a meeting with Netflix. Cathy had gone off HBO when she learned that Vanessa was in fact a talent scout/agent, and had used the “brother in hospital” to get our sympathy. Cathy had also approached Amazon, but had finally decided that Netflix was making a better offer. I had not been involved in the discussions having had a sudden spurt of inspiration, which kept me writing furiously in the Book Club cafe most days for eight or nine hours at a time.

During the flight Cathy told me that Netflix had agreed that I would be able to veto any plot or character deviations from the script that I had objections to, but that it had to be done at an early stage to reduce cost runs. We would be discussing the procedures for dealing with that during my visit. Cathy said the deal was worth about five million dollars for the first five books. She said that Simon Ko and Monica had both agreed that it was a good deal.

The production team at Netflix was young, smart and friendly. They had all read the books and talked me through the process. Apparently my style of writing made for easy script writing - something Simon Ko had also said. They said that they would be influenced by Simon’s graphic novels, which also made things easier and faster for them, and the only changes they were likely to make were in what was included or not included from the books. We spent two days going through the first book, *Token Resistance*, setting up the story board which would be the basis for the film production. I enjoyed it but found it exhausting. They really made every minute count.

Cathy had already told them that I did not want to get involved with the casting process, but they still assured us that they would respect our opinions if we had any strong objections to the actors they chose for the characters. I didn’t recognise any of the names they mentioned, but Cathy seemed to and was quite pleased with them.

I was happy with their approach and signed anything and everything that Cathy asked me to sign. Five days after arriving at Los Gatos, Cathy and I were doing the tourist Pacific route. Cathy refused to drive, and it took me a week to get used to driving on the wrong side of the huge roads.

We had flown to Seattle, on the advice of one of the production team, a New Zealander whose father had been born in Zimbabwe. Jessica insisted that it was best to start in the North and drive down the coast. She had done it both ways and was going to do it again on her next vacation. Cathy had loaded up with tourist brochures and books.

Once I got used to the roads, I loved it. Americans do things well. We took our time. I think I enjoyed the Northern half of the trip more than the Southern half, but Cathy and I both agreed that we would like to do it again.

San Francisco was great too. I returned to Los Gatos six weeks after leaving it. Cathy had eaten something that disagreed with her in Los Angeles, and decided to remain in the Hotel. I spent another three days going through the story board for the second book, by which time Cathy had joined me. We then spent a week in Monterey and decided that we could happily live there. We were still deciding where to go next when Cathy's dad emailed to say that Alice was back in hospital, so we flew back to Gatwick and hired a car.

Alice had suffered another stroke, and was on life support when we arrived at the hospital. Mark had put on weight but looked somehow reduced. He was polite to me, and thanked us both for coming. He didn't mention Sophie.

We spent six days in Chichester. Alice never regained consciousness and died the night after we arrived. Cathy sorted out the funeral arrangements, and sent Sophie an air ticket and five hundred pounds travel money. They didn't look like twins at the funeral. There was a decent turnout at the funeral, and mostly the people that spoke to me said nice things about Cathy. Sophie

ignored me and Mark avoided me, but did hug and thank Cathy for everything when we left. I drove us back to London after the funeral.

“It hasn’t hit me yet,” said Cathy, about half an hour into the drive, “I loved Mum, but always felt that she was disappointed with me.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I said, “She was human, and however awful it was for you, life with your mother, father and sister brought you here, to this point in time. I’m glad you are who you are.”

I felt Cathy looking at me, but concentrated on the road, I felt her hand on my thigh, “I like you Alex Berg. I don’t always understand you, but I like you.”

“I like you too Cathy Wentworth, I understand you not one jot, and probably never will. Please never leave me?”

“Not likely!” she said laughing, digging her fingers into the muscles just above my knee and making my leg twitch, “At least not while you are making me so much money!”

After a week in London, I wanted to leave again. Cathy found an apartment in Monterey and we flew business class. It wasn’t as good as first class but was much better than cattle class. One of the stewards asked for my autograph and said he had bought all the graphic novels. He was delighted when Cathy offered to photograph him with me. I insisted that Cathy be in the picture, as the original artist, and another steward took the photo.

Cathy and I loved Monterey. Cathy got involved in an outrigger canoe club, which looked pretty exhausting but she loved it. I never got tired of wandering around the aquarium and lost count of the wonderful cafes and bars where I could sit for hours, writing and enjoying the scenery.

I spent another two days at Los Gatos on the third book and got to meet some of the film cast. They were mostly really nice people and not as up themselves as I expected film actors to be. One of the sword fighting instructors lived in Monterey and offered to teach me

Kumdo, the Korean martial art of sword fighting, which was the style that the central character of the Augmentor “developed”.

Ken was very methodical and patient. Cathy also wanted to learn and got good really quickly. Ken soon became a friend, he was a quiet, but very intense man. His partner, Bill, was a professional dancer and very good fun.

In early December Cathy and I were awarded Brown belts in Kumdo. With all her rowing and sword training, Cathy was finely muscled, fit and tanned. Ken persuaded us to act in the fight scene early in the third book, “Beyond Exile” where the Marshland Scouts are betrayed by Foreddal and overrun by the Skreelings. Ken and eight of the other students in his dojo were also involved. It was hard work but fun to be part of. Cathy and I were delighted not to have made fools of ourselves. I tried really hard not to show how eager I was to see how it looked. We’d have to wait nine months to see it.

Christmas and New Year in Monterey was different. We went to a New Year’s Eve Ball with Ken and Bill, and Cathy’s team came second in a canoe race on New Year’s day.

By April I had written and submitted the twentieth book, and Netflix had finished production on the first series, which covered books one to five. Cathy was certain that they would go for a second series, as ratings on The Augmentor were high and rising. It was popular in America, Canada, UK, Korea and Australia.

We flew to Germany and did book signings in Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf and Hannover. I rented a car and spent three weeks looking up places I remembered and had enjoyed around Hannover during my Army days. Minden had changed a great deal, but the AltStad was still much the same. My German was pretty rusty but I enjoyed trying it out. We drove to Brugges, and I proposed to Cathy in the square.

Cathy wanted to get married straight away, but it took a week to get the permissions needed. Margaret, Gwynn, Dale, Monica, Ken and Bill came to Brugges for the wedding. It was a simple ceremony,

followed by a meal in a swanky restaurant with a dance floor. We finally got to bed at nine the following morning and told everybody that we had already had the honeymoon.

“This can’t be right,” said Cathy when we were on the ferry to Sheerness, “Happiness like this can’t last.”

I shook my head, “I don’t expect it to,” I said, “I just want to enjoy it while I can.”

“I’d like to visit my Dad,” she said, “Will you come with me?”

“Of course, just don’t expect me to call him Dad now,” I said, “Do you think Sophie will be with him?”

“I doubt it,” said Cathy, “But I don’t mind seeing her as well.”

Sophie was living with her dad, she was in a bad way. Mark seemed genuinely pleased to see Cathy. Sophie was quiet and bitter, she barely acknowledged my existence, and excused herself from the living room a few minutes after we arrived. Cathy had called ahead while I was driving there, to warn her dad and invite him out for lunch. Sophie did not want to come with us.

We went to the Anchor at Dell Quay, and ate outside. The food was really good.

Mark explained that Sophie had an opioid and alcohol addiction, on top of being HIV positive. He seemed resigned to having to look after her, saying it gave him something to do.

Cathy gave him a frame of wedding photos, he got quite emotional when he looked at it, and told her he was proud of her and ashamed of himself. They both had a cry.

We spent two weeks driving down the coast to Lands End. I didn’t think much of Lands End but enjoyed the trip and especially enjoyed seeing Tintagel.

The drive back to London was dreary, it rained solidly almost all the way back, and our hire car got side swiped by a van on the M4 near Swindon. The van driver had been drinking from a mug when he lost control. He flipped the van on the hard shoulder, but was not seriously injured. We spent the night in a dismal hotel in Swindon, before taking the train to Paddington.

The basement smelled mouldy. We checked into an Air BNB instead. I spent the week cleaning out the basement and getting rid of things. I really did not want to give up the basement, but reluctantly offered it to Dale, who actually hugged and kissed me.

The Book Club Cafe was doing very well, and Gwynn was shocked when I offered her my share of it. I told her that working out what tax to pay in UK as well as America was doing my head in, and that I wanted to simplify things, which was partly true. She arranged a party, which I spent mostly signing books and posing for selfies. Cathy was very much in demand for selfies too.

Cathy and I went for a meal at Dillons, and were surprised at how many of the staff recognised us. We weren't allowed to pay.

That night Cathy asked me if I regretted not being able to have children with her.

"Not at all," I said laughing, "The only regret I have is that it took so long for us to find each other."

"You don't want children?" she asked, "Suddenly it seems so very important to me. I want to have your children, but I can't."

"I think I am too selfish," I said, "I don't want to share you with anyone."

By the time we were back in Monterey ten days later, Cathy was fixated on having a child. The last time I tried to reassure her that it wasn't important, she snapped at me, telling me that it was important to her.

I suppose I kept my distance for a while, it was easy enough to keep busy. I went straight to Los Gatos for a two day review, which ended up being four days because they wanted to have an overview of the next five books. When I got back to Monterey, Cathy had been for surgery.

“We can’t have sex for a couple of weeks,” Cathy told me, “And it might take a while before I get pregnant, but the surgeon was optimistic.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so didn’t say anything.

“I really want to do this,” said Cathy, “I know that it is a big change, and I have really tried to think it all through... but the wanting is more emotional than logical, I want your baby.”

“That’s OK by me,” I said, “I’m scared witless at the idea, but I get it. Just don’t freak out on me if it doesn’t happen OK?”

“I’ll try not to... but I don’t want to think about failing. I’m too busy making myself believe that it is going to happen.”

We got back into our Monterey routines, Bill introduced Cathy to a dance colleague of his who was some sort of fertility practitioner, who introduced Cathy to several women who had managed to have children after reversing tube tying surgery. One of them had managed to have triplets using IVF. Our circle of friends expanded to include two of the expectant mothers and their partners.

I got my black belt in Kumdo. Cathy pretended to be jealous, but we both knew that she was better than me.

Cathy told me that she was pregnant during the Netflix Fourth of July party at Los Gatos. She didn’t want me to tell anyone, saying that it was early days, but she was really pleased and very nervous.

In September Cathy suggested we find a bigger home, and within a few days it was done, thanks to Ken.

Our new home became a gathering place for our friends. Trish brought her baby around the day after it was born and a week later Patty arrived with her newborn baby. Seeing Cathy and their parents interacting with the babies made me feel very inadequate. I avoided contact with the babies, and had no desire to hold, and interact with them in any way. I began to worry about what sort of father I was going to be. I had nightmares about it.

Mark, Cathy's father, contacted me on my author email. It took me a while to register who it was. Sophie was in hospital. He needed help and didn't want to ask Cathy.

I called him and asked him what the problem was.

"She's very sick... HIV and drugs and... I don't really know what," said Mark, "But the doctors says she needs specialist help that they can't provide in Chichester, and I can't afford it. I will pay you back Alex, but please help me?"

"I'll send you my personal email address," I told him, "Get the doctors to write to me, tell me what Sophie needs and where it can be done, and I will see what I can do."

"Please don't tell Cathy... she'll be angry with me."

"I'm not going to keep things from Cathy, please do not ask me to."

"I just meant that it would upset her... Sophie was never kind to Cathy."

"Well lying to her and keeping things from her wouldn't be kind either. Cathy will understand. Just get that stuff to me as soon as possible, OK?"

The medical stuff didn't make much sense to me. Bill introduced me to a health professional who read the notes and recommended that I contact a doctor in India, who specialised in finding Indian experts for medical procedures. I sent the documents to Dr Desai in New Delhi and got an immediate response, asking me to give her forty eight hours.

She called me almost exactly forty eight hours later, “This lady needs a lot of supervised care, the medical issues are fairly straight-forward, but her addiction needs to be managed properly, which will take a lot of time.”

“I understand that,” I said, “Are you able to arrange it, and if so, what do I need to do?”

“Yes, this can definitely be done right here in Delhi, and I can arrange everything, including the visa. You will need to get her to the airport and pay, I will arrange the rest.”

It only took three days; Mark flew to New Delhi with Sophie and stayed with her for two weeks, before returning to UK. Sophie stayed in the addiction facility for three months. Dr Desai sent updates and photos twice a week. Mark flew out to Delhi at the end of January and back to UK with Sophie in February.

It cost me thirty five thousand pounds altogether, which I thought pretty acceptable, but Cathy was furious.

“I’m not cross with you,” she told me, “I’m just angry. Sophie lied and stole my parents blind while convincing them how wonderful she was. She convinced them... and me... that I was a failure, and even convinced me that I would be bad for you and that the best thing I could do was end it before I ruined your life... and here you are paying to keep her alive.”

I wanted to ask her if she would prefer her sister to die, but decided that was totally unfair of me. I had known people who had really hated a parent or a sibling, and quite a few people who really hated ex-lovers/partners.

I could not imagine hating someone I had loved, or someone I was related to, but thought that was perhaps because I had spent my life longing to be loved and be part of a family. I did understand, on a certain level, how trust could lead to betrayal and descend into a spiral of recrimination and hate, but it was much harder to

understand it of someone like Cathy, or her twin, who both seemed well mannered, well educated and articulate.

“You might never get your money back,” said Cathy, almost as an afterthought, “I wonder if Sophie will have the decency to thank you?”

“I suspect that Sophie isn’t feeling grateful, and probably will not be for a long time,” I said, “I read the reports your father sent ... Sophie is not in a good place mentally, according to the psychological evaluation. She has been self-harming for years. For all I know, Sophie is going to hate me for this. I suppose I did it for your father... I can not imagine how he must feel about being unable to afford the treatment his child needs to get better.”

Cathy stared at me for a long time before asking if she could see the reports.

I was surprised to get a notification that three hundred pounds had been paid into my account by Mark at the end of February. I composed an email to him to say that he did not need to repay the money, but deleted it after thinking about it for a while. I sent an acknowledgement thanking him for the money instead.

The last four weeks before the birth was pretty awful, Cathy suffered all sorts of indignities and I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Her belly was huge and Cathy looked far too small to have a baby. My routines fell apart, I stopped writing and could not think straight. Ken and Bill were amazing.

Despite being determined to have a “normal” birth, Cathy had a C-section when the specialist warned her that her birthing canal was just too narrow and that she risked losing the baby and her own life. It was the worst forty five minutes of my life. Cathy was busy reassuring me while they operated on her. I passed out when it was done, and ended up in a hospital bed with stitches in my scalp and concussion. Cathy and the baby were fine.

Nancy was named after my mother, and was a plump and cheerful child. Our life was turned upside down, and our home became a visiting centre.

We asked Ken and Bill to be Nancy's god parents, and we had to make special arrangements for all the post we received, which included gifts and even money from fans of the Augmentor films, books and Game. We were invited to a local TV station where we were treated like celebrities by the interviewer. Nancy behaved well, thankfully.

I didn't get to write much for three months, but something about the total disruption and chaos that Nancy brought into our life helped to inspire me. When I did write it was with an intensity I had never felt before.

Cathy and I were having a relatively quiet afternoon at home, having decided at the last minute not to attend the Fourth of July celebrations at Los Gatos, because Nancy had been feverish. As often happens, she was perfectly fine two hours later and gurgling happily in her crib when the doorbell rang.

I went to answer it and didn't recognise the old man and younger woman who were both carrying flowers and large cuddly toys; a tiger and a kangaroo.

"Well, it looks as if we managed to surprise you!" said the old man, I recognised Mark's voice and then realised the woman was Sophie.

"You have indeed!" I said, "Well, do come in."

Cathy must have recognised her father's voice too. She appeared looking a little pale.

"Dad? Sophie? This is unexpected," she said, "How did you find us?"

"Google," said Sophie, "And the Uber driver knew where you lived."

They stood there staring at each other.

“Are you going to be nice to each other?” I asked, “Is it safe for me to go and make a pot of coffee for us all?”

“Yes please Alex,” said Cathy, “We’ll be fine.”

They were all in the living room, kneeling around Nancy’s crib when I carried the tray in.

Sophie got up and faced me.

“I never thanked you for getting me to India,” she said, “I’m sorry I was such a bitch. Thank you for helping me.”

I didn’t know what to say, other than ask if she wanted sugar and milk. She looked a lot healthier than she had in Cuba, and was recognisably related to Cathy though she looked thinner and older.

Mark was absorbed with Nancy.

“So how are you feeling?” Cathy asked Sophie.

“At the moment, quite relieved that you didn’t tell me to bugger off,” said Sophie, “Which you have every right to do.” She smiled nervously, “But other than that, I’m okay. Things are getting easier... less bleak. Dad has been great.”

They had checked into a motel, but gratefully accepted an offer to use our guest room. I drove Mark to the motel to collect their luggage and check out, while Sophie helped Cathy to make up the twin beds in the guest room.

“I’ve sent the balance that I owe you,” said Mark in the car, “It should be in your account in the next day or two. Sophie finally got back the deposit she paid on the Russian yacht.”

“Thank you,” I said, “Sophie seems to be doing well. Has it been difficult?”

“I think it was difficult for her,” said Mark, “But things have not been difficult for me since she went to India. I worry of course... and still feel so wretched about ... but Cathy has done well despite us. No Sophie hasn’t been any trouble. You don’t have to hide the alcohol or anything like that.”

Cathy seemed okay when we got back. Sophie offered to help me with supper and made a salad. She wasn’t chatty, but she was pleasant enough.

I wasn’t sure if I should put wine on the table, but Cathy fetched a bottle each of red and white and asked Sophie what she wanted to drink, so I made cappuccino for her.

“So, I thought I should explain why we came,” said Mark, looking quite anxious, and glancing frequently at Sophie, “Obviously, it was a bit of a surprise to you both... I mean.”

“One of my former colleagues sent me a clip of you being interviewed by a local TV channel, he thought you looked like me... like I used to look anyway,” said Sophie looking at Cathy, “He lives here in Monterey.”

“I knew you were in America,” said Mark, “But didn’t know that you’d had a baby, but then Sophie looked up the Augmentor Fan Club and... I just wanted to see my grand daughter.” He choked up a bit and looked as if he was going to cry.

“Dad and I... we both wanted to come and see you, and Nancy. It was my fault that we didn’t warn you,” said Sophie, “I was worried you would tell us that you didn’t want to see us...” she sounded defiant, but looked nervous.

Cathy went red and was about to speak, but Mark cut in, “I wouldn’t blame you, Cath. I know I let you down, I wasn’t the father I should have been.”

“I can’t take it back, Cath,” said Sophie, “I wish I could but... I’m sorry; really, really sorry for being such a cow all my life. We could have been really good friends. We should have been best friends.”

Cathy nodded. She had tears running down her face, but she didn't make a sound. Mark handed her a paper napkin and she wiped her face.

"It's OK, sweetheart, we didn't come here expecting to be forgiven. We just wanted to see you and Nancy and tell you that we are sorry. We fly back the day after tomorrow."

"And to thank Alex, for taking care of you when we failed you," said Sophie, "And for helping me to get treatment." She looked at me and smiled, "I hated you at first Alex. My therapist said that was okay, as long as I hated you more than I hated myself, but I didn't." She laughed bitterly, "I don't hate you now, and I am still working on not hating me."

"I've got some books you can have, and a poem by Rudyard Kipling," said Cathy, "They helped me a great deal."