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I sat in the Fox and Hounds, as I did most Friday nights, stretching out a cider after having the chef's special, and wondered what had gone wrong. Twenty years of working hard, saving every penny. I wondered if it had been worth it. It was a habit now. Sometimes I imagined selling everything and just taking off, hiking through Europe, making up for all that lost time, doing what my school mates had done. Most of them had given up on me. It was years since anyone had called to suggest that we meet for a drink. All work and no play... that's me. I shook my head and finished my cider, thanked Charles and headed for the door.

It was raining hard outside. I fumbled with the collar of my waterproof coat, releasing the hood and fastening the cuffs, zippers and poppers.

"I can give you a lift on my bike, you'll still get wet but you'll be home sooner," said a familiar voice. I turned to see Denise smiling up at me as she buttoned up a red and white biker's jacket. She looked like a butch little tomboy.

I was surprised, "Hi Denise, I didn't know you were here," I said, "Which way are you going?"

"Chichester," she said, "Where do you live?"

"Strawberry close, West Ashling," I said, "You would have to go out of your way. It's OK, thanks, I can walk."

"I don't mind, I've nothing else to do, I came hoping for a game of darts but...", she shrugged, "Looks like a quiet night tonight."

"Do you come here often?" I asked

"Most Fridays," she said, "I often see you sitting there at the end of the bar by yourself, looking like you want to be left alone, so I don't bother you."

“I’ll play darts with you, if you like? I used to be good at darts.”

I had to use the pub’s plastic darts, they were pretty crap, but I managed to win one game. We played three-o-one, best of three. I handed Denise a fiver, she didn’t want a drink.

“Thanks Denise, I enjoyed that,” I told her.

“You’re welcome Boss,” she said smiling and taking the money. “It’s still raining and I’m still happy to give you a ride home.”

“Not tonight thanks Denise, I don’t mind walking in the rain. It clears my mind. Have a nice weekend, see you Monday.”

She shook her head, “I’m doing Sunday, so I won’t be in on Monday. See you Tuesday Boss.”

I walked back wondering how up myself I must be not to notice that Denise was a regular at my local.

Denise had been working for me for about a year. She was smart, pretty, small, athletic and very Scottish. I loved her accent and quick humour. I had five employees at that time, three young men, and two young women. I liked them all, but being almost twice the age of the youngest one, and five years older than the oldest, I wasn’t part of their social scene, and apart from brief chats when I ‘walked the rounds’ to give myself a break from computer screens, four or five times a day, we didn’t talk much. I actually worked on something completely different, editing user manuals for a printing company, drawing project plans and doing three dimensional drawings for two local architects and several model makers. The rescue centre was run by the staff. They were all volunteers though they all got paid. I kept an eye on the accounts and helped when necessary. I was the go to person when there were problems, but generally they handled the centre with very little input from me.

As far as my staff were concerned, I was married. Maggie, my ex-wife, was the vet who had started the rescue centre, though she seldom came to the Centre, most of the veterinary staff that did,

came from Maggie's Nutbourne Veterinary Practice, a fifteen minute drive away. Maggie was much in demand by the horse racing and breeding community, and we seldom had horses at the Centre.

Maggie and I had been separated for two years now, and I had signed and returned the divorce papers that Maggie's lawyer had sent me eight months earlier. Maggie and I were civil enough when we did meet on the few occasions when she did come to deal with a sick animal.

Yes, I was lonely. I hadn't understood when Maggie had suggested the separation. We'd agreed, before we married, not to have kids until we had made enough money to retire - Maggie's idea and not mine, I did not really want children, but Maggie decided that we should concentrate on making enough money for her to retire by forty, so that she could concentrate on being a mother.

We had the money, the Downs Animal Rescue Centre had been her idea for a retirement cash flow hobby, the properties, our house, her practice and the centre were all paid for. Our savings and investments were healthy enough. I had even managed to pay outright for the flat I had moved into when we separated.

Maggie said she needed distance, to reassess and decide how she wanted to spend the rest of her life. I was shocked when she asked for a divorce. I didn't know what to say, so said nothing. Perhaps that was a mistake. When I did ask her why, two weeks later during an awful dinner at the Mowbray Rooms, she looked me in the eye and said, "It's over Joe... it has been over for more than a year... we have managed well enough without each other and now it is time to make it permanent. Please don't make a scene?"

Maggie never did like a scene. She told me often enough that what she liked most about me was that I didn't make a fuss, I accepted the status quo and dealt with it. So I accepted. I accepted that she keep the house and everything in it, and the practice. I got the rescue centre... at least it pays for itself without any real input from me.

I actually saw Maggie the day after playing darts with Denise. I bumped into her, almost literally, at Marks and Spencer's. She was on her phone and flashed me a smile and waved a hand, but we didn't talk.

It was a busy week for me, nothing out of the ordinary, just lots of work. I greeted Denise when I saw her on Tuesday, struggling with four dogs tangling their leashes around her legs when she was getting ready to exercise them. I got the same friendly smile and a return of my greeting. There was a padded envelope in my mail slot when I collected my coat, prior to locking up on Friday night. There was a set of darts inside with a note. "In case you want to play again.XXX"

The three kisses disturbed me. I drove home wondering if I should go to the Horse and Groom instead. It was closer and served good food. I hadn't liked it very much, mainly because of the karaoke and loud music. In the end I walked to the Fox and Hounds. I had enjoyed playing darts with Denise; there was no harm in enjoying life.

Denise was there, playing darts with a group of people closer to her age. I had seen a motorbike in the car park, a big red beast of a machine. I returned her smile and wave and made my way to the bar and my usual spot.

Charles told me that the special was battered hake and chips as he slid the cider towards me. I nodded acceptance and thanked him.

I saw the reflection of someone approaching me and turned my head, it was Denise, looking a little unsure of herself.

I smiled, "Hello Denise, thanks for the darts," I said patting my shirt pocket.

"You are most welcome Boss," she said, smiling, "I could do with a partner if you have time for a game of five-o-one."

"I've just ordered some food," I said, "Perhaps after I've eaten?"

“Perfect, just come over whenever you are ready. Do you mind if I call you Joe in front of the others?”

“Please do, I prefer it to Boss.”

“Right o Joe!” She flashed me a smile, spun on her heel and returned to the darts.

Denise intruded me to the others, three young men and a young woman. I forgot their names immediately. They had also ordered food and were just finishing up.

Denise and I played two of the men. I was surprised when we beat them. I didn't want another cider, but accepted a coffee, Denise was drinking water and asked for the price of a Guinness.

We then played the other couple, the young woman was really good, and took the game very seriously. I thought they were going to win but Denise got the double finish and seemed as surprised as I was. The young woman was furious and stormed off to the toilet. I declined another coffee. The young woman's partner gave Denise a tenner, telling her to split it with me, and apologised for his girlfriend's temper, saying she didn't like to lose.

Denise and I played a game of three-o-one and she beat me.

We sat and watched the other couples play five-o-one, and the young woman crowed ecstatically when she and her partner won.

I got up and said my farewells, thanking the youngsters for the games and headed home.

I had walked along the main road, and was just about to cross the road to take the bridleway to West Ashling when Denise's motorbike growled to a stop next to me, she lifted the visor, “Want a lift Joe?” she asked, reaching behind to unclip a helmet and hold it out to me. I hesitated, but then accepted and fumbled with the straps.

“Have you been on a bike before?” Denise’s voice startled me, there were speakers in my helmet.

“Twenty years ago I rode a bike. Nothing like this though, this is a monster compared to my old two-fifty.”

“Well, climb on and hold onto me, I won’t break.”

Even with her leathers she felt small, but strong. It was over too soon, she handled the motorbike with a calm assurance.

“Nice house!” she said as she stopped at the gate of Mill Pond House

“I live at the back, in a flat,” I said, “Would you like to come in?”

“Maggie won’t mind?” asked Denise.

“No, she really won’t mind,” I said.

I opened the gate and told her to go straight on and park next to my Land Rover. I would close the gate and walk.

Denise was still on her bike, with her helmet on, looking at the flat when I got there. I heard her voice in the helmet, which I had taken off.

“Sorry,” I said, putting the helmet back on, “I took the helmet off and didn’t catch what you said.”

“There’s nobody home - where’s Maggie?”

“We separated two years ago, she lives in Nutbourne, near the Practice,” I said, “It’s OK really, I promise to behave.”

There was a long silence. I took the helmet off again and tried to figure out how to secure it on the bike. Denise got off and took it from me, quickly securing it on the seat I had been on. She took off her helmet and turned back to face me.

“You and Maggie really aren’t together?” she asked.

I shook my head, “Really really.”

She muttered something I didn’t catch, then shrugged and walked to the door and began to unclip her boots.

I opened up and turned the heating up.

“I don’t have tea but I can make espresso, cappuccino or ...”

“Cappuccino please... no sugar. Is it pods or sachets?”

“Beans,” I replied, “Can you manage a double shot?”

She nodded and hung up her jacket.

She came into the kitchen while I was making the cappuccino.

“Nice machine,” she said, “Nice place, may I nose around?”

“Knock yourself out,” I said.

She was back before I had made the second cappuccino.

“Sorry, I don’t have any biscuits or snacks to offer,” I said.

“That’s OK, I ate well enough at the pub,” she said.

We sat at the kitchen counter, “You are quite neat and tidy for a bloke,” she said, “What happened with you and Maggie?”

I shrugged, “I haven’t worked it out yet,” I replied, “If you find out, please let me know?”

Denise gave me a strange look, “OK, sorry, It’s none of my business.”

I laughed, “No, it isn’t but I really don’t know what went wrong. It was Maggie’s idea.”

“Do you still love her?” she asked, then went red, “Sorry, don’t answer that.”

I shrugged, “It’s OK... I never really thought about it till you asked, but no, I’m not in love with her anymore, not with the person she is now.” I felt something change inside me.

“Are you OK?” asked Denise.

I nodded, “Actually, much better than I was a few moments ago. I think I m learning to let go.”

Denise looked uncomfortable.

“It’s OK Denise, you don’t have to feel nervous.”

“I’m not very good at keeping secrets,” she said, “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, tell anyone you want to..., its not a secret and I don’t think anyone will care.”

“Of course people will care!” said Denise, “I care, everyone at the Centre and Practice will care, even if it’s just about their jobs.”

I nodded, “Well, you have nothing to worry about. The Rescue Centre is mine and the only thing that has changed is that I now live here. Maggie has the house and the practice. The decree nisi hasn’t been issued yet, but everything is done, dusted and paid for.”

“Is there another man or woman involved?” asked Maggie, “This is such a shock! Does anyone at the Centre know?”

“I have no idea,” I told Denise, “I haven’t discussed it with anyone.”

“Martin’s girlfriend works for Maggie... he might know!” said Denise.

I shrugged, “I don’t like to speculate,” I said.

“How long were you married?” asked Denise.

“Twenty years,” I told her, “As soon as we left school, we” I shook my head, “You don’t want to know and I feel wrong talking about it.”

“I do want to know, but I understand that you feel uncomfortable about talking to me, but you should talk to someone Joe.”

I looked at her, feeling surprised, “OK, maybe one day.”

“And I think you should tell everyone at the Centre,” she said.

She finished her cappuccino and offered to wash up. I told her I preferred to do it myself.

Denise nodded and got up to leave, “Thanks for trusting me Joe, and for the coffee. Please tell the others? I don’t know how long I can keep my big mouth shut. Don’t do anything silly Joe.”

I nodded, “I’m not good at silly,” I said, “Thanks for the ride and company. I’m glad I told you... I didn’t realise ... anyway, thanks.”

For a moment I thought Denise was going to hug me, but she just nodded and went to the hallway and got back into her leathers. I walked to the gate and opened it for her, then waved as she growled past. I stood at the gate listening to the sound of her motorbike as it worked its way through the village and out onto the Funtington road.

The decree nisi arrived in the post the very next day. Coincidences like that are not uncommon, at least not in my experience. It was waiting for me when I got back from the pool. I read it and was surprised at the calm acceptance I felt. I wondered why Maggie had changed, but the sudden realisation I had experienced, when Denise asked me if I still loved Maggie kept growing in me, making things clearer. The girl I had fallen in love and married was not the same person as the one who had looked me in the eye and told me not to make a scene, that our marriage was over and had been for over a year. The Maggie I had fallen in love with could never have done that. I wondered if I had caused her to change, and realised

that I must have had something to do with it. It was a sobering thought.

I didn't say anything to the staff on Monday. For one I was really busy, and also... I suppose I just didn't want to. Instead, I stayed late on Monday night, after everyone had gone home, and drafted a letter to tell them that Maggie and I had divorced, and she now owned the Nutbourne Veterinary Practice while I was now the sole owner of the Downs Animal Rescue Centre. I assured them that I had no intention of making any changes and hoped that they would all continue as they had done. I added that they could discuss any concerns with me at any time. I printed and signed five copies and placed one in each person's mail slot, locked up and went home.

Somebody brought in an injured Swan early the next day. Martin had opened up and was waiting for me.

"Hi Joe," he greeted me looking concerned, "Is it OK to take him to the Practice?" he asked pointing at the Swan, secure in a crate.

"Of course it's OK," I said "You don't have to ask. Is there a problem with the van?"

Martin looked relieved, "No the van's fine, I just wanted to check, Thanks Joe."

Sometimes people think we are a veterinary practice, and bring their pets for treatment. Usually it's just a misunderstanding, but occasionally people can get difficult. We had one later that morning, just before midday. I heard shouting and decided to investigate.

A large man was glaring at Denise and Cathy, and looked poised to poke a finger against Denise's shoulder.

"Look, it isn't very complicated, we are an animal rescue centre, we are licensed to confiscate animals that are being neglected or abused, and to accept wild animals and pets that have brought in injured. If you want your dog sterilised you need to go to a vet," Denise told him, "And if your finger touches me again, you will need to find a doctor to get it fixed. Got it?"

Cathy was looking worried and holding a pamphlet out to the man, one that listed the contact details for local Veterinarians.

The man turned his head and saw me, then lowered his head and said something that I didn't catch. He snatched the pamphlet from Cathy and stalked off, carrying what looked like a Jack Russel under his left arm.

"You OK?" I asked.

Denise, looking furious, just nodded, but kept watching the man as he got in his car and reversed away.

"He was very rude!" said Cathy, the youngest person on the staff, "Why are some people like that?" She looked on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry Cathy, it just happens sometimes," I said, "Let me make you something to drink, you prefer tea, two sugars and milk; right?"

Cathy nodded and tried to smile, "Sorry, I don't like confrontation," she said. I put my hand on her shoulder and guided her to a seat, "Just breathe. I'll bring you tea and a biscuit," I told her, "What about you Denise? Coffee?"

"Aye, thank you Boss," she said, then smiled, "No biscuit for me thanks. I'll be back in a minute."

Victor came in just as I brought Cathy her tea and biscuits. He was carrying a hedgehog, and asked for a coffee if there was any left.

"This fellow is ready to be released, I reckon," he said.

I gave him the coffee I had poured for Denise and started a fresh batch while Cathy and Victor admired the hedgehog.

"What's with the letter Joe?" asked Victor, "I thought Maggie was a partner in the business?" Victor had been working at the centre since it opened four years earlier.

“Maggie and I have split up,” I told him, “I got the Centre,”

Victor looked surprised but just nodded.

Cathy burst into tears. Victor looked as surprised as I felt.

Denise arrived while we trying to reassure her. It took a while for Denise to figure out that Cathy wasn't crying about the big man with the Jack Russel. She gave me an angry look when she figured out why Cathy was crying. Cathy told us that her parents were going through a divorce and she just couldn't take all the fighting and screaming. Denise used my Land Rover to drive Cathy home.

That afternoon, just before it was time to close, Martin knocked on my door and asked if he could have a word.

I closed down my computer and asked him to sit. He closed the door carefully behind him. He looked uncomfortable.

“What's up Martin?” I asked.

“I spoke to Cindy,” he said, “While they were operating on the swan. She works at the practice; she's the receptionist.”

I smiled, “That's OK Martin, I know that Cindy works there.”

“Oh yeah, you do. Well, she says the practice is up for sale, did you know that?”

I shook my head, “No, I didn't know that, I am no longer ... I have nothing to do with the Practice anymore.”

“So you aren't forcing the sale?” asked Martin.

“What? No, I mean, it's nothing to do with me anymore. I didn't know Maggie was going to sell.”

“She's selling the house as well,” said Martin, “Cindy thinks it is so that Maggie can pay you out.”

I shook my head, “Maggie isn’t paying me anything, she got the house and practice and I got the centre - simple and straightforward. No fighting.”

“This isn’t some sort of scam?” asked Martin, “You aren’t going to just disappear like that bugger with the BMW agency?”

I shook my head again, “No, nothing like that.” The thought did appeal though.

“We borrowed money to buy our car, we haven’t finished paying for it yet,” said Martin, “We can’t afford to lose our jobs,”

“I know Martin, I agreed to be a guarantor for your loan, remember? I can’t speak for Cindy’s job but you should be fine.”

Martin sat there, looking at his feet and nodding his head, clearly unhappy. Eventually he got to his feet, “Well thanks for speaking to me,” he said before letting himself out of the office.

Cathy came back to work the next day, but Martin and Victor both called in sick. Phillip usually only worked Sundays, but came in to cover. He seemed quite cheerful and told me I was mad to let Maggie get the house and the practice.

Martin and Victor were both back on Thursday, but Phillip also came in. Cathy was fine, she apologised for being a drip and I told her she had nothing to apologise for. Denise was very quiet, but everybody seems quiet when Phillip is around. I had to give a presentation in Chichester on Friday and only got back to the office in time to lock up. It started raining as I walked to the pub. Denise’s motorbike wasn’t in the carpark and the pub was really quiet. I didn’t want steak and kidney pie, and decided to order a take out from the Pride of India. I finished my cider and was just about to leave when Denise came in.

“You leaving already?” she asked, while removing her jacket.

“The special is steak and kidney - can’t stand it, thought I’d go home and send out for a curry.”

“Stay and play a couple of games with me and I’ll take you home and fetch the curry for you?” she suggested, “There’s nobody else here to play against.”

I nodded, we ended up playing darts till almost ten. I had a couple more ciders. I seldom drank more than a pint.

“Martin and Victor went to the Citizens’ Advice Bureau on Wednesday,” Denise told me, “They were worried that you were going to do a runner.”

I nodded, “Martin has trust issues.”

Denise snorted, “You don’t seem too worried.”

“What should I worry about?” I asked, “And how much will the worrying help?” I finished the game, beating Denise for a third time.

“I should never have given you those darts,” she muttered, “Do you want another cider?”

I shook my head, “ Definitely not, which way is the gents?”

“Its your local, you must have used the loo here before?”

I shook my head, “Nope, peed in the bushes a few times on my way home, but I am not getting on your bike with a full bladder!”

“Joe Banks, are you a wee bit tipsy?” asked Denise, laughing, before directing me to the toilets.

I shrugged, “I wouldn’t drive but I am perfectly capable of walking home. I’m not sure I would be if I had another cider though.”

I suggested that Denise fetch the takeaways while I walked home, but she persuaded me to eat at the Pride of India. She changed her mind when we got there. It was crowded with what sounded like a football supporters club. They were loud and obnoxious. I

suggested we get fish and chips from across the road and take them to my flat.

It had stopped raining. I enjoyed hanging onto Denise as she twisted through the narrow roads.

We ate at the kitchen counter.

“So tell me about yourself Denise.” I asked, “Take your time; I want to know everything about you.”

Denise laughed, “There’s not very much to know,” she said, “I was born and raised in Aberdeen, the only child of a Reformed Church of Scotland minister and an absolute bastard. My mum killed herself when I was a baby. When I was sixteen, I converted to Catholicism to spite my dad and he disowned me. I did a BSc in animal psychology in Liverpool University and fell head over heels in love with one of the lecturers. Followed him to Brighton when he got the psychology chair at Sussex University, and discovered, during the pandemic, that he was a serial philanderer. Got a job here and...” she shrugged “That’s me.”

“Come on,” I said, “I learned more about you from your application letter. What do you like doing with your spare time, what are your dreams, where do you live? I seem to recall sailing was something you said you liked doing on your application letter, have you done any since you have been here?”

“No, I haven’t done any sailing since uni,” she said, “I share a bedsit with another Scottish girl in Chichester, she is at the Theological College, we met in Brighton. She was another of David’s distractions - the randy Professor we call him. I like to ride my bike, play darts once a week, and...” she shrugged, “I read a lot. You don’t have a TV, and you have a lot of books, may I borrow some?”

I nodded “Sure, help yourself. I have some in storage... I need to make some more bookshelves. What sort of stuff do you like reading?”

“I’m not too fussy,” she said, “Anything that distracts me. I don’t like horror much or depressing stuff. I saw some Dick Francis books that I haven’t read, can I start on them?”

I nodded, but felt uncomfortable, I disliked lending books, Maggie had lent a lot of my books to her friends and many had been damaged or not returned. Some of my Dick Francis novels had been signed by him, not that I knew him personally, but Maggie had told him I was a fan, and he sent half a dozen signed books.

I cleaned up while Denise went through my books and chose one. I got a call from a model maker and excused myself, going into the spare room that I used as a study. It was a long call. When I came down, Denise was in an armchair engrossed in the book. I made us both cappuccino and put a mug and a half slab of Cadbury’s fruit and nut chocolate on a saucer for her, then sat down across from her with my iPad mini and got on with some writing.

My cappuccino had got cold, and I had forgotten that Denise was there when I looked up. She was looking at me with a strange expression on her face.

She looked away and went red, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ... thank you for the coffee and chocolate. You haven’t touched yours.”

I smiled, “I’m always doing that, it’s OK, I quite like cold coffee. It doesn’t keep me awake.”

“Me neither, in fact it makes me sleepy,” she said, “Association, is what it is; I drank coffee when I was up late trying to cram for exams, and my brain has learned to associate coffee with wanting to sleep.” She laughed a low, delightful laugh. “I should go home, I’m keeping you up.”

“I won’t be sleeping for a while,” I said, “And I’m going to make myself another cappuccino I prefer hot coffee with chocolate. Would you like another one?”

“Only if I am not overstaying my welcome,” said Denise, “Paula will be up late playing death metal no doubt. I’m not sure which I hate

the most, death metal or the bloody incense she burns. I wear acoustic headphones almost all the time, even in bed.”

“You can stay as long as you like, the couch converts into a bed, I use the spare room as an office. There’s clean bedding in that chest under the window and clean towels in the landing cupboard.”

“You’re inviting me to spend the night?” asked Denise, looking surprised, “What will your neighbours say?”

I looked at the time on my iPad, it was almost eleven thirty, “Whatever they say or think doesn’t bother me,” I said, “But I’m guessing they would rather not be woken up by your motorbike at this time of night.”

“In that case, I’d love another cappuccino. May I use the loo?”

I was writing again when she came back down, I looked up and smiled when she thanked me for the cappuccino. I had given her half of the chocolate I hadn’t touched. She returned it to me,

“I love chocolate, but I don’t want to put on weight, I can’t afford another set of leathers.”

“They look expensive,” I said, “Like your bike. What is it?”

“A Ducati 750ss, 1994” she said, “I spent every penny I had saved on it. I rode a Honda one-fifty for years. Initially to annoy my dad, but I love the freedom of being able to get on my bike and just go, get away from everything.” She went bright red.

“You ride well,” I told her, “I feel very safe with you. I didn’t think I would ever feel safe riding pillion on a bike. I can’t stand being a passenger in a car.”

“Thank you, I did a course in Haywards Heath last year, I learned a lot. I want to do the advanced course next. The guy who runs it taught Ewan MacGregor to ride.”

I showed her how to turn the couch into a bed, and helped her to make up the bed, then fetched her a towelling bathrobe, a towel and a new toothbrush.

“Help yourself to whatever you want from the kitchen,” I told her, “I’m going to put some clothes in the machine to wash, if you want to put anything in? Just close the washer door and it will start. The washer and dryer are in the carport, through that door,” I pointed, “I’ll put everything in the dryer early tomorrow, I’m usually up before six, but don’t feel you need to get up. Stay in bed as long as you like. I’ll have plenty to keep me occupied.”

Denise nodded, “Thanks Joe,” she said smiling, “I’ll probably read for a few more hours. Goodnight.”

I had a shower, loaded the washing machine and fell asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow.

I was awake at five. I let myself out quietly, put the washing in the dryer and went for a long walk to the Quay at Bosham. The tide was out. I walked back taking my time and hoped the Crate would be open, but it was deserted. I looked at my phone, it was not yet seven. Denise was up when I got home. She looked lost inside the bathrobe. She had folded up the bedding, the bed was a couch again and she was reading another book. She got up when she noticed me.

“I thought you were still asleep,” she said. The bottom of the bathrobe puddled around her feet, “This is a wee bit too big for me,” she said, trying to gather up the excess sleeves.

“Let me roll the sleeves up for you?” I said. When I finished it looked like she was wearing giant towelling water wings on her forearms. She laughed and thanked me.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked

“Very well,” she said, then held up the book, “Is this really signed by Dick Francis?”

I nodded, “Maggie got him to sign some books for me,” I said, “I’m going to do scrambled eggs with bacon mushrooms, tomato and avocado, would you like some? Cappuccino?”

“I’d love some. I’m going to check the dryer, shall I put these sheets and pillowcases in the washer?”

“Thanks.” I nodded, “The dryer should be done, I put it on around five this morning.”

Denise returned with a stack of neatly folded clothes and asked me where to put them. I asked if she could put them on my bed. She came back down and sat at the counter and sipped the cappuccino.

“I feel very spoiled,” she said, “I usually just have a slice of toast for breakfast, that’s if Paula or her boyfriend haven’t finished all the bread.”

“Sorry, I don’t have any bread. I generally avoid carbs except for milk and on Friday nights.

“I didn’t even know there were carbs in milk,” said Denise, “Why don’t you eat carbs?”

I smiled, “Lactose in milk is a sugar, I use full fat milk which has less lactose than low fat milk. Sorry, it’s a dietary thing, it’s called Ketogenics. It works well for me.”

“Aye, I’ve heard of it. You look healthy enough on it.” She laughed, “So Friday night is your risk night too?”

“Risk night?” I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well my dad was...I can’t begin to explain what it was like growing up as his daughter. I suppose I overreacted. When I was fifteen I just...” she shook her head and shrugged, her expression beyond despair, “I went completely off the rails... drugs, alcohol, sex. I woke up one day in hospital. A nurse told me that there were easier ways to commit suicide and took me to the children’s oncology ward to show me what real suffering looked like. It was as if someone

turned a light on in my head. I got myself cleaned up, did my A levels and went to university. I was very focused and I did really well, but I was living the sort of life my father had forced me to live and which I had rebelled against. All work and no play. No partying, no alcohol, no fun. So, in my final year I decided to have “risk nights”. At first it was just the last Friday of each month, I would go out somewhere nice, usually a pub that did food, I would eat something extravagant, play pool or darts; something that forced me to talk to people and I would ... I wasn't looking for sex, just friendly company. It's how David and I got together... but that felt good at the time. Anyway, that's my risk nights. Now it's one night a week of relaxing my guard just a little.”

I nodded, “Risk night. That sounds about right, I just wanted a break from the dull routine that my life has become. I suppose Friday nights at the Fox and a Hounds is a dull routine as well, but... The bacon looks almost ready, how do you like your scrambled eggs?”

“Not too wet please?” she said, smiling. “I'm glad our risk nights brought me to this point. You make great coffee by the way.”

We ate in silence, I was pleased that Denise seemed to enjoy the food.

“Another cappuccino?” I asked when I had finished.

Denise nodded, her mouth was full. She finished eating and started washing up while I was making cappuccino.

“Did Maggie do Keto as well?” she asked

I nodded, “Maggie got me onto it, it's a lifestyle choice. One of the few things I am happy about in my life. I still swim and walk a lot, but no more running and murdering Gym equipment to fight the flab.”

“You always seem so calm and together,” she said, “I had no idea you were so unhappy.”

I laughed, "I'm not unhappy, I am just generally not happy about Life, like ninety nine percent of the world's population I suspect. At this moment I am happy and enjoying your company."

"Aye, I know exactly how that feels. I had better go now Joe. Thanks for putting me up and putting up with me. I'm sorry if the neighbours start gossiping about you."

"Fuck 'em," I said, "If anything they will be jealous. Thanks for brightening my life. Have a great weekend."

I walked to the gate and waved as she rode away. It was too late for a swim, the pool would be crowded. I spent some time on the Land Rover, checking the fluids and giving it a good clean, inside and out. I spent the rest of the morning going through the storage boxes in the car port and delivered two loads to St Martins and a load to recycling centre. By eight PM the car port looked a lot better and there was enough space to park the Land Rover in it, probably Denise's motorbike as well, if she visited again.

On Sunday I managed an hour of swimming and was feeling good. I went to Covers and had some pine boards sawn to size, bought brackets, rawl-bolts, screws, a delightfully powerful cordless drill and a selection of masonry and high speed drill bits. I rang my neighbour's doorbell and when there was no reply wrote a note asking them to let me know if/when they were home and I would stop drilling and making a noise.

By two that afternoon I had put shelves on all three walls and had emptied the last storage box. I had another load of unwanted stuff to donate to St Martins and decided to leave that till Monday. I spent the rest of the day designing a folding workbench.

It was Wednesday before I managed to deliver the stuff to St Martins. I bought more wood, hardware and tools at Covers. My neighbours' lights were on when I got home, so I decided against making my workbench, but unpacked and arranged my new cordless power tools on a shelf and started charging the batteries.

On Thursday there was a letter from Maggie's lawyer advising me that Maggie was selling the practice and her house and asking me if I had any objections. It was two typed pages of A4 and I wondered if he charged Maggie by the word. I thought about it for a while, then called one of my Architect clients and asked if she could recommend a savvy local lawyer who understood business and property transaction laws. Half an hour later I was driving to Worthing.

Victoria Epps was a handsome, athletic looking woman. Her office was stark, with a simple desk and a kneeling chair much like the one I used, two armchairs and a coffee table. There was a slim laptop on a folding stand on the desk and a spiral bound notebook on the coffee table. Vertical blinds hung on three walls, there was no window.

"Please sit, Mr Banks. Forgive the office, it's temporary but adequate for my needs."

"Please call me Joe?" I asked, "I like functional."

She smiled, "Victoria. So, how can I help you?"

I spent half an hour explaining that Maggie and I had just divorced, that I had not contested anything and had allowed her lawyer to act for both of us, and that while I was not happy, I had accepted the situation, but that the letter I had received earlier in the morning had bothered me because it made no sense to me. I wanted someone to take a good hard look at the settlement and advise me if there was something awry that might cause me trouble.

I had brought every piece of paper I had received and my laptop with all the email correspondence.

Victoria apologised for not being able to offer me any refreshments and suggested I take a walk or visit Costa Coffee further along the block while she had a 'blitz' through the papers. She suggested I return in an hour, at three PM and handed me a thumb drive asking that I save all the emails onto it as PDF's.

By six PM I had a blinding headache. Victoria said that she would respond to Maggie's lawyer, Alex Symes, who was apparently a she and not a he.

"You have been stitched up, Joe. I am certain of it, mainly because of what I know about Alex Symes. It will take me a few days and I will need to get some help, but I think we can salvage this situation."

"What is it likely to cost me?" I asked.

"I don't see this going to court, but if it does, it will cost you tens of thousands of pounds, against the loss of your business property, which is valued at one and a half million pounds. Optimistically, I would say five thousand pounds. It is worth doing either way."

I must have looked unhappy. Victoria put a hand on my shoulder, "This is fraud, Joe, and I can prove it. Alex and your wife will almost certainly back down and make good, but I have to act now. If they leave the country... it will be too late. You will still win, but it will be costly and messy. Please trust me on this?"

I nodded, "I'll go back to Costa's and transfer five thousand pounds to your account before I drive home. Thank you Victoria."

"Please don't talk to either of them Joe? If anyone calls you and asks for a response to this letter, just say you have misplaced it or left it in your car, and don't, whatever you do, agree to anything or let them know you are suspicious?"

I nodded again, shook her hand and left.

I sent the money and then sat in Costa Coffee staring blankly into space till a hand touched my wrist and a voice asked me if I was OK. They were waiting for me to leave so they could close.

It was after midnight when I finally got home. I lay in bed, wide awake and unable to sleep. Eventually, some time after three, I got up and decided to walk to Chichester.

The sky was clear, I took the Funtington road. There was very little traffic. I got to the Cross just after five and walked on down East street and then past the old cattle market and to the bus station. I got off the bus at the Pride of India and walked home.

My next door neighbour came out of her front door and waved, then walked out to greet me. We had never actually spoken before.

“Mr Banks, thank you for your note - we have been away.” She said, “I’m Margaret. It’s good to finally meet you.” She shook my hand with a powerful grip. “I don’t think you need to worry about noise from your Garage. Ours is so full of rubbish that we won’t hear a thing through all that. You are more likely to hear Lynn’s awful music, that’s my daughter, she is at that age... just dreadful.”

“Please call me Joe, Margaret? Thank you for letting me know, I appreciate it. I’m sorry for being such a bad neighbour, I don’t socialise much ... at all really.”

Margaret flapped her hands dismissively, “I’m just as bad. Take care Joe.” She waved and returned to her door.

I showered and changed, then drove to the office. I felt like a condemned man walking to the gallows.

Somehow I got through the day without mishap. I even managed to get some work done, and the only phone calls I got were routine. After getting home, I showered and walked to the Fox and Hounds, determined to clear my mind and not worry about things I had no control over. By the time I reached the pub, I realised I was more angry than worried. I was pleased to see Denise’s motorbike in the car park.

She must have seen me approaching; she was waiting for me at the door and asked if I was up to a game of five-o-one. The woman who we had beaten previously and another woman wanted to play us.

I nodded, and Denise asked if I was OK.

“I’m fine,” I said, removing my coat, “I’m going to get a drink, do you want anything?”

We both had coffees, the bad loser, Sally, and her friend, Midge, wanted to play for money, which wasn’t allowed but I shrugged and put a fifty pound note on the table. Denise shook her head and said she could only afford a twenty. After a short whispered discussion, Sally and Midge cobbled seventy quid together and we threw to start. Sally started.

“You are very pale Joe,” murmured Denise, “Are you unwell or upset?”

I smiled, “Just tired Denise, I didn’t sleep last night.”

Sally and Midge won, but only just. They made such a lot of noise that Charles asked them to quieten down and reminded them that playing for money was against the law.

The house special was liver and onions, I grimaced and asked Charles if I had offended the chef somehow.

“You can always order something else Joe,” said Charles defensively. Sally had been rude to him and he was still sulking.

“What’s the fun in that?” I asked. “I’ll pass tonight. Thanks Charles.”

“Let me take you home?” said Denise, following me to the door “You don’t look right.”

“I don’t want to go home, I want something tasty and unhealthy to eat,” I said, “I’m going to the Richmond Arms.”

“Great, I’ll come with you,” said Denise, taking my arm.

“Joe... can you loosen up a bit?” I heard Denise’s voice in my ears, “I need to breathe”

I hadn’t realised how tight I was holding her, “I’m so sorry; I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t let go, just ease up a little. I like a hug.” Denise sounded cheerful. I needed some of that.

I had to direct her to the Richmond Arms. I had never been in, but often walked past it on my early morning walks.

“It’s a lot closer to your house than the Fox and Hounds,” said Denise, “It looks up market.”

“Too close really, I like the walk to the Fox and Hounds, it helps to clear my head after a week at work,” I said.

Denise nodded, “Well, I’m starving, let’s hope their food is good.”

Everybody stopped talking and turned to stare when Denise walked in, I went to the bar and ordered a pint of cider and a soda water, then asked to see the menu. The young woman recommended steak and Guinness pie.

Denise and I played darts while we waited for the food. She beat me twice.

“I’m sorry I lost you twenty quid,” I told her, “I’ll pay for your food and drink. Do you ever drink alcohol these days?”

“Thanks. Aye, I have my moments, when I take a drink, but this isn’t one. Trust me, you don’t want to see drunk Denise. She’s ugly.”

“Sometimes I wish I could just give up, let go and get blind, stinking drunk.” I said.

“What’s bothering you Joe?” asked Denise quietly.

I shook my head, “Some other time perhaps. Forget what I said, I was being dramatic.”

“I’ll give you a massage later, if you like? I did a course,” she said, “It should help you to sleep.”

I doubted very much that having her hands on my bare skin would induce me to sleep, but I just nodded, “Thanks, let’s see how I feel after we’ve eaten.”

The food was excellent, and we ordered dessert, a very tasty and definitely non-keto suet pudding, which I could only eat a third of. I was amazed that Denise finished hers and what was left of mine. The pub had filled up and was quite lively. I had another cider and felt quite wobbly.

“I think it’s better that I walk home,” I told Denise, “That cider was stronger than I expected.” She followed me on her bike.

“Are you ready for that massage?” asked Denise when we were inside, “No monkey business OK?”

“No monkey business, I promise.”

She sent me upstairs and told me strip down to my shorts and lay a towel across the end of the bed to lie on while she got some coconut oil.

“I have massage oil at home, unless Paula swiped it again, if you like my massage you can get some from Essentials on East Street and keep it here, but coconut oil is good and you have plenty of it.”

I was wearing briefs, so I put on an old pair of rugby shorts, then had to pee.

Denise started on my neck. She talked as she worked, her voice was like a warm blanket. I was asleep within minutes and woke, covered with the duvet just before five in the morning.

Denise was gone. She had left a note on the kitchen counter.

“I hope you had a good sleep. Thanks for dinner. I’d like to take you somewhere for lunch on Sunday. Let me know if I can fetch you at 11:30? Xxx.” She left me her cell phone number.

I had a good swim and got started on the workbench I wanted to make. I got a call just after midday from Cathy, asking if I could help Phillip - he was going with police to take some dogs from a yard in Emsworth, a suspected puppy farm, and Cathy said it was a rough area.

The police constable was as small as Denise, but she had a no-nonsense look about her.

It was unpleasant, but nobody got hurt, I called the practice and asked if we could bring the dogs to be examined. A man answered and said that there were no vets available till Monday, so we went to Fishbourne Veterinary Clinic. I left Phillip there with the van, took a taxi to the office, and got home at six PM. I saw that there was an email from Alex Symes for me, but didn't open it.

I fell asleep writing in an armchair and crawled up to bed. I woke again at five and managed a good swim. I worked on the workbench, assembling everything, and was just about finished when Denise's motorbike growled up to the car port. The Land Rover was still outside, so I showed off my handiwork before parking the Land Rover inside and locking up. It was eleven.

Denise declined coffee and started on another book while I had a quick shower and dressed.

She took me to the Anchor at Itchenor. I really enjoyed the ride there. The food was great, the best prawn salad I've ever had.

"It's a perfect Keto meal," I told her.

We went to East Head and walked along the beach.

"Can you windsurf?" I asked her.

She shook her head, "Never tried, but it looks fun."

"I really slept well after that massage," I said.

“You were asleep before I finished your neck and shoulders,” said Denise, “I couldn’t wake you to turn you over. When we get back I’ll do your front first. I have massage oil.”

I liked the sound of that.

Denise had an ice cream and we both had cappuccino from a van. The weather was kind and stayed dry till we approached Bosham, when we got soaked to the skin in just a few minutes.

I opened the carport for Denise to park her motorbike inside. She borrowed a sweatshirt that reached halfway to her knees and put her wet clothes in the dryer. I rolled up the sleeves of the sweat shirt for her. For some reason, I really enjoyed doing it.

Denise talked while massaging me, telling me about the online video tutorials that she was still learning from. I managed to stay awake all the way through the massage, and made cappuccino for us both afterwards.

Denise declined chocolate when I said I wasn’t having any, it was a treat I allowed myself on Friday nights only.

“You are very self disciplined Joe,” she said, “I can be, but I find that when I am too strict with myself, I end up going off the rails more wildly, if you know what I mean?”

I nodded, “Maggie and I agreed, when we were still teenagers, to do everything we could in order to be able to take life easy by the time we hit forty. Maggie wanted kids, but only if she could spend time with them when they were growing up. We had a registry office wedding, and only invited her mum and dad and two of our high school friends as witnesses. We both got jobs while we were at university, she worked at a veterinary hospital in Goring and I worked as a cleaner for the university and as a barman and barista at the Prestwick hotel. We never took holidays, we never ate out. We bought and sold properties, I think they call it flipping now. We encouraged each other, for twenty years.... We did pretty well really.”

Denise's voice seemed to be coming from far away. She shook my shoulder, "Joe, are you OK?" she asked, "I think you passed out?"

I shook my head, "No, I'm fine, I just got distracted by a thought. Are you staying the night?" I got up to convert the couch.

"I wasn't going to," said Denise, "But I think I will. Yes, thank you."

We made the bed and I thanked her for an enjoyable day and massage. I got a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Good night Joe, I'll see you in the morning."

She called me back just as I reached the stairs asking if I had a spare charger for a Samsung. I nodded and fetched one from a shelf in the carport.

I lay awake wondering what, if anything, Denise felt about me till I drifted off into a very deep sleep. My alarm woke me at five. Denise woke when I crept down the stairs and asked if I was alright. I told her I was going for a walk, and waited for her to use the loo and get dressed, so that she could join me.

"You walk every morning?" asked Denise.

"Most weekday mornings, I usually swim early on Saturday and Sunday."

"The more I learn about you, the less I understand," said Denise after a while, "You are a lot more normal and down to earth than I thought you were."

"Gee thanks," I said, "I feel much better now."

"Och, you know I like you," said Denise, and sent me staggering by thrusting her shoulder under my ribs.

"Ouch! That hurt!"

“You great big ninny,” said Denise laughing and dodging the slap I pretended to direct at her bum, “Don’t touch what ye cannae afford.”

I was surprised to hear a message arrive on my phone so early in the morning, but didn’t remove it from my pocket.

Denise was looking tired after twenty minutes and admitted that she needed to do more exercise, but said she was happy to continue up the path towards Kingley Vale for another ten minutes before turning back.

“Walking in the hills is the only thing I ever enjoyed doing with my dad,” she told me, “His father had been a ghillie for some rich landowner in Munroe and dad had learned a lot from him.”

“Do you ever visit him?” i asked.

“I haven’t set eyes on him since I was fifteen,” she said, “I’ve an old school pal who writes every now and then on WhatsApp. Last I heard Dad was in hospital with Long Covid. I’ve exorcised him; I don’t hate him any more, but I never want to see him again. I feel bad about converting to Catholicism just to hurt him. I’m not religious at all. The Sisters took me in and looked after me when I ran away from home, they helped me to get cleaned up and weaned off drugs and alcohol, and I abused their trust by converting to their religion just to spite my father. They deserved better from me.”

“My parents both died when I was very young,” I said, “My mother while I was a baby, I don’t remember her at all, and my dad when I was five. We lived with his aunt, and she raised me after he died. Nan died when I was seventeen. She was strict, but kind and always very patient with me. I was very lucky to have her.”

“I have an aunt somewhere, or I used to. Dad’s sister Muriel. She was as bad as him, a very dour Protestant. Would not even talk to a Catholic. I think she runs a guest house in Arbroath, I can’t imagine anyone but a saint being able to spend more than one night there.”

“I spent I week in Arbroath back in the early nineties,” I told her, “I stayed in a very strange hotel. It was basically a house, and boasted “a fully equipped gymnasium and pool” which were in the basement with the boiler and the laundry. There was even a “sauna” in there too - it looked like a fibre glass kennel with a plastic chair in it. There was a hole for your head to stick out of and it ran on electrics. It looked home made and just as likely to electrocute you as steam you to death. The pool was a two metre wide agricultural cattle trough; plasticised canvas held up by a wire mesh frame and in the corner was one of those cheap Argos Catalogue home multi-gyms. You couldn’t reach all of the stations without moving it, and I didn’t want to move it for fear of damaging the “pool”. The only thing I liked were the Arbroath Smokies I had for breakfast every morning.”

Denise told me about some of the weird places she had stayed in and around Liverpool when she was a student and managed to trip me just after we crossed the Funtington road on our way back. I fell into some nettles and chased her all the way back to the flat. She was helpless with laughter and being out of breath when I caught up with her. I resisted the urge to grab hold of her and tickle her.

I checked my phone while Denise showered. The message was from Victoria, saying that the notices would be served on Alex Symes and Maggie before nine AM and warned me not to get drawn into a discussion or making any written responses to either of them or anyone acting for them.

I made a cheese, mushroom and leek omelette when Denise called down to say she was out of the shower. We shared it and I was showered, dressed and ready by eight. Denise set off on her bike and I went through my emails and left for the Centre a little after nine.

Everybody seemed happily occupied when I got there. My phone rang before I had unlocked my office. It was Maggie. I declined the call knowing that she would get a text message asking her to send a message. She tried calling three times before sending a message “Call me!”

I started working on some editing but gave up when I realised that I could not focus. At ten I locked up and left the office, telling Cathy that I was probably going to be out for the rest of the day. I drove to West Wittering and parked outside 2XS, which I had found while looking for somewhere to learn how to windsurf. I felt my heart racing and laughed at myself. I was a grown man, almost forty and having palpitations about spending money on doing something that was just for fun.

The staff were really helpful, and answered all my questions without making me feel stupid. I left with a handful of brochures and found a cafe, where I went through everything carefully, before sending a message to Denise, asking if she was free to spend some time with me on Sunday morning from eight till twelve. She didn't answer immediately, so I dug out my iPad, ordered a bottomless coffee and started writing. It was eleven before I realised it. I checked my phone. There were several messages but I opened Denise's first, then called 2XS and asked them to book me and Denise in for the two hour "taster" on windsurfing on Sunday morning, I paid online after being reassured that they provided everything we needed.

I opened but did not respond to the four messages I got from Maggie. I didn't bother opening the two messages and one email from Alex Symes.

I did respond to Victoria's message saying that the summons had been served on Maggie and Alex and that they had been warned not to leave the country. I wrote that I had received messages from Maggie and Alex, and an email from Alex, which I had not opened. She asked me to forward all messages and the emails to her. Alex Symes messages were mildly threatening, warning me that my failure to respond to her could weigh against me, and advising me to respond quickly in the best interests of all parties. All of Maggie's messages were requests that I call her, urgently.

I sat for a while wondering why the thought of losing everything to Alex and Maggie's shenanigans caused me less direct anguish than spending a hundred and sixty pounds on an introduction to windsurfing for myself and Denise. It took me a while to realise it was because I was daring myself to do something that might be

great fun but might equally lead to rejection by Denise and a rupture of our tenuous relationship. I found myself having mental conversations with Denise, reassuring her that while I really enjoyed her company, I had no expectations beyond that. I realised that I was terrified at the thought of sex. Maggie had been my only lover, and though we both enjoyed sex, more so in the first five or six years of manage, it was never a big thing in our lives. The intervals between lovemaking had grown to weeks and then months by the time we separated. I liked looking at shapely women, but it was not, in my mind anyway, a sexual ogling, despite my liking for shapely bums and pert breasts. I liked beauty in many forms, not just women. I looked at the time on my phone and was startled to find it was just after two PM. I left a huge tip, feeling guilty for taking up a table for most of the day for the price of a bottomless coffee. I drove home and found myself realising that worrying about what Denise might make of my interest in her was pointless. Pointless as it might be, I found it more worrying than the prospect of losing everything I owned.

When I got home, I realised that I could not relax, so got my swimming stuff and drove to the sports centre in Chichester. I was in luck and had a lane to myself for almost an hour, by which time I was exhausted and feeling a lot better for it. I went into the pool canteen and asked a for a double portion of garden salad, then sat in a corner with my iPad and wrote till nine PM.

A trio of youngsters were lurking behind my Land Rover and slunk off when I approached. I could smell what I thought might be weed. There was a note under my door when I got home. It was from Maggie.

“Joe, please stop this nonsense and call me? I am certain that whatever is bothering you can easily be sorted out if we just discuss it like adults.

Maggie
XXX”

I shook my head, used my phone to photograph the note and sent it to Victoria saying it had been put under my front door.

The doorbell rung soon afterwards, a young girl was stood outside.

“Hi Mr Banks, I’m Lynn Essam, from next door, Margaret’s daughter. A lady was here around five, she said she was you wife and was worried about you.”

“Thanks Lynn, it’s nice to meet you. Please call me Joe. Thanks, I found Maggie’s note under the door...”

“I didn’t tell her about the girl on the motorbike,” said Lynn, giving me a look, “Do you have kids? It’s not fair on them you know. My dad left mum for a younger woman.”

I nodded, “No Lynne, we don’t have kids, and Maggie and I split up two years ago. We are divorced now.”

Lynne went bright red, “Well, I didn’t say anything to her, except that I’d never spoken to you. She asked me to call you on my phone, so that she could speak to you. I told her I couldn’t do that.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I’m sorry that she bothered you.”

“I’m sorry about... you know...”

“No, it’s OK Lynne, thanks for letting me know.” I had heard a motorbike and hoped it was Denise. I excused myself and walked to the gate and opened it just as Denise approached.

“I just wanted to check on you,” she said, “Maggie came to the office with another woman. She said she had been trying to call you. When she left, Martin told us that Cindy said that papers have been served on Maggie and The Practice by the Lewes Crown Court.”

“Would you like a coffee?” I asked.

Denise lowered her visor and rode up to the flat. I offered to open the car port for her bike and she said she couldn’t stay long. She

took off her boots and helmet, but kept her leathers on and sat at the kitchen counter.

“Cappuccino?” I asked.

“Yes please,” she said, “You look as if you have been working out.”

“I went for a swim. Enjoyed it.” I said. I didn’t hear her reply because of the noise from the coffee grinder.

“Sorry, I missed that,” I said.

“I asked you what is going on with Maggie and the Practice?”

I nodded, and took my time making the cappuccino. I handed it to her and asked if she wanted some chocolate. She shook her head.

“Are you not having one?” She asked as I poured myself a water.

“No, I’ve had about eight mugs of strong coffee today. My mind is jumping around like a monkey on speed.”

She raised her eyebrows, “So... Maggie and the Practice?”

I nodded, “Well something is going on, obviously. I really can’t talk about it, and, in truth I know very little.” I said.

“Are we OK? The Rescue Centre I mean?”

“I think so Denise. The less I say the better, apparently, but I think the Rescue Centre will be OK.”

“That’s the best you can do?” she asked.

“Do you trust me Denise?” I asked, “As a person?”

She nodded slowly but didn’t say anything.

“I promise that I will tell you everything when my lawyer says I can,” I said.

“You went to a lawyer?”

I nodded and didn't say anything else.

“Martin and the others are worried too. What are you going to tell them?”

I shrugged, “The same as I told you.”

“They won't like it, especially not Martin, he'll get onto legal aid, probably has already.”

“That's OK,” I told her.

“Fuck,” said Denise, “I like my job.”

“It will be OK.”

“Is that a promise?”

I shook my head, “No, but I do promise that I think it will be OK. I'll contact my lawyer in the morning. Perhaps I can tell you more after that?”

“Well don't do me any special favours!” snapped Denise angrily, getting to her feet, “Thank you for the coffee, Boss.”

Denise stormed out and roared off on her motorbike spraying gravel. I went out and closed the gate.

I went for a walk and ended up in the Fox and Hounds carpark. I stared at the door for an age, before turning and walking back home. Strangely, I slept well enough and sent a WhatsApp message to Victoria explaining that the staff at the Rescue Centre were concerned about their jobs after notices had been served on Maggie and The Practice and after Maggie had visited the Rescue Centre with her lawyer asking to see me while I was out.

Victoria had responded by the time I got back from my morning walk. She said I should tell the staff that Maggie had borrowed large sums of money using the Rescue Centre as collateral, and had hidden that information from me during the division of assets for the divorce settlement, and that I was taking action to have that money returned. She also said that she was ninety nine percent certain that the matter would be resolved quickly and cost effectively.

I went into work early and managed to clear the backlog of work before Cathy arrived. I made coffee and tea while she and Victor attended to the resident animals. Martin arrived looking glum and was just about to ask me something when Philip breezed in and asked, "So what's the meeting about Boss? Are you selling up too?"

I shook my head, "Not at all Phillip, I just wanted to let you know what's going on. Grab a coffee and when Denise arrives we can all get together. It won't take long."

Denise has gone to Hayling Island," said Martin, "Somebody called her about a dog that's being abused, she said."

I nodded, "OK thanks. Well, it seems that Maggie has borrowed quite a lot of money and used The Rescue Centre as collateral. I didn't know about it and it didn't come up when we agreed the division of assets for the divorce. Maggie's lawyer handled everything for both of us. I got legal advice and the matter has gone to court. I have no idea how long it will take, but it doesn't stop us from carrying on as usual. We don't have any cash flow problems. My lawyer is confident that it will be sorted out quickly and without undue expense to The Rescue Centre."

"Cindy says the new owners have already moved into The Practice," said Martin, "And that Maggie has been told not to leave the country. They only do that for criminal offences."

I shrugged, "I don't know enough about the law to comment on that," I said, "But I do know that our bank account is healthy and that we can carry on as usual."

“How could Maggie borrow money without you knowing about it?” asked Martin.

“I don’t know.” I replied, “The accounts for the Rescue Centre and The Practice are with the same bank, but they are not linked. Maggie had drawing authority on The Rescue Centre account as I had on the Practice. She did not withdraw any money from the Rescue Centre Account, and I would have been notified if she did. She borrowed the money from an offshore bank, but gave the Rescue Centre, as a registered business, including the property and all our assets, as collateral for the loan. I do not think that is legal, not without my approval. It was done before the divorce was finalised, while Maggie owned half the business, but it should still not have been possible. The loan was not included in the assets and liabilities register submitted for the divorce, which I also think is illegal.”

“How much money did she borrow?” asked Cathy

“Two million US dollars,” I said.

“Cindy said it was four million,” said Martin.

I nodded, mentally cursing Cindy.

“She borrowed two million against The Rescue Centre, she also borrowed against my Flat.” I said.

“Shit,” said Phillip.

“I’m so sorry Joe,” said Cathy, sounding as if she was going to cry.

“It’s going to be OK Cathy,” I said, “Hopefully it will not take too long, but it’s with the courts now. There’s not much else we can do except keep going and hope for the best.”

“Well thanks for telling us,” said Phillip, “Is there anything you want me to do or can I go home?”

“Can you help me to offload some feed?” asked Victor. He gave me a thumbs up.

“I think Cindy is going to lose her job,” said Martin, “Can you give her a reference and look out for a place for her?”

I nodded, “Sure. I’ll ask around. Are you getting legal advice for her? They should pay her out, she’s been there more than two years.”

Martin nodded but didn’t say anything. I asked Cathy if she was alright and she nodded, but looked miserable.

I didn’t hear Denise come in, but saw her chatting with Cathy later that day. She glanced at me and waved a greeting. She left early and Cathy said she had gone back to Hayling Island with the police.

On Wednesday morning Victoria called me and asked if I could come to her office that afternoon. I was there at twelve and left at four feeling exhausted after she put me through a long session of questioning to prepare me for a hearing on Friday morning in Chichester’s magistrates court. She told me it wasn’t a trial but wanted me to be prepared. She told me that the hearing would not be open to the public or press but warned me that several local reporters were taking an interest in the case. She told me to wear a suit and tie.

I got a message on my phone while I was driving back in heavy traffic. I had to stop for fuel and looked at the message. It was from Denise saying that Maggie’s Range Rover was parked at my Flat with two people in it. I thanked her for letting me know and stopped at the Fontwell Travel Lodge, switched my phone off and got a room for the night.

I was up at four and back home a little after five. I plugged my phone and iPad in to charge, then walked for an hour, came home, showered, changed and cooked myself an omelette for breakfast. I sent a message to Cathy, asking her to let the others know that I wasn’t going to come in for the rest of the week as I wanted to prepare for a nine AM court hearing at the Chichester Magistrate’s

court on Friday. I told her I would not be taking any calls. I packed a bag and called a taxi. I checked into the Harbour Hotel in Chichester and really enjoyed spending most of the day taking walks in between hour long sessions of sitting in a comfortable leather armchair drinking coffee and writing on my iPad. I walked to the Sports Centre at six PM and swam for an hour and a half, then walked around the city walls, and had a huge and very tasty Greek salad in my room.

I slept fitfully and went back to the Sports Centre for another long swim in the morning. I walked back and was behind a Scottish girl talking on a cell phone for a while before she turned into the Theological College. I wondered if she was Denise's flatmate, Paula.

I changed and walked to the Magistrates Court. I was twenty minutes early and resisted the urge to get some breakfast or a coffee, but walked to the station and got myself a bottle of mineral water.

Victoria came out just as I returned to the court and told me she had been trying to call me. I apologised and told her I had switched my phone off.

"No matter," she said, "You look good in a suit. Just relax, I will be next to you all the time. You can ask my advice whenever you want to, this isn't a trial, but it is important. Don't let them intimidate you."

I was nervous, I had "butterflies" and my stomach growled and gurgled incessantly. I was surprised to see Denise, Martin and Cindy in the court.

Victoria said that Maggie's lawyer had objected to their presence, but said she had insisted that they be allowed in.

"She might ask the judge to remove them," said Victoria, "But they do have a material interest in this matter. Miss Perry has already been given notice by the new owners of The Practice."

"Can they do that?" I asked.

Victoria nodded, “She is entitled to redundancy payment, they are not obliged to employ her.”

Maggie looked good. Her lawyer, Alex Symes, was attractive in a hard way, about the same height and build as Maggie, but dark haired and dark eyed. She wore a dark grey dress suit and looked very severe. Maggie looked soft, fair and very feminine next to her. She glanced at me several times, but Alex Symes didn't once look my way as we waited for the hearing to begin.

There were three judges, Victoria explained that the principle Judge would be the judge of the case if it went for trial. She said the other two judges were there because they had experience in such cases.

The principle Judge, Mary Mathews, opened the hearing and explained that the purpose of the hearing was to allow the parties to state their positions and argue their cases in the hope of resolving their differences. Failing that, the judges present would decide whether the case continue as a criminal trial, a civil trial or go to arbitration. Maggie, Alex and I were asked if we understood and had any questions at this point.

Maggie and Alex both said that they understood and had no questions. Alex looked at me when she spoke. I could not read her expression. I stood and said the same as they had when asked to speak.

Victoria Epps was then asked to explain the charges she had brought against Maggie and Alex Symes.

She was brief and to the point,

“Your honour, I believe that Ms Symes and Mrs Banks have defrauded my client, Joe Banks. Mrs Banks borrowed four million United States dollars from the Panamanian Bank of Credit and Commerce using the home of Joe Banks and the business known as the Downs Animal Rescue Centre as collateral. She did this without the knowledge or consent of my client two weeks, that is ten working days before Ms Symes, acting for both my client and his

then wife, Mrs Banks, divided the assets they had jointly held as equal partners. This division was in settlement of an uncontested divorce initiated by Mrs Banks. The documents provided to the court for the divorce settlement lists all the assets and liabilities of my client and his former wife. The loans do not appear in these documents. My client was not aware of the loans when he agreed to the division of assets and the divorce court was not aware of the loans when they granted the divorce believing both parties to be satisfied with the settlement.”

Victoria paused and poured herself a half glass of water, which she then sipped.

“Are you done Ms Epps?” asked judge Mathews.

“Not yet your Honour,” replied Victoria, “Ms Symes acted for Mrs Banks in obtaining the loan, which was paid to Ms Symes’ Client account, Ms Symes also acted for Mrs Banks in the sale of The Practice veterinary surgery and pet hostel in Nutbourne and the former home of my client and Mrs Banks, The Priory, also in Nutbourne. The business and the properties had been transferred to Mrs Banks as part of the Divorce settlement. There are no loans or liabilities attached to The Practice or The Priory. There were no loans or liabilities connected to any of the properties prior to the divorce other than an outstanding amount on the purchase of Mrs Banks’ Range Rover of forty two thousand pounds, the cost of which was shared equally between my Client and Mrs Banks although Mrs Banks retained the vehicle. My client was made aware of and did not contest this division of the assets.

“Further, my client, after being asked to move out of The Priory, their marital home, which my Client had inherited from his Great Aunt and legal guardian, did purchase a property, 12A Strawberry close in West Ashling. The property was purchased for nine hundred and eighty thousand pounds using the Trust Fund in my Client’s name created for him by his late great aunt. Yet that two bedroomed semi detached property was listed as an asset jointly owned by my client and Margaret Banks in the divorce settlement. That property was valued at two and a half million pounds by the valuers appointed by Ms Symes. The same valuers valued The

Priory in Nutbourne, a five bedroom house with an apple orchard and an extensive garden at one million eight hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

“My client did not contest the valuations nor the division of assets, which deprived him of the home that was his prior to the marriage and which counted the much smaller property that he had purchased using funds from his own trust fund as a jointly owned asset, enabling the division of assets to be unfairly skewed to allow Mrs Banks to retain the large and profitable veterinary practice, leaving my client with the much smaller and barely profitable animal rescue centre.”

Victoria drank the rest of the water in her glass.

“Are you finished now Ms Epps?”

“I have more your honour, but I am happy to allow Ms Symes and Mrs Banks to respond, if it pleases you?”

“Thank you Ms Epps.” The judge looked at Maggie, “Mrs Banks, would you like to respond?”

Maggie stood and cleared her throat, “I would prefer that Alexa... Ms Symes, speaks for me.”

Judge Mathews nodded and looked at Alex Symes, who stood and looked down at her notes.

“Your honour, Ms Epps has reminded us at every turn that Mr Banks has not objected to or contested the divorce settlement at any stage. His recent and sudden refusal to communicate with me or Mrs Banks is baffling and we are mystified by this sudden and totally unnecessary court intervention. If Mr Banks had approached us with his concerns I am confident that we would have been able to resolve the issues without wasting the court’s valuable time and incurring the prohibitive costs of engaging a barrister of Ms Epps’ standing.”

Victoria stood and Judge Mathews waved her back down. She looked at me and then back at Alex before turning back to me.

“Mr Banks, I would like you to answer for yourself. Why did you not approach Ms Symes with your fears? You appeared to trust her to handle the divorce, why this sudden change of heart?”

I opened my mouth and Victoria whispered to me to stand.

“Your honour, I contacted and engaged Ms Epps after I received an email from Ms Symes, asking me if I had any objection to Maggie selling The Practice and The Priory. This was only a few days.... Two weeks I think, after receiving the decree nisi. I thought it strange. We had already done the division of assets. The Practice and the house now legally belonged to Maggie... I mean Mrs Banks. What difference did it make if I objected or not? I had not wanted a divorce. When she asked for it... when it happened ... I knew that I was not thinking straight. I agreed to everything so that the nightmare would end. Then, when I thought it was all over I get a letter asking me if I minded Maggie selling what was now legally hers and nothing to do with me. I realised I needed advice. Someone who wasn't close to Maggie or me, someone who could look at everything and tell me if there was anything awry. Ms Epps was that person.”

“Perhaps you should have engaged Ms Epps before you agreed to the divorce?” suggested the judge. “When and how did you become aware that money had been borrowed against your home and the rescue centre?”

“When Ms Epps informed me, I think that was the day after I first spoke to her.”

“You received no communication from the lender?”

“None your Honour.”

“Did you think that the division of assets was fair and equitable when you agreed to it?” asked one of the other judges, the youngest looking one, on Judge Matthews’s left, a man.

“I just wanted it all over with your Honour, Maggie and I went to high school together. We had been together for twenty years, and we both worked hard so that we could retire young and raise a family.” I turned to look at Maggie, “It never occurred to me to deny her anything, I was still trying to understand how our marriage had fallen apart.”

The judge looked irritated, “What about now, disregarding the loan, do you think that you were cheated out of your fair share of the assets you had owned before the divorce?”

“Yes, even then I realised that the valuations were off, but it was enough for me.”

“You had no objection to her taking the home you inherited and including it and the house you had purchased in the value of shared assets?”

“We were married, there was no hers and mine, everything we owned was ours. Shared equally,” I said.

“Why did you agree to the divorce if you didn’t want to be divorced?” asked the same judge, looking at me as if I was an idiot.

I stood straighter and looked him in the eye, “You can’t force someone to love you. When the only person you have ever loved, the person you have lived with and spent twenty years helping to make her dreams come true doesn’t want you any more, what can you do? What would you do?”

“Thank you Mr Banks, you can sit now,” said Judge Mathews. She turned her head to the judge who hadn’t spoken and spoke quietly to him. He nodded and passed a sheet of paper to her.

Victoria patted my wrist, “Well done Joe. Stay calm, Judge Williamson is clearly playing bad cop today,” she whispered.

“Judge Fine is resting his throat today, so I shall read out his questions,” said Judge Mathews. She looked at Maggie, “This is for you, Mrs Banks. Why did you borrow the money from BCC Panama?”

Maggie stood, “We ... I needed more money to buy the property we... I wanted in Melbourne.” I could hear the fear in her voice. Strangely, it didn't concern me any more.

“Why did you use Mr Banks properties as collateral? Why not use the two properties that belonged to you?”

“They had al... I wanted to sell them,” said Maggie.

Judge Mathews whispered to Judge Fine who nodded, before turning back to Maggie, “How were you intending to repay the loan?”

Maggie went bright red. Alex tapped a sheet of paper that she had slid in front of Maggie, who looked at it and shook her head before looking up at the Judge, “I was going to ask Joe to repay it... he is good with money. I was sure he would help.”

Victoria stood. Judge Mathews looked at her, “Yes Ms. Epps?”

“Thank you your honour,” said Victoria, “It is my understanding that the veterinary practice and The Priory have both been sold.”

The judge turned back to Maggie, “Is this correct Mrs Banks?”

Alex whispered to Maggie, who nodded before getting to her feet again.

“We have accepted offers on The Practice and The Priory,” she said so quietly that Judge Mathews asked her to speak a little louder.

Maggie repeated her answer more loudly, her voice displaying her nervousness.

Judge Mathews nodded, “Perhaps you can provide a more comprehensive answer Ms Symes? What were the business and house sold for, to whom and how much has been paid?”

Maggie and Alex had a short whispered conversation before Alex got to her feet, “Your honour my client would prefer not to disclose the amounts at this time, believing it would prejudice the court.”

“This is not a trial, Ms Symes, and I cannot compel you to answer, as you are no doubt aware. However, I advise you strongly to do so. The allegations against you are serious, and I am inclined, as of this moment to recommend a criminal trial. You may discuss this with your client. This hearing is adjourned for fifteen minutes.”

I really wanted a coffee and hurried off to get one from the Bus Station canteen. I heard and then saw Denise’s distinctive bright red motorbike as she headed south.

I was late and apologised as I made my way to sit next to Victoria. Judge Mathew’s seemed unconcerned, she just nodded and waited till I had sat, before speaking,

“Well, Ms Symes, now that you have had time to discuss this with your client, what is your response?”

“Your honour, we decline to answer,” said Alex, sounding and looking nervous.

Judge Mathews nodded, but said nothing for a while, before turning first to Judge Williamson and then to Judge Fine who both nodded. Judge Mathews drew a deep breath before speaking.

“Very well. This brings us to our conclusion; Judge Fine, Judge Williamson and I agree that this matter be settled by trial in a criminal court. Ms Sykes and Mrs Banks, you are jointly charged with two counts of fraud in that you borrowed four million United States Dollars from...” she hesitated and looked down at a sheet of paper she was holding, “The Bank of Credit and Commerce in Panama City, unlawfully using the property of your former spouse as collateral for that loan, without his knowledge or consent.” She

looked at me and Victoria for a while before turning her head back to Alex and Maggie, who were holding hands and looking very pale, “I am sure that other charges will follow in due course. You will be detained and remain in custody and brought back before me...” she looked at her notes again before continuing, “At ten, on Wednesday, the third of May.”

Alex whispered to Maggie, clearly reassuring her and urging her to sit, before straightening herself and facing the Judges.

Judge Mathews nodded, “You may respond Ms Symes.”

“Your Honour, is it necessary to detain me and my client?” She asked shakily, “Detention will damage my reputation as a lawyer and my client as a respected and well known local veterinary health practitioner.

Judge Fine passed a piece of paper to Judge Mathews, who showed it to Judge Williamson. He nodded and returned it to her. Judge Mathews considered for a moment, before answering.

“Ms Symes, the theft, as it appears to be, of four million United States dollars is in itself sufficient grounds for detention and trial. Your refusal to respond on the value of the transactions on the property, obtained, in the opinion of the judges present, dishonestly, in the divorce settlement between your client and her former husband, combined with your client’s admission that the proceeds of the sale and the money borrowed were for the purchase of property in Australia indicate an intention to leave this country. It would be negligent of me not to order your detention.” She turned her head to look at a court official and instructed her to arrange for Alex and Maggie to be formally charged, detained and held in custody till the bail hearing on Wednesday. A police woman approached and Alex and Maggie were led away. Maggie was crying.

“Are you alright?” asked Victoria quietly.

I nodded, “Yes, I think so. Numb really. Thank you Victoria.”

“I’m sorry it has to go to trial,” she said, “I was hoping they would offer to repay the loan and accept an admonishment.”

Judge Mathews closed the hearing. I wasn’t really paying attention to what she said. Victoria excused herself when the courtroom emptied, saying she would keep me informed. She didn’t leave the court but went through the door the judges had used.

Martin and Cindy were waiting for me at the door.

“Are you alright Joe?” asked Martin, “That must have been hard on you, seeing Maggie being jailed.”

I nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“Denise asked me to tell you she was taking some days off,” said Martin, looking at me questioningly.

“Thanks Martin,” I said when I realised that he expected a response from me, “Thanks for coming. I’m sorry about your job Cindy,”

“She got three and a half million pounds for The Practice,” said Cindy, “The new administrator told me. That was before they let me go,” she added defiantly.

“Who bought it?” I asked. I was feeling a bit faint and wanted to get away.

“South Africans,” said Cindy, “They have a small surgery in Lavant.”

I had a sudden thought, “Look, Cindy, I can’t offer you a full time position, not till this is all over and I know where the Centre stands, financially, but would you consider working there for a while. I need to step back a bit, and with Denise away...”

Cindy smiled and nodded enthusiastically, clutching Martin’s arm.

“Let me have copies of your last three payslips,” I said, “Martin can show you the ropes, and you can share my office... I’ll get a key cut today.”

“Thanks Boss,” said Martin, looking a lot happier, “I’ll let the others know. You did well in there.” He hesitated, then reached out and patted my shoulder, “It will be OK.”

I walked back to the Harbour hotel and ordered a cheese omelette with extra bacon and mushrooms before checking my phone. There was a message from Denise.

“Sorry, can’t make it on Sunday. Am taking some time off. Take care. XXX.”

There was a row of hug emojis below the text. I responded with a thumbs up and answered the work related messages until there was a knock on my door. Room service; my long delayed breakfast had arrived.

I checked out an hour later, begrudgingly accepting the cost of an additional night’s stay because of my late check out. I got a taxi to take me home.

Margaret and her daughter were taking turns at mowing their tiny front lawn with a push mower.

I was unlocking the front door when I realised I had paid for windsurfing lessons for Sunday. I got my phone out and walked over to my neighbours.

“Hi Margaret, hi Lynne,” I said when Lynne stopped pushing the mower, “Are either of you interested in windsurfing? I’ve paid for a couple of two hour wind surfing sessions at West Wittering for Sunday morning, but something has come up and I can’t do it. Would you like them? I am sure they will rearrange the times if you call them now.”

“That sound great!” said Lynne, “How much do you want?”

I shook my head, “Nothing, but I wouldn’t mind borrowing your mower if you don’t mind. It looks like good exercise and much quieter than my electric mower.”

“Thanks” said Lynne smiling widely.

“You can have the bloody thing,” said Margaret, “Want to swap mowers? It’s brand new.”

I happily swapped mowers and asked Lynne for her mobile number so that I could send her the booking confirmations from 2XS. I sent a message to 2XS informing them that I had given my bookings to Lynne Essam.

I cursed myself when I realised that I had forgotten to get a key cut for Cindy, then drove back to Chichester and had a key cut at Covers. I drove to The Centre. Cathy was the only person there. She smiled and asked how I was feeling and told me that Martin and Cindy had told her about the hearing. I gave her the key and asked her to give it to Cindy, then spent a short while clearing the small desk that had accumulated all the “dead” files that I hadn’t got around to putting through the paper shredder. We used a lot of shredded paper in the Centre.

Cindy, Martin and Victor returned sounding cheerful after releasing an injured Kestrel that had made a full recovery. Victor started editing the video he had taken of the Kestrel’s time with us to put on our web page.

Cindy thanked me again and promised not to let me down. She seemed pleased with her desk and said she had a laptop she could use rather than share the PC in the staff room.

“They are nice you know,” she said suddenly.

“Who?” I asked, I had been searching my laptop for an email I thought I might not have responded to from one of my editing clients.

“The new owners of the Practice. They were very apologetic about letting me go, but Mavis, their receptionist has been with them for ten years. She is also a South African, a single mum.”

“Good to know,” I said, “Let’s hope they will continue to give us discounted services.”

“They offered me work on Saturdays, Mavis doesn’t work Saturdays, she goes to Church on Saturdays. I hope you don’t mind?”

“No, that’s fine by me,” I said, “I haven’t written your position up yet, it will be Monday to Friday, eight till four thirty.”

“Cathy suggested I write something up myself, for your approval, is that OK?”

I nodded, “Sure, that’s what most of the others did.”

“May I ask you a personal question?” asked Cindy.

“Sure, I might not answer,” I said, realising that I was going to have to arrange a separate office for Cindy if I wanted to get any work done.

“Had you really never met Alexa Symes before today?”

“Not that I am aware of,” I said, “We emailed each other after Maggie said she wanted a divorce. Why do you ask?”

“Well... I’m not suggesting anything improper” said Cindy, “But I thought she was a friend of the family, you and Maggie I mean. She has always seemed to get on well with Maggie, ever since I started at the Practice, that’s over three years ago. She has two lovely Afghan hounds, and brought them for grooming every Friday.” She frowned, “I hope they are going to be alright!”

“Give her a call and make arrangements for them to be looked after,” I suggested.

“Thanks Joe... may I call you Joe?”

I nodded and suppressed a groan as she called The Practice on her cell phone to get Alex Symes’s number.

I stayed late, and carried all my files to the Land Rover, having decided to work from home till I got round to getting Cindy an office of her own. I also took my kneeling chair and would swap my desk with the one in my spare bedroom later. Having made the decision I felt better for it, and decided to clean up my laptop and leave that for Cindy as well. I would get a new one for myself.

I was getting ready for bed before I realised it was Friday and that I had missed my outing to the Fox and Hounds. I would not have enjoyed it without Denise.

I was up early on Saturday and managed to dismantle the desk in the spare bedroom and get it loaded into the Land Rover by six. By seven I had assembled the desk in my office at The Centre. Victor helped me to load my old desk into the van and helped me get it up the stairs into my spare bedroom. It was really heavy. I went to PC World and got a new laptop, a portable hard drive and a new office chair for Cindy, then drove home and made myself a huge plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. It was six PM before I was finished setting up my new laptop and cleaning up my old one. I had a stinking headache and a sore neck.

I was at the Sports Centre before they opened on Sunday, and swam for two hours. I was exhausted when I finally got out of the pool. I went to Paradiso for breakfast and stayed there till eleven writing, then went home and used the push mower on my front lawn. It was hard work, but I loved it.

I had an early night and slept soundly till four. I managed to walk for an hour, have breakfast and deliver my old laptop and the new office chair to The Centre and leave before Cathy arrived to open up.

There was a card in my letter box from Lynne, thanking me for the Windsurfing and saying that she and her mum had really enjoyed it.

At nine I received a message from Victoria Epps asking me to call her between ten and twelve.

A few minutes later Cindy called me. She thanked me for the laptop and new chair and told me that Alexa's Afghan hounds had been flown to Australia and were in quarantine there. It had been arranged by the new owners of The Practice, from their Lavant surgery. "Mavis says she will send me all the details," said Cindy, "She says it was arranged weeks, ago."

I thanked her and asked her to email me with whatever she got.

Ten minutes later I forwarded her email to Victoria.

I called Victoria at ten thirty, she answered immediately.

"Hello Joe, thanks for calling, and the email. This is very useful information. I haven't managed to confirm the price paid for The Practice yet, but three and a half million pounds does not sound unreasonable to me. The Priory was sold for four million two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I have confirmed that and should be able to confirm the final price agreed for the Practice by the end of today. Even without it, I think we have enough to convince the Judge on Wednesday. It appears that Ms Symes has also sold her house and car, and that Maggie's Range Rover has also been sold. I am certain that neither of them will be allowed bail."

"How long before this is all over?" I asked her.

"I can't say for certain Joe, hopefully less than three months, but these things can drag on. We acted quickly, so I am hoping that this can be salvaged. The Priory was sold to an Investment company in London, and they have only paid the ten percent deposit so far. The judge may be able to order the repayment of the loan to The Bank of Credit and Commerce from the balance due on the sale. If, as I suspect, the money from Kruger Veterinary Services has already been paid into an oversea's account, that will complicate things."

"Do I have to be at the court on Wednesday?" I asked.

“You don’t have to attend, but you should, Joe. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine how you are feeling but I’m certain it’s not good. Please be there?”

“I’ll be there,” I said.

Victoria thanked me and disconnected.

I managed to get quite a lot done that afternoon, and was up at five on Tuesday morning and hard at work by seven having walked for an hour before making myself breakfast. I walked around the village at midday and was surprised to see what I thought was Denise’s motorbike outside the Richmond Arms. I went in but couldn’t see her. There was a young man at the bar, wearing bike leathers.

I really wanted to call Denise but couldn’t muster the courage, instead I applied myself to clearing the back log of editing and computer modelling work that had accumulated over the previous two weeks. I worked until eight PM, walked for an hour and a half and slept well that night.

I had a lot of trouble finding parking in Chichester on Wednesday morning and had to run to get to the court before ten. Victoria was waiting for me and looked pleased with herself.

“Judge Mathews has agreed to allow me to ask Ms Symes and Maggie to reconsider before discussing bail. They aren’t going to get bail; that much is certain.”

We used a smaller court room, and it was only Judge Mathews, the recorder, a court official and a police woman, as well as Alex Symes, Maggie, Victoria Epps and me.

“Before we begin,” said Judge Mathews, “Ms Epps has prevailed on me to allow her to address you directly in order to persuade you to avoid going to trial. I advise you to listen to her carefully.” She turned to Victoria, “Please proceed?”

Victoria stood, “Thank you your Honour.” She turned to Alex and Maggie, “I have no wish to embarrass either of you, but my duty is

to my client, Mr Joe Banks. In ordinary circumstances, your relationship with each other would be none of anybody else's business, but these are not ordinary circumstances. I know and can prove that you, Alex or Alexa and you Maggie have been in an intimate relationship for several years. I know that you have paid the ten percent deposit on a five million Australian dollar four acre property in Melbourne, Australia in both your names and that you have applied for and received resident status in Australia, which you will lose if you get convicted of a crime in England, I know that your two Afghan hounds are currently in the Peaberry Quarantine Centre in Melbourne and that you have a shipping container filled with personal items on its way to Australia. I believe and I am certain that I can prove to the satisfaction of the courts that you manipulated the value of the properties and businesses owned jointly by Joe and Maggie Banks to deprive him of his rightful share of those assets and I have already exposed your attempt to steal what he had left by unlawfully using the assets he did get as collateral for a loan that only you benefitted from and had no intention of repaying."

Victoria stopped and looked at her notes.

Judge Mathews spoke before Victoria could continue, "I have seen the evidence that Ms Epps has acquired," she said, "And I am sure you understand how this will end if it goes to trial Ms Symes. Would you like a moment to confer with Mrs Banks?"

Alex stood, "Thank you your Honour. If I may, you mentioned avoiding a trial, please could you expand on that?"

Judge Mathews looked at Victoria and asked her to explain.

Victoria stood and put her hand on my shoulder before she spoke, "Joe Banks has been deceived, lied to, stolen from and wronged. If he had not sought legal advice he would have been bankrupted by the woman he had loved since he was sixteen and had been married to for twenty years. You used him. You used him to create the wealth that you then tried to steal from him. You were not satisfied with taking the estimated six million pounds of assets that

he agreed to let you keep as part of the divorce settlement, you wanted it all.”

Victoria squeezed my shoulder and then removed her hand, “I want to crucify the pair of you, But Joe ...” Victoria paused, I couldn’t look at anybody, my pulse was loud in my ears and I wanted to get up and walk away. Victoria continued quietly, she sounded somehow regretful, “Joe does not want revenge, he does not want to apply to have the divorce settlement annulled by the courts, he does not want to prosecute for theft by deception and sue for divorce on grounds of infidelity. Joe wants to move on, to get on with his life. So, repay the money you borrowed from The Credit and Commerce Bank of Panama and you can go and start your new lives in Australia, albeit with a smaller house than the one you were planning on.”

I felt sick and wanted to throw up. I loosened my tie and undid the top button of my shirt. I started sweating and wondered if I eaten something bad. I wasn’t listening to whoever was speaking. A burning sensation grew in my chest and I thought I was having an heart attack. I felt someone shaking my arm. It was Victoria, looking concerned, her mouth moved and it took a while to register what she was saying, I was struggling to breath, sipping in air through clenched teeth as I struggled to contain the pain in my chest. I closed my eyes and concentrated on trying to control my breathing. I really wanted to scream. At some level I realised that I was being moved. I felt cool moist air on my face and opened my eyes just as I was put into an ambulance. I closed my eyes again.

I woke in a hospital bed, I struggled to stay awake and gave up. It was dark when I woke again. I looked around, I was in a ward with six beds, two were empty. I had a drip line attached to my left arm. I felt light headed, almost drunk, and my eyes, when I tried to look around, seemed to move sluggishly. I reached up and felt my chest, there was a dull ache inside my chest, but my fingers couldn’t find anything. I hadn’t been opened up. I felt an enormous flood of relief, I hadn’t had an heart attack. I managed to sit up and felt dizzy. I swung my legs off the bed and was trying to work out how to remove the drip from my arm when a nurse came in and ran to stop me.

“Please stay in the bed Mr Banks,” she said, “Do you need a bed pan?”

My head felt really weird as it swung to look at her, “What’s wrong with me?” I asked, “I feel wobbly.” My voice sounded wrong.

“It’s the painkillers Mr Banks, please just lie down?”

“I need to pee, and I am not peeing in bed,” I insisted and tried to get off the bed.

The nurse caught me and really struggled to get me back on the bed. I stabbed my cheek on something in her breast pocket. I tried to apologise and passed out.

It was still dark when I woke again. The pain in my chest was bad, there were safety rails on the side of the bed. They made it easier to sit up. A male nurse was half asleep in a chair next to my bed. He got up, and put a hand on my arm, “Just relax Mr Banks,” he said “How are you feeling?”

Apart from the pain in my chest I felt a bit better. Not so wobbly as I had.

“My chest hurts,” I said, “And I really need to pee.”

“OK, let me help you?” he said, “Don’t try and walk by yourself.”

He was strong; he carried the drip in one hand and helped to steady me with his other hand. I managed to take my weight after a few steps but he told me not to rush.

“You have Shingles Mr. Banks,” he said, “It’s extremely painful but not serious, it will take a while to get the pain medication right but you should be able to go home tomorrow.”

I had a dressing on my cheek, apparently I had stabbed myself on the scissors in the nurse’s breast pocket.

Victoria visited me in the morning, she looked cheerful and handed me a paper bag with a croissant in it and a take away Costa Coffee. I thanked her for the coffee and handed her back the paper bag.

Victoria cheerfully ate the Croissant after I told her I didn't eat carbs.

"You are looking much better than when I last saw you Joe, we thought you were having an heart attack. You had gone grey."

"Shingles," I said, "Sounds like something you make roofs with."

She smiled and picked a flake of croissant off her lip, "Shingles is horrible, I had it just before my A level finals. It was the stress apparently, I hadn't come out yet and was so determined to do well..." she laughed, "The itch, when it comes, is even worse than the pain. I still have scars from the scratching I did."

"Thanks," I said, "You have a terrible bed side manner."

Victoria laughed louder, then apologised, "I'm sorry Joe. I'm just so relieved that you are OK, I felt terrible and couldn't get to sleep till I heard that it was Shingles and not something serious."

"It's not your fault that I have a disease," I told her, "The nurse says it has something to do with chicken pox, which stays dormant in your nervous system and attacks some sort of sheath around the nerves, which is why it is so painful."

Victoria nodded, "The good news is that it isn't anywhere near your eyes, apparently it can cause blindness. More good news, Maggie and Alex are cooperating and have agreed to repay the money they borrowed. Judge Mathews will not release them until the bank has confirmed that the debt is paid."

"What will happen to them?"

Victoria shrugged, "Judge Mathews has agreed to release them when the debt and costs are paid. I am certain she will make sure that Alex Symes is unable to practice law again, ever, but other than that, and barring anything else coming to light, they get away with it."

They will probably lose the deposit they have paid on the Melbourne property, half a million Australian dollars. How are you feeling Joe? Really?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "I am not thinking clearly. How did you find out... about..."

"I'm a lesbian Joe," she said quietly, "I knew as soon as I saw them at the hearing. It didn't take many phone calls to find someone who knew Alexa well enough to confirm that she and Maggie have been in a relationship. I'm sorry Joe, it must have hurt."

"How long has it been going on?"

"At least five years," said Victoria, "Sorry."

I nodded, "You have nothing to apologise for," I said, "Thank you for everything."

"How did you find the details of the property in Melbourne? Do you have a relative living there?"

"Not that I know of," I said, "I had nothing to do with it."

Victoria looked surprised, "I got a WhatsApp message saying that Alexa Symes and Margaret Banks had paid the deposit for the property with photos of the property and a link to the properties page on the Estate Agent's website. I assumed you had arranged it."

I shook my head, "Not me, sorry."

Victoria left, promising to keep me informed.

By eleven AM, I had been discharged with a bag full of medication that I had to take every four hours and some calamine lotion to apply to the rash that spread in a six inch wide band from my spine, just below my shoulder blades and around my ribs on the left side of my chest to my sternum. It was quite livid.

My Land Rover had been clamped. It took two hours and two hundred pounds to have it removed. The clamping company suggested I ask a lawyer to get my money back when I told them I had been rushed to hospital and kept overnight.

My phone had gone flat by the time I got home. I put it on charge and went to bed. I got through the night well enough, the pain medication was pretty good, but by four in the morning the itch was driving me insane. The calamine lotion only really helped while I was applying it.

I found a really hot shower was the best thing, it stopped the itch for about half an hour.

I went on line and googled Shingles, searching for something, ANYTHING to help me with the itch. Some people recommended soaking in a bath of hot water and vinegar. My flat doesn't have a bath. Several people recommended chilli powder. I didn't have any, but I did have some pickled jalapeños. I put them in the blender and smoothed the paste on the rash. It helped, I had run out of hot water by seven AM. I drove to the CoOp shop and bought every container of chilli powder they had. I was served by the bleary eyed lad who opened the store.

I drove to The Centre and asked Cathy to spread chilli powder on the rash on my back. She looked almost frightened when I pulled off my T shirt. The relief was instant.

Martin and Cindy came in while I was making a mess of spreading chilli powder on my ribs with a wooden tongue depressor. By the time Victor arrived I had my T Shirt on. I told them that Maggie had agreed to repay the loan to the Bank in Panama, and that we should be fine.

Cathy complained that her hands were burning from the chilli powder. Victor told me to make a paste of chilli powder and coconut oil to spread on the rash. I was back home before ten, desperate for a scalding hot shower.

The coconut oil and chilli powder paste worked really well, but I struggled with spreading it on my back. I eventually managed using the fish slice in the bathroom where I could see my back using the mirrors on the bathroom cabinet and over the basin. I spent more time cleaning the bathroom floor than applying paste.

It was Friday. I walked to the Richmond Arms, and had grilled lamb chops and salad and a cider. The pub was crowded.

I walked home and scalded my rash in the shower, before lathering it with chilli and coconut oil paste. After putting on an old sweat shirt, I slept surprisingly well.

I decided against swimming in the morning. The pain in my chest was a very dull ache and the rash no longer itched so intensely. I scalded it in the shower anyway and found myself enjoying the sensation, it was exquisite pain. I thought that perhaps I was some sort of pervert. I applied more paste, then set off for Kingsley Vale on foot.

Sweating revived the itch, but it was bearable, and I really enjoyed scalding the itch in the shower when I got home. I was exhausted and went to bed and woke when the doorbell rang.

It was Denise, she looked tired and had black rings around her eyes

“May I come in?” she asked quietly, she was dressed in jeans and a T Shirt with a denim jacket tied around her waist.

I opened the door wide and smiled, “Sorry, I was asleep. Can I make you a cappuccino?”

“Yes please,” she said, “I didn’t mean to wake you, but Cathy said you had Shingles.”

“It’s not contagious,” I told her, “Though I shouldn’t get too close to pregnant women.”

“I’m not pregnant,” said Denise with a hint of a smile. “Are you OK Joe?”

I nodded, “Yes, I think so. Shingles is under control and Maggie has agreed to repay the loan,”

“Shingles is brought on by stress, you know that, don’t you?”

I nodded, “That’s what they say. Are you OK? You look really tired.”

“I am tired,” she admitted, “But I’m fine and pleased to see you again.

I could see that Denise was struggling to stay awake as she sat with her cappuccino.

“Why don’t you have a nap?” I suggested, “I need to change the sheets on my bed and you can use that while I catch up on some work.”

Denise yawned, “Cathy says you’ve moved out of your office and taken on Cindy. Is this a permanent thing?”

I shrugged, “I’m figuring things out as I go along,” I said, “I’m not much good at sharing an office, so if Cindy becomes a permanent fixture, I’ll have to arrange a separate working space for one of us.”

“I liked knowing you were there,” said Denise, “I think we all felt better, knowing that you were there watching out for us and being ready to help if there was a problem.” She yawned again, “I’d like a shower and a nap, if you really don’t mind? Can I borrow a towel and your dressing gown?”

I spent a couple of hours on the computer, then went downstairs with my iPad and got on with some writing. I fell asleep and woke with a stiff neck. Denise was curled up in an armchair opposite me reading a book. She was wrapped up and looking a bit like ET in my dressing gown.

She looked at me and smiled, "Feeling better for that?" she asked. "I certainly am."

"Much better," I said getting up and stretching. The pain in my chest reminded me that I needed to take my meds. I excused myself and showered, enjoying scalding my rash, then smeared chilli and coconut paste over it. Denise was dressed and folding the sheets from the dryer when I came downstairs.

"I know it's not Friday, but how about a meal at the Fox and Hounds and a game of darts?" I suggested.

"Sounds good to me," said Denise, can I bring my bicycle in, actually it's Paula's and it doesn't have a lock. I'd feel bad if someone nicked it."

"You cycled here?" I asked, "What happened to your motorbike?"

"I sold it," said Denise, "I needed the money and..." She shrugged, "I'll get another bike one day."

"I could have lent you money," I said, "You should have asked! You loved that bike, and I loved seeing you on it."

"Och... what's done is done, and I'll hear no more about it," she said, sounding very Scottish. She went bright red then apologised, "I'm so sorry - I sounded just like my father then, but really, I'd really rather not talk about my bike. I do miss it, but I would sell it again if I had to."

She wheeled a battered looking bicycle into the entrance hall, and we set off for the Fox and Hounds. It was quite busy but we managed to get a table and both ordered the curry, I asked them to do me a double portion of curry and poppadoms but no rice. Denise surprised me by having a glass of white wine with her curry.

"How are you feeling about Maggie?" asked Denise while we were eating.

I smiled, "A bit like you feel about your bike," I said, "I'd do it again if I had to, but I don't feel up to talking about it."

"Which bit would you do again, I just want to be clear and then I'll ask you no more."

"I'd take her to court again without hesitation," I said.

My face must have shown something of what I felt, because Denise reached across the table and put her hand on mine, "I'm so sorry for bringing it up Joe."

"It's OK," I said, "I know I have to process it eventually but I just can't go there now."

"So what surprise did I miss on Sunday?" asked Denise, clearly trying to change the subject.

"Mowing the lawn," I told her, "I've got one of those push lawnmowers, I thought you would enjoy using it while I cooked lunch for us."

Denise gave me an incredulous look, "Yeah, that would have been fun! Not!"

"It's good exercise though," I said, "Perhaps another day?"

"You're not even sweating," said Denise, "This curry is hot!" She drank some more wine.

We walked back and Denise said she ought to be heading back. It wasn't fully dark, but it was dark enough and there were no lights on the bike.

"You can't ride home on that," I protested, "Stay the night and I'll drive you and the bike home tomorrow."

"I feel like I am imposing on you."

“Nonsense, I enjoy your company,” I said, “Cappuccino and chocolate?”

“Only if you are having some,” she said, “In which case I would really love some. Thanks Joe, I like your company too.”

Denise found herself another book while I made the cappuccino. She put it down and smiled when I handed her the cappuccino and chocolate.

“It surprises me how much I like it that you do not have a TV!” she said, “I wanted one because my dad refused to let us have one, but really, I can’t stand most of the stuff that Paula watches.”

“Maggie had the TV on as soon as she woke and often fell asleep on the couch watching it,” I said, “I was going to get one of those huge flat screen things when I bought this place, but they were so expensive. By the time I had saved up enough, I realised that I had enjoyed not having a TV.”

“Do you like films?” asked Denise.

“It depends on the film,” I said, “I love the way you say films. It’s very Scottish. Do you speak Gaelic?”

Denise shook her head, “No, not a word. I thought of learning it, but it’s not much use in Sussex. Do you go to the Cinema at all?”

I shook my head, “The last time I went was... over twenty years ago I think. Before I even knew Maggie. The cinema used to be in East Street. It’s by Covers now.”

“You’re not a Presbyterian are you?” asked Denise, “All work and no play.”

“I went to Sunday school till I was thirteen. My Nan insisted, I think it was Church of England, I’m not convinced by any religion, if there is a God, it certainly has no interest or control of anything that happens on this planet.”

My rash started to itch, "I need to take my medicine and scald my rash under a hot shower," I said, getting up.

"Can I see it?"

I unbuttoned my shirt and pulled off the T shirt I had been wearing and turned full circle so she could see the rash.

Denise grimaced, "That looks very uncomfortable, does it hurt?"

"The pain is in my chest, just a dull ache now, but it felt like I had a burning spear in my chest when I first had it. The rash doesn't hurt, but it itches like the mother of all itches. They gave me calamine lotion for it, which helps for about ten seconds. Victoria Epps said she has scars from scratching the Shingles rash she had when she did her A levels. I can believe it. I wanted to tear my skin off."

"Is it itchy now?" asked Denise, "It looks itchy."

"It is a bit, but nothing like it was before I learned to use Chilli Powder on it. I scald it in an almost unbearably hot shower and then put on a paste of chilli powder and coconut oil. The itch vanishes."

"Chilli powder, and scalding - you are a Protestant!" said Denise looking horrified.

"The scalding feels wonderful actually," I said, "And the chilli powder doesn't sting at all, though Cathy complained that it made her hands feel like they were burning when she helped me to put some on the first time. It was Victor that suggested I mix it with coconut oil rather than try to sprinkle the powder on myself."

"Let me know when you are ready and I'll do your back," said Denise, "Do you have any surgical gloves?"

Half an hour later, when she was carefully spreading the paste on my ribs and back using a wooden tongue depressor, Denise asked me how I had managed to paste my back and I told her I used the fish slice. She shook her head.

“If you want I can stay here for a while and do it for you?” she said, “I’ll sleep on the couch and you can drive me to work and back. I’ll look for some wheels after payday.”

“I would like that,” I said carefully, “You are very kind.”

“Kind of something, I’m not sure what,” she said, grimacing, “Is this really not hurting you? It looks awful painful!”

“The rash is on the nerves, I think. That messes up how they work. It doesn’t hurt at all and the itch is gone.”

“Well, I don’t ever want to get it,” said Denise, “OK, you’re all slathered up and basted like a Portuguese Chicken. We should go to the cinema and try Nando’s after.”

My phone rang shortly afterwards, it was Victoria, “Put on your Telly,” she said, “Channel four?” She sounded concerned.

“I don’t have a TV, what is it?”

“Really? Someone has talked to the press, it’s on the news. It’s awful really. You should go away somewhere. I am so sorry Joe.”

“What are they saying?” I asked.

Denise’s phone, which was charging in the kitchen started to ring. She ran to answer it.

“It’s typical press hyperbole, I’ll turn it up for you to hear.”

I listened as a woman went on about how Joseph Banks, owner of the Downs Animal Rescue Centre and The Nutbourne Veterinary Practice had collapsed in court after learning that his wife, the well known race horse Veterinarian, Margaret Banks, had planned to elope with her lesbian lover after selling everything they owned and leaving him heavily in debt.

“Are you there Joe?” asked Victoria, muting the TV.

“Her name is Marjorie, not Margaret, she hated the name Marjorie and prefers to be called Maggie,” I said stupidly, “After Maggie Thatcher, her idol.”

“Joe, can you pack your bags and go somewhere for a few days till the vultures find someone else to crucify with their distortions? Whatever you do, please do not try to tell your side of the story? You will not recognise the words you have said when they present them to the world.”

“Yes, I suppose it makes sense,” I said, “Thanks for calling and warning me.”

“Switch off your phone and get a new SIM card,” she said. I will email you when I need to tell you anything.”

Victoria disconnected. Denise was staring at me, holding her phone against her chest and looking distressed.

I shrugged, “Can you give me a lift to the station?” I asked, “You can stay here and use the Land Rover till I get back.”

“Where are you going?”

“London probably, hopefully just for a few days, till the press move onto something else. What did Cathy say, she sounded upset?”

“That they were saying hurtful things about you on the local news channel, because of Maggie and Alexa. She was in tears; she’s very fragile at the moment because of her mum and dad divorcing.”

I swore softly and Denise came close and carefully put her arms around my waist, giving me a hug. When she stepped back her eyes were moist.

“Go and get packed,” she said, “Don’t forget your chilli paste and the fish slice.”

I managed to get a train from Bosham. Denise was reluctant to use my flat and Land Rover and I told her I would be grateful if she would check up on it regularly if she didn't want to stay there.

The train spent hours stationary in the middle of nowhere. It was almost midnight when it finally reached Victoria. I got a huge room in the hotel above the station, and immediately scalded my rash in the shower. I had trouble sleeping and eventually went out for a walk sometime after four AM. The sidewalks were filthy and I was surprised at how many people were living rough.

I was back at the hotel before six, and enjoyed a long scalding hot soak in the huge bath.

Breakfast was dismal. While I was at breakfast I used my phone and eventually found a hotel right on the edge of Hyde Park that I could better afford. I decided to take a look at it before booking a room and walked, using Google maps and my ear buds to get there. After a few wrong turns, I got the hang of the instructions and eventually reached the Hospitality Inn on the Park. It was on the very busy Bayswater road. The reception staff were nice enough, the room was adequate, so I paid for one night.

The rash on my back had begun to itch a lot from carrying my rucksack, I practically tore my clothes off in my rush to get into the shower when I had finally checked in.

I spent the day wandering around London, more or less aimlessly. The prices of coffee in cafes shocked me. I spent quite a long time sitting on park benches. I watched the changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace.

I checked my email when I returned to the hotel, it was after six PM.

Nothing from Victoria, but two emails from Cindy, saying that she had tried to call me. Reporters had come to the Centre and were asking about me.

I wrote back, telling her that I had switched off my phone, because I didn't want to deal with the press, and said I intended to stay away from the Centre till all the fuss had gone away.

One of my Architect clients had emailed me asking me to draw a 3D model of a conservatory she had designed for a client. She added just one "personal" line. "I am sure you will weather the storm of foulness the press has brought to your door. Don't let them get under your skin." She was the one who had recommended Victoria Epps to me.

By ten PM I had done the 3D modelling and emailed it to her, thanking her for recommending Victoria Epps, who had "Saved me from Hell."

I slept surprisingly well, and only woke at seven. I went straight down to breakfast after showering. After a huge helping of scrambled eggs, crispy bacon and mushrooms and several mugs of coffee, I went down to reception and extended my stay for the rest of the week.

I bought myself a new phone and went in search of a flask. An hour later I was back at the hotel, filling my flask with coffee. I then set off for St James Park.

It was past midday before I had finished setting up my new phone and transferring all the contact details across. There was an email from St Richard's asking me to come in for a check up on my Shingles. They had tried and failed to call me.

I wrote back to say I was away for the foreseeable future, but that the shingles seemed to be getting better with very little pain and discomfort.

I realised that my rash was not bothering me at all. The sound of a motorbike made me look up from the bench I was on, and got me thinking. After half an hour I had made my mind up. I used my phone and by three I had found and walked to a showroom, where a very pretty young woman showed me the motorbikes they had. I found one that looked like Denise's bike, but it was green and white.

She said she could probably find me a red one and took my number, promising to call within the next day or two.

I walked back to the Hotel feeling a lot better.

There were several emails. I read the one from Victoria first. She had returned the money I had paid her, saying that she had recovered her fees from the costs awarded against Alex and Maggie, which had been paid in full. She also informed me that she would like to take action against two magazines and one tabloid paper for printing defamatory and totally untrue content about me. She offered to send me copies of the articles but warned that they would upset me. She said that she doubted that they would risk going to trial, and would publish retractions and pay enough to cover her legal costs.

I wrote back thanking her and asking her to do what she thought best. I said I didn't want to read the articles.

Cindy had also emailed, so I learned some of what had been written about me. It didn't upset me as much as I thought, but I would rather not have read it. I told Cindy that I didn't really want to know what was being said about me, or Maggie and Alex, which is why I had stayed away. I hoped she would take the hint.

The rest were work related, I refilled my coffee flask and walked across the horribly busy Bayswater Road and managed to do some of the editing sitting on a bench in Hyde Park, watching people feed the water fowl and a really tame squirrel.

I went back to the Hotel around eight PM, showered, spread more paste on my rash, and slept late again. I suspected that the roar of traffic outside helped me to sleep.

I had another huge breakfast, snagged three slices of toast to feed to the birds and squirrel and went for another long walk. At nine the woman from Broadway Bikes called and said she had a red Ducati 750ss to show me. I walked to their showroom. It looked just like Denise's bike. I was offered a test ride and said that I didn't trust myself to ride it, but would happily go pillion. It took her fifteen

minutes to gear up. I am sure she was trying to scare me but I enjoyed the ride.

It took nearly an hour to organise delivery and get everything done and paid for.

I walked back to St James's Park feeling better than I had for a long time.

I saw an email from one of my clients asking me to edit a user manual, which I managed to do on my iPad while feeding birds and squirrels bits of toast. I hurried back to the hotel at around six, when it looked like it was going to rain.

Cindy emailed saying that Victor had been bitten by a badger that had been caught in a trap. She said he was in St Richard's, and would probably be off work for several weeks. I used my new phone to call him, but had to send a message as he was not picking up. I wrote back to Cindy and asked her to visit Victor and make sure he was comfortable and ask him if he needed anything done for him, reminding her that he lived alone and had a cat, which would need to be taken care of. I asked her to let me know if they needed someone to stand in for Victor. Usually Phillip could cover, but he did other work and might not be able to commit.

I sent a WhatsApp message to Denise, asking if she was alright. I told her that I was feeling a lot better and was hoping I could come out of hiding before the weekend.

To my surprise Cindy emailed back almost immediately, and had attached the letters of two people who had written, asking to get some work experience at the centre. Both sounded OK to me and I wrote back and told her to speak to the others and then invite either or both of the candidates to the Centre, to meet and talk with the others. I told her that Phillip, Martin, Denise and Cathy knew how it worked, as they had all been chosen the same way. I attached a copy of a terms and conditions letter for her to use for whichever person they took on.

Denise called just as I was about to shower. She sounded cheerful and told me she was thinking of changing the locks and squatting in my flat.

“I’m looking after Victor’s cat,” she said, “I hope you don’t mind?”

“I’ll skin it if it scratches my furniture,” I told her, “Don’t let it out at night, there’s a badger set in the copse behind the back garden.”

Denise laughed, “You obviously haven’t met Victor’s cat,” she said, “He gave me the filthiest look when I carried him out to the garden yesterday. He’s obese and clearly an indoor cat. Victor’s apartment is tiny, and close to a really busy road, near the big Sainsbury’s outside Chichester. He doesn’t do outdoors and he is probably too lazy to scratch furniture, though he has a rope wrapped scratch post with a ball hanging from it. It looks unused.”

“I looked after a parrot once, for one of Maggie’s clients. It caused about six hundred pounds of damage in a week,” I said laughing.

“I nearly lost a finger to a parrot,” Denise told me, “But the nastiest bite I ever got was from my room mate’s pet rabbit when I was at Uni.”

We talked for ages, about everything and nothing. She told me that a few reporters had come to the Centre, but none had come to the Flat. She also told me that Cathy had been an absolute stalwart, and didn’t take any nonsense from the reporters, and even told one to “Bugger off before I slap you.”

I was reluctant to end the call.

Although my rash wasn’t really bothering me; it was quite dry and flaky, I still enjoyed scalding it in the shower. I didn’t bother pasting it, and slept well till seven, when my phone alarm woke me.

I had another huge breakfast, filled my flask with coffee, filched more toast and set off to explore, heading for the Thames.

There was a message from Victoria telling me that Maggie and Alexa had left for Australia and that the retractions she had demanded had been printed. She said that she had transferred another eight and half thousand pounds to my account and hoped that there would be no further problems. She thanked me for engaging her and wished me luck.

I wrote back immediately and thanked her. I went on line and sent her a Hamper from Marks & Spencer's with a card thanking her again.

I was kept busy with editing and drawing work. On Friday morning the breakfast waiter gave me a plastic bag full of crusts and bits of toast, saying he had seen me feeding the ducks and squirrels at the Serpentine. I checked out after breakfast and left my rucksack with the concierge, and spent the morning happily writing and dishing out food to a growing gathering of birds and squirrels.

The train was full when I left London, but the journey was a lot quicker than it had been on the way to London. I took a bus from Chichester to the Pride of India Roundabout and walked to my flat. Victor's cat glared at me from my favourite armchair, but didn't move, it was very fat. The flat was spotless. I loaded my dirty clothes into the washing machine and walked to Kingley Vale.

I sent a message to a Denise asking if she wanted supper and a game of darts at the Fox and Hounds, saying I was aiming to be there at six.

I was there a lot earlier and had a cider in my favourite corner. I was lost, writing in my iPad when Phillip slapped my shoulder.

"Welcome back Joe," he said grinning, "You are looking better, how's the Shingles?"

"Almost gone, I feel fine Phillip, How are things?"

"Great!" he said, "I've sat my exams and have a job offer in Australia conditional on my getting a degree. Thanks for the testimonial."

“You’ll do well,” I said, “And we will miss you, but maybe not your practical jokes.”

Phillip roared with laughter, “I’ll miss you too Joe, you are a great Boss.”

Cathy arrived then, with a nervous looking young girl, with huge glasses, a head of frizzy red hair and the sort of looks that should be on a catwalk. She looked sixteen.

Cathy smiled and asked if she was allowed to hug me, then introduced me to Myra, the new volunteer, who shook my hand and greeted me politely as Mr Banks.

“Please call me Joe?” I asked her, “What are you all doing here?”

“Denise invited us for a game of Darts,” said Phillip, “We didn’t expect to see you here.”

I heard the distinctive growl of a Ducati and felt my pulse pick up. Denise looked surprised to see me, and shook my hand, welcoming me back. We moved to a table near the dartboard. Myra said she wasn’t much good at darts, but she and Cathy took on Philip and Denise and didn’t do too badly. Phillip teased Myra, saying she was so lanky that she should use the men’s toe line.

Cindy, Martin and Victor arrived. Victor was in a wheelchair with his injured leg straight out in front of him. There was a box on his lap, which Denise took while we rearranged some tables.

Victor seemed remarkably cheerful, despite having had his left calf savaged by an injured badger.

“I should have known better Boss,” he said, his eyes glancing at Myra, “But it was worth it for the improved view.”

Victor and I teamed up to play against Cindy and Martin. Victor, despite being in a wheelchair was really good and we won easily.

Our food began to arrive before we finished and we sat around the table. Victor managed to get next to Myra. Denise was almost as far away from me as it was possible to get, at the end of the joined tables. Charles put a steak and kidney pudding in front of me, I had asked for Hake and Chips. Even Charles laughed when I pushed it away. He gave it to Phillip and fetched me a huge plate of fish and chips.

“Welcome back Boss,” said Victor looking pleased with himself as Charles brought more drinks to the table, including another cider for me.

Nobody seemed to want to play darts when the plates were finally cleared away. I sensed some sort of conspiracy going on and then Charles appeared followed by two of the kitchen staff. He was carrying a cake with burning candles on it. They all started singing Happy Birthday, I looked around and joined in, till I realised it was for me.

“It isn’t my birthday,” I protested, when they insisted that I blow out the candles.

“It is on Sunday, so just get on with it,” said Denise loudly and they all started chanting, “Make a wish!”

Several people, who I didn’t know from Adam came to our table to wish me happy birthday. We had a lot of laughs. I was persuaded to have an Irish coffee.

Phillip and Victor were teasing Denise, saying she needed a man in her life. When Martin and Cindy joined in, Denise retorted loudly, “Och away with the lot of you. Who needs a man when they have a sixtysix horsepower Ducati throbbing between their thighs.” She went bright red when they roared with laughter. She looked me in the eye then. I detected a hint of a smile.

I finally got to play darts with Denise, and we were beaten by Victor and Myra. Victor clearly didn’t want to leave when Martin and Cindy said it was time to go. Phillip scrounged a lift with them and Cathy and Myra left shortly after them.

“So,” I asked Denise in the carpark after we had waved off Cathy and Myra, “Who do I have to blame for the ambush?”

She laughed, “You can blame yourself,” she said, “But it was a joint effort. Only Myra didn’t know it was your birthday, Philip told her you liked to get newbies drunk, said it was a rite of passage. I told them you would be here, but they were determined to get you as soon as you got back.”

“Can I have a lift home?” I asked.

“You paid for it, didn’t you?” she asked, “I was hoping to get terms on a 175 Yamaha from the bike shop in the Hornet. This is much better.”

“You sold your bike to fly to Australia, that was kind of you, and very helpful.”

“Aye, well, I felt really bad after biting your head off. Sometimes my temper gets the better of me. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologise,” I said, “You helped a lot. The cost of the bike has already been covered by the damages paid by Maggie and Alexa, and there is more than enough left over for that Advanced Motorbike Course you want to do in Haywards Heath.”

The cat, “Mr Wilkes”, appeared not to have moved since I had first seen him, but was soon winding himself around Denise’s legs when she started filling his bowl with sardines.

I put my clothes in the dryer and returned to find Denise making cappuccino, there was a slab of Cadbury’s fruit and nut on the kitchen counter.

“So, what did you get up to in London?” she asked, “Apart from buying me a bike?”

I walked, worked and wrote,” I said, “And fed the birds and squirrels with toast I nicked from the hotel. I also did a lot of thinking.”

“Oh dear,” said Denise, resting her chin on her hand, with her elbow on the counter, “This sounds serious.”

I nodded, “I haven’t had a holiday since I was a teenager,” I said, “I want to get away, travel, relax and make happy memories.”

“So you are leaving again?” she asked, “When?”

I had watched her carefully, hoping for some sort of sign or signal, I was terrified of making a mistake.

“That depends,” I said, my heart thumping in my chest, “On whether you will come with me or not.”

Denise stared at me for a long time. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking or feeling.

“I’m ready to go tomorrow,” she said eventually, “But tonight, I think I need to test drive my new boyfriend.” She stood and walked around the counter, then reached for my hand and led me up the stairs.