

James Pryce

by
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This is a work of fiction, none of the characters or events portrayed are real. Most of the places and establishments are fictional too.

James, an orphan, veteran and self-employed handyman, is finally able to make ends meet after working hard to establish a client base and reputation in the city, when he ends up in hospital with a head injury. The driver's insurance agrees to cover his medical and rehabilitation costs, but will James be able to continue as a handyman, if he can no longer drive or properly control his limbs?

It was one of those days. I had set off early to do a simple job at the Rochford Centre, and ended up spending the entire day there dealing with problems the centre manager had forgotten about till he saw me. It was not that I objected to the work, and God knows, I could do with the money, but having had no work from them for a couple of months and then suddenly having to work ten hours without a break on a Friday....

I felt further aggrieved when I got to the sports centre as the parking lot was full and I had to park in the pay and display lot two blocks away. It was getting cold and there had been a warning of ice on the roads.

The pool was almost empty, which was a plus, and I managed a really good swim. I went for a sauna afterwards, and was feeling quite good when I left and headed back to the car.

I didn't see what hit me. The last thing I remember is testing the paving outside the sports centre with my foot, as it looked icy.

It took a long while to realise that I was in hospital. For a while I was really confused and wondering if I had somehow fallen through the pavement into a server room. It was dark, but I could see rows of red and green flashing lights. I also felt woozy, almost as if I was drunk.

It was only when I moved that I realised I was in a bed. The red and green flashing lights were reflections off the glass windows, of the monitors and devices on the wall at the head of the bed.

As soon as I realised I was in hospital, my heart started racing and I heard beeping. A short while later a door opened and a sleepy looking young man stuck his head in.

“Are you awake Mr. Pryce?” the young man asked.

My voice sounded really weird when I answered, “Where am I?”

The lights came on and I had to shut my eyes as they were so bright.

“You are in Carlton Park Hospital,” said the voice, “Please do not try to move, I’ll raise the back of the bed so you can sit up a little. Just relax. He leaned over me and I could smell coffee. The bed made a whirring sound as it elevated my torso. I kept my eyes closed, “Why am I in hospital?” I asked. My voice really was not right.

“You had an accident Mr. Pryce,” answered the young man, “Please try to keep calm, the night sister will be here shortly and she can tell you more. You are perfectly OK.”

“I doubt that very much,” I said, “Why would I be in a hospital bed with a tube in my penis if I was OK? What’s wrong with my voice?”

“You can open your eyes, I have dimmed the lights,” said the man, “Do you feel any pain?”

“What sort of accident?” I asked and opened my eyes.

“How are you feeling?” asked the young man.

“All wrong,” I said, “What happened to me?”

“Let me fetch the night sister Mr. Pryce... I will not be long. Just try to relax.”

He left the room looking worried. I tried to assess myself, and found it really difficult. I felt sluggish, mentally and physically, my hands and arms seemed to work but felt all wrong and clumsy. I was wearing a giant diaper. I was feeling my face with my hands when the door opened and a short, plump woman came in and gave me a cheerful smile.

“Hello Mr. Pryce, its good to see you awake and taking stock of yourself. Nothing is missing I assure you. No broken bones. I’m Maggie Pearson, the night sister. How are you feeling?”

“Addle brained and clumsy, confused and not sure if I am angry or scared or both,” I replied, “Please tell me what has happened to me?”

“Of course. Well, you are probably feeling a bit wobbly because of the medication. Let me reduce the dosage a little. She moved around the bed and fiddled with the valve under a bag hanging from a stand that fed the drip line in my left arm.

“You were hit by a car outside the Crossley Sports Centre, the driver lost control and went up onto the pavement. You suffered a head injury and were brought here to the Head Trauma Centre. As far as we can tell you have no permanent damage, but you have been kept in a coma for three weeks.”

“When can I go home?” I asked.

“Not just yet,” answered the nurse, “There are a few more tests that need to be done. Doctor Summers will tell you more in the morning.”

“Three weeks!” I said, feeling my heart begin to race again, “Tubbs... my cat. She needs to be fed...”

“Your cat is fine and has been taken to the Pet Hotel on the Wroxford road. I can show you how to see her on your phone. Your car has been collected and driven to your flat, someone has cleared out the perishables from your fridge and kitchen and your keys, wallet, iPad and cellphone are in the drawer next to your bed.” She smiled, “Your health is what matters now Mr. Pryce. Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“Any broken bones?” I asked, “Was anybody else injured?”

“As far as we can tell you had no other injuries, and nobody else was injured.” said the sister, “Would you like a cup of tea and some yoghurt?”

“What I would like is a shower, a curry, preferably butter chicken with jeera rice and a garlic naan, and a glass of ice cold water.” I said, “I like coffee usually but I’m not sure about hospital coffee or hospital food.”

The sister laughed, she sounded Irish and had a delightful laugh, “Well our food isn’t great, but I can probably get you a decent cup of coffee and the food you want... it’s three in the morning but I’ll do what I can. Sorry, but you can’t shower for a while. I’ll get you some water now.”

The water was a delight on my sore throat. Sister Pearson chatted while she used a mobile phone to order me a black coffee and a butter chicken with rice and naan. I learned that I had been “intubated” which is why my throat and jaw felt uncomfortable. My skull had been “tapped” somehow to relieve the pressure from bruising and bleeding and the driver’s insurance was paying for my treatment.

The butter chicken was not as spicy hot as I usually went for but it was tasty. However, I could not eat much of it, and probably didn't even manage a third, partly because I struggled to hold the utensils,

and partly because I struggled to swallow. The coffee was wonderful.

I soon learned that I could not walk, as I had no balance at all. The nurse, who rescued me and had to call for help to get me back onto the bed told me that the medication probably made me wobbly, but assured me it wasn't permanent. I really did not enjoy having to poop on a bed pan and have someone else clean up my arse.

The doctors, there were three of them, actually irritated me. The day sister had to intervene when I started getting tetchy with their evasive answers. I learned from her that it was a teaching hospital after I told the doctors to bugger off. I had a sleep, probably medically induced by the sister, and was seen by an older man that evening who said that he had operated on me and was in charge of my treatment. He was quite reserved, and told me that it was possible that I might have some cognitive or physical impairment following the bleeding and bruising inside my skull. He calmly told me that fretting about it wouldn't help and said I was lucky to be alive; probably because of the quick thinking and response of the people who got me straight to the Head Trauma Unit rather than taking me to the more distant Accident and Emergency Unit at Wroxford. "You would probably have died by the time the ambulance reached Wroxford," he said, "One of the instructors at the Sports Centre is an intern at Carlton Park and knew enough to get the driver of the vehicle that hit you to bring you here while he made calls to make sure there was a team waiting to receive you." He shrugged, "You are alive, Mr. Pryce. Everything else is a bonus."

I spent another two weeks in the hospital, and found it exhausting. I was not allowed to drive for at least six months. I was surprised to learn that the insurance covered my "rehab" and would compensate me for any loss of earnings. I took a taxi home, via the Pet Hotel to collect Tubbs. The taxi driver, an Asian woman, carried Tubbs for me as I was still struggling to walk and had to use crutches to steady myself.

The following morning I was woken by someone ringing the doorbell. An awkward-looking young woman was stood there carrying a large shopping bag.

“Mr. Pryce?” she asked when I opened the door, “I’m Penny - I volunteered to help you with your recovery, with chores and driving you and things like that. May I come in?” She asked holding out a card. It was a Military ID card.

I took it and studied it “Penelope Goodwin, Army Reservist,” I read out loud, then stepped back and almost fell.

“Are you alright?” asked the woman, as she took hold of my upper arm to steady me. She was small but strong.

“I have problems with balancing,” I said, “Apparently it will get better.”

She seemed to know her way around my flat and explained that she had cleaned it after I had gone into hospital and had also taken Tubbs to the Pet Hotel.

She fetched a tin of sardines from the shopping bag and fed Tubbs, who seemed to know her. I watched from a kitchen chair as the woman, Penny, bustled around the kitchen, clearly uncomfortable about being there or perhaps there with me watching her. She avoided looking at me.

“Its OK, Ms. Goodwin, I’m not dangerous,” I told her, “I had a head injury... the quacks say I should be back to normal in six months to a year. It is very kind of you to help me.”

“Please call me Penny,” she said, “I’m sorry, this is my first...I’m not sure what to do. Would you like me to make you breakfast?”

“Do you know how to use an espresso machine?” I asked pointing at my Breville, “I don’t trust myself to use it yet, and I’d really like a cappuccino.”

She went very red and shook her head, “No, I’m sorry, I should have... I can get you a cappuccino?”

I shook my head and regretted it. I clutched at the kitchen table and dropped a crutch, which hit Tubbs and sent her off, hissing angrily.

“No, its OK. I’m going to get dressed and then try to walk to the corner cafe on Hurdle street,” I told her. “That will probably take me all day.”

Penny looked as if she was going to cry. She picked up my fallen crutch and hovered as I got to my feet. I made my way slowly up to the bedroom with Penny close on my heels, clearly concerned that I might fall.

“Its OK,” I told her, “I am not going to fall.”

I didn't want to get dressed in front of her and told her I could manage when she tried to follow me into the bedroom. I hadn't finished making the bed when she had rung the doorbell. I did that first and was puffing and blowing when that was done. It looked awful, but it would do.

I fell over trying to get into a pair of jeans, landing heavily on my hip. It really hurt.

Penny rushed up the stairs and knocked on the door as she opened it.

“I fell,” I said needlessly, struggling to get up, “There’s nothing damaged except my pride. Its OK; I need to do this myself.”

Penny hovered anxiously as I struggled to my knees and eventually got up and got my jeans up and fastened. Putting on a shirt was easier, though I wished I had sat on my bed to do it.

It was almost midday when I reached the corner cafe. Despite the cold, I was sweating profusely. Penny stayed close and asked if I minded if she sat with me. She ordered herself a cappuccino too

but didn't want to eat, and busied herself tapping away at a huge cellphone. She clearly did not want to talk, and seemed edgy.

It took me a while to settle down enough to use a knife and fork, by which time my very late "breakfast" was rather cold. I ordered another cappuccino and asked the waitress to take my plate away.

"Was there something wrong with the food?" she asked.

"No... no it was fine, I just don't like cold eggs and sausage... I took too long to eat it." I assured her, "I am having some trouble coordinating and balancing."

She offered to reheat the food and I said it really wasn't necessary.

Penny looked embarrassed.

"I'm sorry for embarrassing you," I said, "I can manage on my own if you would prefer not to put up with me."

"I'm sorry Mr. Pryce, I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"Please call me James. I'm afraid I am going to feel uncomfortable anyway," I said, "I really do not like not having proper control over my own body. Its not your fault..."

I stopped talking because I thought she was going to burst into tears.

"Please don't cry?" I said.

She apologised and turned away. Her phone rang and she dug around in her bulky anorak pocket as she got up from the table to answer it. She moved away towards the entrance as she spoke on the phone, then came back to the table.

"It's the health visitor, she wants to visit you at home to assess what help you need. Can I tell her you will be home at four PM?"

I nodded and fumbled with my phone to find out the time, it was just after one PM.

The walk back was easier, but I was still exhausted by it.

“Is there anything I can do for you Mr..., sorry, James?” asked Penny after I had shed my coat and boots, “Anything at all... ironing, cleaning, shopping?”

“I can’t think of anything,” I told her, “It’s going to take a while to settle into a new routine. I’ll probably get my shopping and meals delivered for a while if I can afford it. I need to have a look at my finances as I can’t work like this.”

“You shouldn't have to worry about money,” said Penny, “That should all be taken care of by the insurance...” She went very red, “I can chase that up for you, with your permission of course?”

“That’s OK Penny, I don’t exactly have much to do. I need to keep myself busy or I will go insane,” I replied, then thought about it and added, “Do you know which insurance company I should speak to?”

Penny nodded and fetched out her phone, her hands were shaking as she thumbed the screen and asked me for my cellphone number so that she could share the contact with me.

A few seconds later my phone buzzed and I saw Chrissie@Latham’s contact details and added them to my contacts..

“They are paying my expenses,” said Penny going a deeper shade of red, “Christine is handling your account.”

I sent a message to Christine/Chrissie, introducing myself and asking what they were going to cover in the way of my expenses.

My phone rang almost immediately and a cheerful young voice introduced herself as Christine and asked if this was a convenient time to talk.

“Yes, this is a good time to talk, I don't have anything else to do,” I said.

“Well let me start by saying how sorry I am that you got injured,” said Christine, “I hope you have a full and speedy recovery.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I hope so too. Now what can you tell me?”

“Do you have any specific questions Mr. Pryce?” she asked, “I will be dealing with your account for as long as it takes for you to get back on your feet. If you need anything done, or paid for, I can help you with that.”

“Well for starters, please call me James? I'm sorry to say that I am a bit of an insurance sceptic Christine. On the few occasions that I have tried to claim on insurance in the past, it has always been a struggle to get them to pay up. What can you tell me about the policy to save me wasting my breath?”

“I can start by assuring you that you need not worry James. It is my job to ensure that you do not have to worry about finances while you are recovering.”

“Well, I don't have a mortgage, but I still have to pay council tax and for water, gas and electricity and rubbish collection,” I said, “And I need to get my car serviced and through its MoT though I can't drive it for the next six months at least, then there are the contracts I have with clients - I have no idea what liabilities I have for not being able to do the work. I suppose I had better write to them.”

“I can do that for you, but I will need a letter of authority from you,” said Christine, “I'll send you a letter of authorisation on WhatsApp. Please let me know if you are happy to sign it and I will have a printed copy delivered to you to sign tomorrow morning?”

“Just email it to me at james.pryce@gmail.com; that's Pryce with a Y and I will print, sign, scan and send it back to you,” I told her.

“I’ll do that now James,” she said, “Please send me the contact details and any contracts for clients that that you want me to deal with?”

“You’ll copy me on all correspondence?” I asked.

“Absolutely James,” she said, “I’ll send you a draft before I send anything to any of your clients. You can tell me what to say if you want?”

“Which insurance company is this?” I asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say James, but I can tell you it is not your standard high street Insurance company, it is more like a multinational re-insurer.”

“Like Lloyd’s of London?” I asked.

There was a noticeable pause before she replied, her tone guarded, “Yes, very much like Lloyd’s.”

I thanked her and ended the call. Penny was watching me carefully and looked away when my eyes met hers. She got up and fussed about with Tubbs’s litter tray.

My phone buzzed minutes later - an email from christine.latham@latham.co.uk. It was a stock letter authorising Christine Latham, Senior Partner at Latham Legal Services to act for and on my behalf regarding accounts payable. I read it twice on my phone and could not find anything to object to, then got to my feet and headed for the stairs and my little study. An hour later I closed down my computer and printer and got myself ready for the Health Visitor. I had emailed copies of all my maintenance contracts to Christine along with a signed copy of the authorisation letter she had sent. I had also sent her a message about an unfinished generator maintenance job I had started for the Pedestal Care Home. I was still waiting for a replacement air filter before I could finish the job. The generator was still serviceable, but I had held off on billing for the work until I had received and fitted the new air filter.

Penny was ready to leave as soon as I got back downstairs. She asked if there was any shopping I wanted done.

The Health visitor was actually a team of two. A middle aged lady who introduced herself as Anne and a young man who looked fifteen and who suffered from terrible acne who she introduced as Stewart, a trainee.

Anne asked me to show her around the flat, and waited patiently as I struggled with the stairs. After that she asked me if I cooked for myself and then went through a long list of questions on a pad, making notes when I replied. She knew that I had “home help” provided through Latham Legal Services, and seemed surprised that it was a woman and that she wasn’t present.

“You appear to be well organised Mr. Pryce. I would have liked to meet your home help, but for now, I have only three recommendations. First and most important is that you get a hand-rail fitted to your stairwell - your condition isn't permanent, or I would have suggested a stair lift. Second, is a grab rail in the shower, and lastly that you get a support frame that you can use in the kitchen. I can provide you with the support frame, and a list of local installers to supply and fit the stair and grab rails. Ms. Latham has assured me that they will arrange and fund any necessary works.”

She suggested that I use a gymnasium to do some strength and mobility exercises, something that the hospital physiotherapist had also suggested, and told me that she could arrange for a physiotherapist to assist me at home and or at the gym. I told her I had membership at the Crossley Sports Centre, and she said it was excellent and gave me the names and contact details of two physiotherapists who worked from there.

The following morning I woke to the doorbell ringing. I stumbled and fell going down the stairs. Luckily I didn't go far and ended up face against the wall on the landing. Penny let herself in after hearing me fall; I was sitting on the landing staring at the dislocated ring finger on my right hand, while stemming the flow of blood from my nose

with my left hand. I was swearing quietly but vehemently. It was not a good start to the day.

“I’ll call an ambulance...”

“No!” I said, probably louder than I should have, adding more calmly, “It’s just a nose bleed and a dislocated finger. Not an emergency.”

I’m so sorry... I didn't want to let myself in... it seems presumptuous and rude somehow.”

That made me laugh, which wasn’t a good idea as I let go of my nose and sprayed blood on the stairwell wall and carpet.

“I’m sorry Penny, I’m not laughing at you, just the situation. Thank you for making me laugh anyway,” I said and eased my way down the stairs on my bum.

Penny backed down the stairs, looking as if she wanted to help me and run away at the same time.

I avoided looking at my right hand while I rinsed my left hand and face at the kitchen sink. It took a long while and a lot of pressure, to stem the blood from my nose. I guessed that the hospital must have dosed me with some sort of blood thinner while I was being treated there.

Penny eventually stopped hovering and fed Tubbs and cleaned the litter tray. I stuffed bits of kitchen paper towel up my nostrils, and sat at the kitchen table, working up the courage to try and get my dislocated finger back into place. It took several attempts, after which I felt more than a little nauseous. I desperately wanted a strong coffee, preferably a cappuccino. Penny came back into the kitchen while I was standing at the espresso bar.

“I think I can manage if you tell me what to do?” suggested Penny tentatively, “I looked at a few on-line tutorials last night.”

“It’s really quite easy,” I said, “The machine does most of the work, its just the milk frothing that is a bit tricky.”

I checked the beans and water level and asked her to empty the water tray. Then showed her how to fill the puck and tamp it, which was a bit tricky as my right hand still hurt. I showed her how I judged the amount of milk needed, then leaned against the counter while I demonstrated how to froth the milk, explaining that it was important to make sure it got hot enough, but not to let it boil. I managed well enough, but had forgotten to have a damp cloth ready to clean the steam spout before the milk dried on it. Penny carefully cleaned it after I showed her how, and then made another cappuccino.

“There you go, that looks perfect,” I said.

We sat at the kitchen table to drink our cappuccinos.

“The health visitor said I should get a hand rail installed in the stair well, and grab rails in the shower,” I told her, “I’d like to do it myself, if you could drive me to find the materials I want?”

“What about your hand?” asked Penny, “Shouldn’t you get it looked at?”

I smiled and held my hand up, “There, we have looked at it. nothing is broken except my pride and that got well and truly destroyed when I had strangers cleaning my dirty bottom in hospital.”

Penny’s face fell.

“Don’t feel sorry for me Penny,” I told her, “It’s just Life and my sick sense of humour. I suppose I have a strange way of coping. Are you happy to drive me around? My car’s an automatic.”

Penny nodded, "I can drive automatic," she said, "I'm happy to drive you, and I can help you with the handrail if you like."

"Thanks. Well, let me clean up the stairwell, then have a shower and get dressed and we can go."

"I'll clean up the stairwell," said Penny.

An hour later we were shopping for hardware. It took till midday to find the things I wanted, and I felt a lot better walking around with a shopping trolley to lean on.

I directed Penny to the Pawn & Castle, where we had lunch. She clearly liked it, and asked if I minded if she had a game of pool after we had eaten. I told her to go ahead and asked her for the car keys, saying she would find me behind the pub in the third lock-up garage. She looked surprised.

"I have my workshop there," I told her, "Take your time."

I moved the car close to my lockup and had just started cutting the steel strap to length when Penny came to check on me.

"Nice workshop," she told me, looking impressed, "Can I help with anything?"

I am not keen on letting anyone touch my tools, but thought it best to let her do something to help.

"If you feel up to it," I said, "Can you clean up these while I cut some more?" I turned on the belt sander and put on safety goggles, "Please be very careful, there's a safety mask over there," I pointed, "I don't like to wear gloves when I use this machine, but be careful not to burn your fingers on hot edges. Its quite safe if you work sensibly." I showed her how to round the corners of the rectangular piece of metal plate I had cut.

I watched her deftly sand the second plate, then went and cut the rest. I figured I needed at least a dozen for the stairwell.

Penny did a really neat job of sanding off the plates and watched quietly while I wound the round bar around a piece of pipe. I made fifteen coils, by which time my right hand was hurting, but not unbearably. Penny offered to cut the rings.

“Are you certain?” I asked her, “Have you used an angle grinder before?”

Penny smiled and took the angle grinder from me, “I’m a Royal Engineer,” she said, “I did two years of workshop practice and loved every minute.” She seemed more confident than the Penny I thought I knew. I handed her my gloves and she shook her head, “Thanks, but my hands are much smaller than yours.”

I watched her for a while and then set up the drill press and drilled the steel tubing. Penny finished cutting the coils and then hammering them flat before I had finished drilling and cutting the pipe.

“Can you weld?” I asked as I wheeled out my Mig Welder.

Penny nodded, “Arc, Oxy-acetylene, MIG and TIG, but I’m not a coded welder.”

“Well, I’m YouTube trained,” I said, “So please feel free to tell me if I am doing anything wrong?”

Penny didn't say anything but watched while I set up and then asked if I was going to drill the plates before welding them.

I laughed and thanked her. Penny drilled the holes after I punched the centres.

I welded the first bracket and asked Penny what she thought.

“It looks OK,” she said, “Do you want me to clean up the welds? Are you going to paint them?”

“I thought clear laquer after wire brushing,” I said, “Is your welding neat?”

“I can do neat,” she said, “Can I practice on a bit of scrap?”

Her welding was much neater than mine. I did the wire brushing and set up my pipe bender to make the grab rails, then used a holesaw to cut out four three inch disks of steel plate from a piece of salvaged lip channel and cleaned them up on the belt sander.

Penny was impressed with my home made pipe bender and asked if she could bend the second grab rail. She welded the disks on it.

I sprayed the grab rails with white hammered enamel and the stairwell brackets with clear laquer after tidying up the workshop, then locked up and left them to dry overnight.

“That was satisfying, thanks for the help,” I said as we walked back to wash our hands in the pub.

“I enjoyed it,” said Penny, “Can I help tomorrow? I’ll bring work gloves and coveralls.”

“Thank you, I’d like that,” I said, “Do you have time to drive me to the Crossley Sports Centre? I would like to speak to one of the physiotherapists there.”

Penny looked anxious again, but nodded her head, “OK, I need to make some calls, but I can do that while you are there. Will you be there for long?”

I shrugged, “I hope not, I just want to arrange some exercise and physiotherapy sessions.”

Penny dropped me at the entrance and drove to the car park, asking me to call or message her when I wanted picking up.

“I think I can walk to the car park,” I told her, smiling, “I feel a lot better already, doing things really is helping.”

Penny nodded but looked doubtful.

It took a while to speak to one of the physiotherapists as she was busy with a client. The other one was not in. I messaged Penny to say I had to wait fifteen minutes at least to see the physiotherapist, and was that OK with her. She answered with a thumbs up, and said she would wait in the car.

I used the loo and had a go on a treadmill, under the watchful eye of a nervous young man who said he remembered me from the accident.

“I don’t remember a thing,” I said, “Thank you for getting me to hospital so quickly.”

The young man nodded, but didn’t say anything. He seemed convinced I was going to fall off the treadmill. I managed seven minutes at a fairly fast walking pace before I started to feel uncomfortable.

Steve took me to find Andrea, and left me sat outside “Physio Studio 3”. I could hear a woman’s voice talking someone through a series of exercises. She sounded professional.

Andrea, recognised me when she came out of the studio, following a young Asian woman using crutches.

“Mr..Pryce?” she asked, “How are you?”

“Er... well, I’m recovering,” I said, “Have we met before?”

Andrea laughed, “You were unconscious, so it was a bit of a one-sided meeting.” She said eyeing my crutches as I got to my feet, “We were told you had a head injury.”

I nodded, “Yes, I need to work on my balance and motor skills. You were recommended to me, can I send you a copy of my medical report and book some physiotherapy sessions with you?”

“Sure,” she said and fetched a card for me, “Let me know which day and times suit you best and I’ll get back to you. Are you paying direct or through insurance?”

“Its all being paid by an insurance company through a solicitor,” I told her, “I’ll pay directly if necessary and claim it back.”

“No sweat, we can sort all that out later. Let me have your medical report and I’ll work on a plan to discuss with you.”

I made my way back to the car park. Penny looked relieved to see me and got out to hold the door open for me, “I could have driven to reception to get you,” she said.

“I need the exercise,” I told her. I felt a bit shaky, but was certain that I had improved a bit during the day.

There was a zimmer frame outside my front door when I arrived, with a note from Anne, the Health Visitor telling me I could borrow it till I no longer felt the need for it. I didn't like the look of it at all, but decided to give it a try. It had to be lifted and moved forward with each step. It wasn't much good for walking with, but I thought it would be easier to use in the kitchen than crutches. Safer for Tubbs too.

Penny asked if I wanted her to do anything, and I shook my head and thanked her.

“Thanks, but I think I can manage. I’m actually quite tired, and I’ll probably go to bed quite soon. I’ve enjoyed today, thank you.”

Penny made a face, “Apart from the bloody nose and dislocated finger, which I still feel awful about, I enjoyed the day too,” she said. “What time should I come tomorrow?”

“Are you really happy to spend the whole day minding me?” I asked, “I hope you are being paid properly for this?”

Penny shrugged, "I'm happy if you are," she said, going slightly red, "Would seven AM be OK? May I let myself in?"

"That's perfect," I said, "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

I fell asleep in an armchair minutes after she left. It was late when I woke up with Tubbs digging her claws into my thigh while purring loudly. I practically crawled up the stairs to bed and slept very soundly.

I was up, showered and dressed before Penny arrived at 07:00. I found the zimmer frame quite useful in the kitchen, and managed to make cappuccino for Penny and myself without any difficulty. I decided against trying to cook, and set off to Amity Deli and Cafe for breakfast with Penny. She looked different, but I only realised why when we got to the Cafe. She was wearing denim bib overalls and a T shirt under her bulky coat rather than the baggy sweat pants and hoodie she had worn before. She had a nice athletic figure.

She seemed more relaxed too and happy to talk about the news, which was being shown on a widescreen in the cafe. I was surprised when she agreed with me on Gaza and Hamas. Most people did not. She told me that she used to be a Labour Supporter, but now thought that Labour had gone off the rails. She was vehemently anti-Brexit.

We parked behind the Pawn & Castle and loaded the materials and tools into the car, then headed back to my flat.

It took longer to mark out where to position the brackets on the stairwell than to fix them in place. I drilled the first couple of holes, while Penny held the vacuum cleaner hose and a dustpan to catch the dust, then swapped roles with Penny. She was a bit hesitant at first but quickly got the hang of it. It would have been neater if I had made two brackets to fit into the corners, but it worked and looked OK. The rope wasn't super taut, and probably would not be acceptable as a handrail in a public place, but it was good enough for me. I told Penny that I would add some Turk's Head knots to the rope over the next few days, which would tighten it up and make it

look better. She asked if she could take a photo of the handrail and let me use her phone to photograph her sitting on the landing and holding onto the rope.

It took a lot longer to fit the grab rails I had made for the toilet and shower, using hole cutting diamond bits to cut through the tiles. Penny declined to even try, saying she had never drilled such big holes through tiles before. Eventually it was done, and Penny was really impressed with how strong the grab rails were.

It was mid afternoon when we took the tools back to my little workshop.

We had a late lunch at the Pawn & Castle. I suggested Penny have a game or two of pool as I was happy to sit and enjoy another coffee. I checked my emails and saw a response from Andrea. She suggested three one hour sessions a week, at £50.00 each, but said the first session would be free to allow us to assess each other before committing. She had slots available at seven on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, all the other slots were after ten.

I wrote back asking her to put me down for the early slots and asked if I could come in on the following day, which was a Friday, for the first session at seven.

I heard angry words and the sound of Penny's voice and went into the pool room. Penny looked furious and was holding her pool cue like a weapon as she faced an embarrassed looking man, who was apologising profusely. It took me a while to figure out that he had brushed his hand across Penny's bum. The Barman intervened and told the man to get out or get thrown out.

"I'm really sorry about that," he said, turning back to Penny after the man had left, "I won't allow him back in here. Your food and drinks are on the house."

"Are you OK Penny?" I asked.

Penny made a face and laughed, embarrassedly, "I'm fine James... I suppose I over-reacted, it's not like I'm not used to idiots touching me, I just wasn't expecting it here."

"What do you mean when you say you are used to it?" I asked.

"I do mostly delivery driving when I do my reserve service," she said, "Usually July to September, taking heavy plant from Cambridge to the Hebrides, and guys are always being a nuisance at the truck stops. They think women in uniform are easy, I suppose." She shrugged, "I can take care of myself, it's not a problem."

"I'm sorry that it happens," I told her.

We left a short while later. Penny was a lot more chatty and seemed in a good mood.

I told her, when she dropped me off, that I had a seven AM session with the physiotherapist at the Sports Centre and said I wanted to take the bus there. I suggested she take a day off from babysitting me, saying I would probably come straight home after the physiotherapy.

"Call me if you need me," said Penny, "I can get here in half an hour by bus."

"Why don't you keep the car?" I suggested, "I can't drive it till I am cleared by the quacks."

"Are you certain that you trust me with it?" she asked.

"You are a better driver than me, and its fully insured," I told her.

I fell asleep on the stairs doing Turk's Head knots on the hand rail rope, and crawled up to bed around midnight.

The six thirty bus got me to the Crossley Sports Centre at a quarter to seven. Andrea arrived at five to seven and had me stripped down

to my underpants as she assessed me and put me through a barrage of exercises. By seven thirty I was sweating and breathing hard. She was relentless and kept me working steadily till eight. I could feel improvements in my coordination by the end of the session, and happily agreed to continue. I had intended to swim after the session but was too tired and the pool looked crowded. I sat in the cafeteria and used my phone to send nine hundred pounds to the account Andrea had given me, paying for six weeks of sessions, then took the bus back to my flat. I managed to get three Turk's Heads done before deciding that I had enough. I managed to heat one of the pre-made lasagnes that Penny had stocked the freezer with, and ended up eating all of it in one sitting, though it was supposedly a meal for two people.

It was three PM and despite the session with Andrea, I still felt wide awake. I argued with myself about calling Penny to take me out somewhere, and realised that it was her company that I wanted, rather than an outing. I decided that was not good. I was wary of getting into a relationship, the last two had ended really badly. I decided to make a set of drawers to store my tools in, lots of shallow drawers that I would make shadow foam recesses in to store individual tools, making them easy to find and easy to account for. I went up to my little study and spent a happy few hours designing the drawers on SketchUp. I could probably have done it all in less than an hour before my injury, but at least I could still do it.

A message pinged my phone, it was Penny asking if and when I would need her the next day.

I messaged back saying that I could probably manage without her for the weekend, but that if she wanted to help me with a workshop project I would be glad of it and that I was planning on being at Latimer's Hardware when they opened at nine to get some materials.

She messaged back saying she would be at the flat at seven and would let herself in.

I was up, dressed and making cappuccino when Penny arrived. I had fed Tubbs and raked out her litter tray, and I had stripped and changed the bedclothes and had the dirty linen and clothes in the washing machine. I felt good.

Penny looked different, I think she had her hair cut or styled, and she looked good. I was careful not to say anything. The doorbell rang shortly after she arrived - a parcel delivery. Some filters I had ordered for a client's generator.

"How do you feel about a drive out of town?" I asked Penny after signing for the package, "I need to replace the air filter on a generator at Pedestal Care Home, it is in Coggeshank, its a beautiful place."

Penny nodded, "Sure, when do you want to go?"

"I'd like to do Latimer's first," I said, "I have a cutting list for some MDF; a manufactured type of wood board. I can ask them to deliver at two, which gives us plenty of time to get to Coggeshank and back."

"You seem different today," said Penny when we were on the way to Coggeshank. She had admired the Turk's Heads and I had brought a short section of the rope I had used for the hand rail, and some red cord to show her how to make a simple Turk's Head knot.

"I'm feeling more positive," I said, "Andrea, the physio at the Sports Centre says I should make a full recovery, probably in less than six months."

"How was the session yesterday?"

"I enjoyed it, though it was hard work," I said, "I'm going in earlier on Monday, to swim for half an hour before the session."

"Don't overdo things," said Penny, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

I laughed and told her it was OK, and that I probably needed to lower my expectations and take things slower at my age.

“You aren’t old,” said Penny, “It’s just that ... well, I worry that heavy exercise might cause a brain bleed... that’s what you had right?”

“Yes, I think so, but the doctor said the all the damage is repaired and I have low blood pressure anyway.” I said, “Exercise helps me to sleep better. I don’t usually sleep well and since the accident, I generally sleep really badly, though I get tired quickly. I need to make an appointment for a check up at the trauma unit soon anyway. I’ll ask them about it.”

Penny nodded, “A colleague of mine, a fellow reservist, died suddenly when he was forty five, he ran every day, didn't smoke, hardly drank and ate healthily. His heart just stopped. They said it was sudden death syndrome.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I suppose life isn’t guaranteed. I feel that it is not how long you live that matters, but how well you live. If I thought I would be like this for the rest of my life, I’d be heading to Switzerland and a suicide pill.”

I felt Penny staring at me.

“I’m definitely not feeling suicidal now,” I said, “Just impatient to get back to normal.”

“That’s understandable,” she said eventually.

It did not take long to swap out the generator air filter and test the generator. We had coffee and scones in the residents’ lounge. Penny looked happy to chat with the residents and laughed when they asked if she was my girlfriend and told me that I should marry her quick before somebody else did.

We were done by ten and I suggested we get an early lunch at the Coggeshank Oak, before heading for my workshop.

We sat outside overlooking the golf course and I showed her how to do a Turk's Head knot.

"I love this place!" said Penny, "Ducks and geese and rabbits nibbling at the grass around our feet, it's so..." she shrugged, "Story book, I suppose, like something by Beatrix Potter."

"There are a lot of old people here, the whole village is a retirement home really. I do a lot of work here - well, I used to."

"I can help if you have jobs you want to do here," she said, "As long as you show me what to do."

I nodded, "It's a deal," I said, "I'll let them know I am available again. What do you normally do for a living?"

Penny went red, "I drive mostly," she said, "I can drive almost anything. I made a lot of my money over Christmas and New Year in Felixstowe moving containers in the docks. I deliver vehicles. I do quite a lot of hire car delivery for Europcar and Hertz, mostly at night. In January I delivered a luxury customised motorhome to Turin; that was fun."

"That's a lot different to babysitting a brain damaged cripple," I told her, "Why the change?"

"You aren't brain damaged or a cripple," said Penny quietly, I could tell she was upset, "You are just recovering from an accident."

"I was just being flippant," I said, "But my brain has been damaged and I have physical impairments as a result. Hopefully they aren't permanent. What made you volunteer to look after me rather than do driving work?"

Penny was silent for a while, I looked at her and saw that she was frowning, she glanced at me before speaking, "A whole lot of reasons that I don't really want to talk about, but I'd lost control of a vehicle; that knocked my confidence a lot. I thought that helping an accident victim would help me... it sounds stupid, I know."

I shook my head, “No, that isn’t stupid. I knocked down a kid in Germany and broke his leg. He was eight years old. It wasn’t my fault, he’d been struggling with his granny on the pavement and ran across the road in front of me. There was nothing I could have done but I still felt guilty. I had nightmares about it for years afterwards and was really nervous about driving anywhere near crowded pavements. Still am. But I am grateful that you did volunteer to help me. Are you serious about helping with some maintenance work? I’ll share the money with you fifty-fifty.”

“You don’t need to pay me,” she said, “I get paid to look after you, and I would like to help. It’s probably good for you to do stuff anyway.”

“We can argue about the money later, if I get any work,” I said.

The Latimer delivery truck was parked near my lock-up when we got there at a few minutes past one. The delivery guys were in the Pawn & Castle having a meal and a game of darts. They cheerfully gave me the keys when I offered to offload my stuff.

It didn’t take long to offload and check that everything was delivered and cut to the right size. I showed Penny my drawings and had her gluing and assembling the drawers while I used the Festool Domino to cut the mortices. We were well into it and had made ten drawers before the delivery guys came to get their keys. By three we had a neat stack of twenty shallow drawers. Making the two drawer boxes took a little longer. I managed to do most of the routing myself, as Penny had never used a router before. She did the last ten slots but asked if she could practice on a bit of scrap first. By five PM the boxes were assembled. The drawers worked well enough and only one slot needed sanding; the last one, that I had done, when I was feeling very shaky.

“This is amazing,” said Penny, “You could make a whole kitchen in a couple of days.”

“Probably,” I said, “The painting takes longer because I don’t like spray painting and use a roller instead, but I’m not going to paint these, I’m going to seal them with a water based sealer.”

“Can I help with that?” asked Penny, “I can spray paint, but I don't mind doing it by hand.”

“I’ve got a spray gun, but I don’t have a good enough safety mask. I don’t like the fumes.”

“Can we do it tomorrow?” asked Penny.

“Sure,” I said, “But it is Sunday, and I want breakfast at Amiti’s Cafe first. They open at eight.”

“Can I have a go at cutting some mortices on a piece of scrap?” asked Penny, picking up the Domino, “I’ve never heard of one of these things.”

I had some blanks I had cut too many of for storage boxes I had made for a chandler. I had been meaning to finish them off for myself and had just never got round to doing it. I set up the Domino and let Penny practice on some scrap before letting her cut the mortices for a storage box. She dry assembled it and then took it apart and glued it. She asked if she could do the rest, and by six PM she had done all eight of them.

“I only want four,” I said, “We can seal them tomorrow, and you can have four. You can paint them if you like. I have Appliance White, Battleship Grey, Postbox Red and Canary Yellow.”

“May I do one in each colour?” asked Penny, “I’ll happily pay for them, they are a perfect size.”

“Sure, we should prime them now, in that case. The primer takes longer to dry. Then you can finish them tomorrow with two coats of paint. It should dry well enough if its not raining.”

“I really enjoyed today,” said Penny when she dropped me at the flat, “Thank you so much.”

“Me too,” I replied, “See you tomorrow.”

I fed Tubbs and went straight to bed, it was just after ten PM and I slept through my alarm in the morning. I woke to the sound of Penny’s voice as she fed Tubbs. It was a quarter to eight.

I went downstairs in my dressing gown and apologised.

Penny looked surprised, “You don't need to apologise for sleeping in!” she said smiling, “Especially not on a Sunday. Would you like me to make cappuccino?”

“Not for me thanks, but please feel free to make for yourself, I’ll shower and get dressed.”

Penny was sat on the landing comparing the Turk's Head knot she had made with one of mine when I emerged from my room after getting dressed. Her Turk's Head was much neater than mine, and I told her so.

“May I do some on your hand rail?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, “I was going to do one above and below each bracket, so there are plenty more to do. I need to get more cord.”

Amiti’s Cafe was busy when we got there, and we ended up at the table closest to the kitchen door, but we didn't have to wait long for our coffee and breakfast. Penny eyed my salmon and scrambled egg dubiously, “I always thought salmon was for toffs,” she said, “I like kippers and haddock. What’s it like?”

I shrugged, “I should probably eat sardines or kippers, less heavy metals in the fish lower down the food chain apparently, but I really enjoy Salmon and Scrambled Eggs here. I think that’s why I got a flat in this area when I came back to UK after leaving the army. A friend of mine brought me here for breakfast one New Years day

after we had spent the night carousing around Trafalgar Square. His parents lived just around the corner from here. It was the best hangover meal I had ever eaten. Mrs. Amiti was pregnant with Hamid then, the lad who served us.”

“How long were you in the Army?” she asked.

“Two years as an apprentice then eighteen years,” I said.

“Why didn't you do the full twenty two?”

I shrugged, “Too many reasons to answer over breakfast, but no regrets, I enjoyed the time I did have and really enjoyed being out when I left. Life has been good to me in many ways.”

“What did you do in the Army?”

“I was REME, a telecommunications artificer,” I said, “Loved it.”

“Where did you serve?” she asked.

“Mostly in Germany, I had six years training in UK, a four months stint in the Falklands and two years in Colchester but the rest of my service was in Germany.”

“The military prison is in Colchester,” said Penny, “I drove there once, delivering a bus to the prison.”

“I worked there for a month when I was a sergeant” I said, “Godawful place, but I really liked Colchester itself. The oldest town in UK, apparently.”

“All I know is that it is where Boadicea spanked the Romans,” said Penny. “Where are you from? You don't have an accent.”

“Zimbabwe,” I told her, “In Africa. It used to be called Rhodesia.”

Penny's eyebrows shot up, "Wow, I've never met a white Zimbabwean before. There was that footballer, Grobbelaar, from there, he was white."

I nodded, "Bruce Grobbelaar, goalkeeper, he played for Liverpool and was amazing. He was accused of match fixing... I'm not sure when, but I think it was after he left Liverpool, then got bankrupted when he tried to sue the Sun newspaper for defamation. He was born in South Africa but grew up in Zimbabwe. Are you a football fan?"

Penny made a face, "I don't mind watching a game every now and again, but I think sport is something people should do, not watch. What about you?"

"I used to enjoy watching things like show jumping, gymnastics and figure skating, things I wanted to do but couldn't. I played a lot of sports at school and in the army, I was OK but never excellent. I like swimming and cross country skiing. I can't do things like squash or tennis and the only ball game I like playing is volleyball, but I am really bad at it. Are you sporty?"

Penny laughed, she had an appealing laugh, "I loved running at school, but that was it. I can just about doggy paddle across a pool, and I've smacked a ball around a tennis court and played ping pong. At high school I played pool and darts. I played volleyball when I went to Cyprus with the Royal Engineers, I enjoyed that. We also played touch rugby, which was quite good fun. I always wanted to do sculling. They wouldn't let me do it at Fleet because I couldn't swim. That's just daft."

"Yes, I always wanted to do sculling, it looks like a good way to stay in shape. I can teach you to swim if you want? I am a qualified swimming and lifesaving teacher."

"Maybe one day..." said Penny, going a bit red. "Shall I ask for the bill or do you want some more coffee?"

We paid, and Penny insisted in paying her share.

Someone had smashed a beer bottle on my lock-up door. Penny helped me to pick up the bits of bottle. I suggested that she start on painting her boxes as the paint took longer to dry than the wood-seal. The sky looked clear so I set up a couple of trestles and two boards just outside the lock-up and gave her four roller pads and the paint and a pair of disposable gloves. By ten AM all the drawers and boxes had a coat of sealer or paint on them. I helped Penny to carry the trestles inside the lock-up and challenged her to a game of darts in the Pawn & Castle. I lost.

Penny drove us to the Rochford Centre where we had coffee and cheesecake, I did some grocery shopping while Penny went to do some shopping for herself. I went back to the Costa Coffee shop and had another cappuccino while I wrote emails to several clients saying that I was able to work again if they needed any maintenance work done. I also wrote to Christine Latham and explained that Penny had offered to help me with maintenance work, which would mean that I might be able to earn some money, which I would share with Penny. I told her that I had paid for eighteen physiotherapy sessions with Andrea Phelps at fifty pounds a session.

Penny arrived with a couple of shopping bags while I was writing to Christine. It was ten past two, so we went back to the lock-up and did a second and final coat of paint and sealer. We finished just before five and headed for my flat.

Penny agreed to collect me from the Sports Centre at eight.

I went online and ordered shadow foam from the ShadowFoam website, then made two more Turk's Head knots on the hand rail rope before going to bed.

I was at the pool before six thirty, but only managed fifteen minutes of swimming before I had to get out as I was feeling really dizzy. I was feeling a lot better by seven when my session with Andrea started, but after half an hour I blacked out. I woke up in an ambulance on the way to the Head Trauma Unit.

I managed, when I got to the hospital, to get a message to Penny letting her know I was at the Head Trauma Centre, having blacked out during physiotherapy.

I spent the rest of the morning being examined and left in examination rooms for long periods before being told, just after two that they could not find anything wrong with me. The doctor who finally signed off on me suggested that I may just have exhausted myself, noting that I had lost weight since my release from hospital. Penny was waiting for me at the reception and looked as if she had been crying. I reassured her that I was OK and that the doctors could not find anything wrong with me. I said I thought I had overdone the swimming before I went to Andrea for physio. I was really hungry and had a stinking headache, and asked her to take me to Amiti Deli and Cafe.

I felt a lot better after a plate of lamb chops and mash and two mugs of coffee and asked Penny to take us to the lock-up.

I sanded and waxed the tracks for the drawers and assembled them. I was really very pleased with them. I collected the shadow foam from the Pawn & Castle and told Penny I would start cutting it the next day. She was very pleased with her storage boxes and loaded them into the car. She dropped me at home and agreed come back at eight the next morning.

I emailed Andrea and told her what the doctor had said, adding that I thought the swimming had been a mistake and that I would return on Wednesday at seven for my next session.

I had a troubled night but felt much better in the morning. I managed to make cappuccino without any fumbling, and was tying another Turk's Head on the handrail when Penny arrived. I made cappuccino for her and asked if she wanted breakfast at Amiti Cafe. Penny smiled and said she had watched some YouTube videos and wanted to try and cook scrambled eggs and salmon.

“If you don't like them, I will pay for your breakfast at the Deli,” she said, “I'm not much of a cook, but it's never too late to learn, right?” she said, “I brought all the ingredients.”

“I was an OK cook till...the collywobbles got me, but I never could make good scrambled egg. Let's do this!” I said.

It was fun, and the scrambled eggs tasted good too. She admitted that she liked the salmon and scrambled eggs a lot.

We went to the lock-up and spent the day marking and cutting out shadow foam. Penny was much faster and neater than me, so I did the removal after she had marked and cut the outlines. I was really pleased with the tool storage drawers. Penny photographed them and seemed just as pleased as I was. I told her I had got the idea from the Hooked on Wood YouTube videos and sent her a link to one of them. We had lunch at the Pawn & Castle, Penny tried to teach me pool and beat me at darts.

There was a response from Andrea confirming that I would be seeing her at seven on Wednesday and an email from the centre manager at the Rochford Centre asking me to repair the doors and locks in the first floor men's ablutions, which had been vandalised. There was a WhatsApp message from Anne Waller asking if I would be home at eight on Wednesday as she wanted to visit me. She also said she would like to meet my home-help, if possible.

I messaged back to say I was having physiotherapy from seven till eight every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for the next six weeks, but that Thursday at eight would be fine.

Penny drove us to the Rochford Centre and came with me to check the damaged toilet doors. I made notes and measured the doors. One of the mirrors had also been damaged and a urinal was loose. I photographed them and measured the mirror and sent the photos to the centre manager asking if he wanted the mirror replaced and the urinal fixed, then asked Penny to take me home.

Penny was waiting for me when I came downstairs at six the next morning, and said she would take me to the Sports Centre and wait there for me. I made cappuccino and toast and she made scrambled eggs.

Andrea checked my blood pressure and oxygen levels at the beginning, middle and end of the session and made me wear a wrist monitor that she said would warn us if my pulse got too high. I was fine. Penny was hunched up in the corner of the reception when I got there, peering closely at her huge phone, with earbuds in, sunglasses on and her hood up. She smiled but didn't speak when she saw me.

We went to Latimer's Hardware where I had the boards cut to size and edge banded for the repairs at the Rochford Centre. I got some hardware, paid and left, then went to the lock-up and loaded the tools needed to do the work.

Latimer's delivered the boards before Penny and I had finished removing the damaged partitions and doors. Getting the new panels up and assembled was much easier with Penny's help and I left her to fit the locks, hooks and loo roll holders while I attended to the loose urinal. That proved to be as difficult as I thought it might be - I prefer to expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised rather than the other way around. I disconnected the Urinal and chiseled out the crumbling mortar it had been secured to, then mixed and filled the space with quick setting mortar. It was only half past eleven, so I suggested we clean up and come back the next day to reattach the urinal. It took half an hour to find the centre manager and get him to secure the removed urinal.

Penny drove us to my flat, and then stayed and helped to finish making the Turk's Heads on the stairwell handrail. I showered and changed before doing the last one. Penny's were neater than mine, but I thought the handrail looked pretty damned good.

I made cappuccino and then helped Penny who wanted to give the place a good clean before the health visitor arrived. I wasn't inclined

to do such a lot of cleaning at once, but Penny somehow encouraged me to do a lot more than I would have.

By six PM I was exhausted and needed another shower. I ordered butter-chicken with jeera rice and garlic butter naan from the Delhi Lounge. Penny asked for the same but asked for hers to be medium spiced rather than hot.

Penny only ate about a third of her butter-chicken, but finished the rice and naan.

“I do like it,” she said, “But it’s a little hotter than I’m used to.”

She took the remainder of the butter chicken home with her.

I slept really well that night, and woke when I heard Penny vacuuming. It was after seven.

There was a small vase with a flower arrangement in the entrance hall, and Penny had sprayed some sort of air freshener downstairs. She had taken the rubbish out to the bins behind the flat.

There was a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter and lovely smelling french loaf. I put on the espresso machine and was just making the second cappuccino when Penny came in. She looked very different, with a thigh length smock and jeans and her hair held back with a sort of clamp.

“Could you face more scrambled egg for breakfast?” she asked, “I want to try it with feta cheese and french bread.”

“That sounds good,” I told her, handing her a cappuccino, “Are you worried about meeting the Health Visitor?”

Penny nodded and smiled, “A little, but it doesn’t hurt to try and make a good impression does it?”

I really liked scrambled egg and feta, especially with warm french bread and salted butter.

The health visitor was early, and by herself. She apologised for being early, saying she wanted to try and get a dentist to fix a tooth that had broken the night before.

She was surprised that the stair handrail had already been installed and even more astonished when I said that Penny and I had made and installed it ourselves. She tested it rigorously and said it was more than adequate. She tried hard to wrench the grab bars in the shower and toilet off the wall and seemed very impressed with them. She asked Penny a few questions, and seemed less than impressed when Penny said she had never done any sort of home help work before, and that she wasn't much of a cook. She was gone about fifteen minutes after she arrived. Penny looked very relieved.

We went back to the Rochford Centre and fitted the urinal, which took half an hour. By ten we had returned the tools to the lock-up and were back at my flat.

I looked at Penny and she looked at me.

"I don't know what to do now," I said, "Perhaps I should get myself a TV and slob about eating crisps and chocolate while watching rubbish."

"Don't you like TV?" asked Penny.

I shook my head, "I got rid of my TV years ago, before I left the army. I found myself wondering where all my free time had gone and realised I had spent it watching the box, constantly looking for distraction."

"Yeah, I suppose it does take up a lot of one's life," she said, "But it's not all bad."

"No, it isn't all bad," I said, "But I need a sense of purpose, I like to have things to do. I'll go upstairs and check my emails, maybe there's some work I can do?"

“Do you do kitchen units?” asked Penny.

“I do, yes,” I said, “Fitted cupboards, drawers and that sort of thing. mostly with MDF- the stuff I made your storage boxes out of. Why?”

“Well, I’ve been wanting new kitchen units for a while... I can pay, and I’d like to help to make them if that’s possible?” She went bright red.

I nodded, “Can you take me there? Show me your kitchen and tell me what you want?”

“You don’t mind?” asked Penny, “I really can pay.”

“Of course I don’t mind. I really want something I can do, but I’d have to see what you want first and work out how to do it before I can decide.”

I fetched my survey kit and laptop and Penny drove me to her flat, which was just past Wroxford. Penny parked outside the flat door, it was a corner unit and rather nice. Inside it was spotless, Penny was a very neat and tidy person. I took my shoes off, though she told me not to worry about them. The kitchen was separated from the sitting room by a counter which served as a dining table.

“There’s plenty of room for me to work in here, if you don't mind not being able to use your sitting room for a few days.” I said, “It would be better and much cheaper for me to bring the materials and my tools here. You would have to check with the neighbours about noise, make sure there’s no one trying to sleep during the day.”

“I have a secure parking space, that is under cover, perhaps you could work there?” asked Penny.

“I would still like to store the boards in this room for at least three days so they can adjust to the room’s temperature and humidity, if possible,” I said, “It doesn't make a lot of difference, but it does help.”

There was a large Dodge pick up truck in her secure parking space. It was in immaculate condition.

“Now that is the sort of truck I always wanted,” I said, “Does it work?”

Jenny nodded, but looked anxious, “Yes, its a runner,” she said, “I don’t use it much, but it works well. It was my father’s.”

“Well, it is big enough that I could make the units at my lock-up and you can bring them here in your truck if you prefer that?”

“I think I would prefer to make them here, but either way is fine with me.”

“OK then,” I said, lets go back to the kitchen and you tell me what you want?” I suggested.

It took about two hours, maybe a little longer before I was clear about what Penny wanted. I took measurements and started a SketchUp model. It didn’t take long.

I worked out how much MDF was needed, and the numbers and types of hinges, handles and slides.

“I usually charge three times the costs of all the materials to make the units,” I said, “It would be much cheaper for you to deal directly with the countertop people if you want marble, granite or Caesar stone. I will give you contact details for people I have used and am happy with. We can go to Latimer’s and price up the hardware. I can clean and polish this stainless steel sink, but I think you should replace the mixer. I can’t quote on the plumbing, as it is mostly hidden. You can hire another plumber if you want. I charge thirty quid an hour and add ten percent to out of pocket procurement.”

“I’d prefer that you do the plumbing, if you will let me help?” said Penny, “I want one of those old fashioned enamel sinks, I saw some

at Latimer's when we were getting the panels cut for the Rochford Centre toilets."

"I like them," I said, "Shall we go to Latimer's now?"

Penny didn't hesitate when I gave her a price after totting up everything at Latimer's, and paid for the materials using a card. We took the sink and fittings with us, but arranged for Latimer's to deliver the MDF boards to Penny's flat the following morning. We went back to Penny's flat and I helped her to move most of her living room furniture into her spare bedroom. I told her I would use the existing kitchen units as a base to work on, and suggested we wait till the MDF had been in the sitting room for three days before dismantling her existing kitchen.

I made my own way to the Sports Centre for physiotherapy the next morning, and found Penny waiting at reception for me when I was leaving. She looked uncomfortable and was wearing dark glasses and had her head covered with her hood again.

"What are you hiding from?" I asked her as we were leaving, "You seem really anxious to get away from here."

Penny went very red and shook her head "It's not important," she said quietly, "I would rather not talk about it."

I checked my phone in the car, and had two job requests. I asked Penny to pull over while I called Pedestal Care Centre and spoke to the day manager. Ten minutes later we were at my lock-up loading up some tools and materials.

The work at Pedestal Care Centre kept me and Penny busy till Saturday morning. Penny was more than helpful, and the work, which would have taken me twice as long by myself before my accident, was more enjoyable for having her working with me.

We had lunch at the Coggeshank Oak after finishing up on Saturday. It was quite busy and we could not find an empty table in the garden, but got one on the upper floor, which was even nicer, as

it had a better view over the golf course and surrounds. It was also quieter.

“I am enjoying working with you,” I told Penny, “Would you consider making a proper job of this... a sort of partnership?” I asked.

Penny went very red, and shook her head, “I am enjoying it too,” she said, “But I’m not sure about going into business with you... it’s complicated.”

I nodded, “That’s perfectly OK,” I said, not wanting to offend her, “I am still going to share what I am earning with you. It was just a suggestion.”

“Really, I don't need to be paid for helping you,” said Penny, “It feels wrong to me.”

“No,” I said, “Even before my accident I would have taken twice as long to do the work at the Care Centre, and I wouldn’t have enjoyed it half as much.”

Penny took a deep breath, “It’s not about you James,” she said, “I have a trust fund, and it has some restrictions as to what I can and cannot do. Going into business with somebody else is not allowed, I would get cut off. I can do voluntary work, as long as it is approved by the Trustees. It is a very generous trust fund, but also very restrictive. Under normal circumstances I would jump at your offer, because I really like working with you too, but I can’t take any money and I can’t go into business with you. I have to remain self-employed for paid work.”

I shrugged, “I had to ask,” I said, “Please let me know if you ever change your mind? I don’t make a fortune, but it is enough, it is honest work, and I enjoyed it even when I worked on my own. You make it more enjoyable.”

Penny reached across the table and touched the back of my wrist with her fingertips, “Thank you James,” she said, “I really appreciate

you saying that, and as long as you need it, I am more than willing to help, but as a volunteer... I can't promise any more than that."

I nodded, realising that I liked her company whether she helped me or not. It was a surprise to me. Penny wasn't the buxom boisterous type of woman I had found attractive in my youth... and my few relationships had ended badly. I had no idea how old Penny was, but she was probably younger than me. I told myself to get a grip; that there was no reason why a healthy, capable and good looking young woman would want to invest in a brain damaged man like me, and that I should just make the most of the time I would have with Penny.

"A trust fund?" I said aloud, to cover my discomfort, "Does that mean you have to fend off gold diggers every day?"

Penny laughed, "Hardly," she said, "You are the first person I have told about it, but getting married ends the payments, so ..." she shrugged, "But I'm not very good at relationships anyway, I generally keep to myself... less chance of getting hurt."

I nodded, "Tubbs is the only female that has stayed with me for more than three months... probably because I keep her locked in. Apparently I am too self-contained for a proper relationship. Not needy enough. I have it in writing."

"Wanting and needing are different," said Penny quietly, "I don't need anyone... but that doesn't mean I don't want anyone."

"Exactly!" I said, "They aren't the same."

Our food arrived, followed shortly by a noisy family that sat at a table next to us, which curtailed further conversation.

I wanted to ask Penny more about her Trust fund and family during the drive back, but sensed an awkwardness between us. We hardly spoke at all. Penny asked if I needed her on Sunday while we offloaded the tools and materials at the lock-up. I told her I wasn't planning on doing anything, which was a lie.

On Sunday morning I took the bus to the Sports Centre and spent twenty minutes in the pool, then asked the staff if there was any chance I could see the CCTV footage at the time of my accident outside the centre at around 8PM on Friday the 13th of January. It took a while, and necessitated several phone calls, including one to Andrea, before the assistant manager allowed me to sit at her desk while she searched for the footage. I saw myself standing on the pavement, head down, left leg outstretched as I felt the tarmac with my foot. There was no sound, but I saw the big truck as it spun slowly on the icy road and casually side swiped me off my feet, sending me flying into the large glass front, which starred and sagged at the impact but which held me. Seconds later the driver of the truck was kneeling next to my unconscious body, a phone pinned to her ear by her shoulder as she carefully checked my body. I recognised her by her posture and I recognised the actions of someone trained in military first aid. A short while later my body was hidden from view as people came out of the sports centre. I recognised Andrea and two others. The driver, Penny, took charge and I was lifted by four people and laid in the back of the truck. Two of the centre staff climbed in with me and the truck moved slowly away, its hazard lights flashing.

I felt numb. Penny was the driver of the vehicle that hit me. I felt my hands shaking. I thanked the manager and said I did not want a copy of the footage when she offered to have it put on a DVD. I used Uber to get to Amity Deli and cafe and had salmon scrambled eggs and a cappuccino while I tried to get my head around what I had learned.

I didn't think that Penny was to blame for my accident, but it explained her reluctance to be recognised at the Sports Centre. What I didn't understand was why she had volunteered to look after me. I assumed that the "insurance" that paid for my treatment and aftercare was, in fact, Penny's Trust Fund. I wondered if the same Trust Fund obliged her to do penance by looking after me. I found myself walking home with little recollection of eating or even paying for my breakfast. I retraced myself and was assured by Hamid that I

had paid. I then realised that I was walking with much more confidence and that I really didn't need the crutches anymore.

We started on Penny's kitchen after my Physiotherapy session on Monday. Penny had waited in the car in the carpark for me as agreed on Saturday.

It felt strange, working with her, and not knowing what she was thinking, having learned that she was the driver of the vehicle that had put me in hospital. Somehow things had changed, and Penny sensed it too.

"Are you alright James?" she asked when we stopped for a break just before twelve.

I nodded, "I'm a lot better thanks, I don't really need the crutches anymore and Andrea says my dexterity is above ninety percent now."

"That's fantastic," said Penny brightly, "What about your fine motor skills?"

I grimaced, "Not so good, Andrea isn't worried, she says that they are close to the average, but I know that they are not as good as they were."

"Have they improved?" asked Penny.

I shook my head, "Not measurably, but I never did those sorts of tests before the accident."

"Perhaps you should see a specialist?" suggested Penny.

I shrugged, "I'm not going to be doing microsurgery or anything like that," I said, "I would rather work on things that I can fix and hope that time will help with everything else."

Penny nodded her head but looked unconvinced. I desperately wanted to ask her about her role in the accident, but didn't know

how to do it without upsetting her, and I really did not want to do that.

By six PM we had used her old kitchen units to make a rectangular stable work platform in the middle of the sitting room for my tracksaw cutting station and had begun cutting the large MDF boards, marking and stacking them carefully. My home-made cyclone filter wasn't working as well as it used to, so I took it home with me, stripped it and examined it carefully. I couldn't find anything wrong with the filter, but eventually found a split in the hose between the filter and the vacuum cleaner. The vacuum cleaner, one I had salvaged from a shop clearance sale years earlier, also seemed to have lost much of its suck.

The next day, despite a visit to Latimer's to buy a much more powerful shopvac, we made excellent progress, and had all the boards cut except the cupboard and drawer fronts which Penny wanted to make from 16mm black mdf, which we had not yet received. We also assembled the carcass for the sink side wall cabinets.

Penny waited till we had finished and cleaned up before handing me a sheet of paper, "I hope you don't mind, but I looked into experts at rehabilitation of fine motor skills after brain injury - this clinic in Vancouver specialises in helping ice hockey players who..." Penny went very red, "Please have a read and maybe you can go there?"

I thanked her, took the paper from her, and read it then and there. The Vancouver BTI clinic was a non-profit clinic that specialised in rehabilitation of patients with loss of speech and motor skills following traumatic brain injuries. I nodded.

"This sounds really good," I said, "I'll write to Andrea and ask her to write to them. I'll do it tonight."

The next morning I took myself to the Sports Centre and told Penny I would get an Uber to her flat, so that she could receive the delivery of Black MDF and some drawer slides from Latimer's.

Andrea said she would gladly write to the Vancouver clinic, but told me not to set my hopes too high.

“You have made remarkable progress already,” she said, “Generally most improvement in motor skills takes about six months, after which there is very little improvement. You are almost one hundred percent after less than three months. Many people who have not had any brain injury are less dextrous than you are right now. Your balance is excellent and your hand eye coordination is almost normal. I think you should ask the doctors at the head trauma unit to review and reduce your medication before you consider going to Vancouver.”

By the time I reached Penny’s flat I had made an appointment at the Head Trauma Unit for the following Monday afternoon.

Penny and I assembled and fitted the rest of the cabinet bases in her kitchen, and glued and assembled all the overhead cabinets. I stayed late, glueing and assembling all the drawers and insisted on taking an Uber back to my flat, as I could tell that Penny wanted to get on with undercoating the bases.

By Sunday the work was done. Penny had done most of the hinge and drawer slide fitting, learning quickly and doing it a lot better than I could. Despite my initial misgivings, I really liked the look of the black MDF drawer and cabinet fronts.

Penny asked if she could make some boxes and display units with the offcuts and left over MDF, and I ended up staying late that night helping her to make storage boxes with the material we could salvage from her original kitchen units as well.

Penny ordered a take out of my favourite butter chicken with jeera rice and garlic naan, and thanked me for helping with her kitchen.

“I enjoyed it, and I think doing work like this probably helps as much, if not more than the physiotherapy,” I told her, “We would make a good team, you and I.”

Penny went red and shook her head, her mouth full of food.

“Yes, I know... you can’t because of your trust fund,” I said, “I hope it is worth it. The trust fund I mean... there’s a lot to be said for earning a living through your own efforts.”

Penny nodded and swallowed, “I know,” she said, “Sometimes I think I am just being a coward... but it is hard to throw away the safety-net of a guaranteed income. Life can be tough.”

I laughed, “You are right... but,” I shrugged, “I would probably opt for safety and security if I had a choice.”

Penny shook her head, “I doubt it,” she said, “You could have gone the disabled victim route and lived off a disability pension, but you are working hard to get better. You like to be independent.”

I walked to the Sports Centre in the morning, and had a swim afterwards. Penny had stayed home for Beeston Counters to come and fit the granite worktops. She called me at midday and offered to collect me and take me to the Head Trauma Unit.

I spent half an hour with Dr. Grahams, who happily reduced my medication and encouraged me to go to the Vancouver BTI rehabilitation clinic.

Penny was keen to show off her now completed kitchen. She said the Beeston Counters installers had been really impressed by it. She dropped me off at my flat and looked as if she wanted to say something, but just asked what time she should come around in the morning.

“Take the day off?” I suggested, “You worked all weekend and I don't have anything special to do. I'll probably get the train into London and do a movie and have a good long walk.”

There was an email from the Rochford Centre manager asking me to get the broken mirror replaced in the first floor gents toilets. I had

offered to get it done when he asked me to replace the damaged toilet walls and doors, but he said somebody else had already agreed to do it.

I took the early bus to the Rochford Centre the next morning. The “new” mirror had been glued in place and had fallen off and damaged a basin and three floor tiles. I sent an email to the manager asking if he wanted me to replace the basin and floor tiles, then took the next bus to the train station.

In the end I didn't see a movie in London, but enjoyed walking around St James's Park and Hyde Park. I spent a couple of hours in the Design Centre and then took the train back to Wroxford, where I managed to buy a cordless router at Wroxford Power Tools before they closed. I had to stand on the bus all the way back to the Rochford Centre, and had a cappuccino and cheese cake there before taking a later bus home.

Penny was waiting for me when I came downstairs the following morning. She made cappuccino and offered to make breakfast, but I said I would rather eat after physio and a swim.

Penny looked alarmed, “I thought you had decided not to swim for a while?” she said, “Aren't you worried about blacking out in the pool?”

I laughed and shook my head, “Not really, I don't swim hard and the lifesavers are excellent. Have you thought about learning to swim properly? I am a really good swimming teacher.”

Penny went red and shook her head, “Not today... but I'll come and watch you from the cafe.” She said, “But I want to tell you something first... you might not want to have anything to do with me afterwards.” She carefully laid an envelope and a set of keys on the counter; keys to my flat, lockup and car.

I nodded, “I am all ears,” I said, “But if you are going to tell me about the accident, I already know that it was your truck that hit me,

and you that made sure I got taken to the head trauma unit quickly. You saved my life.”

Penny went very pale, she stared at me and gave a slight shake of her head, “You knew all the time... who...”

“Nobody told me,” I said, “I asked to see the camera footage from the Sports Centre.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” asked Penny.

I shrugged, “I don’t know... I could ask you the same thing,” I said eventually.

Penny got to her feet, her face still very pale. She looked as if she was about to speak, then turned and walked away, she was out of the door before I could think of what to say. When I reached the pavement she was twenty yards away, walking fast, with her phone to her ear. I thought about following her, but then thought it would be a mistake. My car was parked outside the flat, it was an half hour only parking zone. I fetched the keys and drove around to the residents’ parking.

I decided to walk to the Sports Centre, and was almost late for my session with Andrea. I don’t remember much of it. I did swim afterwards, and glanced up at the cafe windows frequently, hoping to see Penny, but she was not there. I took the bus home. There was a missed call on my phone from Christine Latham and an email from her informing me that Ms. Goodwin would not be able to continue as my home-help and driver and asking if I had anyone in mind to replace her or if she should ask an agency to send someone for my approval.

I wrote back and said I could manage without a home-help, and hoped that I would be able to drive myself soon as I was now being weaned off anti-epilepsy medication.

A few minutes after sending the email I got a call from Christine.

“Good morning Mr. Pryce, I hope you don’t mind me calling?” she asked.

“I’d prefer it if you called me James,” I said, “I always think of Mr. Pryce as my father. Of course I don’t mind you calling. Is it about Penny?”

Christine laughed, “I’m sorry James, but no, it’s not about Penny... its a bit cheeky of me really, but when I read your email and comment about anti epilepsy medication, it reminded me that my younger brother, also James, has been on a special diet that prevents epilepsy without medication. He is a diabetic, and has a strictly restricted carbohydrate diet. He hasn't had a seizure for years. I thought you might be interested.”

“That does sound interesting, thank you,” I replied, “I’ll call the doctor at the trauma unit straight away.”

“You are most welcome James. Is there anything I can help with?” she asked, “You have not submitted any invoices or requests for payment for a while?”

“No, all is going well, though I am considering a trip to a rehab clinic in Vancouver,” I said.

“Please let me know I you need any help with that?” asked Christine, “I can make all the arrangements. It would be my pleasure.”

“Thank you,” I said, “I will get back to you when I know more.”

We said our goodbyes and I cursed myself for not asking her about Penny and the Trust and if she was part of it.

I couldn't get through to Dr. Graham on the phone, as he was in surgery, so I sent an email instead, and copied Andrea.

The Rochford Centre manager had replied asking me to go ahead with all the works, so I called an Uber to take me to Latimers.

By the time I had bought a new basin, tiles and tile fix, and collected the tools I wanted from the lock-up, it was four PM. I stayed till eight PM, and was shaking like a leaf by the time I was finished fitting the new basin and replacing the tiles.

I thought about how much more I had enjoyed doing the work with Penny as I cleaned up and carefully checked and double checked the measurements on the mirror screw holes. I would need help to put up the mirror, at least two people to hold it in place. I took the bus home and got harassed by a couple of drunken teenagers. Luckily they were all mouth and no trousers. The bus driver looked scared half to death and then very relieved when they got off a couple of stops before mine.

I went to Latimer's in the morning and had the mirror cut to size and the holes drilled. Their edge polishing machine was down for at least two days. They agreed to call me before delivery and to help me with installation. I went back to the Rochford centre and filled the old screw holes with ready mix mortar repair, as I was not confident that the holes in the new mirror were right.

I found the centre manager and learned that he had handed in his notice and was moving to Australia.

The next morning Andrea spent a while telling me about the Keto low carb diet. She thought it was excellent but advised me not to start on it till I had checked with the doctors at the trauma unit, because of the medication I was on. I had a swim afterwards and walked back to my flat.

I spent the day cleaning, and thinking. I really missed Penny. I sent her a WhatsApp message to say I was sorry to have upset her and hope we could still be friends. It took me over an hour to write it, rewording it so many times and trying hard to keep it light and friendly without being pushy.

That afternoon I got an email response from Dr. Grahams. He said the Ketogenic diet was absolutely fine for me, but that I should do it

properly. He suggested that I work with Andrea and that I could probably stop all medication after four weeks on proper ketogenic dieting. He warned that I should be prepared to remain on the diet for the long term if I decided to go that route and asked that I come for a checkup after four weeks of maintaining the diet. He had copied Andrea on the email.

Andrea sent me a list of YouTube links and a questionnaire regarding my eating likes and dislikes. I watched all the videos and completed the questionnaire. It looked easy enough to me, though I wasn't sure about avoiding fruit. I generally ate a lot of fruit and was surprised to learn that fructose was such a problem with blood sugar.

I slept badly that night, and felt grouchy the next day. I got a nasty scratch from Tubbs when I accidentally trod on her tail getting up from a chair.

There was a WhatsApp reply from Penny,

“Can't understand why you want to be friends after what I did to you. Am in Brussels, about to take a luxury trailer-home to Belgrade. Back on the road again. Take good care of yourself.”

I wrote back “It was an accident - nobody's fault. I like you and your company. Have fun.”

Almost immediately there was a response. A phone number and a name - Ken and “Wants a new kitchen.”

I messaged back, “Not ready to do such a big job by myself. Will you help?”

I waited half an hour for a response, then turned my phone off and walked to the Sports Centre to have a swim. My timing was bad; the pool was in use by the local school for the next two hours. I looked in on Andrea and she invited me in to her studio.

“I’ve been working on a keto plan for you,” she said, “Have you got twenty minutes to go through it with me?”

Half an hour later I was on the bus to the Rochford Centre. I stocked up on nuts and seeds and double cream yoghurt. Andrea had tried to get me to give up on cappuccino and then insisted that I use whole cream milk as it has lower lactose or milk sugar content. I hadn't thought of lactose as a sugar, but it wasn't surprising, I suppose, ending is 'ose' like sucrose, glucose and fructose. Andrea suggested I watch YouTube videos by Dr. Paul Mason and Eric Berg to learn more about metabolic health. She also suggested that I learn to make sauerkraut and said there were hundreds of YouTube videos on how to do it.

I ended up going back to the Rochford Centre at four PM to fit the replacement mirror with two strong lads from Latimers.

I was up late that night watching YouTube videos, and horrified at how little I knew about metabolic health and the importance of what we do and do not eat.

I was late for Andrea's physiotherapy session in the morning and spent almost half of it talking about Keto diets and carbohydrates. I learned that Andrea had been a diabetic before doing keto and that she was now running marathons and no longer diabetic.

Three days later I was feeling less than happy with life. I felt like shit and I was constipated. The videos and Andrea had warned me about Keto Flu, but not about the constipation. I was reluctant to discuss the constipation with Andrea, but I did cancel the physiotherapy session. I got a laxative from the chemist and stayed at home looking up constipation and keto on Google and YouTube.

I went to the healthshop at the Rochford Centre and got Chia and Flax seeds, and a mortar and pestle for pulverising flax seeds. By Saturday my bowels were working properly again and I started to feel better.

Andrea laughed when I muttered about constipation not being on the list of cons when I learned about Keto. She admitted then, that she took psyllium husk for constipation. I told her I was using flax and chia seeds.

I got called out to the Pedestal Care Home, they wanted me to refurbish two vacant units. I spent the morning doing measurements. Many of the residents asked about Penny. I sent the cutting list to Latimer's and spent the afternoon salvaging the fittings and dismantling the units. I asked if I could keep the wood - mostly good quality plywood, and was told that was fine.

I sent a message to Penny that night before going to bed, telling her that the residents at the Care Home had asked about her and said they missed her too.

On Friday morning Andrea announced that there wasn't much more she could do for me, that my hand eye coordination, balance and motor control was fine, but said that she was happy to help me if I needed any advice on Keto.

I phoned Dr. Graham who told me to come and see him in two weeks or before, if I had a seizure.

I was invited to a farewell dinner at Franklins on Saturday night by the Rochdale Centre manager. I was surprised but accepted, even though it was a posh restaurant I had never felt willing to afford.

I was even more surprised when I got there, feeling under dressed, when I was shown to the table. There were ten of us, including the centre manager and his wife. The others were all managers of Rochford Centre shops and an Australian sounding woman, Maggie, who was the new Centre Manager. I knew most of the shop managers, but not well. They were a nice bunch.

"Thanks for coming," Paul, the centre manager told me when introducing me to his wife, Sophie and the others, "I really wanted Sophie to meet you and introduce you to Maggie, my replacement." He turned to face Maggie, "James has helped me out more times

than I can count,” he said, “He got taken out by a drunk driver and almost killed in January, but was back working by the end of February even though he had to use crutches. If he can’t fix it, he will get it fixed. You can rely on him.”

I felt really embarrassed, especially as I had often cursed him behind his back, but I managed to thank him.

“I hope the drunk driver got locked up!” said Maggie, a good looking red-haired woman.

“It was an accident - a sudden cold spell and icy roads,” I said, “The driver, who wasn't drunk; saved my life by getting me straight to the local head trauma unit at Carlton Park. The surgeons said if they had waited for an ambulance, which would have insisted on taking me to Coggeshank Accident and Emergency, I would almost certainly have been dead on arrival.”

“One of my students was treated at the head trauma unit,” said Sophie, “They are excellent. Its the top brain surgery place in UK apparently.”

“They get all the head injury victims from the M1, M11 and M25 accidents said one of the others. “Lots of practice.”

“My son trained there,” said another, “He’s in Perth, Australia now.”

Maggie was sat on my left and Sophie on my right. They were both really pleasant and attractive. The dinner was excellent and passed too quickly.

There was a WhatsApp message and a photo from Penny on my phone when I got home. She was wearing a high visibility Jacket over her combat uniform and behind her was a tank transporter with a tank on it.

“Safely delivered to Ukraine, now in Cyprus, driving a field ambulance for a two week training exercise.” There were hug and kiss emojis below the message which had my heart beating faster.

“Dare Devil!” I responded, “Enjoy Cyprus. Miss you.” I eventually decided against sending any emojis.

I really did miss her when I started on the work at the Pedestal Care Home. I had liked working by myself before working with Penny. The few occasions that I had asked for help had put me off working with other people, but since working with Penny, working by myself seemed somehow less enjoyable, something was missing. It took all week, which was normal, but would have been a three day job with Penny. I tried to get an Uber XL to take the salvaged boards from the care home back to my lock-up, and ended up calling a transporter who agreed to do it for twenty five quid. He was an hour late collecting me and grumbled all the way and didn't offer to help with loading and off loading. I paid him in cash and made a note never to use him again.

I stayed at the lock-up, cutting some of the boards down to use as the bases for more workshop drawers, then got an Uber home.

I spent Saturday and Sunday making workshop drawer units and was very pleased with them. I had enough material left over to make a six drawer unit like the one Penny had helped me with and decided to make one for her, as a thank you gift. I ordered more shadow foam.

I had two small jobs at the Rochford Centre the next week, and spent the rest of the time working on the drawers for Penny. I swam every day.

Dr.Grahams checked me over on Friday afternoon and told me I could drive and gave me a letter saying so. He also gave me a letter for the Vancouver BTI clinic.

I scanned and sent the letter to Christine Latimer and two days later, on Monday, I had a return ticket to Vancouver and two weeks to get ready.

I cut and fitted the shadow foam in Penny's drawers and added a new Japanese folding saw that I had liked so much I had bought two spares. I took several photos of the drawers before choosing one to send to her and told her I would leave the drawers with the Landlord of the Pawn & Castle for her to collect. I told her I was flying to Vancouver on the tenth of June for a three week course of treatment at the BTI clinic.

I wrote to my regular clients letting them know that I would be away from the tenth of June till the third of July, but didn't have an email address for Maggie, the new Rochford Centre manager. I put Tubbs in her carry crate and took the bus to the Rochford centre on the Friday morning before I was due to leave and found Maggie just as she was unlocking her office door. She greeted me and invited me in for coffee, and asked if she could give Tubbs some milk. She was clearly a cat person and fussed over Tubbs while I explained that I was going away for three weeks.

"What's going to happen to Tubbs?" Maggie asked, "She's adorable."

"I'm taking her to the Wroxford road pet hotel," I said, "They are pretty good and I can log into their website and see how Tubbs is doing whenever I feel like it."

"She will still be unhappy, cats are very territorial," she said, "And she likes company, I can tell that." She was on her knees fussing over Tubbs who was enjoying the attention while pretending not to, the way cats do. "I'd offer to look after her, but my apartment isn't ready yet and the dreadful place I am staying doesn't allow pets. Its not really fit for humans."

"Well, I am away for three weeks, so you can stay at my flat if you like, its fifteen minutes by bus from here," I offered half heartedly.

Maggie looked up at me, "Are you serious?"

I nodded, "Sure, why not?" I said, "I'm taking the train to Heathrow tonight, so you'd have to move in today. Do you want to take a look at it?"

We took the bus, and Maggie agreed within minutes. She promised to keep it clean and pay all the utility bills while I was away. I didn't have a landline phone, so wasn't worried about her running up a huge phone bill, which had happened to me in my youth. I gave her a set of keys, we exchanged phone numbers and email addresses and she left. A couple of hours later I was packed and ready to go, with nothing to do, so I got an Uber to Wroxford Railway station and was at Heathrow and checked into the Ibis Budget Hotel by three PM.

The hotel was very basic, but more than adequate, I went to bed early, and slept surprisingly well, skipped breakfast and checked into the Air France flight two hours before take off. I was surprised to find that I was flying business class. I asked the lady at the check in to double check and she looked puzzled and told me I was booked business class for both flights to Vancouver and back; I had to go to Paris and then get on a Virgin Atlantic flight to Vancouver. She told me I could use the business class lounge too.

The journey was very comfortable, and I was super impressed with the food. The flight attendants didn't even blink when I asked if they had carb free choices.

I was met at Vancouver by an Asian man holding a board with my name on it. He drove me to the BTI Clinic where I was treated like a VIP and shown to a very comfortable room.

The next day I was put through a series of tests and given a very thorough medical examination. In the afternoon I was told what was going to happen and what was expected of me. I had four hours of therapy every morning from eight till twelve, after which I was free to do as I pleased. The clinic was on a beautiful estate with a sports and leisure centre that I was welcome to use. There was even a nine hole golf course. I was perfectly happy to walk around the

estate. The swimming pool was really nice and had a very pleasant cafe with a small library close to it.

The therapy itself was intense, and included some very mild electrical 'stimulation' as well as ultra sound and other weird technical therapies. I got to have a full body massage each day which I really enjoyed. After a week I was shown several graphs which showed some progress. I was given very high doses of vitamin D and asked to take magnesium and potassium tablets.

The second week was much like the first. At the end of the week, they showed me more graphs and said I had improved more than they had anticipated. I ventured out on the Sunday afternoon and took a guided tour of Vancouver that one of the clinic staff had recommended. It rained hard all afternoon, but the tour was a pleasant distraction.

The last week was very different, with much less treatment and a lot more of doing really intricate tasks. I actually enjoyed most of them, even when I couldn't complete them. On the last day I was shown my final results. I had made improvements, and they said I had no substantial fine motor control impairment. They recommended that I continue taking high levels of vitamin D, as well as Magnesium and Potassium supplements, and have my blood tested every three months to ensure that my potassium levels don't get too high. Bottom line was that I was fully recovered and was probably able to relearn any fine motor skill I might have lost with suitable repetitive practice. I had seen some of the other seriously impaired patients at the clinic, and felt like a fraud by comparison.

I enjoyed the flights back to UK, and messaged Maggie from Paris to let her know I would be arriving back that evening. She messaged back immediately to say that she had already moved into her own apartment and had just checked up on Tubbs as she did every day.

I got home to find a welcome home card on the kitchen table, the fridge stocked with fresh milk and food and the flat spotless. Tubbs

looked well groomed and a bit tubbier than when I had last seen her.

I wrote an email to Christine, thanking her and telling her that I was now officially OK.

I WhatsApp messaged Penny too, saying that the clinic had helped and reassured me that I was now a hundred percent OK. I added that I actually felt better than I had for several years. I got a thumbs up response.

I found the envelope that she had left. It contained eight hundred pounds in cash and a hand written note.

“Thanks for the kitchen, I couldn't have done it without you. Please take the money, you more than earned it? Phil from Beeston Counters wants his kitchen done, I'll happily help you do it if you want the work? You can pay me as a sub contractor. Phil's contact details are below.”

I stared at the note for a long time, then sent a WhatsApp message to Penny asking if she was still up for helping me in making kitchen units for Phil from Beeston Counters. I could see that she had got and read my message, but she didn't respond.

I went to bed feeling troubled about Penny, but slept well enough. I got a call at seven the following morning, one of the shop owners at Rochford Centre asking if I could drop in and discuss some shopfitting ideas with her. I said I would be there at eight.

I drove, and found it strangely unnerving, but decided that it was time to buy myself a panel van, if I could get an automatic.

I spent two hours with Jocelyn, she had some rather good hand-drawn sketches of wall mounted shelves for displaying her candles and scent wares, and wanted to know if I could make and fit them.

“I think so,” I said, “Would you like me to make up a sample and cost it for you?”

“Yes please James, Maggie Styles suggested I ask you, she did the drawings.”

“Maggie, the centre manager?” I asked her.

“Yes, she is incredibly helpful and rather lovely, don’t you think?”

Maggie caught up with me in the parking lot.

“I’m glad I saw you James,” she said, “I wanted to apologise, I broke one of your mugs. I replaced it but thought it might have sentimental value. I am so sorry.”

I laughed, “I hadn’t even noticed, but thank you for telling me, and for looking after Tubbs and my flat, as well as stocking up the fridge.”

“Honestly, it was a pleasure James, I was getting really fed up with the room I had at the Dorning building, I don't know if you know it?”

I shook my head.

“Its not fit for human habitation, it’s filthy and the manager is a pig,” she said with feeling, “My new apartment is OK, but I might be calling on you to fix a few things when I’ve settled in a bit.”

“Thanks, I could do with the work,” I said, “And thank you for recommending me to Jocelyn from the Candle and Scent Boutique, I like your drawing.”

“Thanks, I love sketching things out. Did your girlfriend get hold of you? I think she was a bit surprised to find me in your flat.”

“Girlfriend?” I asked, “Do you mean Penny?”

“She didn't give a name, a pretty, skinny little thing in army uniform. If she isn't your girlfriend, introduce me to her ... I liked the look of her.” Maggie laughed, “Yes, I’m a dyke!”

I smiled, "I don't know which way Penny swings, but I had hopes, though I think I ruined my chances before I left."

"Well give her a call!" Maggie urged me, "She looked surprised to see me, but she hadn't come for a fight, perhaps she came to make up. Tell her I'm a dyke!"

I thanked her and was about to unlock my car when she laughed and came back to me, "I almost forgot," she said, "I think it's a bit dark and dismal down here, what do you think about livening it up a bit, painting the concrete white?"

I looked around and nodded, "Should work," I said, "But I wouldn't paint the bottom three feet of the walls and pillars white. I think black and yellow diagonals would be better for avoiding dings."

"Could you do the work, or get it done?" she asked, "I'd need a firm quotation. No adjustments after agreeing."

"It's too big a job for me," I said, "But I can get some quotes for you and tell you which ones I trust to do a good job."

"Thanks James," she said, "Please bill me for your time and expenses involved."

I nodded and she turned and headed back to the lifts.

I went to my lockup and spent a while experimenting with some chipboard off-cuts before driving to Latimer's and asking them to cut and edge band some 32mm laminated chipboard to size for me saying I would collect it in an hour. I drove down to Mason's Vans and spent a while looking at panel vans. They only had one automatic van and it was too small. The salesman asked for my number and said he would call if he found something bigger. I collected the boards from Latimer's and drove back to my lock-up.

It took me an hour to make the shelf, but I knew I could make more in a third of that time. I loaded the shelf, tools and fittings into my

car and drove home. It was not quite four PM so I called three contractors who did painting, and asked them to meet me at the Rochdale Centre the following morning at eight, explaining that they wanted to paint the underground car parking areas. Two said they could be there, one said he couldn't take on any more work for three months.

I sent another WhatsApp to Penny asking her to meet me for a coffee when she had time. She didn't respond.

I had shown Jocelyn the shelf and put it up for her before eight. She liked it and agreed on the price and asked for eleven more.

The first paint contractor turned up at eight thirty and left after I said he had to give a firm quote.

The second contractor called and asked where I was, saying he had been stood outside the Centre Manager's office waiting for me since seven forty-five. He grumbled at me when we met in the car park but listened quietly while I told him what was wanted.

"I can do it," he said, "But it will take time. If they want a firm price, they will have to pay for all the materials up front and give me somewhere secure to store them here. I can have four guys on it, and we will tape off and do one section at a time... don't want customers claiming against us or the centre for paint splashes on their cars. Give me a couple of hours and I'll send you a price and a couple of references."

I thanked him and messaged him with Maggie's name and email address, asking him to send the quote and contract directly to her.

I drove to Latimer's and paid for the wood, cutting and edge banding for Jocelyn's shelves and arranged for them to be delivered to the lock-up the following morning. I loaded the hardware in my car then drove to two more second-hand van sales yards I had found using Google, but didn't find a suitable van.

I contemplated trying to call Penny, but chickened out and messaged her instead, asking her advice at where I might find a decent second-hand Ford Transit sized automatic van.

I heard messages arrive on my phone as I was driving home. I pulled into a filling station. Six messages from Penny. Each a link to an automatic van being offered for sale, the second one, a Mercedes, looked perfect. I clicked on the link and said I wanted to see and test drive the vehicle. Then messaged Penny, thanking her and saying I had asked to see the Mercedes. I got a thumbs up in return.

By the time I got home, the seller of the Mercedes had messaged, asking me to call him back. He was in Basildon and said he might consider a trade for my car if he liked it. I agreed to drive to Basildon on Saturday morning and he sent me a WhatsApp pin to his location.

By Friday midday I had made the shelves for Jocelyn, and Maggie had messaged to thank me for finding a painting contractor.

I set off for Basildon at six in the morning and was parked outside Mark's house at seven. He came out barefoot in his pyjamas, grinning sheepishly.

"When you say first thing in the morning you mean it!" he said, "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"Coffee please?" I said, "Sorry to wake you."

Mark waved a dismissive hand, "Its OK, the baby kept us up late last night, but she's asleep now, thank God," he put a finger to his lips when we went into the house. "I'll fetch the keys and make the coffee while you take a drive around the block. Please leave your car keys with me?"

The van looked nice and clean, Mark waved me off and closed the garage door as I drove away. I liked it and had decided I wanted it long before I parked it outside his garage. Mark brought the coffee

out on a tray, with milk and sugar and a packet of oatmeal biscuits, he had changed into jeans and a t shirt.

“I like the look and feel of your car,” he said, “What are you asking for it?”

We haggled for a while, then shook hands, I wrote a bill of sale and transferred three thousand eight hundred pounds into Mark’s bank account. He wrote me a bill of sale and we swapped documents. I transferred my tools to the van, finished my coffee and shook Mark’s hand again before heading back home. I stopped to fill the tank, as the gauge had showed a red light when I had test driven it. Mark wasn’t that trusting. I checked the oil and the expansion tank. then the tyre pressures before leaving the filling station. I nearly pranged the van before I reached the motorway, swerving to avoid a dog that ran out barking from a driveway.

I parked outside my lock-up and loaded Jocelyn’s shelves and my tools into the van, then drove to the Rochford Centre. I had a few moments of indecision when it came to using the underground car park as I wasn’t sure about the height of the van, then realised I could use the trade entrance. Jocelyn looked a bit worried when I turned up. Her shop was full of customers. I asked her if I could install the shelves after the shop closed and she looked relieved and gave me a key and the alarm code.

I went for a coffee and messaged Penny, telling her I had bought the Mercedes van and thanked her and added, “I have eleven floating shelves to fit in the Candle and Scent Boutique at the Rochford Centre tonight after 16:30. I could really use your help and can pay two hundred pounds if you have the time. Please?”

I left the van at the centre and took the bus home. I distracted myself from thinking about Penny by doing some cleaning, then went for a long walk. Time seemed to slow down and it felt like an eternity waiting for four PM when I took the bus back to the Rochford Centre. Penny had not responded. I got on with carrying shelves to the boutique, and by five I was ready to start marking and drilling.

I jumped and nearly cried out when someone spoke from right behind me as I stepped down off the ladder after drilling the first set of holes. It was Penny. She almost smiled.

“I didn't mean to startle you. Sorry I am late; I was going through the Dartford tunnel when you messaged.”

“I'm glad you came,” I said, resisting the urge to touch her, “I thought you were avoiding me.”

“I was going to and probably should be,” said Penny, “But you asked for help. Those shelves look heavy.”

“They are heavy,” I said, “Let me show you what I'm doing. If you drill the holes and drive in the fixings, I should be able to lift the shelves into place.”

It didn't take long with Penny's help. By nine PM we had finished, cleaned up, set the alarm and locked the shop.

“Can I buy you supper?” I asked, “Nando's is open, I have no idea what they are like.”

Penny shrugged and nodded. She was wearing dungaree overalls, a hoodie top and boots. Her short hair had a spiky urchin look.

She helped me carry my tools and ladder back to the van.

“It looks nice,” she said of the van, “I can give it a health check if you like?”

“I would like that,” I said, “Have you been anywhere exciting recently?”

She shook her head, “Southampton, Southend and Dartford. Military transports. Nothing special. Did you like Vancouver?”

“Not really, I’m not much of a city lover, but the clinic was in a pretty nice place.”

“Are you really a hundred percent OK now?” asked Penny as we walked up the stairs.

I nodded, “As far as they can tell,” I told her, “I can send you the report if you like? They said that I responded well to therapy and that everybody loses fine motor-skills when they stop doing certain things, but that I have better than normal ability to reacquire lost skills if and when I need them. I actually feel a lot better than I did before the accident.”

Penny looked thoughtful and didn't speak again till we reached Nando's.

“I like Nando's,” she said, “The founders are from Mozambique in Africa. My mother was born in Mozambique.”

“You don't look very African,” I said

Penny smiled, “My mother was Irish by descent, her mother was a doctor working in Mozambique.”

We ordered and Penny excused herself to wash her hands. I went to the gents and did the same, then found a table, it was in a booth.

The waitress brought my coffee and a water for Penny. Penny arrived as the waitress was leaving.

“How can you drink coffee now?” asked Penny sliding into the seat opposite me, “I wouldn't be able to sleep if I had a coffee now.”

I shrugged, “I would prefer a cider, I'm allowed alcohol now, but I am driving.”

“I'll drive, if you want a cider,” said Penny, “I came from Dartford in a taxi. I can get a taxi from your place, the military is paying.”

I thanked her and pushed my coffee away.

“I have cash at home,” I said, “To pay you for helping, please remind me?”

“You don't need to pay me James,” said Penny quietly, “I earn enough with my driving.”

“I like your help,” I said, “And I do get paid for the work, I thought you were happy to get paid as a sub contractor? That works for your trust fund rules doesn't it?”

She nodded, “Yes, I suppose it does. I haven't checked. I will.”

The food arrived then. It was quite tasty. I pushed my onion rings across to Penny.

“I shouldn't eat those, too many carbs,”

Penny nodded, “Thanks. Are you staying on the keto diet?” She asked.

“Yes... I quite like it, though I miss things like fruit and french bread,” I said, “It feels right.”

“I'd had a drink,” said Penny so quietly that it took me a moment to realise what she said.

“I don't understand,” I replied.

“When I lost control and hit you, I'd had a drink, a glass of Gluhwein at the RAF Northolt mess before I drove home. I took a short cut and lost control in the dip right in front of the sports centre. I'd been drinking an hour or so before I nearly killed you. I have not touched alcohol since that day.” She said, looking me in the eye, “I can't begin to explain how bad I feel about it.”

“It was an accident,” I told her, “It was not your fault. Don't ever think that. It turned out to a happy accident for me, I got to learn about Keto and I got to meet you.”

She sat up and gave me a questioning look, “I came to your flat early on the morning you were going to fly to Canada, to offer you a lift to the airport. There was a very pretty woman there, a red headed Australian.”

I nodded, “I went to Heathrow the day before. Maggie agreed to look after Tubbs while she waited for her flat to be ready.”

“She's very pretty and sexy,” said Penny.

I nodded, “She told me you visited. She's really nice too. She's the new manager at the Rochford Centre,”

“You're just friends then?” said Penny, “Not ...”

“Not even friends really, though I hope we can be,” I said, “There's nothing between us except that we both prefer women.”

Penny's eyes widened and she went quite red.

“Its OK if you prefer women too,” I said, “I'll be devastated, but pleased for both of you.”

It took Penny a while before she smiled, “I think I prefer men... well you anyway, some men are pigs. Some women too, I suppose.”

I smiled and struggled not to laugh with relief, “Does that mean I can kiss you?” I asked.

“You'll have to try and find that out,” said Penny.

“Does your Trust fund allow you to have a boyfriend?”

Penny shrugged, “It isn’t like that, but basically it takes care of me as long as I am unemployed and single. It should be OK if we live in separate homes. I could check.”

“With Christine?” I asked and Penny nodded, her face serious, “Please don't discuss it with her? It doesn't say I can't talk about the Trust Fund, but I feel uncomfortable about it.”

I ended up drinking the cold cappuccino, having forgotten to ask for a cider. I didn't mind staying awake as long as I was with Penny. I told her so and she got up and ordered a cappuccino and a brownie for herself and a cider for me.

It was almost midnight when we left the Rochdale centre. Penny drove my van and parked it in Residents' parking.

I invited Penny in and she rushed to the loo. I fetched two hundred pounds from the money she had paid me for her kitchen. When she came back down the stairs, Tubbs ran to greet her and wound herself in between Penny's feet. I handed Penny the two hundred pounds and she thanked me, then put the money in a back pocket, before taking hold of my arm and pulling me closer.

She tasted of chocolate and coffee and I didn't want to let her go. When I did she went very red, and smiled, “I have wanted to do that for a very long time,” she said, “But now I have to go, I called a taxi to take me home and I have another taxi booked to take me to Northolt airfield at four AM, I'm bringing a salvaged Russian tank back from Poland. Can we go out for a meal when I get back? I should be back by Saturday?”

I walked her out to the taxi, feeling a lot happier. I could wait another week.

It was a busy week. Penny sent me a message on Monday to say she would be delayed and wasn't sure for how long. She sent a longish voicemail on Thursday to say she was on her way at last, and hoped to get to Chobham by Tuesday afternoon. I could hear the drone of a powerful engine in the background.

I worked through the weekend doing shop-fitting jobs for several of the stores at the Rochford Centre. Mostly things that Maggie had encouraged them to do. One of the managers asked me to give her a quote for a kitchen refit at her flat, which was in the same block as mine. She had already had drawings done, but had liked the look of the work I had done for her and wanted a second quote on her kitchen. I spent half an hour checking the dimensions in her kitchen and did a quote for her over the weekend and pushed it through her letter box before I went to the Sports Centre for a swim.

On Wednesday morning Penny was waiting for me when I left the Sports Centre changing room.

“I watched you swimming,” she said, after giving me a light kiss on the lips, “Could you really teach me to swim like that?”

“Front crawl? Yes, its easy to teach,” I said, “Have you got a membership card?”

Half an hour later we were at Amity's Deli and Cafe, having breakfast.

Serena Blake called while we were there, and asked me to go ahead with doing her kitchen. She asked if I could do it while she was away over the second and third week of August, and said she would transfer the advance payment to my account that morning.

“Can you help me with the job?” I asked Penny, “It works out at about a grand each for a week's work.”

Penny nodded, “Sure, I haven't checked with Christine, but I need a break from driving for a while. What about you and me...?”

“I'm up for whatever you can give me,” I said, “I have to warn you that my previous relationships failed miserably, but I feel very different about you.”

Penny gave me a puzzled look, “In what way?” she asked.

I had been thinking about it for a while, but it was still difficult to explain, "I'm not sure how to explain properly, but I sort of ended up in relationships before, without really intending to be there... if you know what I mean? I met my first girlfriend, Sandra, at a friend's birthday party, she was fun and wanted to see me again. Before I knew it we were in a relationship... and I didn't really live up to her expectations. A couple of years later I went to stay with an army friend and ended up with his sister, Betty, ... she had all sorts of plans for me, and was furious when I didn't go along with them. That got really unpleasant. The last one, Greta, was an ex RAF air traffic controller, we met on a resettlement course in Glasgow. She had been married before, and said her ex was abusive. She also had plans for me that didn't sit well with me, but I saw the signs early and the fall out was less unpleasant than with Sandra and Betty."

"So what do you feel differently about?" asked Penny.

"Well mostly, I didn't really want a relationship with any of them, it just sort of happened and I didn't want to be rude or hurt anybody, so I just went along with it. I actually want to be with you, and I'd probably learn to do back flips if you wanted me to. I want to make you happy."

Penny went bright red, "Can't you do back flips already?" She asked, "It's an essential part of any relationship." She reached across the table and touched my hand, "I trust you James, all I expect from you is honesty and good company. I find it hard to trust people. Very hard."

"Well, I have no intention of hurting you," I told her, "Honesty is good. Please let me know if I do anything that you don't like?"

Penny nodded, "I'm not very good at relationships... I'd rather not talk about mine... not yet anyway. Can we just take things slowly?"

"You set the pace," I said, "But there is one thing I want to ask... I was planning on taking two weeks off in August... I'll probably have

to wait till after doing Serena Blake's kitchen. How do you feel about coming with me? I was just going to take a flight to Faro and look for a place to stay... take it day by day?"

Penny looked thoughtful, "Faro in Portugal, the Algarve? We pay our own way? Share a room?"

I nodded, "You don't have to share a room with me, or a bed, we can get twin beds. I can behave myself and I don't get drunk."

Penny nodded, "I like the idea... I've never been to the Algarve," she said, "Can we get started on the work that needs doing before we go?"

I messaged Serena from the cafe, asking when we could meet to discuss the work, then collected some tools and materials to do some small jobs at the Rochford Centre. Penny was waiting at the centre when I got there. We blitzed through the jobs, and were done before midday. Maggie sought us out while we were repairing some vandalised cupboards in the room at the base of the elevator shaft. She told me that she was really pleased with the paintwork being done by Clifford's crew in the parking lot, and asked if we had time to look at two empty units that she wanted to fix up and turn into a day care centre. She asked how Tubbs was doing and said she would be happy to look after her if ever I needed a cat sitter. She wanted to get a cat, but was going to wait to see how things worked out with her UK residency, apparently she had been born in Chester but grew up in Perth, Australia. I was surprised to learn that she wasn't an employee, but actually a partner and director of the Investment Group that owned the Rochford Centre. The units were at the back of what had been a multiplex cinema, which had closed down during the pandemic. There had been a sex toy shop and a computer parts shop there for a while, but they had both closed down. Maggie thought that a day care centre would do well and provide a much needed service to the local community. Maggie and Penny did most of the talking while I took measurements and made notes. I knew Maggie would provide good sketches of what she wanted.

I left my van at the Rochdale Centre and went to Serena's flat in Penny's truck. Serena was a little late but agreed to allow us to store the panels in the dining room and introduced us to her neighbours, a middle aged couple, who would let us in when the panels were delivered.

I walked back to my flat and agreed to be ready at seven PM, when Penny would collect me to go out to dinner.

Penny arrived at five to seven, she looked very different, and a little nervous.

"I was going to wear a dress," she said, "But I felt ridiculous, I hope I don't look too butch?"

"You look lovely," I said, "I feel under dressed,"

"You look perfect, come on, the taxi's waiting," she kissed my cheek and took my arm. It felt good.

It was quite a long drive in the taxi, to a place I had never heard of, in a two storey building that looked a bit run down.

Penny thanked the taxi driver, she clearly knew him, and waved him off as he did a U turn.

"Billy's worried about me," she said, "He's never seen me dressed up or with a boyfriend before." She took my arm, "Can I hold on to you, I haven't worn heels for a while. I don't want to fall over."

We walked towards the building, I couldn't see any signs for a restaurant.

"Its a club," said Penny, "I hope you like it,"

There was a courtyard behind the front of the building, surrounded by boutiques and shops, most were closed but there was a betting shop and what looked like an old fashioned tobacconist that were

open. An elderly couple were sitting at a bench in the courtyard, they looked out of place.

“Most of the businesses here are Brazilian, I think the building belongs to a Brazilian,” said Penny after greeting the elderly couple in Portuguese.

We crossed the courtyard and headed down a broad stairwell, I could smell good food and hear muted sounds of music. We walked past a bar, with pool tables and gaming machines, which seemed quite busy. A set of black doors opened when we approached and we were greeted by a waiter who clearly recognised Penny. They spoke in rapid Portuguese and the man grinned and nodded at me,

“Welcome please to Roman’s, Señor,” he said as the doors closed silently behind us.

The restaurant was quite dark, it took a while for my eyes to adjust. It was also surprisingly busy. There was a dance floor and a band stand, but the music was not being played by a band, it had a slightly jazzy feel. We were led around the dance floor to a table for two close to the dance floor. I felt immediately comfortable, there was something old fashioned and familiar about the atmosphere that I liked.

The waiter asked me what I would like to drink and poured water for both of us before handing us menus.

“This place is fantastic!” I told Penny when the waiter left to fetch espressos, “I’ve never even heard of it.”

Penny nodded, clearly pleased, “I usually only come here to celebrate birthdays; my parents’ as well as mine. I used to come with my mum’s sister, but she has moved to Australia. It’s a club, membership by invitation only.”

The menu was in English and Portuguese. The waiter returned with the espressos and asked if we needed help choosing what to eat. Penny explained to him that I liked meat, but did not eat

carbohydrates, and told me that he always recommended her meals and she always enjoyed his choices.

“Please do the same for me Gabriel?” I asked, “I have no experience at all of Brazilian food.”

“Bueno Señor, it will be my pleasure,” said the waiter with a smile.

“So you were invited to be a member?” I asked Penny.

She nodded, “My mother had been a member, she had worked in Brazil and spoke Portuguese. After mum and dad died, I was sent an invitation to be a member.”

“What happened to your parents?” I asked

“They died, along with my older sister and brother, in a ‘plane crash when I was twelve. I was the only survivor. I had been asleep at the back of the ‘plane when it happened. The investigation found that the plane broke apart when the landing gear was lowered.”

“Were you injured?” I asked, “It must have been terrifying!”

Penny nodded, “I have a scar, it wasn’t a serious injury, but I never saw or felt a thing. I woke up on the way to the hospital.”

“It must have been a terrible shock,” I said, “I’m so sorry.”

“It happens,” said Penny, “I was lucky, we were flying to see my Aunt in San Diego, she was expecting her first baby. She took care of me. I think it was harder for her, Mum was six years older than her and more like her mother than her sister .” She looked up at me, “I know that your parents died as well, I looked you up after... well, when you were in Hospital, I wanted to contact your family.”

I nodded, “Yes, we are both orphans, but you were only twelve.”

“It was a long time ago James, and I had a wonderful Aunt, and my Dad’s parents, who set up the Trust Fund for me. I’ve had lots of therapy and ... well, you don't need to feel sorry for me.”

The starters arrived then. I was a bit nervous about eating chicken livers, having never really liked liver, but it was delicious. I was tempted to lick the plate.

The waiter brought two bottles of wine to the table before bringing the next course. Penny looked worried and I said I was happy to go without wine.

“No, its just that I haven’t touched alcohol for half a year... I don't want to make a fool of myself, especially tonight in these high heels.”

“You won’t make a fool of yourself,” I told her, “And you can always walk barefoot. I’ll take off my shoes if it makes you feel better?”

Penny grinned, “I’m not dancing barefoot!” she said.

“Dancing?” I said, “We aren’t going to dance are we?”

“Why not?” asked Penny, “I’ve been dining here for almost thirty years, and always wanted to have someone to dance with... don’t tell me you don’t like dancing?”

“I don’t know much about it!” I protested, “You are just teasing me.”

“What’s to know?” asked Penny, “You just listen to the music, and move your feet. I’ll show you how to dance... and you can teach me how to swim. I forgot to buy a swimsuit today.”

Gabriel served the next course and poured white wine for us both. We both had the same dish, prawns and line fish with garlic, and finely sliced vegetables. There was crusty bread and butter too, which I avoided. The fish was delicious.

There were five courses altogether, and I enjoyed every single one. The dessert, Gabriel told me, was specially made for me by the chef, from cream, nuts, seeds, raspberries and blueberries.

By the time dessert was served there was a four piece band playing, and the dining room was almost full. Penny and I had drunk at least a bottle of wine between us, and I didn't hesitate when Penny asked me if we should dance. There were several couples dancing by then. It wasn't extravagant dancing.

"See," said Penny, "Dancing is easy, just a full body conversation to music."

"You make it seem easy," I told her, "Thank you for this, I don't think I have ever enjoyed a meal so much before."

The dancing pace livened up a bit a while later, but we managed. Penny seemed calm and relaxed and I felt my heart expanding as if it was going to burst. We danced till Penny said her feet were getting sore.

Gabriel brought us coffee and chocolate. We declined liqueurs.

There were two couples that danced superbly, we enjoyed watching them.

"They do dancing classes here," said Penny, "I'll give it a try if you want to learn some Latin ballroom. I think those two couples are the instructors."

Gabriel confirmed, when asked, that the two couples taught dancing at the club on Saturday mornings, and gave Penny a card with contact details.

There was no bill to pay, Penny told me not to leave any money, that everything was on her account and paid directly to the club. We left at a quarter past midnight and Billy, the taxi driver was waiting for us. He opened the door for Penny and gave me an approving smile.

Penny held my hand in the car, and told me that she had really enjoyed the evening, before adding that she wanted to sleep in her own bed that night.

“Can I come and cook breakfast with you tomorrow?” she asked, “Will eight be too early? I’ve got salmon and eggs...”

“Eight will be perfect,” I said, “Thank you for a lovely evening.”

She squeezed my hand and kissed the back of it. I got a proper kiss when the taxi stopped outside my flat. I watched after the taxi till it was gone and let myself in. I don’t remember taking myself to bed, but I slept well and was startled by my alarm at seven. Usually I was awake before it went off.

Penny arrived just before eight. I had showered and made the bed and was just starting down the stairs when the doorbell rung. Penny with two shopping bags.

“I was hoping you’d still be in bed,” she said, smiling and going red, “I wanted to spend the night with you, but felt awkward about Billy - he knows me well and ... he seems so old fashioned and protective.”

I got a kiss before she was distracted by Tubbs.

“Yes Tubbs, I’ve got some fish for you too,” she said.

I followed them into the kitchen and started on the cappuccino. Penny made the scrambled eggs and said she didn’t want toast.

“How are you feeling this morning?” she asked, “I thought I’d be hung over but I feel fine. A bit tired but fine.”

“I slept well, not sure if I am going to get hung over or not, but I do not feel bad at the moment,” I said, “How are your feet?”

“They are a bit tender, I’m not used to high heels, they pinch my toes.”

“I’ve stopped wearing them,” I told her, “Never could dance in them.”

Penny laughed, “I’ve seen men wearing high heels you know, even at Roman’s. And make up,”

I nodded, “I know, my mum brought me back a pair of patent leather boots from her and Dad’s second honeymoon in Europe. They had a purple sheen, and high heels. I was fifteen and utterly horrified, but Mum was so pleased with them that I wore them out one night to a high school Disco. It was agony on so many levels, I got teased mercilessly for dancing like an ape with my bum sticking out and I fell head over heels when I tried to sneak out down the back stairs... well it was the fire escape, but it had been left open as it got so hot in the crowded disco. I could hardly walk for a month afterwards. No more high heels for me, I poured petrol on the damned things and burned them in the rubbish pit when I came out of hospital.”

Penny laughed, then apologised, which made me laugh.

We spent the day working on plans for Maggie’s DayCare centre. Penny was comfortable with SketchUp and between us, we quickly made what I thought was a pretty good 3D Model that matched Maggie’s sketches and sent her a presentation. She called back half an hour later and said it was great, then asked me to get her a price for getting it done, she wanted me to project manage it.

By the seventh of August, I had found a contractor to do the brickwork, and had firm prices from contractors used by the Rochford Centre to do the tiling, painting, electrics, plumbing, air ducting and glazing. Penny and I would do the final finishing, and were due to start on 28 September.

We started early on the morning of the seventh of August, removing Serena Blake’s old kitchen. I salvaged the doors and fittings but

everything else went into a skip as there was a lot of water damage. We then spent a day removing and redoing the washing machine and dishwasher plumbing, which had done the damage and which had been badly repaired. By Sunday the kitchen was in and had received the primer coat of paint. I couldn't believe it. Beeston Counters did the granite top on the Monday, and Phil asked again, if we would do his kitchen. I agreed to take a look when he said he was not in a hurry, but wanted it done nicely. We finished up on Wednesday, and after checking up on the works at the Rochford DayCare centre, we flew to Faro on Saturday morning.

Penny told me that she had studied Portuguese after being given membership to Roman's. She had learned some Portuguese as a youngster, living in Brazil for five years and taking frequent trips to Lisbon, where her mother had an apartment. The apartment had been destroyed in a fire that destroyed much of Lisbon's city centre in 1988, but her mother had bought a small property on the outskirts of Lisbon after that, which now belonged to Penny, and which was rented out and managed by her Trust Fund. Penny had a favourite hotel in Lisbon, where she spent a couple of weeks every year since staying there to do her Portuguese language course. She proudly showed me her Portuguese passport when we were in the departure hall. This time I made a note of her birthday, 31 December 1985. She was a year younger than me, give or take a week.

Penny did all the talking when we got to Faro, and booked us into the Rocamar Hotel in Albufeira at a tiny booth in Faro Airport. The girl at the booth had recommended it. We took a bus to the town, arriving just before noon. It was beautiful, and the hotel was right on the sea. We checked in and twenty minutes later we were exploring the town. I was still wondering about the double bed, and worried about getting condoms when Penny suggested lunch at a terraced open air restaurant overlooking the sea.

"Are you OK James?" asked Penny when the waiter had taken our drinks orders, "You seem a bit distracted? Would you prefer to eat somewhere else?"

I shook my head and laughed, “No, this is perfect. I’m just a bit blown away... being here, with you...” I shrugged, “I keep worrying that I will wake up in my flat and find out I am just dreaming.”

Penny smiled, “I know... I feel the same. I’m actually a bit nervous. It’s why I can’t shut up.”

I had three sardines each the size of a small trout, for lunch. It was really tasty and accompanied by a man sized salad. Penny had a huge bowl of seafood pasta, that she was unable to finish. We shared a bottle of Portuguese Vinho Verde that the waiter recommended. I couldn't eat any more and had an espresso while Penny picked at a huge piece of Lemon Meringue pie that looked so tempting, I helped her to finish it.

“Aren’t you worried about coming off Keto?” asked Penny, looking worried.

I laughed, “No... I’ve lost weight, which I hadn't counted on, but I’m not going to drive and if I do have a fit,” I shrugged, “I’m not that worried... you speak excellent Portuguese and I reckon their doctors and hospitals are at least as good as UK’s... we have medical insurance.”

Penny snorted, “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but don't you dare have a fit James Pryce, I plan to enjoy this holiday and I don't want to spend any time visiting you in hospital.”

“Really Penny, I’m fine,” I said, “I haven't felt better or happier in my life,” I took a last forkful of lemon meringue and reluctantly pushed the plate away. “That was really nice... but I’m just too full to eat more.”

I quickly discovered that swimming in the sea there is not on when we walked along the beach later and saw a man and his son being dragged from the water, choking up lungs full of water after being dragged down by an undercurrent. The water was really cold too.

“You still haven’t taught me to swim,” Penny said quietly as we walked back to the Hotel, “I brought a swim suit.”

I had coffee in the Hotel Lounge while Penny went to ask if there was a quieter pool where she could do swimming lessons. I got talking to a middle aged english couple who had been in the Hotel for a week and were waiting for the courtesy bus to take them to the airport. They came to the Hotel every year for a week at the beginning of September and loved it. They said the Algarve was too crowded in July and August.

Penny returned with a handful of brochures and a bus time table. We set off for the municipal swimming pool, which was surprisingly quiet.

Penny was terrified of the water, but gamely showed me her frantic doggy paddle in the shallow end of the pool. I got in with her and spent half an hour getting her to relax and play silly games in the shallow end. Penny floated pretty well when she relaxed. We had about fifteen minutes of push and glide in the shallow end before the pool got suddenly very busy.

“Was I pathetic?” asked Penny as we took the bus back to the hotel.

“Not at all,” I said, “The biggest problem with adult learners is getting over a lifetime of fear of the water. It didn't take you long to relax.”

“Its easy to relax when the water only comes up to my tummy,” said Penny, “I wouldn’t have managed to let go of the side if we had been in the deep end.”

“You can learn to swim just as well in shallow water,” I said, “But I’ll show you how easy it is to get out of the deep end of a swimming pool without swimming a single stroke. In the army it was the first thing I would show beginners. You don't have to try it, just watch from the edge of the pool. I can show you at the hotel pool if you like?”

Penny nodded, "You promise that I don't have to get in?"

"You don't have to get in," I said.

Penny had not wanted to use the Hotel pool, which had been quite crowded when we first looked at it, but there was just one older man using it when we got back to the hotel, so Penny changed back into her swimsuit. I showed her my technique for surviving in a deep pool, which was basically about keeping calm, taking a breath, and then raising one's arms and straightening one's legs so that you sink to the bottom of the pool, then pushing off the bottom and angling one's body to get closer to the edge. I crossed the deep end of the pool twice, taking my time and not swimming a single stroke. Penny didn't offer to try it, but did get into the shallow end and practiced pushing off the wall across the width of the pool. It was a lot smaller than the municipal pool. I did it with her, and gradually got her to relax more and more. By the time we got out of the pool she was happily gliding the width of the pool and corkscrewing her body as she did so.

We ate at the hotel, Penny's eyes were red from the chlorine.

We danced, a little awkwardly at first.

"Are you nervous?" asked Penny quietly in my ear after we had been dancing for a while, "I am... isn't that silly? We are both adults."

"Terrified," I admitted, "But there's no need to rush."

"I think I need an Irish Coffee," said Penny, "Dutch courage. Why do they call it that?"

"I think it was because the Dutch got brave by drinking Genever, or Dutch Gin, before battle," I replied, as Penny led me back to our table.

We had Irish coffee and danced a little more. Penny was very quiet, almost withdrawn, but she pressed close against me. When the

music stopped, she took my hand and headed for the elevator without a word.

Penny dropped the keycard as she fumbled to open the door. I picked it up and opened the door, letting her in before me. She stood there looking at the bed, I couldn't read her expression. I put my arms around her and she pressed against me, her mouth seeking mine.

When we drew back for breath I tried to speak but Penny pressed her fingers against my lips and shook her head, "Don't say anything yet James, I want to undress you, but I want to do it in the dark... will you let me undress you please?" she whispered.

I reached behind her and turned off the lights. Penny took her time, kneeling down and removing my shoes and socks one item at a time. It was light enough to see her outline and the outline of the bed and furniture. Penny pulled open the curtains after she led me barefoot towards the bed. I could just make out her face, her eyes looked huge in her pale elfin face. I kissed her again.

She unbuttoned my shirt and removed it, then undid my belt and trousers and slid my trousers down and getting me to step out of them one leg at a time. She draped my shirt and trousers over the back of an armchair and came back to me, caressing my skin and kissing me some more. I lifted my hands to undo her blouse but she gently pulled my hands away and kissed me some more, then slid my briefs down to my ankles, before standing and using her hands to push me back towards the bed and down onto it till I was lying across the width of the bed with my feet on the floor.

"Don't move until I tell you," she whispered, as she undressed herself swiftly. She straddled me, and I felt her breasts touch my chest as she lowered her head to kiss me again, I pulled her close and felt her heart beating as fast and loud as mine. Penny moved back down and told me again not to move, as she went down on me. I groaned and nearly lost control after a few seconds.

“Please stop?” I begged her, “I can’t hold back... I don’t want to... not yet?”

Penny stopped and moved back up to look down at me, she grinned, “Don’t hold back James, I’m not going to stop till you’ve come,” She kissed me again, sucking hard on my tongue then moved back down. It didn't take very long at all, and she wouldn't stop and wouldn't let go till it was over.

“My turn to be in charge,” I told her when she let go and moved back to kiss me. I rolled her onto her back and she wrapped her legs around me. She was strong. I kissed her and slowly moved down, lingering on her breasts, which were just perfect. Penny squirmed and gasped when I went down on her. I took my time, savouring every second, losing myself in pleasing her. Penny clung to my head, moaning and gasping. When it was over I lay very still for a while. I pulled away and looked down at Penny, she had both hands on her belly, she gleamed in the moonlight, her huge eyes dark as she looked at me. I moved up to kiss her and her eyes and mouth opened wide as I sunk into her.

“I’m not sure how long I will last this time,” I said, “But we have all night and so much to catch up on.”

“There’s no rush,” said Penny, “You recover quickly,”

“I didn’t bring any condoms,” I told her, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, you don't need condoms with me.”

“Are you on the Pill?” I asked.

“Something like that,” murmured Penny, “I like this... don’t stop James.”

“I want to see you better,” I said.

“I’ll still be here in the morning and the curtains are open,” she said, “Please don't turn on the lights? Not tonight?”

We didn't get much sleep. I'd enjoyed sex before, but this seemed very different. I felt more comfortable and connected with Penny and her responsiveness was a big turn on. It must have been about four in the morning when we stopped, exhausted and remade the bed. Penny snuggled up close and stroked my chest and kissed my cheek. I loved the feel of her body against me.

"You are quite the lover boy James Pryce," she murmured, "How long has it been for you since you last had sex?"

"Like this? Never," I told her, "The last time I had sex was ... two, almost three years ago, I think, but it was nothing like this..."

"It's been nearly two years for me," said Penny quietly, "I was not overly impressed and decided then not to bother again. You've changed my mind."

We drifted off to sleep. I woke again around six. Penny was fast asleep on her tummy. I stroked her back and watched her face as she slowly woke up. She smiled up at me and then covered her mouth with her hand, "My breath must stink," she said.

"Well that's not a problem," I told her, "My sense of smell has never fully recovered since I had covid." I kissed her shoulder, "You are extraordinarily beautiful and sexy, and I want more of you."

Penny looked down and then back up at me and smiled, "I'll be back in a minute," she said, then rolled off the bed and darted into bathroom. She emerged minutes later red faced with a towel around her.

"Take that towel off," I mock growled at her, "I want to see you properly. I pulled her onto the bed and wrestled the towel from her. She went red and tried to cover her belly with her hands. There was a crescent moon shaped purple-red scar just above her pubic bone, and two faint surgical scars on either side of it.

"My scars," she whispered, "I can't have babies."

I bent down and kissed her belly and the scars, “That must have been painful,” I said, “Was it from the ‘plane crash in San Diego?”

“That is the big scar,” she said, “Then I had two more operations - something had gone wrong when they first stitched me up, and eventually they removed my uterus.”

I kissed her belly again.

“Do you still fancy me?” asked Penny, she looked sad.

“More than ever,” I told her, “But I am sorry that you suffered so much.” I pulled her close and kissed her again, before slowly working my way down. Penny responded quickly and was soon holding onto my head with both hands and moaning with pleasure.

We were exhausted when we went down for breakfast.

“When are we supposed to check out?” I asked in the elevator.

“Do you really want to move to another hotel?” asked Penny.

“It all depends on the breakfast,” I told her, “But we had better let them know if we want to stay longer; we said it was only one night when we checked in.”

“No, I told the receptionist that we needed to spend one night before deciding how long to stay... I don't care about the breakfast, I just want to spend the rest of the day in bed with you,” said Penny.

There was someone cleaning the room when we went back to it after breakfast, so we went shopping and managed to get some swimming goggles, a kick board and a nose clip for Penny, and spent half an hour in the hotel pool before going up to our room to shower and change for lunch... only we skipped lunch and spent the rest of the day on the bed. We did go for supper.

“I can hardly walk, never mind dance,” said Penny looking at a couple dancing by themselves.

After we had eaten and finished a bottle of wine between us, we did manage to dance, but not for long. We were like teenagers.

Penny ordered breakfast to be brought up to our room in the morning and we had a frantic few minutes of tidying up when we woke just before it was due to be brought to us. We spent several hours by the pool, and Penny’s swimming improved a lot. After lunch she managed to swim across the pool in head down crawl. It was only about six metres, but Penny was delighted.

We decided to venture into the town for dinner, and ended up at a local restaurant recommended by the hotel waiter, and stayed there till three in the morning, dancing and enjoying each other’s company. We walked along the shore back to the hotel, and stayed to watch the sardine boats as they came in and offloaded their catch, then had breakfast in a cafe used by the fishermen and traders. We put the “Do not Disturb” card on our door knob when we returned to the hotel and only emerged at three PM. Penny stayed in the pool till six, determined to master breathing to one side using the kickboard. We went out again for dinner, to an outdoor grill and danced till around ten PM.

We were informed when we returned to the Hotel that there was a Ball the following night, with a professional Dance Host and advised to book a table if we wished to attend, as it was very popular. We booked a table.

Later that night, Penny bit my earlobe and asked me what I was thinking.

“I’m not really thinking,” I said, kissing her forehead, “I’m just trying to find a way to save how I am feeling right now... I want to be able to remember exactly what I am feeling right now.”

“And how are you feeling right now?” asked Penny.

“Complete...” I said, “I don’t want or need anything else in my life. This... being with you... is perfect.”

Penny snuggled closer and didn't say anything. That made it even more perfect.

The next morning, Penny swam crawl for the entire length of the municipal pool. I stayed close to her, but she managed to go the whole way without stopping. The Lifeguard came to congratulate her. He had been on duty when she had started her swimming lessons and was impressed with her progress. He and Penny chatted animatedly in Portuguese before he congratulated me in English, saying I was an excellent swimming teacher. Penny swam back to the shallow end and spent half an hour working on getting her breathing to the side right, swimming with one hand on the kick board.

We ate lunch at the Hotel, and went up to our room to “rest” in preparation for the Ball. We even managed to sleep for a while, and woke at seven PM.

The dining room was full when we got there. I felt slightly under-dressed, but there were quite a few, probably around twenty other men who were in smart casual dress and two in jeans and T shirts. Penny looked very good in a sleek, sheer black dress. Simple, sexy and elegant.

There was a master of ceremonies or Compere, who spoke, surprisingly, in English. It seemed to me that there were more Germans than any other nationality there, but I heard at least one Australian accent.

They had dance instructors, and Penny and I happily had lessons in the Waltz and Tango. They also had competitions, which we did not attempt. It was during the second competition that a smartly dressed man approached our table.

“Good evening Ms. Goodwin; Mr. Pryce, excuse me for intruding, I am Luis Bennetar... the Hotel Manager. I hope you are enjoying your stay with us?”

I nodded and Penny told him that we were very happy with the Hotel. The manager asked a few seemingly perfunctory questions, but it was clear he wanted to say something else. Eventually it came out.

“Forgive me, Miss Goodwin, but I am told you speak excellent Portuguese? Are you perhaps related in some way to Doctor Louise Goodwin?”

I understood when Penny answered in Portuguese that Louise Goodwin was her mother. The manager became quite emotional, and I did not understand much of what was said after that. He hugged Penny and kissed her hand and shook mine with both of his, then took his leave.

“He has just seen a documentary made about my mother,” explained Penny, “She was awarded a sort of Portuguese Knighthood for her services. I think Luis’s mother worked with my mother at some stage, he said his mother knew my mother, he has gone to tell her that he has met me.”

“You must be very proud of your mother,” I said, “Were you ever tempted to go into medicine?”

Penny shook her head, “No never... of course I am proud of my mother, but... I’ve never admitted this to anyone... I hardly knew her. She was always so busy saving lives and doing good things that we hardly ever saw her. I knew my father a lot better than I knew my mother.”

“Tell me about him?”

“He was a pilot, he was a lot older than mummy, and he had learned to fly in the airforce at the end of the second world war. He was stationed in Burma, doing air sea rescue missions. After the

war he did whatever flying work he could, and spent a lot of time delivering supplies to remote places for aid agencies and the UN. That's how he met mummy. He loved Americans and American cars, he was always buying and rebuilding old American pickup trucks, that was his second passion after flying. I loved helping him with his cars, I still miss him.”

Penny told me about her older brother and sister John and Mary, they were very close, being only a year apart in age, while she was six years younger than John, the oldest. Penny said that she often felt excluded by them, but said that they were very protective of her, as the family “baby”.

We stayed till late, talking and dancing, one of the instructors had a group doing the Tango, which we joined, and had a lot of fun. We fell asleep soon after getting to bed.

The next morning at breakfast the concierge came to our table and told us that he had been instructed to move us to a luxury suite on the top floor and gave us keycards. There was a large arrangement of flowers and a basket filled with fruit, fancy chocolates and a bottle each of expensive looking red, white and rose wine, with compliments of the Hotel. Penny went straight down to thank the manager.

We spent the morning at the hotel pool, and Penny managed to swim several lengths of the pool, breathing to the side without stopping. She was very pleased with herself. I offered to teach her butterfly next and swam a length to show off. She laughed and told me she would wait a while before learning butterfly.

We went out for lunch, trying a restaurant that one of the people we had chatted to at the ball had recommended. It was a Brazilian owned restaurant - the meal, ordered by Penny, was a selection of grilled meats and prawns on sword-like skewers, served with roasted vegetables. We ate far too much and spent the afternoon wallowing around feeling overstuffed but content.

The next morning we got the bus to Vilamoura Marina, and spent the day on a sailing boat. I was terrified of getting seasick, and had bought some Joyrides travel sickness tablets from a vendor. We both got sunburned but had a wonderful day, which ended with a beach barbecue. Penny decided we should do at least one “activity” every day, and apart from a quad bike “safari”, we enjoyed them all. We did the same wine tasting tour twice, and enjoyed it both times. On the last day, Penny wanted to go back to the Municipal Pool, and impressed the lifeguard with her swimming. I didn't understand everything they said, but it sounded to me that she said she intended to learn butterfly on her next holiday.

The hotel courtesy bus took us to Faro Airport, the manager and staff seemed genuinely sad to say goodbye when we left.

Penny came with me to collect Tubbs from the pet hotel, but said she needed to get back to her flat.

I struggled to get to sleep that night, and was up and dressed before six, and at the Rochford Centre by seven. Penny said she needed a day to sort out some issues, and would meet me for breakfast on the following, Monday morning.

The work at the day care centre was a little behind schedule as Maggie had decided that the toilet and changing room needed to be bigger, but it wasn't a train smash. The parking space painting was done and looked great. Clifford was also doing the tiling and painting in the day care centre. Most of the tiling was done and looked good. He had sent me a message saying he would come back to tile the changing room and toilets when the work was done. Painting would be done last. I measured up and checked with Maggie, who told me off for getting sunburned - my nose, cheeks and ears were still peeling, and told me that skin cancer was a major cause of death in Australia.

I went home and worked out the cutting list for the daycare centre, and sent it to Latimer's. The doorbell rang around four thirty in the afternoon. It was Penny. She had a small rucksack on her back and asked if she could stay the night.

“You don’t ever have to ask,” I said, “You are welcome to stay as long and whenever you want. I fetched the keys she had returned and gave them to her, “I’ll get you a parking permit for the residents parking... I am entitled to two spaces.”

“It was weird sleeping on my own last night,” said Penny. A few minutes later we were in bed.

Tubbs woke us, it was dark and she hadn’t been fed.

“I spoke to Christine on the phone,” said Penny when we climbed back into bed, “I told her I am going to work with you, as a self-employed contractor, and that we are in a relationship.”

“What was her reaction?” I asked when Penny didn't say any more.

“She asked if you knew that I had knocked you down, and about my Trust Fund,” said Penny, “I told her that you had worked out for yourself that I had knocked you down, and that you knew I had a trust fund, which would stop supporting me if I got a job or got married.”

“Did she give you any advice?” I asked.

Penny shook her head, “Not really, she just said that she hoped it all worked out for both of us.”

“It will work out just perfect,” I said.

We both went to measure and check out Phil’s kitchen. It was huge, and the floor was really uneven. It was an old house, set a long way back off the main road to Wroxham, an old farm house by the look of it. Phil’s wife told us that they did not want to replace the old flagstone floor. The walls were not that straight or flush either, but it was doable. It was a big job in a big house with a large and very active young family. The children were the type that made one not want to have kids.

I suggested to Penny that we pre-make most of the units in my lock-up and have them delivered to Phil's house. I didn't think leaving the units in the house to adjust to the house moisture levels would work. The kids would ruin the wood. I spent the afternoon writing and costing the proposal and emailed it to Phil.

Penny and I had our first argument that night. It was probably my fault for not paying proper attention when Penny asked me whether she should stop doing driving jobs.

"That's totally up to you," I said, "I don't want you blaming me if we have a dry spell without any work."

"What makes you think I would blame you? I just want to know if you mind me doing driving jobs."

"Why would I mind?" I said, "There's nothing wrong with you doing it... I just hoped you would enjoy working with me, when I have work."

"Well, things can't stay the same... something has to change, I'm just trying to get it right in my head."

"Of course things change, they change every day, but I can't tell what the future holds, I can't guarantee anything."

"Jesus Christ James... All I am asking you is what you want me to do... I don't need guarantees!"

"There's no need to yell at me," I responded, "All I am saying is that you need to decide what you want to do... it is your choice. OK?"

"I think I want to go home!" said Penny icily. "I'll call you tomorrow." Five minutes later she was gone.

I did not need very long to think about it. I sent her a voice message minutes later, telling her that I was sorry, that I wanted her to work with me, live with me and be with me, for as long as she could manage. I checked my phone and kept checking my phone to see if

she had received the message, after half an hour I called her number but she declined the call. I saw that she had received my message, but then she must have turned off her phone.

I slept well enough, but woke really early and felt a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Penny called at seven, "Are we OK James?" she asked, "I'm sorry I shouted at you."

"We are OK Penny, I was a dickhead, I am a dickhead... forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive... I was cranky and not explaining myself properly. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No... I was just about to make cappuccino. You want some?"

"I'm parked in the residence parking... yes please."

We had scrambled eggs and Penny had toast, then drove to the Rochford Centre and checked on progress before going to the lockup. I went into the Pawn & Castle and asked the landlord if he had any empty units I could rent. He showed me one about eight units down from mine that needed cleaning out. He asked how long I needed it and I said that depended on the price and ended up paying him for six months. He ordered a skip and promised to have it cleaned out and the lock changed by five PM.

Phil phoned and said he would pay the money into my account and I could start whenever I liked. He told me that his wife could manage with the kitchen in the granny annexe he had built for her late great aunt and said he would have the kitchen units removed. I told him to wait five days, and then check with me before removing the old kitchen units.

Penny and I drove to Latimers and loaded the boards and fittings we would need for Phil's kitchen into the van. By seven PM we had everything cut to size and ready to start joining with the domino.

The new unit had been cleaned out and I used some old pallets to keep the newly cut boards off the floor before we marked the boards and stacked them neatly. We had supper in the Pawn & Castle then drove home.

It took two days to assemble all the units, another day to sand and prime everything and a day to fit all the doors, drawers and hardware. Most nights we were done by eight PM. I messaged Phil at nine AM on Thursday morning saying we would like to start installing on Saturday morning. We finished at eleven on Thursday night.

We took Friday morning off and spent most of it in bed after getting up early to swim at the Sports Centre. Penny rented a large removals truck and we loaded Phil's units into the truck on Friday afternoon and parked it in the tradesman yard at the Rochdale Centre. I'd once had a Budget rental van damaged by late night revellers when I had left it parked at the Pawn & Castle. The insurance had covered the damage to the van but not the tools and furniture that had been stolen from the van.

Phil had a plumber and an electrician doing work in the stripped out kitchen when we arrived. They promised not to get in the way, which was farcical, because that's exactly where they were. Phil apologised and said he would pay extra for the delays. They did help us to offload all the units and get them into the house. Penny took the truck back as there wasn't much we could do while the plumber and electrician were there. I stayed, mainly to keep pressure on the plumber and electrician to hurry up but also to make sure that Phil's kids didn't start playing in the units. I did help with the work, and they were gone before Penny returned with the Mercedes Panel van and a takeout lunch.

Phil's kids were not a problem, their mum had taken them off somewhere. Phil helped, and proved to be pretty handy. He was really strong, which made fitting the wall mounted cabinets really easy and more than made up for the extra time and effort it took to level out everything on their very uneven flagstone kitchen floor. The carcasses were all in and painted with one coat by the time the

family got home at eight PM. They were really loud and noisy but very pleasant.

We started at seven on Sunday morning, and by four had done a second and final coat of paint. We came back on Monday at nine to fit the drawers and doors and had to wait half an hour as Phil and his colleague were a little behind fitting the granite counter-top. We were all done by midday, and went with Phil to his local for lunch. He was really pleased with his kitchen and promised to recommend us to anyone who wanted a fitted kitchen or cupboards.

There were more delays on the day care centre. Maggie apologised and offered to compensate me for having to wait - it was some licensing issue that she had not been aware of. I told her not to worry about it, as I had a number of small jobs to do for some of the tenants at the Centre; mostly making display units and floating shelves.

Penny got a call from her Royal Engineers base asking her to help with an urgent transport request, bringing another vehicle from Poland, the remains of a Russian UAV command centre that the Ukrainians had captured. She asked me if I could manage without her for a week.

“I don’t want to be without you for ten minutes, never mind a week,” I said, “But it would probably do us both good to have some alone time every now and again so that we don't take each other for granted.”

“Is that your way of saying it’s OK for me to accept the job?” asked Penny, she looked worried.

I sighed, “We managed on our own before we knew each other Penny. I don’t want you to go because I like having you here...and I suppose because I worry that you will change your mind and stay away...but I also worry that holding on too tight will make you resent me and ... help me out here please?”

Penny nodded, “I worry that I will get too used to being with you and that you will get tired of me... but I also don’t like letting people down, and my boss at the base was there for me when I needed support, if she says she needs me to do a job... I’d like to help her.”

“You should go,” I said, “I can cope with the work on my own, and missing you for a few days will just make getting back together more enjoyable.”

Penny set off for RAF Northolt at four PM, and half an hour later my phone rang. It was Christine Latham, the solicitor that administered Penny’s Trust Fund payments.

“Penny has just left for RAF Northolt,” I told her.

“Yes, I know,” said Christine, “That’s why I am calling... Penny lets me know when she is leaving the country. This is a bit awkward James... Can I ask you not to discuss this with Penny?”

“I can’t possibly answer that without knowing what it is you want to discuss,” I said carefully.

“Yes... yes of course. Well, I will have to trust your discretion. I am not a Trustee. I am employed by Penny’s trustees to administer disbursements and act as a buffer between Penny and the Trustees. What I am about to discuss with you will jeopardise my position with the Trustees.... They might not appreciate my intervening like this.”

“What is this about?” I asked.

“You travelled to Portugal with Penny recently,” said Christine, “She was recognised at a Hotel Ball, the manager posted on line about it. Penny’s mother and grandmother are ...”

“Yes, I know. Our Hotel manager told us that he had seen a documentary about Penny’s mother... and his mother apparently knew her.”

“Well, it came to the Trustees’ attention, and they are concerned about you... you are aware that there are conditions on the disbursements to Penny regarding the Trust Fund?”

“I know that she is not supposed to be employed and that she will not get any allowance if she gets married,” I said.

“It is more complicated than that, but in essence, the trustees worry about somebody manipulating Penny in order to benefit from the Trust Fund. I know that you have asked Penny to work with you... she discussed it with me and we agreed that she could subcontract her services to you without violating the conditions of the Trust Fund. I just wanted to warn you to be on your guard James, the Trustees may employ someone to check on you and your relationship with Penny. I have grown very fond of Penny, and would not like to see her hurt over this.”

“Are you still there James?” she asked when I did not respond.

“Yes... I’m trying to understand what you are not telling me,” I said, “I’m a bit slow.”

“Penny seems genuinely happy now,” said Christine, “I’ve known her for almost ten years now, and this is the first time I have seen her like this. She needs you James... She thinks she is tough and probably doesn't know how much she needs you. Keep that in mind.”

Christine hung up before I could think of anything to say. I wasn’t concerned about someone investigating me, I didn’t have anything to hide and I was used to security and background checks; they were a very normal part of life in the military.

I didn't have long to worry about it because it was suddenly all systems go for completing the day care centre. I had worked alone for years, and had no real difficulty getting on with the job. I found myself working much longer hours than usual. Generally I would get a take out from Nando’s and take the ten thirty PM bus home and the six thirty AM bus back to the Rochdale Centre. I kept my phone

on silent and set up a voice message asking callers to message me as I was working with sharp, noisy machinery. I generally checked my messages when I stopped for a coffee or loo break.

Penny messaged me twice in the first two days. The second was a voice message, telling me that she had picked up the transporter in Paderborn, Germany and was heading to Poland. I could hear the drone of the engine and a male voice in the background, it sounded like he was talking on a two way radio using military terminology. I messaged back, trying to be brief and light, telling her I was working all out on the day care centre as Maggie was now in a hurry to have it ready. I had been adding a hug and kiss emojis to my messages to Penny, though I felt a bit embarrassed by doing so. I told myself that I needed to relax and evolve.

On the third night, I nipped into Nando's and asked Perry at the counter for a quarter grilled chicken with green salad and a cappuccino to take away, paid and used their facilities to wash my hands and face. I went back and sat at the booth closest to the till and pulled out my phone to check for messages. I felt someone approach and looked up as a smartly dressed woman asked if she could wait for her order at my table. I nodded and moved my legs out of the way so that she could sit opposite me.

"I've seen you here before," she said, "I'm Liz."

I looked up, "Hi Liz. I'm James," I said. She smiled and held out a slim hand.

"Sorry... my hands are wet.... I just washed them," I said, making a fist to bump hers. She laughed and bumped fists with me.

"I didn't mean to interrupt..." said Liz, indicating my phone, "Sorry, please ignore me."

I put my phone in my pocket, "No... that's OK. I was just checking for messages - out of habit really."

“I am trying to wean myself off my phone,” she said, “Its ridiculously difficult. How did we manage before cell phones?”

I was saved from further discussion by the arrival of my food. I stood and said goodbye to Liz and walked to the bus stop.

Penny messaged while I was on the bus, telling me she missed me. I told her I was on the bus and missed her too, I asked what she was doing.

“I’m getting ready to sleep,” she wrote back, “The sleeper cab really smells of my co-drivers socks and fried chicken dinner.”

“I’m having Nando’s peri peri chicken for supper,” I wrote, “Smells very tempting. Sorry about the smelly sock smell. Not nice.”

She asked how I got on with the day care centre, and I was still busy replying to that when I let myself into my flat. I fed Tubbs and ate one handed as we texted back and forth, till eventually Penny said she was falling asleep, and said good night.

The next day, I stopped for a toilet and coffee break at around ten as I usually did, and saw someone wave and call my name out as I went into Costas. It was Liz. I smiled and waved back, then went to the counter to place my order. Liz was looking expectantly at me when I turned away from the counter, so I went and sat with her.

“Its nice to see a face I know,” she said, “Do you work here at the Centre?”

I nodded, “Sort of, I am fitting out a day care centre here,” I said, “What brings you here?”

“I’m using the business centre while I do some research,” she said, “Nothing very exciting.”

“What are you researching?” I asked, not really knowing what else to say.

“At the moment, accommodation. I need to find somewhere nicer to stay. The place I am in is disgusting. You don't know of any decent apartments on short lets do you?”

I shook my head, “Sorry... but you might try asking the Centre manager...Maggie Styles, she was looking recently and found something nice. Don't try the Dorning building... she says it is awful.”

“That's where I am staying, it's worse than awful.”

I felt my phone buzz, I took it from my pocket, then stood and excused myself, “Work - have to go,” I said taking my coffee.

Liz made a disappointed face, then smiled and waved goodbye.

It was Penny. “We've been stopped by the police,” she said, “There's some sort of protest going on, tractors and farm machinery on the motorway. Archie has gone to find out more.”

“Archie the co-driver with smelly socks?” I asked.

Penny laughed, “That's the one. He's not so bad. At least he isn't a smoker... I've told the boss I don't want to share a cab with a smoker ever again. Some of the regulars smoke non-stop.”

We talked a while till Penny said she had to move the truck. I could hear sirens and asked if she was OK.

“I'm fine... we're getting a police escort by the look of it. Call you later, bye.” She ended the call.

I decided against another Nando's meal that evening and called out for a butter chicken and onion bhajia while I waited at the bus stop. I thought I could see Liz, the lady I had met at Nandos and again at Costa Coffee. She was looking at the bus as it drove towards the Rochford centre before turning at the lights and had a mobile phone in her hand. She looked thoughtful.

I had to go to Latimer's the next day to get more anchor nails and a new battery for my cordless drill as one of the two I had was refusing to charge. I got a coffee at the kiosk outside Latimer's and was back on site an hour later securing a row of cabinets to the wall, wearing ear defenders against the sound of the drill. I didn't hear her enter, but smelled her perfume and got an eyeful of very shapely legs. A woman was stood a couple of feet away watching me. I backed out of the cabinet I was in. It was Liz.

She smiled, "I missed you at Costa's she said, "I wanted to thank you for suggesting I speak to the Centre Manager... I brought you a Cappuccino and a cinnamon bun. Ms. Styles... Maggie said you would probably be here."

I nodded and thanked her, then removed my gloves and ear defenders, "Thank you for the coffee... I ... er,... would you like the cinnamon bun, I don't eat bread and sugary stuff. Sorry."

Liz smiled, "That's OK, I'll save it for later. "

"So have you found somewhere better to stay?" I asked, sipping the coffee. It was really hot.

She nodded, "Yes, so much better and not too far away. I moved in this morning." She turned and looked around... "Are you working by yourself? Is that allowed... for safety I mean?"

I nodded, "I've been working on my own for years," I said, "I get help if and when I need it."

"I didn't mean to criticise... I just thought... what if you have an accident or something?"

"It happens," I said, "Mostly when there are too many people on a site." I pointed, "The CCTV works - hopefully someone will notice if I do have an accident." I sipped some more coffee. "Thanks for the coffee Liz," I told her, "I had better crack on... Maggie wants this finished soon; she might be watching us now!"

Liz looked startled by that, but recovered quickly, “You are welcome. I hope I bump into you again James... I’ll let you get back to work.” She smiled, turned and walked away. She was good looking and she did seem to like me. I shook my head and put my gloves and ear defenders back on before taking another sip of coffee. I never got coffee that hot from Costas.

I worked later than usual that night, and had to drive home as I had missed the last bus. I couldn’t be bothered to eat, and took myself to bed as soon as I had fed Tubbs and showered. There was a long message from Penny. They had been diverted by their police escort and made up for all the lost time because the police allowed them to exceed the speed limits. They were now in Korczowa by the Polish Border and Archie was trying to find a dentist as he had a really bad toothache. She said her mobile phone wasn’t able to find a working signal there, but she was using the truck-stop free WiFi. She added that the goods had not yet been delivered. I fell asleep looking up Korczowa on Google maps.

I woke in the early hours feeling really rough, my head was pounding and my stomach was cramping. I swallowed half a dozen charcoal capsules and had a big glass of water and eventually fell asleep again. I woke again at six, turned off the alarm and went back to sleep.

I got up at eight, took a couple of paracetamol then showered and set off on foot for Amity Deli.

I felt a lot better after filling my belly with scrambled eggs and salmon and a big mug of cappuccino. I walked back to my flat, then decided to drive to the Rochford Centre. I had only just started working when Maggie arrived.

“I was worried when I didn’t see you this morning,” she told me, and you are looking very pale, are you alright?”

I nodded, “Had a bad night and stomach cramps, but I’m OK now,” I said, “Don’t worry, I’ll be finished in good time for your grand opening,”

“Oh bugger the Grand Opening James,” she said hotly, “Your health is far more important, “Come and have a coffee at least.”

I laughed, “I’ve just had a huge mug of coffee... really I am fine.”

“Well, I’m going to fetch myself a coffee and I’m coming back to keep an eye on you,” she said, “I’ll bring my laptop and catch up on some reports I need to write.”

I didn’t hear her return, but she was sat in a corner, on a comfortable looking office chair, tapping away at her laptop with a pair of glasses perched on the end of her nose, when I finished attaching the doors and fitting the drawers in the last row of floor level cabinets. I fetched the table and cross cut saw, Domino and shopvac from the van, and brought a set of ear defenders for Maggie before starting on the wall mounted cabinets. Maggie had opted for French Cleat mounted wall cabinets, as this allowed them to be easily moved around as needed once the day care centre was running. I put up two parallel rows of supports on all the walls, then started cutting and assembling the cabinets. There were three sizes, and ten of each size. I did the smallest first, cutting, morticing, gluing and assembling one cabinet at a time, then hanging it on the support cleats. The backing boards had already been cut to size.

Time passed swiftly. By four PM I had assembled and hung all of the small cabinets and had cut and assembled the first of the medium cabinets.

“You make that look easy,” said Maggie coming up to help me lift the cabinet into place.

“Most things are easy when you know how to do them,” I said, “Have you been here all day?”

Maggie laughed, “Good God no, but I checked on you at least once every hour. Can I buy you a coffee now? Have you even stopped to use the toilet?”

“A coffee would be good, I might grab a salad too, from Nando’s,” I said.

We walked to Nando’s and Maggie asked me how Penny was getting on. I had already told her she was doing a heavy load driving job from Poland to UK.

I told her that Penny was waiting at the Polish border for the equipment to be loaded.

“She doesn’t look like a typical trucker...” said Maggie, “Back in Australia, all the truckers have arms as big as my thighs and belly’s the size of a barrel, and that’s the women truckers.” She laughed.

“Penny’s amazingly strong,” I said, “She says the trucks are easier to drive than a car, with power-everything including wing mirrors.”

Liz was in Nando’s, she looked up and then dug out her phone and gave me a distracted wave as she frowned and pressed the phone to her ear.

“She was asking about you yesterday... attractive woman,” said Maggie. I sensed a tone of dislike but she was busy studying the overhead board.

Liz was gone when Maggie and I looked for a table.

We spent a while discussing ideas for toddler tables and chairs, Maggie had already sent me sketches and I said I would make up some samples as soon as I had finished with the fixed-in-place work in the day care centre. Clifford Barnes was itching to get on with the final painting and I didn’t want to delay him.

I left Maggie at Nando’s and worked till nine that night making and hanging the rest of the medium sized wall mounted cabinets.

Tubbs was very agitated when I got back to the flat. It took me a while to reassure her and calm her down with tinned sardines. It was only when I was about to get into bed that I started suspecting that somebody had been in my flat. The charger for my phone was not positioned the way I always left it. I got up and did a thorough search. Nothing was missing, but I was now convinced that my flat had been searched by somebody. Whoever it was now had my undivided attention.

I tried calling Penny, but couldn't make a connection. There were several messages from her, mostly about what she was doing, which was basically killing time till the "goods" were brought from Ukraine. Her co-driver, Archie, was on his way back to UK and a replacement was being sent to replace him. He apparently had an abscess on his jaw. Penny said the replacement would catch up with her, where ever she was.

I sent her a WhatsApp message updating her on the progress I had made, and telling her that I missed her.

I lay awake a long time thinking about who might search my flat and why. I slept well enough and was back at the day care centre by six. Clifford Barnes arrived at midday and helped me to clear up. By four PM I was at my flat, changing the lock and adding a security system. My ex-army buddy, Nick, arrived late, but didn't waste any time apologising or explaining. It took him half an hour to find and remove two listening devices and a tiny camera in my bedroom. He put them all into an old coffee tin before telling me they were expensive self powered units, and that they had a short range - whoever planted them would be monitoring from somewhere relatively close - typically less than a hundred metres. He spent another hour trying to find the receiver/recorder in the block, but without any luck. He looked at my old lock, and then my new lock and security system, nodded and said it would do, and put in a camera that would send an image to my phone of whoever came through my flat door. Nick refused payment for his time and asked me to let him know when he could have his camera back, then agreed to sell it to me for two hundred pounds and promised to email the set up and user manual to me.

“Let me know if you need any help when you catch the bastard,” he said, “They deserve a good spanking.”

I threw away everything in the fridge and pantry that might have been tampered with, and my toothbrush, then put all the crockery I used regularly through the hottest wash in the dishwasher.

There was a voice message from Penny, saying that she was on her way back to UK with a full military police escort and an armed policewoman in her cab. She sounded cheerful. It was well after midnight when I got to bed. I slept badly, and decided on another salmon scrambled egg breakfast at Amity's before going to my lock-up.

I got indigestion before I reached Amity's, probably at the thought that someone might have searched my lockup and planted bugs there. By the time my food arrived I had calmed down and rationalised my worries away. I got another voice message from Penny, saying her new CoDriver was waiting at the German Border and that we really needed to take a holiday in Poland. Irena, the military policewoman travelling with her, had an AirBnB in Krakow, and had convinced her to visit the city. She sent some photos that Irena had sent her. It was a beautiful looking city. I messaged back saying I was looking forward to another holiday with her.

I spent the day making prototypes of the tables and chairs that Maggie wanted made for the day care centre. I only made one of each in the smallest size, and used them to make templates in case Maggie wanted more. I finished too late to find Maggie at the Rochford Centre, but parked my van there and got a take away from Nando's and took the bus home.

My phone vibrated and I got three photos of me entering my flat when I opened the front door.

I managed a long voice call on WhatsApp with Penny, who sounded cheerful but tired. She was about to go to sleep in the guard room

of a Polish Army Base. Irena, she said, was great and brooked no nonsense from anybody.

The next morning I was at the Rochford Centre at seven. Clifford and his guys were getting started and it looked like the day care centre would be finished before the end of the day. I messaged Maggie asking her to let me know when she could look at the samples I had brought, and went to Costa's for coffee. Liz was there and greeted me with a friendly smile.

"You're in early!" she said, "How is the day care centre coming on?"

"Almost done - the last touches should be done today," I told her, "I'm waiting to show Maggie some samples I've made of toddler chairs and tables she wants in there. That will keep me busy for a week or two, but she has some plastic stuff she can use for the opening on Friday."

Maggie came in as I was speaking, she looked flustered and was talking into her phone. Liz picked up her coffee and excused herself, "Good luck with the samples," she said, "I've got a video conference in ten minutes." She wriggled her fingers in farewell and was gone.

Maggie got a coffee and followed me to the van. She liked the samples and wanted to put them in the day care centre as they were. Clifford eyed her warily, and agreed to paint them for her. I left them discussing colours and went back to the van. My phone buzzed three times. It was Liz, looking very different in a tracksuit and trainers with gloves on. I was still staring at my phone wondering what was going on when my phone buzzed again. She was leaving. Whatever she was doing hadn't taken long. So much for my new and bloody expensive lock and alarm system.

I struggled to concentrate when I went back to the lockup and tried to get on with making more tables and chairs. It took me all morning just to make three sets of templates. I locked up and spent half an hour on the phone with Nick, before setting off to Wroxford industrial estate. I paid seven hundred pounds for a door entry system. The

technician who showed me how to install it told me that it would be easier to break the door down than bypass the system. It took me three hours to install it.

Penny voice messaged to say she was now in Germany and that the new CoDriver was driving. I could hear muffled conversation in the background. They now had a German Police escort.

I messaged back saying I had changed the lock on my flat door, and had finished at the day care centre but was still making furniture for it.

I had several emails requesting quotes for kitchens and one wanting me to do fitted cupboards for a new apartment building, including two kitchen units. I responded to all of them saying I could not do any work till November.

I had another bad night, and got up twice when I thought I could hear something unusual. There was nothing. I sent the clearest of the photos to Christine Latham, and asked her if she knew who it was, saying it was a photo of someone entering my flat uninvited. I went for a swim at six, and then had breakfast at Amity Deli before going to the lockup. I managed to cut all the parts for the tables and chairs and sand them. Clifford had asked me not to seal or assemble them, saying he would prefer to paint them and then assemble them himself. I finished quite late and had a meal in the Pawn & Castle after loading everything in the Mercedes. There was a reply from Christine saying she had no idea who the woman was, and suggested I inform the police.

I parked at home and walked two blocks to find an all night grocer to get milk for my cappuccino and Tubbs. I needed to do some serious shopping before Penny returned home, but first I wanted to be certain that nobody could get in undetected.

Penny called and we had a long chat. She seemed pleased with life, but said that apart from meeting Irena and enjoying the hassle free driving with having a police escort, she had not enjoyed the trip and would not want to do it again.

“It was different before,” she said, “There was nobody I looked forward to seeing, nobody that I missed, nothing to look forward to except a hot bath and my own bed.”

“Well hurry on back,” I told her, “I miss you horribly.”

“I should be back on Sunday,” she said, “But I need to go home for some clean clothes. It will be late at night.”

“Just get here when you can,” I said, “I’ll let you sleep as long as you want.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” she said laughing, “Get some rest, you are going to need it!”. The line disconnected before I could answer.

I slept well that night and went for a swim at six and then had breakfast at Amity Deli before delivering the desk and table parts to the Rochford Centre. Clifford had taped off a section of the basement to do the painting. He gave me an old fashioned look when I said he needed to tape off the jointing surfaces before painting. He thanked me for the offer of clamps but said he had plenty and told me that he had done an apprenticeship as a joiner and still dabbled. He said he was impressed with the speed of my work and wanted to know what I thought of the Domino morticer. I told him that I would not manage without one.

There was an envelope under my door when I got home just before midday. There was nothing written on the outside. Inside was a colour printout. It took me a while to recognise the face ringed in red felt tip. A tiny picture of Liz - who, according to the printout, was an associate of Dunn and Blake Associates, of Ipswich. They offered a discreet and confidential investigative service to discerning clients. They looked expensive. There was an address in Ipswich, contact telephone numbers and an email address.

I sent an email to the “contact us” address marking it for the attention of Patricia Blake, adding a copy of a time and date stamped photo of her inside my front door with a single line of text.

“What did you put in the coffee you gave me “Liz”?”

I was up early on Sunday and gave the flat a good cleaning before heading for the Rochford Centre, where I filled a huge shopping trolley at Tesco.

Maggie spotted me there and we chatted for a while. She said that the official opening of the day care centre had gone well, but she seemed distracted and tired.

I had just finished putting the last of the groceries away when my phone rang. It was Penny.

“Are you home?” she asked, “I’m almost at my place, and wondered if you would like to come around for a meal? I want to order some Thai food and soak in the bath with you.”

“OK, do you want me to collect the order?” I replied, and five minutes later I was on my way to Penny’s flat. She said she would collect the Thai food.

I didn’t have keys to Penny’s flat, so walked twice around the block rather than wait in my van. Penny looked tired but very pleased to see me, and pulled me into the flat and ordered me to supervise the bath while she loaded her clothes into the washing machine.

She carried up a huge tray of food, which fitted nicely across the bathtub. She tutted at the temperature of the bathwater and turned on the hot tap, saying she needed a really HOT bath. She stepped out of her bathrobe and into the bath in seconds, and laughed at my struggle to get straight into such hot water.

“This is a first in so many ways,” I told her when I was settled. “I haven’t shared a bath with anyone since I was eight, and I’ve never eaten in a bath.”

“It’s a sort of ritual for me, after some of the more tiring trips, getting in the bath with a mild green Thai Curry, a couple of ice cold Thai beers and a good book, except I’ve exchanged the book for a bloke. This feels much better!”

“Was it a tiring trip?” I asked.

She nodded, her mouth full. After a while she told me that she hadn’t got on with either of the co-drivers. She enjoyed the drive back though Poland because she got on well with Irena the military police woman. A real ball buster with a good sense of humour, but the rest of the trip was tedious.

She asked about the day care centre job and if I had any more work, and seemed pleased to know there was enough work to keep us busy into February.

She asked why I had changed my locks. Remembering the listening devices in my flat I told her that it just seemed a good idea and asked her if she was serious about a holiday in Krakow. We ended up agreeing to go there for Christmas and New Year, and Penny immediately sent a message to Irena asking if she could book her AirBnB for the period.

We finally fell asleep around four in the morning and didn’t wake till just before midday.

Penny came with me to the lockup, and by six PM we had filled the van with table and chair parts for the daycare centre. We parked the van at the Rochford Centre, then took the bus to my flat.

While Penny was making a fuss of Tubbs, I told her about the listening devices and camera I had found in my flat, and about “Liz” aka Patricia Blake. I did not tell her that I suspected Christine Latham had sent me the information on Dunn and Blake Associates.

Penny went very still, “This is scary James,” she said, “Did you tell anyone that I was going to Poland to pick up Russian equipment?”

I shrugged, “I told Maggie that you were waiting at the Polish Border for some equipment you were delivering to UK.” I said, “Do you think this might be connected to that?”

Penny nodded, “They were very worried about Russian interference, Irena said that they thought the Russians were behind the farmers protesting and blocking the roads, for all sorts of reasons. The protests are supposedly about cheap Ukrainian imports, but she said that the Russians would take any opportunity to prevent the equipment from reaching UK. I need to report this... do you mind?”

I shook my head, “No... please go ahead,” I said, “I used an old army mate who is a surveillance and counter surveillance man. He does work for GCHQ.” I fetched the cocoa tin and handed it to her, “The listening devices and camera are in here. Nick says they are top notch and really expensive.”

Penny spent half an hour messaging and talking to her boss, a regular RE Major based in Fleet, Hampshire. Major Gibson sent a message at around eleven PM asking that I allow a team from GCHQ to check my flat and said they would arrive between nine and ten.

Penny was apologetic and I told her not to be daft; it was an adventure and a good excuse to go for a swim in the morning and breakfast at Amity Deli. We could finish the rest of the tables and chairs in a day, and there was no deadline, though Clifford would probably not appreciate us making him wait too long.

We were up too late for a swim, but we enjoyed the breakfast at Amity's. The GCHQ people were waiting for us when we got back to the flat. They were a very serious bunch of people. Penny and I handed over our phones. I unlocked my laptop and desktop PC and gave them the keys to my van. Penny went off with four people who would do a sweep of her flat. I was interviewed for three hours by

two women and a man, in a vehicle, while my flat was checked. I was given my phone back a little after one PM, and told that I should go and get myself some lunch. They would call me when they were done with my flat, van and computers.

I called Penny who met me at Nando's at the Rochdale centre. She looked pale and furious... they had found listening devices and hidden cameras in her flat.

After we had eaten we walked down to the basement and spoke to Clifford. I told him I would not be bringing him any more table and chair parts to paint till Thursday morning. He shrugged and said that would be fine, then asked if I would consider making him four sets of each size of chairs, and two sets of each size of tables for him. He said his daughter sold classroom resources and had really liked the tables and chairs.

I told him that I was happy to make them, but that we had better check with Maggie first as they were her design. He said he would do that.

We found Maggie at the Day Care Centre. She was busy showing some people around but called us over and told them that Penny and I had done the cabinets and the new wooden tables and chairs for the Day Care Centre and were helping her to bring the Rochford Centre into the 21st Century.

Maggie caught up with us again later while we were having coffee at Costas. She looked tired but pleased with life and asked how Tubbs was doing.

"I really miss having a cat," she said, "Please let me know if you ever need a cat sitter again?"

"We're hoping to go away over Christmas and New Year," I said, "But you'll probably be away for that."

"Are you kidding?" said Maggie laughing, "I'm not leaving here for at least a year, unless its on a guernsey. Christmas and New Year is

peak time for a Mall. Do you mind if I keep Tubbs in my apartment? Yours is nice but...”

“Tubbs never goes outdoors,” I said, “She should be fine, just keep her indoors.”

Maggie nodded, “Always... even in Australia. They are lovely pets, but they are a menace to birds. I’ll really enjoy her company. Where are you going for Christmas?”

“Krakow,” said Penny, “Have you ever been there?”

Maggie shook her head, “No, but my sister went there for a wedding last year and said it was fantastic. It was her first trip to Europe and she can’t wait to go again. She’s a lot younger than me and has just finished doing her Masters in Business and Financial management. if she doesn’t find work in Australia I’ll try to get her some work here.”

“Have you seen any more of that woman, Liz,” I asked Maggie,

Maggie frowned, “Patricia Blake, you mean? Didn't you see the flyer I put under your door? She skipped owing the business centre quite a bit of money. They are taking her to the small claims court.”

Penny’s phone rang and mine buzzed. Maggie excused herself. I could return to my flat. Penny came with me.

Only two of the GCHQ people were at my flat when I got there. They thanked me for being cooperative, and told me that my flat, van, laptop and desktop PC were now “clean”, but that they had removed spyware, including from my phone. They asked to speak privately with Penny. I made cappuccino and left them talking in the sitting room and went up to my bedroom. Half an hour later they were gone.

Penny looked worried, but said that they had not told her much more than they had told me. Only that there were listening devices and a hidden camera in her flat, identical to the ones that Nick had

found in my flat and that her laptop also had spyware on it, but her phone had not been compromised as far as they could tell. They advised her to get a security system like mine.

“What’s the betting that they have installed their own spyware now?” I asked.

Penny nodded glumly, “I suppose they might have, I’m not sure there is much we can do about it, but ...” she shrugged, “Let’s see what happens. Major Gibson told me not to worry about it. Easier said than done.”

I asked Nick to come and check both out flats, and he came with a colleague who ran checks on our phones and computers. They didn't find anything but Nick told me that it was impossible to prevent someone from spying on you if they were determined enough.

Penny and I got back to making chairs and tables and did more cabinets and shelves for one of the managers at the Rochdale centre who had shops in the Thurrock Centre and one in a small strip mall in Croydon.

I got a call from an Inspector Marcheson, asking me if I could meet him at the Wroxford Police station that evening between 17:00 and 18:00.

I asked what it was about and he said that it was in relation to an unauthorised entry and monitoring of my home, phone and computer. I said I would be there. Penny wanted to come too.

Penny knew where the police station was, and we got there before 17:00. We asked at the desk to see Inspector Marcheson and discovered that he wasn’t there yet. He was from Essex Police. He arrived while we were being told that. He looked tired. We were shown to an interview room and he thanked us for coming. He showed us photographs of Patricia Blake and asked me to confirm that I knew her. I said I knew her as Liz. There was a bit of back and forth as he tried to get it clear in his head what had happened when.

I didn't complicate the story by telling him that I think she had put something in the coffee she had brought me. He asked several times if I had any idea why she would be spying on me. I shook my head saying that I did not. Eventually he told me that Patricia Blake had been charged with illegal surveillance and trespass, remanded in custody and then bailed. She would be appearing in court, probably in mid to late January or early February and that I should be prepared to attend court as well. He said I should get myself a lawyer.

"I haven't pressed any charges," I said, "Do I have to go to court?"

"If you get a summons, you will have to attend," he said, "But otherwise you do not have to, but I would suggest that you do."

He recorded a statement. It was mercifully brief and I signed it and asked for a copy of it. He told Penny that they had nothing to connect Patricia to the planted surveillance equipment in her flat. The only evidence they had was the series of photographs showing her entering and then leaving my flat.

There was a smartly dressed woman waiting outside my flat when Penny and I got there that night. It was after eight as we had stopped to get some groceries on the way home.

"Mr.. Pryce?" she asked, "Ms. Goodwin? I am Elizabeth Dunn of Blake and Dunn Associates... I think you have met my colleague, Patricia Blake?"

I nodded, "What is it that you want with me?" I asked, sensing Penny's anger.

"May I talk with you inside?" she asked, "I promise not to take up much of your time?"

"You've got a bloody cheek," said Penny, "Your colleague spied on us both, we've just come from talking to the police about it."

“That is why I am here...Please just hear me out? Things are not as they seem,” said the woman, “You can record everything I say.”

I deliberately blocked her view while I opened the door and then held it open for her. Penny went in first and watched. Ms. Dunn like a hawk. I directed her into the sitting room and an armchair opposite the couch. Penny remained standing, arms folded across her chest. I sat facing Ms. Dunn. She looked at Penny and then at me.

“This is not about your activities for the military, Ms. Goodwin... The police seem to think we are acting for the Russians. I... we, Patricia is my daughter... We are... were acting for your Trust Fund, Ms. Goodwin. They wanted to know about your relationship with Mr. Pryce and asked us to do a thorough assessment of him.”

I looked at Penny, she had gone very pale apart from a bright red spot on each cheek.

“You what?” she hissed.

“It is what we do....” said Ms. Dunn, “We investigate people... we are very discreet.”

“You put listening devices in my bedroom and sitting room and a camera in my bedroom and you call that discreet?” Penny’s voice grew louder with every word, “How dare you!”

“You weren't trying to investigate me, you were trying to set me up!” I said as it dawned on me, “That’s why she put something in my coffee! She wanted me to stay home so she could come and check up on me, and get film of her in my bedroom, with me!”

Penny looked at me, her mouth open in surprise, “What do you mean... she spiked your coffee with something?”

I nodded, “She brought me a coffee while I was working in the Day Care Centre... she said it was to thank me for suggesting she ask

Maggie about where to stay. I got really bad cramps later that night. She was surprised to see me at the Rochdale Centre the next day.”

“That is ridiculous,” said Ms. Dunn, “Patricia would never have stooped so low... she doesn't need poison to lure a man...” She got to her feet, “I just wanted to set the record straight, this is not a National Security Matter.”

“Well it is,” said Penny, “Because you also bugged my flat and computer, you spied on a member of the British Armed Forces while they were carrying out operational duties. You are in the shit. I hope you go to prison, now get out!” Penny marched to the door and held it open.

Ms. Dunn left. She looked like she wanted to say more but she stayed silent and left, nodding apologetically as she made eye contact with me.

Penny burst into tears as soon as the door was closed. She moved away from me when I went to hold her, and shook her head when I said it wasn't worth crying about. I offered to make her cappuccino and she nodded, then made her way up the stairs and locked herself in the bathroom. She came down again before I had finished making her cappuccino. She had stopped crying but her face still had that crumpled look.

“I spoke to Chrissie,” she said, “She doesn't know anything about it, but says she isn't surprised. The Trustees ... she says that they are not the most trusting types. I'm so sorry James.”

“You have nothing to apologise for,” I said, “You haven't done anything wrong. What really bugs me is that she was setting me up... I am sure of it. She was trying to seduce me.”

“Do you really think she spiked your coffee?”

I nodded, “I think so - I took charcoal tablets, I think I would have been clutching my guts and moaning in agony all night if I hadn't.”

“Charcoal tablets?” Penny looked surprised, “Like barbecue charcoal?”

I smiled, “Barbecue charcoal would also work, charcoal is great at removing poison from your gut. The medical stuff is called activated charcoal, a teaspoon of it has the same surface area as a tennis court. It wraps up the nasty stuff and helps it to pass straight through you. I always carry it when I travel.”

“Well, I asked Chrissie to tell the Trustees that I am really, really angry with them. I think she is really embarrassed by it all.”

I shrugged, “They employ her; that makes it difficult for her.”

“I don’t need them... the Trust, any of it,” said Penny, “I’ve earned more than enough to live on for the last ... at least ten years, I don’t have any debts and ...I think I should tell them to get stuffed.”

“I’m not suggesting that you do it because of the Trust, but why not move in with me and rent your place out?” I said, “There’s plenty enough space here and that will give you a steady income if there is a slack period with work,” I grinned, “And I would really like to have you permanently in my life.”

Penny looked at me for a long time, her expression unreadable. She nodded slowly, “OK, but I’ll hold back on renting out my place for a few weeks, in case we find living together doesn't work so well...can I move into the spare room?”

I nodded, “Of course you can, I keep meaning to take the boxes out of there... we can take them to the lock-up today, I use them for packing small stuff in to take to craft sales.”

“What sort of small stuff?” asked Penny.

“When there is no work I make things with whatever material I have on hand or can get from Latimer’s sale bins. Chopping boards, pot stands... all sorts. I usually manage to sell it in the pre-Christmas sales.”

We loaded all the boxes in the van and took them to the lock-up. I showed Penny some of the things I had made - there wasn't that much. She was intrigued by some of the small turned bowls and pots, so I set up a bit of scrap in the lathe and showed her the basics. She enjoyed it so much that we stayed at the lock-up till eight and ate at the Pawn & Castle before going home. Two days later Penny had moved in with me. A day later Maggie convinced her to contact the property manager that she rented from, and within a week, Penny's flat was an Air BNB property.

We spent the best part of a week in the lock-up making small stuff, which Maggie agreed to sell on commission at the Daycare Centre. She had also agreed to me making tables and chairs of her design for Clifford Barnes, and gave me a catalogue of Early Learning Resources - simple colourful wooden things, that she said she would buy for the Daycare Centre and sell on my behalf. She arranged for Clifford to do the painting; something I disliked doing.

The day before our flight to Krakow, Christine Latham called Penny. it was a long call, with Penny saying very little. At the end she thanked Christine and wished her a Merry Christmas, then looked at me and smiled a lop-sided smile.

“The Trustee's have told Christine to cease any further monthly payments to me. I can still ask her for help if I have any medical emergencies, and they will continue to insure my health and vehicle for now.”

“You don't need them,” I told her, “We are fully booked from January to May already,” I touched my head, “Touch wood that nothing goes wrong.”

“I never really needed their money, not since I left school, except when I put you in hospital, but I could probably have paid that myself as well, using a credit card. I can earn huge amounts if I work at the container yards.”

“There you go,” I said, “No need to worry. Are you coming with me to the Rochdale Centre when I deliver Tubbs to Maggie?”

“Yes... I want to get some last minute shopping,” she said, “Irena says you can buy everything in Krakow if you know where to look, but I don’t want to waste holiday time shopping.”

Krakow was nothing like I expected. Irena met us at the airport and drove us to the apartment, which was huge and ultra modern. It had the sort of kitchen that made me want to cook.

Irena was a handsome and hugely attractive woman. She was not in uniform and told us that she had been enjoying the last of a few days leave before the festive season chaos. Her English was excellent, and she said we should be able to get by well enough with English in Krakow. She hugged and kissed us both goodbye when she left, after telling us that her cousin would come and introduce herself; she would be looking after us as Irena was off to the border for the next two weeks.

We found a market a block away and got the basics. There was a pod coffee machine in the apartment, so I reluctantly bought a selection of coffee pods. We didn’t want to hang around waiting for Irena’s cousin, Anna, so Penny sent her a message saying that we were going exploring and asking her to let us know when she was on her way.

Anna called back immediately and said she was almost at the apartment, and would be there in five minutes at the most.

She was young and bubbly. Her English was not as good as Irena’s but it was more than adequate. She had brought a basket full of groceries, and refused payment, saying that the apartment included basics including one meal a day, cleaning and laundering. She said she was an excellent cook and asked what we liked to eat.

She seemed unconvinced by my non-carbohydrate diet, but was happy when Penny opted for Polish Pot Luck, and explained what it meant. She would prepare one hot meal for both of us each day

and include a green salad. She also offered to give us guided tours of the city, but said she charged for that and proudly showed us a certificate showing that she was an approved Krakow City Guide. She said we should start with the Wieliczka Salt mine, which was not in Krakow, and half an hour later we were with her on a bus heading for the Salt Mine.

Like Krakow, the salt mine was not anything like I expected. We spent four hours there, which included a coffee in a busy restaurant. The huge underground Cathedral carved out of solid salt was mind-blowingly beautiful.

It was dark when we emerged, and we managed to persuade Anna that we did not need her to make an evening meal. We got off the bus in a square close to our apartment and found a cosy looking bar on a side street off the square, where we had cold beer and beetroot soup and talked about the salt mine. Anna, who had got off the bus before us had suggested we do a tour of Auschwitz the next day, but Penny and I had already decided before coming to Krakow that we weren't going there.

Penny and I made scrambled eggs with mushrooms for breakfast, and toast for Penny. Anna had agreed to meet us in the square at midday to show us some of the many things there were to see in and around the square. We both agreed that we didn't really need a guide, but that we would ask Anna to give us a couple of hours of guiding each day. It turned out to be money and time well spent. Anna was knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and there was so much to see.

Her cooking really was good too, and both Penny and I put on weight despite all the walking we did. I was hooked on the history of Krakow as soon as I learned that the Mongols had raided the city. Anna helped me find a second-hand English language book with more detail on the Mongol period.

Anna's mother, a lecturer at one of the oldest universities in the world, in Krakow, gave us a three hour tour of the Universities which was probably the highlight of the holiday for Penny and me. We

celebrated Christmas in the square on Christmas eve and went to a very nice restaurant on New Year's Eve, where we danced the new year in and spent the whole of New Year's day in the apartment, mostly in bed.

Anna invited us to a wedding being held the day before our departure.

"It is my best friend from school," she said, "She has only one relative...Grandmother, Please to come sit on family side of church? Her husband have big family."

Anna brushed aside all our objections, saying we would like Mina and Petr, and that it was an opportunity to see a traditional Polish wedding.

It was wonderful. We were welcomed like old friends. Mina was utterly gorgeous, and Petr, a nice looking young man, was clearly bowled over by her. Mina's grandmother spoke no English, but took a shine to Penny. The wedding was in an open sided barn overlooking a quaint village. Anna translated for us. We sat at the end of the top table. The meal was fantastic. Seven courses!

The dancing was pretty good too. I asked Mina's grandmother to dance and she talked non-stop, despite my not understanding a word. I got kissed on both cheeks afterwards. When Mina came to talk to us, this was just before she and Petr left in a horse drawn carriage, her grandmother spoke to her earnestly, gesturing across the table at me and Penny. When she stopped and sat back Mina went bright red and told us that her grandmother had offered to host our wedding, and said we should do it soon before she died. Penny laughed, clearly embarrassed. Mina's grandmother looked at me, and asked a question, which Mina was reluctant to translate. Eventually, Anna said the old woman wanted to know if I wanted to marry Penny or not.

I nodded, "Yes... I do, very much," I said, looking at Penny, who went very red, before nodding and whispering, "I accept," then burst into tears.

I didn't know what to say or do, but Anna, Mina and her Grandmother and Anna's mother surrounded Penny. A voice called out and before I knew it, other wedding guests were cheering and clapping. Mina's granny had announced that I had proposed to Penny and she had accepted. Drinks were pushed into our hands, we were shepherded into photographs and toasted so many times that we both had trouble walking to the bus that had been hired to take those living in Krakow back to the town. Penny clung to my arm all the way. Anna and her mother came to the apartment with us and made sure we were OK before going. It was six AM, and we had a flight back to UK at three PM!

"What have we done?" asked Penny when Anna and her mother, Barbara, left.

"It's like being in a whirlwind," I said, "But I am happy!"

We nearly missed the 'plane.

On the 'plane Penny asked if I really wanted to marry her.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you," I said, "I know that marriage doesn't guarantee anything, but yes, I want to marry you, make it official. I'll settle for less, but I would like to be your husband."

"I'm not religious," she said, "Can we do a registry wedding?"

"Whatever you like," I said, "I'm not religious either. Do you want to do the reception in Poland?"

"Yes, but not as big as Mina and Petr's wedding. I don't know that many people. I'd like to invite my cousin from Australia."

Somehow we managed to get five kitchen and three bedroom installations done, as well as several van loads of toddler tables and learning resources done before getting married at the Wroxford Registry office on the fifteenth of March. Penny's cousin, Bet and

her husband attended with their toddler, as did Maggie and Penny's Royal Engineer boss, Major Gibson, a good-looking young woman. We flew to Krakow, and stayed in a tiny cottage in the village where Mina had been married. There were more guests than we had originally planned for, including Maggie, Clifford Barnes, Major Gibson, Penny's cousin and her husband and daughter, Irena, her partner, a Polish Airforce pilot, Anna, her mother and aunt, Mina, Petr and Mina's grandmother and about a dozen of the guests from their wedding. Christine Latimer also came, though I didn't realise it was her till the photographer was arranging us all. She was pushing a wheelchair with a very old looking woman in it. The woman was wrapped up against the cold, despite it being relatively mild weather.

Penny recognised her and smiled, "Hello Chrissie," she said, "I'm glad you could make it." She glanced at the old woman as she stepped forward to hug and kiss Chrissie, who I still didn't realise was Christine Latimer.

"James, this is Christine Latimer..." said Penny, introducing us,

"Congratulations James, it is nice to meet you at last," said Christine, I recognised her voice, "Please allow me to introduce Señora Doctor Sullivan, Penny's grandmother."

Penny went very still and very pale, and stood there with her mouth open. Christine took her hand.

The old woman smiled, "You look surprised my dear," she said, I could hear an Irish lilt in her voice, "I'm so glad to meet you at last."

"You are alive?" asked Penny, it was almost a whisper, but it sounded quite angry.

"Not for much longer I suspect," said the old woman, "You sound angry about it. Don't let it spoil your day. The photographer is waiting and I would like a photograph with you. We can talk later."

There was nothing wrong with the old woman's mind, or voice, though she was clearly very frail, physically. Christine told me later that her heart was giving her trouble. There was a nurse who was almost always with Mary Sullivan, but she had gone to use the loo.

A lot of fuss was made. Penny composed herself well and by the time the photography marathon was over, she was able to talk about how she was feeling.

"Nobody ever talked about her, even when I was young... I thought she was long dead. I can't believe she is still alive, even Bet didn't know...."

Bet or Bettina had excused herself after being introduced to her grandmother... I hadn't seen her go, but imagined that she was upset.

There was a bit of fuss rearranging the top table to include Dr. Sullivan and Dorothea, her nurse. They had quite a routine, I noticed. The old woman was not really able to use her hands very well, Dorothea cut up her food and helped her hold the fork to eat. She also helped her to hold her glass to drink, and managed to make it look natural. The meal lasted a very long time, and there was a great deal of dancing.

Christine asked for dance soon after I had danced with Penny, "Congratulations James," she said, "I hope you and Penny have a wonderful life."

"Thank you," I replied, "Did you know that her grandmother was alive?"

"Not until a week ago," said Christine, "She is quite a character, and it turns out, the sole remaining Trustee of her daughter's estate. She has asked me to represent her in the case brought against Dunn and Blake Associates, she engaged them to investigate you."

"That must be a bit awkward for you," I said, "For what it is worth, I have no axe to grind with them, though I don't like what they did."

Christine laughed, “Dr. Sullivan is unapologetic, but she says she would prefer not to go to court, simply because she doesn't want to waste what little life she has left. I think she approves of you.”

“Do you have any idea why she cut herself off from Penny and Bet and her own daughter?”

Christine shook her head, “No, and I will not be asking her! She is fierce!”

Penny took my hand when she decided to chat with her grandmother. I sensed her tension. The old lady smiled up at us as we approached.

“I was wondering if you would talk to me again,” she said, “Dorothea my dear, you should go and enjoy yourself. Have a dance or two? Perhaps Mr. Pryce would do you the honour?”

Penny let go of my hand and I asked Dorothea to dance, her English was limited and she was clearly nervous. She told me that she had been the Dottore's nurse for a little over a year. A tall young Polish man nervously asked her for a dance halfway through our first dance, he was clearly keen to get to know her, and smiled delightedly when she acquiesced. I fetched myself a strong coffee before rejoining Penny and her grandmother. Bet joined us as well, but only to take her leave of us, saying her little girl was getting fractious.

“I'm sorry to have shocked you this way my dear,” said the old woman, “I'm not asking for forgiveness, I don't need or deserve it, but I do hope we can talk again soon?”

Bet nodded, “Sure thing... we are in Krakow for a few more days, I'll send Christine a WhatsApp pin of the apartment.”

“I know where you are staying Bettina. Ms. Latimer will call to make arrangements for us to have tea somewhere nice.”

Bet nodded and hesitated before reaching down and touching the old lady's cheek with her lips. She gave Penny a hug and a kiss, then turned to me and told me to look after her cousin, and gave me a hug and a kiss too.

"Well James, you seem to have lost Dorothea to a younger man," said the old woman after Bet had gone, "Would you mind moving my chair around so I can see more of the dance floor. I used to dance once. I see that you and Penny have been attending dance classes at Roman's."

"Your spies have been busy," said Penny, "James caught them in the act you know."

The old woman smiled, "Yes... it's going to cost me dearly I suspect, but no matter."

"But why?" asked Penny, "What did you expect to achieve?"

The old woman raised her eyebrows in surprise, "I didn't have any expectations. I like to be informed. You, Bettina and little Louise are my issue... I want to know everything there is to know about you and your lives."

"While making sure that we know nothing about you?" muttered Penny.

"You could have done your own research," said the old woman, "Its a free world after all, and you clearly have a good brain."

"Why didn't you want Penny to know you were alive?" I asked bluntly.

The old woman regarded me calmly with her dark eyes before answering, "My daughter and two grandchildren had just died... I was... well, I was an addict if you must know; addicted to morphine... I hadn't seen my children or grandchildren for fifteen years, my husband ...Roberto... he hadn't abandoned me altogether, but the strain of caring for me had worn him out, and the

shock of Louise, Alex, John and Mary's death finished him off, he died before the inquest..."

"I'm sorry..." I said.

Her face twitched, "I neither deserve nor desire your sympathy," she said, "I had neglected and abandoned my family, but Roberto made me promise, before he died, to take care of Penny." She shrugged, "From what I see, she has turned out rather well."

I opened my mouth to speak but she frowned at me, "Save your breath James. You do not know me, or anything about me. Penny and Bettina were better off without me. Addiction is an ugly, monstrous thing, it brings out the worst in people, and I was never very nice to begin with. Being here is a selfish indulgence. I came for nobody's benefit but my own. I have made it my business to learn as much as I could about you, and, for what it is worth, I approve of you. Now I am tired and ought to go. Please fetch Dorothea for me James?"

Penny gave me a nod. I went in search of Dorothea, but she was already making her way back to the old woman. Penny followed them outside, where a taxi was waiting for them. I waited till the taxi had gone before approaching Penny.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

She nodded, "I guess... how old do you think she is?"

"Well over eighty," I said, "She looks very frail."

We left shortly after that. We had decided against a honeymoon. Two days later we were busy refitting two units at the Pedestal Care Home in Coggeshank.

"I got an email from Chrissie," Penny told me over mid-morning coffee, "She asked me to visit her office, she says it is important and that it needs to be on a working week day, between nine and

eleven and I could be there several hours. I need to take my passport.”

“Can we do it on Thursday?” I asked “We should be finished here by then.”

“Does that mean you will come with me?” asked Penny.

“Of course,” I said, “Unless you prefer that I didn’t.”

“No... I would like you there. What do you think it is about? Do you think she has died... Mary Sullivan?”

“Maybe,” I said, “What did Christine say?”

“Just that it is important that I visit and let her know when I am coming so that she can be certain to clear her calendar.”

I suggested that she call or message Christine and Penny was strangely reluctant to do so, but the matter stayed on her mind and by the time we were on the train heading for London on Thursday morning, Penny convinced herself that her grandmother had died. She called her cousin Bet, who told her that Granny Sullivan, as she had decided to refer to her, had told her that she had been estranged from the family long before Bet was born, and that she had been a heroin addict, but that after the crash that killed Penny’s family, and the death of her husband, she had been determined to get her act together. Her husband’s lawyers had set up the initial Trust fund for Penny using the compensation awarded by the courts and paid by the Brazilian company that made the aircraft. Dr. Sullivan had become the sole trustee after the death of Penny’s paternal grandparents. Granny Sullivan had told Bet that while the Trust-fund had paid Bet’s mother to care for Penny, it had not been able to provide anything for Bet’s mother, Megan, Bet or anybody else as it was mandated for Penny only. Granny Sullivan had used her own money to pay for Bet’s mother’s chemotherapy and funeral. She had told Bet that she would inherit her estate when she died. She told Penny that Granny Sullivan was a recluse, and said she

hadn't heard anything from her since leaving Krakow, but that was only days ago.

Christine's office was in Aldwych, on the fourth floor of a very grand looking building. She met us and led us straight out onto the pavement.

"Oh no," she reassured Penny, "Dr. Sullivan has not died, not to my knowledge anyway. She is back in Porto as far as I am aware, and very much alive."

She walked briskly, "I hope you don't mind walking, it is not far." She said, "I have instructions to take you to the Portuguese Commercial Bank, to meet the manager. That's all I know and I am very curious about it all."

A smartly dressed young woman was expecting us, and ushered us though to a small elevator, which took us up to the top floor where we were shown into a grand office and introduced to the manager.

He came around the desk and took Penny's hand with both of his.

"It is an honour to meet you, your mother was a legend," he said in perfect unaccented English.

We were offered refreshments while someone was sent for. Their coffee was great. The Manager, I forgot his name, was delighted to learn that Penny spoke Portuguese. They chatted in Portuguese for a short while when another man joined us, whose English was less fluent. He was a lawyer, I think, and he took over. I was clearly not party to whatever was happening, but I was asked to add my signature as a witness to several sheets of stiff, expensive looking sheets of paper.

We went down to the basement in the same elevator. I went last with the woman who had met us. Penny was given the key to a safe deposit box. It had been her mother's, and held some personal effects and jewellery as well as several bundles of aerogramme letters. Penny got quite emotional when she saw them, and took

one of the bundles before returning everything else to the vault. We went back up to the banking floor, where the manager and lawyer shook our hands and left us with the young woman. Penny had to fill in several signature cards and was given a cheque book and a credit card, after which we said goodbye to the young woman and left the bank.

“I really need a coffee,” said Penny. Christine laughed and hailed a cab.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Penny when Christine asked her how it felt to be a multi-millionaire.

“It’s your money,” said Christine, “Awarded by the court. What are you going to do with it?”

“I’ll buy you all a coffee while I think about it,” said Penny, “I’m going to need some advice.”