Kevin Coombes

by
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This is a work of fiction; none of the characters or events portrayed are real. None of the construction sites or developers are real.

Two unhappy, lonely people in England's oldest town. A chance and all too brief meeting leaves them both intrigued, but betrayal has left them both wary. A tale of love and hope.

Kevin - 01

Kevin woke early. It was still dark out. He groaned and tried to get back to sleep. After twenty minutes he finally gave up and flung the covers back. By six, when his phone alarm finally went off, he had showered, dressed, breakfasted and made the bed. He stared unseeingly at his phone for a while, before going out to his car and rummaging around in the trunk till he found the tyre pressure gauge. He checked the car tyres, oil and water levels, then started the car and drove to work. The night security officer had to open the door for him. Kevin showed his ID card, "I'm early… couldn't sleep."

The night security officer didn't say anything, he just nodded and then turned to switch on the entrance lobby lights. Kevin used the stairs, ignoring the pain in his hip.

By eight AM, Kevin had updated and emailed out the largest of the project plans he was responsible for, and was writing a summary for the site manager when Louise poked her head through the door of his cubicle to say good morning. She was at the coffee machine when Kevin went there after sending the report.

"You're in early," she commented, "Pressing deadlines?"

Kevin smiled and shook his head, “Nothing like that, just woke early and decided to make the most of it. I’ll probably leave early, I need to get a slow puncture fixed on one of my tyres.”

“Its the bloody potholes,” said Louise, “I ruined a tyre last week on a pothole just by the level crossing near Tesco’s. They aren’t cheap.”

“You can make a claim against the council apparently,” said Kevin, “I’m not sure exactly how, but I overheard someone from Legal talking about it in the canteen last week.”

“I suppose I should,” said Louise, “But there’s never enough time.” She picked up her coffee mug and waggled her fingers at Kevin as she left.

Kevin went back to his cubicle and got started on sending out requests for updates for the various project plans, taking care to ensure that he asked the right people the right questions. It had taken him a while to learn the different quirks of the engineers and project staff, and he preferred to deal with those who would respond to short written requests first. Those that preferred to be called were generally more likely to answer and less likely to talk for long if he called them just before lunch or knocking off time. There were some who just could not be bothered to respond and had to be asked during the weekly conference calls, which didn’t mean that Kevin would get a meaningful answer. Kevin worked through lunch and managed to get away fifteen minutes early.

TyreMasters was still open when he got there, and by six PM, Kevin was sat in slow moving traffic and heading home, but at least his tyre had been mended. It was almost seven PM when he got home. Too late for the swimming pool, it would be crowded. Kevin changed and went for a long walk, then loaded the washing machine and showered. He looked at the TV and managed to convince himself not to switch it on. He spent an hour scrolling through the newsfeed on his phone and reading one or two articles, avoiding news about Gaza [7 oct 2023], Ukraine [07 April 2022], Sudan [15 April 2023] and Trump[2017-21 and 2024-28].

Finally he gave up and played Sudoku on his laptop, setting his alarm for twenty minutes. He managed two sets of Sudoku, then switched off his laptop and opened his iPad and the Kindle App. He opened the book reluctantly, not wanting it to end, he was 60% through it. He stared at the page, desperate to know more but also reluctant to get lost in the story, which he knew would soon end, leaving him feeling ever more desolate. He closed the Kindle app.

“Desolate,” he thought, “Sounds like it comes from French or Latin…being utterly alone… empty.”

He got up abruptly and paced, then picked up his coat and keys and let himself out.

Kevin walked; counting his steps and forcing himself to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth. Eventually the pain in his hip fell away and he started to enjoy the rhythm of walking. He kept counting his steps, starting again from one every time he reached a hundred. He had no idea how long he had walked or where he was. He knew he could find his way back using Google Maps. The smell of fish and chips led him to a small take away. There was one other customer there, a slim and attractive but very tired looking young woman, she had a long dark coat over what looked like a nurse’s uniform. She glanced nervously at him, before moving as far from him as the tiny space would allow.

“‘Good evening,” Kevin smiled and nodded at the counterman and the woman, knowing that his appearance might seem intimidating. He kept well back allowing the woman as much space as possible.

“What’ll you have?” asked the counterman, looking up at Kevin as he wrapped the woman’s order.

“Just fish and chips please?” asked Kevin, “Salt and vinegar… it smells really good.”

The man nodded, “Not seen you before, I never forget a face…”

Kevin grinned, “Mine’s not so easy to forget,” he said, “Not even sure where I am, couldn’t settle so I went for a walk, but if your fish tastes as good as it smells, you’ll see me again.”

“Boxer are you?” asked the counterman.

Kevin shook has head and touched his nose, “No, nothing like that… I got punched by a policeman during the Firemen’s strikes, I was just out of High School. Didn't know what hit me.”

The woman gave Kevin a sympathetic smile, and edged past him, thanking the counterman by name, “Thanks Anand. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight Lee,” he called after her, then smiled at Kevin, “I think you scared her. We had a robbery here last week, my dad got hurt.”

“Hell, I’m sorry,” said Kevin.

“It happens. Not as bad as it used to be. Dad says it was much worse when he started here in the eighties.”

Kevin nodded, “Yes, so I heard. My neighbour in St. Botolph‘s, said she found a dead body on her door step once. I’ve been here since the pandemic and I walk a lot. Never had any trouble.

Anand nodded, “Stay away from Greenstead, that’s a bad place, even for someone with shoulders like yours. Used to get some trouble at St Botolph’s station and the Castle grounds with football hooligans when I was a kid … not so bad now.”

He put two pieces of fish and a large portion of chips on the papers and laid it on the counter, “Help yourself to salt and vinegar… there’s pepper, chilli and tomato sauce.” He pointed, and waited till Kevin had done before expertly wrapping the food. Kevin handed over a twenty and told him to keep the change.

“Thanks!… you should speak to Lee about your nose… she’s a sister on the cosmetic surgery ward.”

Kevin laughed, “Perhaps one day… I’m too much of a coward to go for surgery.”

He used his phone to orient himself and set off back towards St Botolph’s, taking his time and eating the fish and chips as he walked. It was good. He would be definitely be visiting DelhiChips again. He eventually found a bin for the greasy paper when he was back in familiar territory.

He showered and went to bed, and lay awake trying to make sense of his life. He was still awake when the Church bells rang midnight, but as usual, he was awake again before his six AM alarm.

The week passed without incident, and on Saturday Kevin was up at five AM, doing his weekly clean and looking forward to having brunch at the Castle Community Kitchen and savouring the last of the Girl that Kicked the Hornets’ Nest. By ten he was sat in a corner seat with his back to a window waiting for someone to bring his order.

By the time his breakfast was served, Kevin was engrossed with the story. He wasn’t aware of his empty plate being removed and was surprised to find he had half a mug of cold coffee left when he finally finished the book. He closed his iPad mini reluctantly, and drained the cold coffee, then carefully stowed the iPad in the zipper pocket of his coat.

“Are you leaving?” asked a voice, “May we take this table?”

Kevin looked up, and the woman drew back, her eyes widening.

Kevin smiled, “Yes, I’m leaving now.” The woman smiled back nervously, and blushed red.

Kevin didn’t notice her companion till he had got to his feet; it was the woman, Lee, from DelhiChips; the nursing Sister from the Cosmetic Surgery Ward.

Kevin nodded and smiled at her and saw the recognition in her eyes as she smiled back and said hello. He felt a sort of connection for a

moment, that lifted his spirits as he made his way out through the crowded cafe. He wondered about that, what it was about that little spark of mutual recognition that was somehow rewarding, and concluded that it met a basic human need. Being acknowledged was important. He thought about it as he walked around the gardens and into the Castle Park. Kevin was not unhappy, or so he told himself. He reasoned that he was quite lucky; he had a good job, he had no serious health issues and he had bought himself a small flat in Colchester with the money he had inherited from his parents. He had paid off the loan he had taken out for his car. But he was not happy either. He was lonely. He hadn't gone to university, but had got his degrees through the open university while in the army. The few mates he'd had in the army were married now, some more than once and most had young children. Kevin had not been so lucky with women; Kathleen, his first love, had died doing VSO work in Sierra Leone. They had been together for five years and were planning on getting married after she had done her year of volunteering. Kevin had been devastated. He realised now that he was probably still grieving for Kathleen when he found himself drawn into Noel's world. At first Kevin had been flattered that such an attractive woman wanted anything to do with him. He felt grateful for her attention and then, when he found things were moving too fast for him, he was not able to say anything because he didn't want to hurt her feelings. At first he felt really guilty about his doubts. Noel wanted to control every aspect of his life, and by the time Kevin realised it, he had given in too much. He felt trapped and did not know how to extract himself from the trap without upsetting Noel, and he was too much of a coward to do that. When Noel announced that she was leaving him and getting married to their boss, Kevin had been relieved.

Kevin took a deep breath and sensed the familiar heaviness in his chest and told himself to stop feeling sorry for himself; that there were thousands, probably millions of people looking for meaning in their lives. He just had to get on with life, live in the present and make the most of it.

A spattering of rain brought Kevin back to reality, he put up his hood and decided to spend the afternoon reading. He walked back to the Community Kitchen and after asking for a large coffee, he took one

of the high seats along the shelf he thought of as the laptop zone. He saw that the nurse, Lee, and her friend were still at the table he had had his breakfast at. Kevin hung his coat over the back of the high chair and dug out his phone and iPad mini. He spent a few minutes reading the reviews on the book written by David Lagercrantz, The Girl in the Spider's Web, before buying the book and downloading it on his iPad mini. He plugged his earbuds in and blocked out the sounds around him with some guitar moods before opening the book.

Lee - 02

Lee shifted uncomfortably on her seat and waited for Cindy to stop talking before excusing herself, "So sorry Cindy," she said, "I need the loo… I'll be back in a minute… do you want anything else?" she said getting to her feet, "I'm going to have another coffee."

"No thanks Lee… there's at least another cup left in the pot," said her companion, "And I have to go soon, Jason's mum has invited us for lunch." she rolled her eyes, "I had better call and remind him." She hefted her cell phone and swiped her thumb across the screen.

Lee picked her way between the tables. She glanced at the back of the broad shouldered man sat at the counter that ran along the wall and wondered if it was him. The man she had seen at the Desai's fish and chip shop on Layer road. He had been in the cafe earlier, she and Cindy had taken the table he vacated. She smiled when she remembered how scared she had felt when he walked into the shop that night, and how nice and reassuring he had sounded when he spoke. He was still there when she returned from the loo, his head down as he concentrated on something on a tablet. Cindy was still talking on her phone. Lee sat.

"I've got to go now," Cindy said into her phone, "I'll see you at your mum's and I'll get something on the way. Love you… Byee." She made some kissing sounds and ended the call, then dropped the phone into her bag.

“Jason says hello,” she said to Lee, “He’d forgotten about lunch with his mum. Honestly, I don’t think he cares about anything except football.”

Lee smiled, “I hope he cares about you?” she said quietly, “Has he agreed to a date yet?”

Cindy shook her head, “No… we decided to wait till he gets a promotion so that I can stop working.”

“Do you want to stop working?” asked Lee.

Cindy shrugged, “It’s not as if I mind not working, and if we are going to have kids… it makes sense for me to be at home.”

Lee nodded but didn’t say anything, she picked up her coffee and sipped it.

“Look, I know you don’t approve of Jason, but he’s a good bloke. He wants a family and he is doing everything he can to find a proper job,” said Cindy.

“Maybe you could freeze your eggs,” said Lee, “So that you can have things later when Jason has a job and you can afford to stop working? Raising kids on benefits…” She shook her head.

“Life’s too short and unpredictable Lee,” said Cindy, “I want kids, Jason wants kids and he wants me… we will manage somehow, and Jason’s mum likes having us with her. She has plenty of space.”

Lee nodded, “You are right, you only live once. It is your life and I hope it all works out for you.”

“You have to let go of the past Lee. Not all men are like Alan… you need to get out there and take a few risks. Live a little,” said Cindy, “You deserve some happiness.” She reached across the table and put her hand on top of Lee’s.

Lee nodded and found herself thinking of the man from the fish and chip shop. She glanced over Cindy's shoulder and saw the wide-shouldered man was still there, engrossed in whatever he was reading or looking at. Cindy had always been impetuous. Lee had lost count of the boyfriends that Cindy had gone through and she was certain that Jason would be history sooner rather than later.

"I need to go," she said to Cindy, "I want to get some shopping done before I go on night shift. It's my turn to pay." Lee stood and glanced at the wide shouldered man just as he lifted his head to drink from a mug. It was the man from the fish and chip shop! Lee felt her spirits lift. Seeing him twice on the same day in the same place made it very likely that the Castle Community Kitchen was somewhere he came to often. She might meet him again here.

Cindy took her arm, demanding her attention.

"Can you make it next Wednesday?" Cindy asked, "I don't think I could bear it unless you were there too… Amanda can be a bit overwhelming, can't she?"

"No… sorry, I can't do Wednesday, I'll be working. Why don't you take Jason with you?" Lee suggested.

Cindy laughed, "Yeah, that might work. I'll ask him. Thanks Lee, it was nice chatting." They hugged awkwardly and Cindy headed for the loo. Lee paid and left with a last look at the stranger with the wide shoulders. He had his head down again.

Kevin - 03

Kevin spent the rest of the day and half of Sunday reading. As usual the return to reality after he finished the book left him feeling low. He called the retirement home at two PM before setting off to see his Great Aunt Sally, giving them plenty of time to get her ready.

Kevin endured her rebukes quietly. Sally was a stickler for appearances and meant well. Having done her duty, she relaxed and enjoyed his company. They played scrabble while Sally

interrogated Kevin, hungry for conversation. She had been an active woman most of her life and was affronted by her disability and growing infirmity. Kevin happily answered, and enjoyed her insights, she had often given him useful advice. One of her greatest regrets was never having had children. She had married late, in her fifties and her husband and both of his children, by a previous marriage, had died shortly afterwards when their charter flight to Cheltenham races had crashed. Sally's step son Daniel had been a promising jockey, Sally had survived but was never able to walk again.

As usual Sally wanted to know if he had any romantic interests.

Kevin smiled and shrugged, "No joy in that department I'm afraid. one of my office colleagues, Louise, suggested I use a dating app called Tinder; she even offered to help me with my on-line profile."

"Is that the lesbian Louise who does triathlons?"

"Yes. I told her it's not really on; the only people likely to be interested in me after seeing my face are probably masochists."

"You aren't ugly Kevin, and you could get your nose fixed you know."

Kevin laughed, "Yes… actually, the fellow running a fish and chip shop on Layer road suggested that I do that. One of his regular customers works on the cosmetic surgery ward at the local hospital. Actually, they do really nice fish and chips… would you like me to bring you some?"

"Don't change the subject… I never did understand why you didn't get your nose fixed."

Kevin shrugged, "It was my mark of honour I suppose. Now I am just used to it."

"Well it does make you recognisable," said Sally, "But it probably makes you snore, which isn't good for your health you know. Some

people say that sleep apnoea can lead to dementia. You should speak to your doctor about it."

"I don't think I snore, but alright, I'll look into it."

"Weren't you going to do a triathlon with Louise?"

Kevin nodded, "We wanted to do the Essex Epic, it's a team event, but the cyclist broke his collar bone a couple of weeks ago. We agreed to try again next year."

"I was prepared to sponsor you."

"I'll let you know if we qualify next year,"

"I never was any good at swimming, but your mother swam like a fish and she liked diving I recall. She won medals for diving."

"She taught me well," said Kevin, "I love swimming, but I never took to diving."

"The pool here costs an absolute fortune to maintain, I discovered. It irks me that I am contributing to the upkeep of a facility that I cannot use, and I've taken it up with management. I like to keep them on their toes."

"I am sure you do," said Kevin grinning, "You might enjoy using the pool. It's good exercise."

Sally waved a dismissive hand, "I'm far too vain. No, it's not for me." She carefully added some letters to the Scrabble board, "That's me done. I think I have won this time."

Kevin totted up the numbers of his unused pieces, then helped to clear up and pack away the Scrabble. It was time to go.

"I'll be away next weekend," he told her, "I'm driving to Barnard Castle on Thursday and should be back next Wednesday. Would you like to go to the Cinema on Thursday?."

“Yes, that would be nice, and that lovely Italian restaurant afterwards? My treat?”

“It’s a deal. I will call before to remind you.” said Kevin, bending down to give Sally an awkward hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Lee - 04

After spending all of Saturday morning at the Castle Community Kitchen and not seeing the wide shouldered man, Lee went to DelhiChips on Saturday evening and asked Anand if he had seen the man again.

“You mean the fellow who had been punched in the face by a policeman?” asked Anand, pushing his nose to the left, “He looked quite scary didn’t he?”

Lee nodded, “At first, but he had a nice smile. Has he been in again?”

“No… he lives by St. Botolph‘s, the Last Chance Fish and Chips is much closer for him.”

“He told you where he lives?”

“It just came up… he said he lives near St Botolph‘s, and moved to Colchester after the Pandemic.” He grinned, “Fancy him do you?”

Lee blushed, “Well, his face is hard to forget.”

“He should get it fixed,” said Anand, wrapping her order and taking the money, “Perhaps you’ll see him on your ward one day?”

Lee nodded, “Maybe… thanks Anand, give my regards to your dad?”

Lee sat at her kitchen counter, picking idly at the fish and wondering about the wide shouldered man and why she was so curious about

him. He had frightened her at first, The broad shoulders, untidy hair and the battered, bearded face. It was the unexpectedness, his physical size and appearance… and Mr. Desai had been hurt in a robbery only a few days earlier. But the man's smile and voice… the kindness in his eyes. That's what she responded to. The contrast. So very different to Alan. She shuddered and got to her feet, then gathered up the fish and chips and put them in the bin. She wasn't hungry anymore.

Lee walked along St Botolph's on her way to the cinema on Thursday, and nearly missed the film. She told herself she was being an idiot, but she enjoyed Deadpool and was in a good mood by the time it ended. She called an Uber, and had just got in when she saw him. It was definitely him and he was laughing and pushing a wheelchair with an older woman in it. The older woman was laughing too. Lee slept well that night.

Kevin - 05

Kevin's trip to Barnard Castle turned out to be very successful. A week after he returned he was called into the Managing Partner's office and offered coffee.

"You did well with Denby and Essam," said Alena Parsons, "They have signed a contract and want you to take charge of the planning. Sugar? I've already spoken to Mike and told him that you will probably have to step back from the Tesco and the Ipswich projects, I've also told him that you can do as much overtime as you need but only on Barnard Castle… there is a generous early completion bonus on it and draconian penalties if they overshoot. Get it right Kevin… we need more work from the big developers."

"Thanks… what about travelling?"

"Let me know what you need and we will discuss it… come directly to me. Mike's nose is going to be out of joint for a while. So watch your back." She went red, "I'm sorry… about the nose reference."

Kevin smiled, “No offence taken. I’m glad my nose didn’t put Denby and Essam off.”

“I thought you and Louise were supposed to be doing a triathlon?”

“The cyclist… Alan Wardle, I think he is in accounts… broke his collar bone a week before the qualifying rounds.”

“That is a shame, I used to cycle competitively in my youth,” she laughed, “I won’t even sit on a bicycle now…. the thought exhausts me. Do you swim a lot?”

“I usually manage an hour at least three times a week… I can swim far, but not very fast.”

“Will you be watching Louise on Sunday?”

“Sort of, I have been roped in to officiate at the Royal Grammar Pool, so I’ll see her swim,” said Kevin, “And I’ll hopefully see some of the running.”

Lee - 06

Lee swapped her duties so that she could have Saturday and Sunday off. She had intended to spend the whole of Saturday at the Castle Community Kitchen and had bought herself a book to read, but Cindy called her in tears after a row with Jason, so Lee only got to the Community Kitchen at eleven. She didn’t get to see the wide shouldered man, but was enjoying the book and decided to return on Sunday.

She finished her book by ten on Sunday, and decided to go for a walk. The Castle park was busy, there was some sort of sports event going on. She nearly walked into him, he was stood yelling encouragement to a woman called Louise! Lee tried to see which of the group of five runners was Louise, her heart sank, but she enjoyed hearing his voice. She followed him to the finish, carefully keeping her distance; she was determined to put a face to the woman that had dashed her hopes.

The woman was exhausted, she looked leggy but her face was hidden by her blonde hair as she stood legs apart, head down and her hands on her knees. The wide shouldered man reached her at the same time as another woman, a curvy brunette, who looked as if she might be from Latin America. She smiled brightly at the wide shouldered man and greeted him by name.

“Hi Kevin!” she sounded Hispanic, “I didn't think you would be finished at the pool in time to see the Louise finish.”

“I had to run,” said Kevin, “It was worth it! Well done Louise, you made the medals!”

The blonde woman straightened up, she was gorgeous despite the sweat and red face.

“Thanks!” she panted, as the Latino woman hugged her, kissed her on the lips and laughed delightedly, when Louise protested, “I’m all sweaty Marissa!”

Lee moved away, feeling confused. Kevin. She knew his name, perhaps the blonde woman was his sister? He hadn’t touched her, but was clearly fond of her and delighted for her. The Hispanic woman was too, and she looked familiar to Lee.

Lee saw him again later that evening, he was coming out of DelhiChips with an insulated food bag just as she was about to pull over and stop. He got into a Saab and drove off. Lee decided to follow him. After half an hour she was beginning to feel really annoyed with herself, but he stopped shortly after that, outside a large and rather grand looking building in St. Osyth. Lee carried on driving past and ended up in a Cul de Sac. She waited five minutes before turning around and heading back. There was a small sign outside the property, but Lee couldn’t see it clearly.

“I’m a bloody stalker,” she muttered as she headed back to Colchester, “This has gone too far.” She drove back to DelhiChips and managed to find the property on Google maps while Mr. Desai attended to three loud and indecisive teenage girls. Kevin had

parked outside Holnbrook House in St. Osyth. A Google search described it as a Residential Care Home. Kevin was probably visiting the old lady she had seen him laughing with at the Cinema.

Kevin - 07

Louise came to sit with Kevin in the staff canteen, “Hello stranger,” she greeted him, “I can’t recall seeing you in the canteen since…. well, ever… may I join you?”

Kevin nodded as he stood and pulled out a chair for her. He held a finger to his lips. Louise realised that he was in the middle of a phone conversation and grimaced, as she mouthed “I’m sorry!” soundlessly at him.

Keven smiled and shook his head, mouthing, “It’s OK.” before talking out loud.

“I’m sorry to interrupt Mike, but I just…. yes, hang on just a minute and let me explain OK?… Yes, thank you, I am aware of that. Of course I understand… If you like I will speak to her myself, but before you do… Really Mike, just listen for a second will you? Alena expressly instructed me to prioritise the Barnard Castle work, and that is what I intend to do. I am sorry if that means more work for you, but the only overtime I am authorised to do is for the Barnard Castle job… Yes, you have made yourself very clear, thank you.” Kevin frowned as he ended the call then grinned at Louise, “Sorry for that. What’s up?”

“Lord Michael Muck on his high horse again?” asked Louise, “He’s likely to get slapped if shows his face in QS. Patricia was in tears last week. He is unbearably rude.”

Kevin shrugged, “He’s an awkward bugger, that’s for certain.”

“So how is the Barnard Castle job going?”

“So far, so good,” said Kevin, “Thanks for recommending Patricia, she’s good.”

“I’ll tell her you said so,” said Louise, “I never got round to thanking you for your help with my swimming, I did a personal best in the Colchester Masters, nearly three seconds faster in the pool. Thanks a lot.”

Kevin smiled, “You did all the work.”

“Are you taking leave this summer? Marissa and I are off to Lanzarote next week. Club LaSanta. Have you been there?”

Kevin shook his head, “No and no. I dare not take time off till this Barnard Castle project is done, but I’ve heard of Club LaSanta. I hope you have a great time.” He looked at his phone, “I had better go… am off to Barnard Castle for a week and was just waiting for a new assistant, Greg. He’s at reception.”

Lee - 08

Lee was furious with herself. She had finally stopped obsessing about Kevin, and had stupidly let slip to Cindy that she had been intrigued by him. They had met for an afternoon coffee at Cafe Med in the Culver Centre.

“You must know more…” insisted Cindy, “I mean, come on girl, spill the beans!”

“Really I don’t. I just noticed him, that’s all and was curious.”

“Well of course you noticed him, so did I. He looked like one of those bare knuckle boxers, a pub brawler! Perhaps you fancy a bit of rough after oh so smooth and sophisticated Alan? Is that what it is?”

Lee shrugged, “I don’t want to think about Alan,” she said, “But just because he got his nose broken by a policeman doesn’t mean he’s rough.”

“So you do know something about him!” said Cindy, “What happened, why did a policeman break his nose?”

“He told Anand that a policeman punched him in the face during the Firemens’ strikes, when he was a student. That’s all I know. He sounded nice OK? Can we drop it now?”

“Alright, no need to get your knickers in a twist. I’m just pleased that somebody got you interested again. There’s hope for you yet. Jason has some rough looking friends… Mick’s a biker and looks like he got punched in the face a few times.”

Lee got to her feet, “That’s it Cindy. I’m not enjoying this.” she said crossly, “Its your turn to pay.” She turned and stalked out of the cafe fuming, and was halfway to the carpark when she remembered that she needed to get milk and butter. She turned around and walked to Sainsbury’s Express.

She had two weeks of night duty coming up and was dreading it. She drove home feeling wretched for walking out on Cindy, and pathetic for stalking Kevin. She spent hours just sitting in an armchair, staring blindly across the room with a book on her lap. It was almost nine PM when she came out of her trance like state. She put a Sarah Beth Yoga DVD in the player and did an hour of yoga before showering and going to bed. She read till past two in the morning and slept till midday. Lee really didn't like doing nights.

Kevin - 09

Kevin felt dreadful the day after he got back from Barnard Castle. He woke earlier than usual with a pounding headache and ached all over. He muttered a curse and went in search of some paracetamol. He couldn’t afford to be sick. He’d worked fourteen hours a day for the last eight days, and knew he was getting run down. He found the paracetamol and pressed two out of the blister pack then headed for the kitchen and filled a tumbler with water. He took the paracetamol, then swallowed some water before digging out an assortment of vitamins and supplements and swallowing them with

more water. He looked at the clock above the door. It was three fifteen AM.

By eight Kevin had responded to the emails and updated the plan. He showered and made his bed, then drove to the office and went straight to the company nurse's office.

Cathy looked up at him, and smiled before pulling her mask up and over her nose, "Why is it that you only visit when you are sick Kevin?" she asked, "What's up?"

"Probably Covid or something like that," said Kevin, "Sorry to visit it on you, but I thought I should get tested."

"There's a lot of it going around with this hot weather," said Cathy getting up and pointing at a chair, "Have a seat and I'll swab you."

It didn't take long, but Kevin really didn't enjoy having his nose swabbed, and decided that he really ought to get it straightened.

"Can I get my nose straightened up on the company health plan?" he asked Cathy.

Cathy nodded, but didn't respond for a while. She was busy annotating a swab container. When she looked up she spoke, "Yes, I'm pretty sure you can. Do you want me to look into it for you? You can't have it done while you're sick, but you will have to see a doctor and then a plastic surgeon before any surgery is done anyway."

"I'm not in a hurry, but I'd like to know what can be done and what the risks are."

"I'll look into it and get back to you," said Cathy, she frowned at the test strip, "Yep, you have Covid alright. Let me write you up."

Two hours later Kevin was back at home with a bag full of medication. He messaged Alena Parsons immediately and told her that he would be working from home, as he had Covid, and

reassured her that he could manage. She called back immediately and asked if he needed anything.

“No, I’m OK and organised. I have all the medication I need and my freezer is well stocked. I’m good. Greg Baines is doing a good job on site so far. No problems there.”

“Well call me if you need anything, and thank you, I appreciate you working through this.”

Kevin was tempted to ask her to keep Mike Coulsden off his back, but knew that would be a bad move. Mike had been with the company since it had started. He was probably best friends with one of the partners. Kevin couldn’t see any other reason why he had survived so long. He thanked Alena and ended the call. It was going to be a rough week. Cathy had promised to inform his department, that meant Mike, that he was staying home and sick with covid for at least the next five days, but Kevin drafted a message and copied it to everyone he worked with apologising and informing them that he was working from home after catching covid.

Mike called within minutes and offered to take over the Barnard Castle planning work.

“We can’t afford to take chances with that project Kevin. I can pick up from where you left off with minimal disruption.”

“Thanks Mike, but I’ve got it covered.”

“It’s not your decision I’m afraid. As department head, I am responsible for making sure that …”

“Sorry Mike, I have an incoming call,” said Kevin before disconnecting. He switched off the phone before swearing out loud and wishing all manner of pox on Mike Coulsden. He got up and blended half a lemon and a finger of ginger with some hot water, then switched his phone on when he sat back down to sip from the mug.

Lee -10

Lee had to stay and sort out a problem with one of the patient records. After twelve consecutive night duties she was feeling light headed and really looking forward to having the next five days off. She recognised him immediately, he was sat in reception with a mask on, but she knew it was Kevin. He looked up and caught her eyes just as she recognised him.

“Hello, what are you doing here?” she asked him before she could stop herself.

Kevin got to his feet and put down the magazine he had been looking at.

“Hi there… you’re Lee I think. We sort of met at DelhiChips…I’m Kevin.” He extended a hand then pulled it back, “Sorry, I should warn you that I had Covid two weeks ago… I should be clear now but…”

“Hi Kevin, yes I am Lee. Can I help you?”

“I’m waiting to see Mr. Chaudhry… for my nose. To discuss getting it straightened out. I’ve an appointment at eight. He’s not here yet.”

“Is your nose bothering you?” asked Lee.

“No, no. Not really, but swabbing it is a b… well it’s uncomfortable. I’m used to it, but it scares people so I thought…”

“Do you have trouble breathing through your nose? Do you snore?” asked Lee, “Sorry, it’s just that there is always a risk with surgery, so you really need to weigh the risks against the benefits… sometimes surgery makes things worse.”

“I don’t know if I snore,” said Kevin, “But otherwise it doesn't really bother me,” his eyes crinkled and Lee could imagine his grin, “I don't get to look at it very often, I don’t shave.”

Lee nodded and lowered her voice, “Look, I’ve been working here for… well, longer than I want to admit. My advice is don’t do it unless you have to. Please don’t quote me?”

“I won’t say a word,” said Kevin, “Thank you… could I…” what Lee could see of his face and neck went really red, “No, you probably don’t want to. Thank you anyway.”

“I don’t want to what?” asked Lee.

“Tell me what to expect, what questions to ask the surgeon… over a coffee somewhere… later I mean?”

“I could do that… only I’ve just finished a long stint of night shifts. Perhaps tomorrow?”

Kevin nodded, “Tomorrow would be great! When and where?”

“The Castle Community Kitchen…I saw you there,” said Lee feeling herself blush, “Say around nine?”

“I’ll be there!” said Kevin, “I look forward to it.”

Lee forgot where she had parked her car and had to stop and think about it. She felt absurdly pleased with life despite feeling desperately tired and in need of a shower.

Kevin - 11

Kevin nearly forgot. He had woken early, as usual, and had updated and sent off the plan. He tucked a new mask into his pocket and gathered up his laptop and the charger and set off walking briskly. it was five past nine when he got to the community kitchen. There was no sign of the woman, Lee. Kevin cursed himself for being late but settled at a table and checked his phone. When he looked up he saw Lee. She smiled and waved before stopping at the counter and ordering, she pointed at his table.

Kevin stood and pulled out a chair for her.

“Thank you,” said Lee, “I’m sorry for being late.”

“Good morning. I’m glad you could make it. Have you caught up on your sleep yet? It takes me forever to get over working nights, though oddly I sleep better when I work nights. Would you like me to wear a mask?” Kevin pulled the mask from his pocket.

“No that’s fine. I don’t like nights at all… well, I suppose I like the extra money and the extra days off, but I would rather not work nights. How did you get on with Mr. Chaudhry?”

“He cancelled on me, a medical emergency apparently,”

“How frustrating. Well… ask away?”

“I was hoping you could tell me what you think?”

“OK… well, I think that if it does not bother you, if you can breathe easily and don’t suffer from sleep apnoea because of your nose, then you should avoid surgery.”

“By sleep apnoea, you mean snoring?”

Lee nodded.

“I don’t think I snore, but I live on my own.” He grinned, “Perhaps it is because I snore?”

“You can get tested easily enough, but you will need to be referred to the Sleep Apnoea Clinic at Colchester Hospital by your doctor. Other things can cause sleep apnoea, most commonly it is caused by being overweight, but there are other causes. Getting tested is a good idea.”

“So what sort of things can go wrong with a nose job?” asked Kevin.

“Mostly apnoea I would say. Scar tissue builds up and narrows the airways. A surprising number of people, mostly women, suffer from sleep apnoea after nose jobs. Most cosmetic nose jobs are done for

women. Mr. Chaudry is OK at most cosmetic work, but noses are dirty places, and infections do happen. Your nose is close to your brain, your eyes… Really Kevin, if you don't need it, please don't do it?"

Kevin nodded, "Well I promised someone I would look into it…and I'll see if I can get tested for sleep apnoea. I forgot to order." He got to his feet, "I hope you ordered something to eat? Its on me and I am going to have an omelette. Can I get you anything?"

"Scrambled egg and bacon… brown toast, thanks!" said Lee smiling.

Kevin wasn't gone long, and returned just as Lee's coffee was brought to the table.

"So what got you into working on a cosmetic surgery ward?"

Lee shrugged, "It was the first job I was offered after qualifying as a nurse. I like it… it gives me purpose I suppose. What do you do for a living?"

"Project planning," said Kevin, "I'm a project manager, but since the pandemic I have just done critical path planning, mostly for construction projects." He tapped his laptop, "These days it's very much a computer thing."

"Are you a local lad?" asked Lee, "I've seen you around here before."

"I like to come here, to the community kitchen on Saturday mornings and sometimes on a Sunday for brunch, if I have a good book to read. My mum was born here, but I moved here just after the pandemic from Sussex. I was born and raised in one of the colonies, but was based in and around Chichester since I was eighteen. What about you?"

"Born and raised in Colchester, an Essex Girl, through and through. Perhaps we will meet here again one day, I like reading here too." Lee laughed and went very red.

“Its a wonderful town, with loads of history. I love it here.”

“Colchester is a city now,” said Lee smiling, “Its the oldest recorded town in England.”

“Are you a local History Buff?” asked Kevin, “I’ve done the Castle tour several times, but I am sure there’s a lot more to learn about Colchester.”

“I should learn more about Colchester. I keep meaning to, but life gets in the way.”

Kevin’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He frowned and dug it out. A message from Alena Parsons, the managing partner of TurnKey Consultants. “Call me - URGENT,”

“I’m sorry, I need to make a call. Work,” he told Lee.

Kevin moved away to take the call.

“Hello? Kevin? Thank you for calling back so soon. I’m afraid there is a problem at Barnard Castle… Brian Humphries is in hospital, and it looks bad. A traffic accident. The thing is, we don’t have another project manager to replace him, unless we send Mike Coulsden, and frankly, I think he would be a disaster. Can you step up?”

Kevin’s mind was reeling. He was qualified but he hadn’t managed a building site for almost two years and that had been tiny compared to the Barnard Castle resort.

“Hello Kevin… are you there?” asked Alena.

“Yes, sorry I was just thinking. Will Denby and Essam be happy with me taking over from Brian?”

“They don’t really have a say, but they are happy enough with your planning work. I need you to do this Kevin, we cannot afford to lose money on this project and I think you can do this.”

“I probably can,” said Kevin, “But Mike will have a fit, and he is already angry with me.”

“Don’t worry about Mike Coulsden, he’s had more opportunities than he deserves and made a mess of most of them. This is a big step up for you Kevin… take it.”

“When do you want me there?”

“Now preferably, but as soon as you can manage.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” said Kevin, not sure how he felt about it.

“Great! You won’t regret this Kevin. Call me if you need anything?”

“Thank you.”

Alena laughed, “I hear doubt in your voice Kevin. Trust me; you will be fine.”

The food had arrived by the time Kevin returned to the table.

“Sorry about that,” he said, returning to his seat.

“No need to apologise,” she said, “I enjoyed talking to you. I hope it all works out well for you. Whatever Mr. Chaudry says, please do get a second opinion and find someone a little less cocky… I shouldn’t say this but he works too fast and, well, a lot of his nose jobs end up with complications.”

“I won’t do anything until I’ve been tested for sleep apnoea,” said Kevin, “Thank you so much for the advice.”

Kevin enjoyed his omelette and chatting to Lee about the Community Kitchen. They both liked it. Lee looked at her watch when the waitress cleared her plate away, and said she had to go. Kevin got to his feet as she stood.

He shook her hand and liked the feel of it. He was reluctant to let go. He remained standing and watched after her until she had left the cafe.

Kevin nearly forgot to pay. His mind was in a turmoil as he walked home. He called Holnbrook House and was told that his Great Aunt Sally was asleep.

He cleared out his fridge and pantry. Mrs. Eames, his neighbour, happily accepted everything. He carried all his bedding and laundry to the Launderette and paid Sumi for an express wash and dry. She promised to message him when it was ready to collect. By five PM he had done a thorough clean and had packed everything he thought he needed into the Saab. He drove to Bridges and had the oil, coolant and tyre pressure's checked and filled the tank with petrol then parked and walked to Cafe Med and had chicken pie and a large coffee. After one last check around his flat, he left at seven PM and headed north. He called Riverview Caravan Park and arranged a caravan for himself.

He managed to speak to his Great Aunt Sally, she really did not like talking over the phone, but the care assistant persuaded her. Sally told Kevin not to worry about her and said she was happy to video chat him when he had time to do it. She congratulated him on his promotion, though he said that hadn't been discussed.

He made it to Barnard Castle before midnight. His caravan smelled a lot better than the last one he had rented and was at the far end of the caravan park, with a clear view over the river. The sleepy eyed girl who showed him to his caravan told him that Greg Baines had moved out a week earlier, which was news to Kevin.

Kevin struggled to get to sleep, and thought about Lee. He had really enjoyed the short time he had spent with her and found her hugely attractive. He told himself it would never have worked and that she was probably married or engaged anyway. He had not thought to look at her left hand.

Lee - 12

Lee walked home in a happy trance. Meeting Kevin in the Hospital had been so unexpected. She had changed her clothes three times and spent an age trying to decide whether to doll herself up for him before deciding that she should not change her appearance too much, and just dusted over the acne she always got after extended night shifts. She had been late, which mortified her. She loved his smile and crooked nose and wondered if he could tell that her heart was hammering away in her chest as she sat across from him, trying to maintain her cool. Her hand still tingled after shaking his. She really had not wanted to let go. He had lovely hands. She liked everything about him and wanted to learn more. She looked forward to meeting him again… She would do nights every week if she had to, just to make sure she had Saturday and Sunday off to meet him at the Community Kitchen. Learning about him, where he grew up and what he liked doing, was going to be like unwrapping a present, she decided, and she was going to savour it. The first thing she was going to do was dig out all the books she had gathered over the years on Colchester, and swot up on its history so she could show him around the city.

She cleaned her little apartment and decided to do some more yoga. Life was looking up.

Kevin - 13

It took Kevin a week to get into his new role. Brian had been very organised, which helped. Unfortunately he had died two days after a collision with a truck just outside Bishop's Auckland. Greg had fetched the site keys and Brian's personal effects from Darlington Hospital.

Greg had moved in with a local girl who worked in the site canteen, and cycled to site in the mornings.

Brian had been staying in the Rafters BandB in Barnard Castle, which Kevin was now entitled to expense, but he preferred the

caravan park, from which he could easily walk to site, as it was literally across the river from the caravan park.

Alena had emailed a new contract to him. Kevin was surprised at how much he was now being paid, and was not looking forward to how Mike Coulsden would react, though Mike was no longer his superior. As a project manager he was now entitled to a company vehicle. The lease hire company had called him two days after he had got to Barnard Castle and asked him what he wanted. Brian had driven a Land-rover Discovery. The woman from the lease hire company had recommended a short wheelbase Mitsubishi Shogun, and told Kevin that they could return his Saab to Colchester for him. Three days after arriving on site he was handed a registered delivery package containing a TurnKey Consultants' expenses guidelines booklet and a Credit Card.

After two weeks on site, Kevin realised that he did not actually need Greg. Kevin was content to work twelve hours a day, and being on site meant that he was able to chase up progress data more easily than he had been able to do, working remotely from Marks Tey. Greg was hard working, but struggled with project planning. He had a much higher opinion of his computer skills than his ability warranted. Kevin explained to him that he needed to focus on improving his planning skills, and that the Barnard Castle project was a good opportunity for him to do that, but Greg said he preferred site work. By the end of September Greg was becoming a problem, turning up late, sneaking off early and generally not making any effort to make himself useful.

Kevin took him to the Farrier's Inn for lunch and told him that he was going to ask for Greg to be found work on another site. He had warned Greg several times, and Greg reluctantly admitted that he was bored and really not that interested in Project Planning and wanted something more hands on.

"Turnkey Consultants provide consultants, Greg, you need a skill that they can sell. Building site skivvy is not a consultant skill. I was a project manager before they hired me, but they took me on as a planner. Think about what you want to do and let me know if I can

help, but unless you apply yourself properly to project planning, there's nothing for you here. OK?"

"I'll go back to Marks Tey and speak to June in Personnel," said Greg, "Maybe she can find something for me?"

Kevin doubted it but didn't say so. Greg didn't bother thanking him for the meal and didn't turn up for work the next day. Kevin had written to Alena telling her that he no longer needed Greg and that his attendance and performance had become erratic.

Alena visited the site in mid October. She had not warned Kevin and had trouble reaching him on site as he was up to his knees in thick mud, surrounded by excavators and site workers dealing with a broken water main. When one of the site workers tapped Kevin on the shoulder and pointed, he saw her waving a hard hat at him, and waded through the mire towards her.

"What the hell are you doing there?" she yelled to be heard above the roar of engines.

Kevin took her hard hat and put it on her head, then pointed. Alena led the way.

"It's not a major problem," said Kevin, "The old concrete water main was going to be replaced anyway, everything is ready, they just have to get on with it."

"What happened?" asked Alena.

"Not sure yet, but it looks like someone was trying to widen the access point and didn't know the water main was so close below the surface. They've closed the water main already and it should be all sorted by tonight. I hope so anyway, the water main goes under the river and supplies the caravan park I'm living in." He pointed towards the river.

"Can't you find somewhere better to stay?" asked Alena, "It looks dismal."

“I like it and it's convenient. I might move if it gets snowed in.”

“I suppose you are wondering why I’m here?”

“I am sure you are going to tell me,” said Kevin, “Be gentle with me.”

Alena laughed, “You are twice my size and almost half my age, and almost everybody in the office is terrified of you.”

“Me?” Kevin was surprised, then rubbed his nose, “It’s the nose isn’t it?”

Alena laughed and shook her head, “I don’t actually know, but I suspect it is that you have the shoulders of a power lifter and never raise your voice. No one wants to make you angry. Louise assured me that you are not a violent man, and is always defending you.”

Kevin nodded, but felt dismayed and wondered what he needed defending from. Alena must have sensed his thoughts.

“Nobody dislikes you Kevin, except perhaps Mike Coulsden, and he dislikes everybody,” she laughed, “I’m here because the rest of the board want me to verify that things are as good as you say they are. They aren’t used to seeing such positive reports, so go and get yourself cleaned up and show me around. Where can I get a proper cup of tea?

Kevin pointed out the canteen and said he would be at least half an hour. He was back in twenty five minutes and took Alena to the site office first.

The site manager asked his QS to go with Kevin and Alena. Morgan was a quiet Yorkshireman and Kevin liked him a lot. By noon Alena was looking tired, but she gamely agreed to keep going. They were done by three. Alena shook Morgan’s hand and asked Kevin to take her somewhere nice where they could have something to eat and chat.

They sat at a corner table at the Farrier's Inn. Alena had a huge plate of cottage pie and a glass of red wine.

"You should eat something," she told Kevin, "You've lost weight."

Kevin nodded, "I eat once a day and had a big breakfast, I put on weight when I started here, probably because I can't find a decent swimming pool close enough. A coffee will do me."

"We let Greg Baines go," said Alena, "He wasn't very happy about it, but said he didn't want office work. Have you heard anything from Mike Coulsden?"

"Not since I moved here," said Kevin.

"He made a formal complaint, put it in writing, the silly ass," said Alena with a hint of a smile, "He is under a formal review now. His brother-in-law is a partner, and I suspect he will be relieved when the review is over."

Kevin just nodded but didn't say anything about Mike, "I suppose your visit of the site is connected to the review?" he asked.

Alena nodded but didn't reply as she sipped some wine, "This is a nice place and not too far from site. You haven't claimed much on expenses, your allowance for entertainment is quite generous; you do know that?"

"I don't do any entertaining," said Kevin, "I get on well enough with the site management and workers, but I find it is better not to get too friendly with them."

"How many years of project management did you do before you came to us?"

"Eight years in the engineers and five years with Scarpetti and Son," said Kevin, "Nothing on this scale though. I have worked on bigger projects but not as overall project manager."

"Why did you leave Scarpetti and Son?"

“I was stuck in a rut,” said Kevin, “The senior project manager was a lazy bugger and enjoyed having a skivvy to do his work while he entertained clients and played golf.”

“Skarpetti junior I presume? Another Mike Coulsden I suspect,” said Alena, “So you took a pay cut and moved to Essex. How do you feel about it now?”

Kevin smiled, “I am happy enough. A bit nervous about steering this project through the winter, but we have been lucky so far.”

Alena snorted, “Tosh! Luck has nothing to do with it. You plan ahead and work hard to make sure things go right. Denby and Essam have started discussions about another project in Hertfordshire, and they want you as the project manager.”

“We won’t be finished here till June next year,” said Kevin.

“Don’t be surprised if you get more visits from the partners,” said Alena, “Have you met any of them?”

Kevin nodded, “John Coventry, that was just after I started with you and did the planning for his house in Ipswich. I’ve seen some of the others at the office, but not spoken to any of them.”

“I’ll send you the prospectus we sent to Denby and Essam, the photos are quite recent and there’s a little write up about each one.”

Kevin wanted to ask which one was Mike Coulsden’s brother-in-law but didn’t. He thanked her.

“Would you mind driving me to Darlington?” asked Alena, “I’d like another glass of wine before trying their suet pudding. I haven't had suet pudding since I was in boarding school in York.”

She was good company and told him about some of the other projects they were doing. Alena was a risk consultant, and most of the risk management was for government related contracts. They also provided chemical and mining engineers for several large

mining projects in Canada, Chile, Indonesia, Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo. During the drive to Darlington, Kevin offered to drive Alena's Mercedes to Darlington in the morning, to save her getting a taxi to site. She handed him her keys and suggested he have breakfast at her Hotel, a five star, swanky looking stone built place called The Edison.

Two days after Alena returned to Marks Tey, Kevin got a call from the Colchester police to inform him that his car had been set on fire and his front door and porch had been damaged by fire. He drove to Colchester on Thursday night. Mrs. Eames had had the front door boarded over. Kevin let himself in the back door. There wasn't much actual damage in the entry hall, mostly just smoke damage. the coconut door mat was scorched.

Mrs. Eames knocked on the back door just after Kevin got up the following morning. He let her in and offered her coffee, but she declined saying she had to go and visit her sister who was recovering from hip surgery. She handed him two DVDs and told him that her nephew had made them for her. She told him they were from her security cameras and showed the man who had burned his car and front door. She hadn't shown them them to the police, because she didn't want them in her house. Kevin knew that her son had spent time in jail, but didn't know what for. He had never met the son and didn't even know if he was still alive. He didn't like to ask. He did ask her if he could give the DVD's to the police.

"Just give them one. Keep the other, it's a copy. David says there's a good view of his face; the man what did it."

Kevin thanked her and put a DVD in his laptop as soon as Mrs. Eames had gone. He was surprised when he recognised Greg Baines's face. He made an image from the video and emailed it to Alena Parsons saying his neighbour had him on film, setting fire to Kevin's car and approaching the front door of Kevin's flat.

An hour later Kevin was at Colchester police station talking to a sergeant and a constable. He gave them the DVD and told them about his relationship with Greg Baines. He gave a statement and

then walked to the Guardian Royal Exchange insurance office and filled in the claim forms. By midday he had a stinking headache and was not feeling well disposed towards Greg Baines.

He had a coffee at Cafe Med and took some paracetamol. There was a message from Alena telling him that June from personnel would contact him.

June called just as he was leaving Cafe Med. She told him that TurnKey Consulting would pay all the legal fees and deal with the police and insurance company on his behalf. She said they had already asked a contractor to assess and quote for repairing the fire damage to his flat and gave him the contractor's number. Kevin had only met June at his initial interview and didn't really know her well. She said she had sent him a letter to sign and return, authorising TurnKey to act for him regarding the damage to his car and property.

The contractor was waiting outside Kevin's flat. Kevin took him around the back and let him in. He was gone in less than half an hour, saying the job was a doddle and would take half a day max. Kevin said he would leave keys with Mrs. Eames if he was not around.

Kevin went to the police pound outside Braintree to look at his Saab. He'd had the car for seven years and had really liked it. It was a burned out shell. The old fellow who showed it to him said it was lucky the fuel tank had been full or it would have exploded and done more damage to the other vehicles in the residents' parking.

Kevin slept badly that night and woke early in a sweat. He got to the pool before it opened and was surprised how much he struggled when he did get into the pool. He felt a lot better for having had a good swim and walked back to his flat feeling more positive. He wasn't going to replace the Saab while he had a company car, and he really liked the Shogun, even though it was automatic.

Lee - 14

Lee dragged herself out of bed and forced herself to do half an hour of yoga. She really did not want to face the day. The last two weeks had been awful and she was still feeling weak after a nasty chest infection. She stood under the shower and turned the cold off till the shower was almost too hot. She had cut her hair really short and enjoyed how easy it was to wash and care for.

The milk in the fridge had gone off and there was mould on the butter. She threw the stale bread into the bin, then fetched it out and decided to feed it to the birds. The sky looked grey, so she carried her waterproof and decided to go to the Community Kitchen. It made her think about Kevin again and she wondered what had happened to him. She shook her head and told herself to move on; she had lost enough sleep over Kevin Coombes, she had found his name on the appointments register for Mr. Chaudry, but there were no other details. She hadn't found him on LinkedIn or FaceBook; there was nothing about him on line. She had found TurnKey Consultants, but there was no mention of Kevin on their web page.

Cindy had been an absolute cow. Jason had been charged with dealing in a class A drugs and was locked up in Ipswich. Jason's mum had told Cindy to move out. Cindy had spent three nights in Lee's tiny flat and had stormed out in huff when Lee refused to give her a lift to Ipswich to see Jason. Her parting remark had been especially cruel. Lee shook her head and didn't want to think about it. A car hooted and the driver yelled at her as she ran across the intersection by the roundabout. Lee raised a middle finger, surprising herself and then feeling ashamed.

"Get a grip," she told herself, "You don't need anybody; make your own happiness."

She realised she had stepped in dog poop and took a deep breath as she pushed away the familiar blanket of depression that wanted to smother her. She spent a few minutes trying to get all the poop off the sole and side of her trainer with a twig and hoped she wouldn't still be able to smell it when she got to the cafe.

She wiped her feet carefully before entering, and went to wash her hands in the ladies before she made her way to the counter, looking

down at her feet and sniffing surreptitiously. She saw him as soon as she headed towards the tables. Kevin was sat, shoulders hunched and head down, looking at a tablet. He looked up just as she was about to turn away. His face was paler, but he looked pleased and surprised to see her as he got to his feet, that familiar grin transforming his face.

“Hello Lee… I was hoping I would see you again… it's been a while. Will you join me?” he looked past her, checking to see if she was with anyone.

“Hello Kevin,” Lee didn’t trust her voice, she nodded and smiled as he pulled out a chair for her. He was old fashioned, she thought.

“How are you?” he asked, “Your hair looks nice.”

Lee patted her hair self consciously and smiled, “Thank you. I’m good. How are you? You look pale and you’ve lost weight… sorry, it's the nurse in me.”

“I’m fine,” he said, “I’ve been up North on a job.”

“You didn’t get your nose done?”

Kevin laughed, “No time… things are getting easier now, so I will look into getting those tests done … sleep apnoea you said. I wrote it down and looked it up. I’m sure they do that sort of thing in Yorkshire.”

“Have you moved there?” asked Lee.

“No, I’ve taken over project management of a building site in Barnard Castle, near Darlington. The original manager was killed in an accident. I’ll be staying there probably till June next year, unless I screw up.”

“You won’t,” said Lee and felt herself blushing. “I have to admit I was worried having not seen you for such a long time.”

It was Kevin's turn to blush, "I wanted to leave a note for you at the hospital, but I didn't… don't know if you are… I didn't want to cause offence and I don't know your surname."

"There's no-one to offend. Wainwright… Miss Lee Jennifer Wainwright, with two w's." She smiled and held out her hand, "Pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Kevin Coombes. I saw your name on Mr. Chaudry's appointment register."

Kevin smiled and shook her hand, "Likewise Miss Wainwright with two w's. Would you mind if we shared phone numbers?"

Lee laughed and reluctantly let go of Kevin's hand. She reached into her bag and found a receipt from the hospital canteen, and used a pencil to write her number on it. Kevin put it straight into his phone and called her number.

"I can WhatsApp and FaceTime," he said and held up his tablet, "I don't do any other social media stuff."

"Is that a small iPad?" asked Lee, "Or a very large iPhone?"

"An iPad mini," said Kevin, "I use it mainly to read books and FaceTime with my Great Aunt. She doesn't like phones, especially cell phones. I read a lot. Escapism mainly."

"Me too," said Lee and fetched a book from her shoulder bag, Dissolution by CJ Sansom.

"I like his books," said Kevin, "He died recently, sadly."

"I've just started this," said Lee, "One of the patients gave it to me. What's your favourite book?"

Kevin grimaced, "I really could not say… I read too much and I'm not very discerning I'm afraid. I read practically anything. I loved the Harry Potter books and Millennium trilogy, which now has four books. I am still furious with George R.R. Martin for not completing the Game of Thrones books."

“What happened to him?” asked Lee, “I watched the films… and enjoyed the first two most.”

“He’s still alive,” said Kevin, “Though he is probably worried about being attacked by an irate fan. I have no idea why he stopped writing. it was supposed to be an eight book series and he wrote five and then… I suppose he made enough from the films.”

“How did they finish the films if the books aren’t all written?” asked Lee.

Kevin shrugged, “That’s probably why the last film was so rubbish. I prefer books to films…. they last longer.”

“I know what you mean,” said Lee, “I often feel lost and even more lonely when I finish a book.” She blushed and looked away.

Kevin lifted his mug and put it down, it was empty.

“Have you ordered food?” he asked, “Suddenly I feel like a change. Have you ever had breakfast at The Bottled Crab by the Hythe?”

“I’ve never even heard of it,” said Lee.

“Would you come with me?” asked Kevin, “I promise to behave.”

Lee smiled and nodded, and decided not to tell him that she might prefer him not to behave. She told herself to make the most of her time with Kevin.

They walked to the counter and Lee insisted on paying for her coffee.

“I live nearby, by the Church,” said Kevin, pointing, “My car is there.”

“Do you have any family here?” he asked as they walked.

Lee shook her head, “No… I have an aunt in Ipswich, but we don’t get on. Mum and dad passed away during the pandemic, within

weeks of each other. There's just me… I used to have a cat. What about you?"

"A Great Aunt. Sally. She is in St. Osyth. She really is a grand old lady. I'm going to visit her this evening. She likes to thrash me at Scrabble. She lost her husband and two stepchildren in a 'plane crash thirty plus years ago, and has been in a wheelchair ever since." he turned his head to look at her, "She will be very pleased to learn that I had breakfast with a beautiful young woman."

Lee felt herself going red, "Thank you, that is very flattering."

"You aren't gay are you?" said Kevin, "I'm sorry, it's none of my business… it's just that the only female friends I have are gay; Great Aunt Sally is bound to ask me."

"I'm not really sure what I am anymore," said Lee, "But I don't think I am gay, but who really knows?"

"I would definitely be gay if I was a woman," said Kevin, "I haven't met a man I would want to kiss. Yetch!"

Lee laughed and reached for his hand. She felt herself blushing as he turned to look at her, taking her hand in his. She didn't want to let go.

The asphalt around Kevin's car looked as if it had been burned. He unlocked the car and opened the passenger door for her. It looked and smelled brand new.

"This is nice," she told him when he climbed into the driver's seat.

"It's a lease hire, and comes with my job," he said as he started the car and backed carefully out.

Lee hadn't been to the Hythe for years, it had changed a lot. They parked outside a student hostel and walked. The Bottled Crab was tucked away between two huge industrial looking buildings, one of which looked like it was being redeveloped.

“Its a student run place,” said Kevin, “One of my friends told me about it. There is always something happening here, but the breakfasts are legendary and very affordable. Well they were the last time I came here, which was almost a year ago.

It was busy, but they found a table and were attended to very promptly by a tall, dark-skinned young man with a strong Australian accent who gave his name as Kevin.

They both ordered bacon, scrambled egg and coffee. There were posters on all the walls advertising recitals, plays, and a range of activities.

“My mum and dad used to come to the Hythe every year for the Oyster festival,” said Lee. She laughed, “They got sick more often than not too. Have you ever tried oysters?”

Kevn shook his head, “Never. I worked in a few pubs around Chichester when I was eighteen. Sometimes people brought in oysters and ate them raw. Disgusting looking things, and yes, they often got sick. I like mussels…. they do good mussels here sometimes. That’s what I had when I first came here. Louise, my friend and colleague, lives around here somewhere. I’ve been helping her with her swimming technique… she does triathlon and swimming used to be her weakest event. We’re looking for a cyclist so we can do team events… are you a cycle racer?”

“Good God no, I can only just ride a bike and would rather not, I’ve lost count of the cyclists we’ve had on the ward. I do a bit of yoga, and walk a lot. I can just about swim. One of the nurses I work with is a keen cyclist. I’ll ask her if she wants to make up a team, can I give her your number? Her name is Alice.”

“Sure. Please do. I’ll put her in touch with Louise as I’m going to be away a lot of the time. I haven’t found a decent pool to swim in where I am.”

“Will you be coming back at all?” asked Louise.

“I hope to. Things are going well and I can probably get away once or twice a month now. The middle phase of most construction jobs is usually the easiest. Starting and finishing can be a bit intense.”

Lee looked at Kevin and wanted to hold onto him. She told herself to slow down, but she felt conflicted. He was going to be working in Yorkshire for the next nine months. Alan wasn’t able to remain faithful for two weeks!

“What are we doing Kevin?” she asked quietly.

“We are having breakfast and getting to know each other.”

“Why are you… no, I mean why do you want to get to know me?” Lee felt her heart beating hard in her chest. The way he looked at her was almost unbearable. She wanted to get up and run away, but couldn’t move.

“I like you,” he said simply, “I enjoy your company.” He shrugged “I’m sorry if that bothers you. Would you like me to call you a taxi?”

Lee was shocked and felt the blood draining from her face, “No… what made you ask that? I just wanted to … it doesn’t feel real to me, a man like you. I’m sorry… I’m not very sophisticated and … I’m sorry.”

“What is it Lee?” he said quietly, “You can ask me anything. I’m not very good at relationships… I don’t make friends easily but I’m not a nasty person. I really will not hurt you Lee, not in any way, I promise.”

Lee nodded and reached out to cover his hand with both of hers, She looked around; nobody seemed to be paying any attention to them. She smiled.

“I feel quite old in here,” she said, “Actually I feel quite old anywhere. Old in spirit, or maybe just worn out in spirit. I’m not very good at relationships either. I suppose I’ve withdrawn too much since my last… it was awful. Can we go for a walk? I haven’t been to the Hythe for ages and it has changed a lot.”

Kevin - 15

Kevin thought that Lee was a little bit like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights of a car. He wanted to protect her and reassure her, but wasn't sure how she would react. He told himself not to be silly, and that he had nothing to lose by opening his heart to her. It was hard though. He held the door open for her and fell in step next to her and reached for her hand. She didn't resist and squeezed his fingers. He loved the feel of her hand in his.

"Tell me about yourself," he said. His voice seemed odd to him and he realised his heart was racing.

"Not a lot to tell really," said Lee, "Born here, thirty two years ago, went to school here, trained as a nurse here and now work as a nursing sister. I was happy enough as a kid. Mum and dad were great, he was an accountant, mum was a kindergarten teacher. We never had any dramas, not really. I never smoked, never got into trouble, always wanted to be a nurse and was a brownie and a girl guide. I had a few boyfriends, nothing too serious till I started working. Alan was an Intern, from Manchester. Very posh, well to do parents. We got engaged just before the pandemic. It was hectic then. I suppose I was lucky that I had work, but losing dad and then mum was hard. Alan went away for two weeks just after mum died. I called him one night… I couldn't sleep, and a woman answered his phone. We were engaged! I felt dead inside after that. Later I learned that he'd screwed half the nurses in the hospital. My best friend, Cindy, knew all about it and said she hadn't wanted to hurt me." She turned and looked into Kevin's eyes, "I have trust issues."

"You and me both," said Kevin, "What happened to Alan?"

"I don't know or care," said Lee, "I posted his engagement ring back to his mother…. it had been hers. I never heard from him nor his parents again. I have not seen him again and don't want to. Ever."

“I’m so sorry that you got hurt, he must be an idiot,” said Kevin, “I can not begin to imagine how you must have felt.”

They walked in silence for a while. Kevin had no idea where they were and didn’t mind. He wanted to put and arm around Lee, but didn't want to let go of her hand. He really didn't want to go back to Barnard Castle, but knew he would have to finish the project.

“Your turn,” said Lee.

“Well, I’m a lot older than you, I was born in Zambia almost forty years ago. I was eight when mum died, it was malaria and she was pregnant with what would have been my sister. I was sent to boarding school in South Africa. Dad fell apart and became an alcoholic. He wrapped his pickup around a tree when I was seventeen. I finished school and came to UK to join the army. I spent eight years in the Royal Engineers and did an Open University degree in project management, then worked as a project manager for a construction company in Hampshire and Sussex, before moving to Colchester and getting a job as a project planner with TurnKey consultants. I was engaged to a girl called Kathleen, She was in the army too, did three years. We were together for five years, and were going to get married but she wanted to do two years with VSO first. She went to Sierra Leone and was killed by rebels that raided the village she was in. I ended up in a relationship that just sort of happened before I had really come to terms with Kathleen’s death, and I felt powerless to stop it and didn't know how to extract myself when I realised that I had no emotional investment in the relationship. Luckily for me it ended when Noel decided to get married to her boss, who was also my boss. I moved here to Colchester and… well, I work and I read.”

They had reached a narrow bridge that crossed the Hythe river. They stopped and looked down at the water. A condom floated slowly past.

“They always look so big in the water,” said Kevin, “Makes me feel very inadequate, sometimes I think that some evil bastard buys extra extra large condoms to throw into rivers just to humiliate ordinary men.”

Lee laughed, Her laugh was infectious and soon they were both laughing. Lee let go of his hand to wipe her eyes and Kevin put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. She pressed against him and they stood for a while, saying nothing till a cyclist came across the bridge and grinned at them,

“We had better head back to your car,” said Lee, “What time are you going to visit your Great Aunt?”

“I have to call and check with her,” said Kevin, “She’s very bossy and arranges bridge tournaments and poetry readings and that sort of thing for the residents… visitors by appointment only. I don’t want to let you go.”

“Take me home,” said Lee, “Can you stop at Sainsbury’s so that I can stock up on a few things? My place is on the way to St. Osyth. When are you going back to Yorkshire?” She put her arm around his waist.

“Sunday evening,” said Kevin, “I don’t want to think about it till then.”

They walked the rest of the way to the car in silence. Kevin kept glancing at Lee and wondering what she was thinking as he made his way to Sainsburys, They went in together and she pushed a trolley and asked him if he drank.

“Alcohol only sometimes, usually dark rum or dry cider. Mostly coffee and water. Real coffee, I won’t drink instant even if you threaten me.”

“Wine?”

“Its wasted on me, I must be a peasant. I’ll drink dry wine but am happier with coffee or water.”

Lee paid with a credit card and allowed Kevin to push the trolley back to the car. She insisted on paying for the parking and then directed him up past DelhiChips to her flat. It had started to rain, so

he stopped on the pavement outside her flat while she carried the shopping in, then drove around the back to look for parking. Lee was waiting by the door with a large towel for him. but he was dry enough. He took off his shoes and socks and left them in her entrance hall.

“Please excuse the mess, I’m usually quite tidy,” said Lee as she picked up some laundered and folded clothes from an armchair.

“This is a nice flat,” said Kevin, “I really like the layout.”

“Thanks… it's all mine, and paid for,” said Lee, “I repaired and upholstered these chairs myself. I love fixing things.”

Lee was clearly nervous, but also proud and pleased to show her home and things to Kevin. She offered to make coffee and suggested that Kevin call to make an appointment to visit his Great Aunt while she did that.

Kevin’s Great Aunt Sally wanted him to visit at seven PM, according to the care giver who answered the phone and called him back.

“I could make you something to eat or we could have fish and chips from DelhiChips?” suggested Lee.

“I’ve eaten more than my fill for today,” said Kevin taking the coffee and sitting carefully in an armchair. He felt nervous and excited at the same time. He wasn’t sure what to say, so he sipped his coffee.

Lee - 16

Lee wasn’t sure how she felt. Part of her wanted to leap onto Kevin and tear his clothes off and lose herself in his arms. Another part of her was terrified that he would be disappointed with her. Mostly she wanted to use the loo bit didn’t dare to in case she farted.

“My telly is in my bedroom… I could fetch it if you want to watch something. It’s not very big or fancy… I usually just watch DVD’s on

it when I can't sleep. I could put some music on… what do you like?"

"Surprise me," said Kevin, "I will listen to almost anything, I don't know much of the modern stuff though."

"I was listening to Abba last night… do you like Abba?"

Lee put on the music and excused herself to use the loo in her bedroom. She took the opportunity to freshen herself up and changed into a tracksuit before coming down. Kevin was kneeling in front of her book shelf and reading the back cover of a book.

"You can borrow as many books as you like," she said, "I'll hunt you down if you don't return them. My fried Cindy is always losing my books. I think she gives them away."

"Don't introduce her to me," said Kevin smiling, "I won't borrow any books just yet, but thank you for the offer." He got to his feet. "You have a lot of books." He sat back in the armchair and picked up his coffee mug.

"I never realised before how small that armchair is," said Lee, "I got it from a salvage yard, it must be one of those sub-size chairs they make for show houses, to make the rooms look bigger. Why don't you try the couch? That way I can sit close to you." She smiled and pulled a face, "I'm not very good at seducing am I?"

Kevin smiled, "I feel like a teenager, and I'm terrified of making a mistake. And also of breaking your chair. Do you mind if I sit on the floor?" He didn't wait for an answer and sat cross-legged on the floor looking up at Lee.

"I'm terrified too," said Lee, "Terrified that this is a dream and that I'm going to wake up all alone again."

Kevin reached up and took her hand, then tugged gently, "Come and sit on my lap, let me hold you properly?"

Lee carefully sat across his lap and placed his mug on a side table.

Kevin wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to his chest. Lee felt something give inside her and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. He tasted of coffee.

“Why are you crying?” asked Kevin when she came up for breath.

“Am I?” asked Lee, before kissing him again, “Come upstairs, I want to unwrap you slowly.”

Kevin startled her by standing up with her in his arms, she took his hand and led him up the stairs and into her bedroom, where she undressed him slowly, refusing to let him help or undress her till he was naked. She lifted her arms and let him undress her and stared at his body while she stood with her arms across her breasts.

“I don’t have any condoms,” said Kevin, as he took her wrists and gently pulled her arms away. He lifted her up and sat her on her bed, then knelt in front of her and kissed her as he eased her knees apart and pulled her body against his.

“I don’t care about condoms,” she said when he stopped kissing her, “I’ll take a morning-after pill.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” murmured Kevin, before taking her nipple between his lips, “I’m going to kiss every inch of you.”

Lee had never experienced anything like it, and wanted to cry when Kevin eventually stopped and said he ought to go. Cindy had often told Lee lurid tales of having multiple orgasms and Lee had never really believed her. Kevin had made her body sing. She cringed when she thought of some of the things she had said, but she clung to the memories. For the first time in her life she felt truly sexy and desirable. And they hadn’t even fucked! As soon as Kevin left, Lee fetched her car keys and went out to get some condoms. Kevin had agreed to come back to her flat after visiting his Great Aunt and she was going to to be ready for him.

Kevin - 17

Kevin let himself into Lee's flat just after ten PM. The lights were on and Lee was curled up fast asleep on her two seater couch, dressed in her tracksuit. She woke while he was carrying her up the stairs.

Minutes later Lee was straddling Kevin on the bed. Kevin marvelled at her supple body and how she responded to every touch. Lee lost all her inhibitions.

"I've got to make the most of you," she told him, "I don't want to waste another second."

It was ten AM when Kevin woke. He managed to extract himself from the tangle of limbs and bedclothes without waking Lee and cleaned himself up and made a pot of coffee. Lee was still fast asleep but looked so wantonly abandoned that he couldn't help himself and went down on her. She responded sleepily at first and by eleven they had finished the last of the condoms.

"I can't believe we used five condoms in one steamy night," Lee said quietly while stroking Kevin's side. "I've never had sex like this before. I never knew it was possible."

"It's a dream," said Kevin, "Someone put drugs in our food and we are hallucinating."

"I don't think I can walk," said Lee rolling over and sitting up, "I need to pee."

"Take my hand," said Kevin, "We go on three OK? One, two, three!"

They made their way to the bathroom giggling like school children.

Kevin helped Lee to strip the bed and load the washing machine. She didn't want him to put clothes on but agreed that they would probably not get served any lunch if they ate naked. He drove them

back to The Hythe and they shared a plate of mussels at the Bottled Crab.

“When was the last time you had sex?” asked Lee in the car.

“During the pandemic; two years I suppose, replied Kevin, “You?”

“I’ve never had sex like that before,” said Lee, “But about the same, almost two years since I had any sex at all.”

“I’m not sure I can manage again for another four years,” said Kevin.

“Please don’t make me wait four years for more?” said Lee putting her hand on his thigh, “That would be so cruel, now that I know what I am missing.”

“You can always come up to Barnard Castle,” said Kevin, “I’m living in a caravan park, but it's quite comfortable and there’s lots to see and do up there.”

“Do you mean that?” asked Lee quietly.

“I do,” said Kevin, “I’ll send you a Pin on WhatsApp.”

“Why did you come to Colchester this time?”

“Some bugger set fire to my car and my front door.”

“What? That’s awful! Have they caught whoever did it?”

“It was someone I know from work, I sent him back from Barnard Castle when he started slacking off and didn’t want to continue there. The company laid him off. Sadly for him, my neighbours caught him in the act on their CCTV system.”

“Has he been arrested?”

“I have no idea. I don’t really want to know, it just makes me sad thinking about it.”

“I hope you were insured?”

“Yes. I’ve done all the paperwork and the company has arranged for someone to replace my front door. I don’t need the car.”

“I forgot to ask, how was your Great Aunt Sally?”

“Oh she was in fine form, and very pleased to learn that I have a girl friend. She wants to meet you.”

“I can visit her if you like, what’s her name?”

“Vera Sally Marshal. She does not like to be called Vera. I’ll send you the number and address. I think you will like each other.”

Kevin wanted the afternoon to last forever, but it passed too soon. It was raining when he set off a few minutes after six PM, but he made good time and was bed in the caravan park by eleven PM. He slept really well.

The week passed quickly, and Kevin spent half an hour each evening video chatting with Lee. He had several dreams about Katherine, which bothered him till he realised that he was probably doing the sort of grieving that he hadn’t managed to do after Katherine was killed.

He was surprised to learn, when he had a FaceTime video chat with his Great Aunt Sally on Sunday evening, that Lee had taken her out for Sunday Lunch at the Castle Community Kitchen. He wasn’t surprised that Great Aunt Sally approved of Lee.

Lee had started a stint of night shifts that night, so they had not chatted, but she had sent a WhatsApp message saying that Sally was wonderful, and asking if she could come and stay with him the following Sunday till Thursday morning.

Lee - 18

Lee was up early on Monday, she felt different and told herself to enjoy it. She saw her GP and was given a prescription for the pill and an appointment on Wednesday morning to have and IUD fitted, By three PM she had found a large second hand armchair and had had it delivered to her flat. She took photos of the small armchair that she had only recently upholstered and advertised it on eBay and CustomCrafts at twice what she had paid for it and the materials she had used to reupholster it.

By ten PM she had stripped off the old upholstery on the bigger armchair and replaced the webbing straps that held the springs and glued and screwed two cracked bits of wood. She struggled to get all the material she had removed into her bin, but managed. She parked her Honda Fit back in the carport and locked up.

She thought that Kevin looked tired when they FaceTimed, and suggested that he get himself some multivitamin and magnesium supplements. She fell asleep hugging a pillow and telling herself that it was perfectly OK to enjoy being in love.

The week went well for her; the patients and nurses all told her that she was looking different and better. Her undersize armchair was collected and paid for in cash by a young Asian girl who said it was perfect for her bedsit. She had managed to find new springs for the bigger armchair and had sewn and bound them into place. The Calico under layer was in place and she had finished upholstering the arms and back-rest. Kevin had FaceTime video called her every night between ten and eleven PM and she had arranged to do six nights starting on Sunday.

She had been nervous about meeting Kevin’s Great Aunt Sally and had offered to take her out for lunch on Sunday, as they were doing a traditional roast beef and Yorkshire pudding lunch at the community kitchen. Getting Sally from her wheelchair and into her Honda Fit had been a bit of a challenge, but Sally had been a delight. They had talked for so long that Lee had been late for her shift that night.

Nights did not seem so awful now that she had something to look forward to, and she even managed to finish upholstering the

armchair. She still had to make the seat cushion, but had everything needed and thought she could finish it as soon as she got back from Yorkshire. She was quite nervous about driving to Barnard Castle. She had driven to BlackPool and back once with Cindy, and had not enjoyed the long drive at all.

She had decided to set off earlier than Kevin had suggested on Sunday, and traffic was not really a problem, though the huge trucks dwarfing her little Honda Fit on the motorways made her cringe. It took her six hours almost exactly and she was exhausted when she got to the caravan park just after ten PM.

Kevin - 19

Kevin cleaned the caravan from top to bottom well before midday on Sunday, then spent two hours on site updating and printing the project plan and putting copies up in the site office and canteen. He had filled the caravan's pantry cupboards and fridge with groceries during the week and Mrs. Bolton, from the staff canteen, had promised to get a nice flower arrangement delivered to the caravan site reception for him; her daughter-in-law was a florist. Kevin walked back to the caravan site and fetched the Shogun to the reception rather than try to carry the huge arrangement to the caravan in the blustery wind. There were two smaller arrangements and a nice hand painted card as well. The arrangement took up most of the little table in the caravan, but it looked good.

Kevin had driven to Darlington during the week rather than buy condoms in Boots in Barnard Castle, where everyone seemed to know him.

His Great Aunt Sally had surprised him by calling him, or more accurately, she had got one of the care attendants to make the call. She told him that he should propose to Lee and said she would be very pleased to let him have her engagement ring cleaned up and used for the purpose. Kevin had been a bit slow to respond, and Sally had sounded quite cross when she told him that he would be a fool not to snatch at the opportunity for happiness, because one never knew how long it would last. Kevin admitted that he was

terrified of scaring Lee away by moving too fast and his Great Aunt actually laughed and told him not to be a coward, “If commitment scares her off, then she isn’t worth bothering with, trust me Kevin.” Kevin thanked her and said he would get the ring cleaned up first, before proposing. Just thinking about it made him sweat.

He got out his skipping rope and spent half an hour skipping on the tiny patch of lawn between his caravan and the fence. He was finding it surprisingly difficult to skip without entangling his feet in the skipping rope, but it got him panting and sweating, which was good enough for the moment. After showering, Kevin went over the project plan and made notes for things he wanted to check in the morning. He was worried about slacking off on work while Lee visited, but had decided that he wanted Lee in his life more than the job. He had read quite a lot of self-help articles since the pandemic, and knew that it was unhealthy to allow himself to be defined by his job, but like most things health, and especially mental or emotional health related, identifying the problem was a lot easier than resolving it. For most of Kevin’s adult life, the thing that got him out of bed and motivated was “the job”. He wondered how Lee coped. She seemed very together to him.

Kevin was lost in a Deon Meyer story when Lee messaged to say she was at the caravan park reception. He didn’t bother with a coat and ran through the light drizzle to Reception to sign her in. It didn’t take long as he had already done most of the paperwork. He sat in Lee’s little car and directed her to the parking slot next to his Shogun then carried her bag.

Lee admired the flowers and card, and said the caravan was much nicer than the holiday caravans she was used to.

Lee put the flower arrangement in the bedroom to make space on the table for supper. Kevin hoped the cook-from-frozen Lasagne he had got from Morrisons was as tasty as it looked and smelled. He had been living off cold cuts and salads prepared for him by Mrs. Bolton mostly. The salad Mrs. Bolton had made looked pretty good.

“I got red and white wine,” said Kevin, “I haven’t got a clue what they are like, which would you prefer?” He fetched the white wine from the fridge while Lee examined the label of the Rioja.

“This looks nice,” said Lee handing him the Rioja and taking the white, a German Gewűrztraminer. She frowned, “I’ve never heard of this, but I think we should have the red with Lasagne, though I am happy to try the white if you like.”

They had the red and by the time it, and the Lasagne was finished, Kevin was feeling much more relaxed.

Lee was telling him about meeting his Great Aunt Sally, it was clear that they had got on well with each other.

“She’s amazing, but you know that. Meeting her made me realise how silly it was to feel sorry for myself,” Lee smiled suddenly, “Which I don’t anymore, thanks to you. I even enjoyed doing nights and I haven’t got any pimples either… usually I get loads of them when I do nights.”

Lee insisted on helping with the washing up. Kevin enjoyed having her so close and lost the last lingering feelings of awkwardness.

“What time do you have to start tomorrow?” Lee asked as she put the cutlery away.

“Work officially starts at seven forty five; I’m usually there before seven,” said Kevin, “But tomorrow I can go in later as I’ve already put up the PERTS. Do you want to come and see the site? I can give you a tour but you need to be off site by nine.”

“You should go in at your usual time. I’d like a tour, but I don’t want you changing your work routine for me.”

Kevin laughed and pulled her close, “I’d rather spend the day with you, but it's OK, unless something goes wrong I can finish at three thirty most days. They have a really good crew here and they are well ahead of schedule.”

“I’d better get the flowers out of the bedroom,” said Lee, “They’re lovely, but there is not enough room for them.”

Kevin carried the arrangement to his Shogun while Lee showered. She called out to him when he returned to the caravan, and asked him to scrub her back.

“I think my boobs are bigger,” she told him much later, “Its the pill, I think.”

“I bought five packets of condoms,” mumbled Kevin, “You could have told me you were going on the pill.”

Lee laughed, “Well I’m taking them all back to Colchester with me. You are going to donate them to the nurses’ station” She kissed his shoulder, “Go to sleep lover boy.”

Lee - 20

Lee was a nervous wreck by the time she reached the Riverview Caravan Park. She used the reception toilet before calling Kevin.

Her palms were sweating when he arrived, looking pleased to see her. She was surprised by the huge flower arrangement that took up too much space in the caravan, she really hadn’t expected it and tried to look pleased. She was relieved that it wasn’t candles and soft music, which was Alan’s style. She hadn’t expected lasagne and wine either, and though what she wanted most of all was to be hugged, kissed and dragged off to bed, she really enjoyed the anticipation. Things had moved really fast as soon as they finished clearing up after the meal.

Lee snuggled closer and breathed in the smell of him. She wanted to wake him and straddle him again. Sex without condoms had been even better. She kissed his shoulder and worked on her breathing, trying to will herself to sleep.

Lee enjoyed the site tour the next morning, and was pleased when she saw the respect that the site workers showed Kevin. She was

surprised at how friendly the canteen lady was, and embarrassed when she told Lee that everybody wanted to see the woman that Kevin was so smitten by. Kevin thanked the woman for the flower arrangement, which he said had taken up the caravan's dining area.

Lee was determined not to interfere with Kevin's work and left at eight, telling him that she had already planned out her day and would be back at the trailer park by four.

She transferred the large flower arrangement into her car and put the two smaller arrangements on the table before driving to the Kings Court Care Home, which was the closest care home she could find on Google maps. They were delighted with the flowers. Lee then drove to the Bowes museum, where she had coffee and a WhatsApp Chat with Cindy, who told her that she was pregnant and that Jason had been moved to a remand prison in Kent.

Lee had a quick walk around the museum and decided that it was worth a longer visit, then stocked up with brochures and had a walk around the town. By midday she had done enough walking and had filled her shoulder bag with little items she had found in antique shops that she thought she could sell on at a profit in Colchester. She was very pleased with an upholstery tacking hammer she had found with a magnetic head that would hold a tack. She had seen them on the YouTube upholstery tutorials but couldn't justify upwards of twenty pounds for a new one. She thought three pounds for a used one was a great bargain. Lee thought the people in Barnard Castle were very friendly. The woman in the second hand tool shop told her that the castle ruins were nice to see but said that the seven pound fifty entrance fee was too high as it was just a ruin. Lee drove back to the caravan park and made sure she had everything ready to make a risotto when Kevin got back from site, then spent an hour doing yoga on the tiny section of lawn between the caravan and the fence. She heard yelling from the site and got up to have a look, to see what it was, hoping it was not an accident and didn't involve Kevin. She couldn't see anything and went back to doing her Yoga.

By three she was showered and quietly reading a book on the sofa. Kevin arrived a little after three looking cheerful. He handed her a paper bag before hugging her and kissing her on the lips.

“You look and smell lovely,” he said smiling widely, “Mrs. Bolton sent this for you, she says you are far too skinny. It’s a carrot cake muffin I think.”

“Go and shower,” she said, “I’m going to make risotto that we can have with that nice looking white wine. Do you want a coffee?”

Kevin nodded and kissed her again, “Yes please… you don’t have to cook, we can go out to eat.”

“I’d prefer to eat here early and get you into bed,” said Lee going very red, “I’ve been looking forward to it all day.”

Kevin laughed, “I’ll be quick then!”

Kevin - 21

“What a woman!” thought Kevin as he scrubbed himself vigorously in the shower. He had hurried back from site as soon as he could after hastily updating the plan and filing a report on the accident. Luckily nobody had been hurt, but a section of wall had been destroyed. It would not be hard to rebuild and the excavator appeared undamaged, it was an eight man-hour setback at the most.

Lee was laying the table when Kevin returned to the dining area. She told him that she had taken the huge flower arrangement to a care home on the way to Barnard Castle, and showed him the tacking hammer she had bought and explained what it was for.

Kevin couldn’t help wondering what such a beautiful and capable woman saw in him.

“What did I say?” asked Lee looking at him questioningly.

“No… I was just thinking how lucky I am,” said Kevin, “What other skills have you got hidden up your sleeves?”

Lee smiled, “I told you, I am an Essex Girl, through and through… we don’t rely on our men to get things done. Its official, you can look it up.”

Kevin wasn’t sure what to say; he’d looked up “Essex Girl”, on Google and didn't think it was very nice at all. Lee must have seen something in his expression, she smiled, “I know what they say about Essex Girls, that we are shallow minded, materialistic sluts… maybe it's true… but I think Essex women are just more independent and that scares some men, so they call us sluts.”

“Most men like the idea of independent women,” said Kevin carefully, “I think very few men can actually cope with an independent woman.”

“What about you?” asked Lee.

“I like you. The more I learn about you the more I like,” said Kevin.

“I’m not promiscuous,” said Lee going red, “Except with you.”

Kevin kissed her, “I’ll open the wine.”

“I heard some shouting from the site early in the afternoon,” said Lee, “I think the food is ready.”

“There was an accident, an excavator bashed down a section of retaining wall. Nobody was hurt,” said Kevin, pouring the wine. “What did you think of the town? I’ve only been to Morrisons.”

“Its a nice little town, very friendly and loads of cafes. The museum is pretty good, I want to spend longer there, maybe on a rainy day. I didn’t go into the castle, one of the shop keepers said there isn’t much to see for the money. I got some nice stuff from antique shops… I like buying and selling things. Let’s eat,”

Kevin forced himself to eat slowly and really enjoyed the food. The wine was really nice too, and they had no trouble finishing it. Things got quite steamy at the table too, and Kevin could not conceal the erection that was tenting his tracksuit when he got up to clear the dishes. Lee was delighted and they did a hasty job of clearing up before heading for the bedroom.

“You don’t snore,” Lee told him. She was sat astride him, glistening with sweat. “I could’t sleep for a while last night… after… and you never snored.”

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” asked Kevin. He wanted to sit her on his face again.

Lee shrugged, “It happens after doing nights, my body clock gets confused.”

“Well, let’s see if I can wind it up a little,” said Kevin, getting his hands under her buttocks and lifting, “I want to make you moan again.”

Lee giggled, but didn’t protest. It wasn’t long before she was moaning though.

By midnight they were both fast asleep.

Kevin woke suddenly when he smelled coffee, he felt disorientated. It was still dark and he had a painful erection. He could hear Lee moving about in the kitchen and fumbled for the light switch wondering what time it was. He couldn’t see the alarm clock.

Lee backed into the room, carrying a tray. She smiled when she turned around and saw Kevin sprawled naked on the bed.

“Is that for me?” she said grinning as Kevin sat up and cleared the pillow and clothing off the nightstand. It was five past five in the morning.

“I didn’t hear the alarm,” he said.

“Never mind that,” said Lee, putting down the tray and then sliding down her pants, “Something important has come up that needs my attention,”

Kevin was exhausted when he got to site, and couldn’t stop smiling.

Lee - 22

Lee spent a long time in the shower after Kevin had left for site.

“Perhaps I’m a nympho?” she murmured, then smiled and turned off the shower. Cindy had told her years ago that she would end up with a fanny like a dried up prune if she didn’t have regular sex. Lee hadn’t believed her of course, but she’d felt like a dried up prune for long enough.

An hour later she was on her way to Darlington. She wanted to look for a bigger car. It had been really awkward getting Sally into her little car. The folding wheelchair was easy enough to put in the back, but getting Sally in and out of the car was going to end up with somebody hurting their back or dropping Sally. Lee knew it was early days with Kevin, but she’d got on so well with Sally that she thought it was worth looking into getting a more suitable car. She could use a bigger car to carry furniture for upholstering too.

Lee spent a frustrating morning looking at second hand dealerships in Darlington before deciding that she would leave looking at vehicles till she was back in Colchester. She had seen a Fiat Qubo which looked perfect if a bit basic, and a Honda Odyssey which she liked as well, but the one she had seen was quite shabby.

Lee found a swimming pool that was not too far from Barnard Castle and visited it. The Active Life Leisure Centre looked nice enough to Lee, and the staff were happy to show her around. She explained that she was looking for a pool where her boyfriend could swim, as that was his sport and they gave her a timetable and price list. It took Lee fifteen minutes to drive back to the trailer park, which she thought was OK. She finished the second Shardlake book

before Kevin got back from site. He looked tired but said it had been a good day.

Lee said she'd found a swimming pool that she wanted to show him, and a pub where they could have supper. Kevin got his swimming stuff and asked about her day as she drove him to the Active Leisure pool.

"I had a look at some cars, I'm thinking of doing a trade in," she told him, "I want something a bit bigger than this."

"This is a really nice little car," Kevin told her. "Honda's are good."

"What's happened about your car? The one that got burned… what was it?"

Kevin frowned, "I need to chase that up… I haven't heard anything, it was a Saab. I loved that car. My door's been replaced and the entrance hall has been repainted. My neighbour sent photos .., it looks better than before."

"There was something in the news… they said the police had arrested a man from Southend for arson. Greg Baines."

"That's the guy," said Kevin, "I liked him…"

"Lots of people got a bit strange after the pandemic," said Lee, "The British don't like therapy, but we need lots of it, I reckon."

Lee said she was happy to sit in the cafe while Kevin swam, and told him she didn't have a swimsuit and couldn't really swim anyway. She watched him swimming and was thrilled when he swam butterfly. He swam non stop for twenty minutes before heaving himself out of the pool. Ten minutes later he joined her in the cafe.

"You make it look easy," she told him, "I wish I could swim like that."

“Get yourself a costume and some goggles and I’ll teach you,” Kevin told her, “I would enjoy teaching you. This would be a good pool for it, it’s nice and quiet.”

“It was quite busy when I got here around one,” said Lee, “But I’ll get a costume tomorrow. Do I really need goggles?”

“The chlorine will make your eyes red and a bit sore, a nose clip would be good too. Some people wear ear plugs but they make the inside of my ears itch.” He handed her his goggles and nose clip.

Lee drove them back to Barnard Castle and the Old Well Inn. They had beef and ale pie and shared a chocolate brownie with ice cream. Kevin was happy to have coffee and water to drink so Lee had a glass of red wine and handed him her car keys.

“I’m a bit tender,” Lee told Kevin quietly when they got back to the trailer, “But I’m feeling ever so horny…” she blushed bright red, “Be gentle OK.”

Half an hour later she collapsed on Kevin’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her, “I thought you wanted gentle,” he said quietly and kissed the top of her head.

“I’m not sore now,” said Lee, “Not really.”

“Sleep now,” said Kevin.

They were both sore in the morning.

Lee fell asleep on the bed after Kevin had gone to site, and woke feeling very disorientated after nine. She drove into Barnard Castle and parked at the Bowes Museum and spent the rest of the morning there. She bought herself a blue and yellow swimsuit goggles and a nose clip and was back at the trailer site just before Kevin returned. He looked tired and was splattered with mud.

Lee made coffee while Kevin showered and they walked to the site Laundromat carrying all the bed linen and dirty clothes. The young

woman said she would leave their dried and folded laundry in the reception for them.

Lee wasn't frightened of water, and she wasn't looking forward to looking silly and useless in the pool, but she put a brave face on it.

She ended up enjoying it; Kevin made it all fun and easy, getting in the shallow end with her and getting her to push off the side walls with her feet and just glide through the water like an arrow. It didn't take very long before he started getting her to use her arms to pull herself through the water. They spent almost an hour in the pool then went back to the Old Well Inn for supper.

Lee felt uncomfortable about eating out two days in a row, it seemed wasteful to her, but she enjoyed the meal and chatting in the pub. She desperately wanted to ask Kevin if he wanted children and what his plans for life were, but worried that it would put him off. In the end it was him who brought up the subject of children when she told him she was worried about Cindy, now that she was pregnant.

"I don't suppose there is such a thing as the perfect time to have children," he said, "Some of the guys I worked with in the army wanted kids as soon as possible, so they could still be young enough to enjoy their children, but a lot of them ended up separating from their wives, which can't be good for the children."

"Lots of kids grow up with single parents, usually their mums," said Lee, "I want children, I had my eggs harvested and frozen as soon as I qualified as a nurse… just in case."

"Just in case what?" asked Kevin.

"Well, you know… nursing isn't the best paid profession, and I knew I might have to wait a while before I had enough saved to look after them properly. Its not safe or sometimes even possible for a woman to have kids after forty… safe for the children I mean. And even back then, I could see that couples weren't staying together like they used to."

Kevin nodded, “So you are determined to have children?”

Lee shrugged, “I’d like to have a child, a girl if possible, but I’m not ready yet. It’s not healthy to get too obsessed about having a child… I remember a few of the matrons at the hospital that got very bitter and twisted when they couldn’t manage.”

“I like the idea of having a child, but it also terrifies me. I know that some of the kids of the guys I served with have become drug addicts and ended up in jail. I wouldn’t know how to cope.”

“I worry about being killed in traffic, but I still drive,” said Lee, “You can’t let fear decide how you are going to live your life.”

Kevin nodded and looked thoughtful, Lee was worried that she’d put him off, though he did say that he liked the idea of having a child.

“Well,” he said after a while, “In the spirit of not letting fear dictate your life… I’m terrified of losing you, but I’m hoping to convince you to spend the rest of your life with me and if that brings a child or two into my life, it would be a bonus.”

Kevin - 23

Kevin was terrified after telling Lee that he wanted to spend his life and have children with her, but after seeing how fearlessly she applied herself to learning to swim, and hearing that she’d had her eggs harvested in case she had to wait till she was older to have a child, Kevin decided not to waste any more time worrying about it.

He was so relieved when she smiled and told him that she liked the idea of spending her life with him.

“I won’t be a kept woman,” she told him calmly, “I’m not the type to stay at home and mend socks, but I’ll never cheat on you or let you down, and I’ll expect the same of you.”

“Do you mean it?” asked Kevin, “Really?”

“Well yes… I’m not going to marry you and move into your flat or anything like that… not for a while, but I’m yours if you want to commit. I’m not looking for a bigger fish.” Lee stuck out her hand, “Partners?”

Kevin took her hand in both of his,”Partners.” he said, grinning delightedly.

“Do they do Irish Coffee here?” asked Lee smiling happily, “I want to celebrate.”

They ended up getting some cream and Irish whiskey from Morrisons, and making Irish coffee in the trailer. Kevin lay awake for a long time after Lee fell into an exhausted sleep. His heart thumped steadily in his chest as he tried to decide how to make everything work.

Lee struggled to wake him in the morning, he had not heard the alarm again.

“Are you OK?” Lee asked feeling his forehead, “You only had the one Irish Coffee last night.”

“I’m fine,” said Kevin sitting up, “I couldn’t sleep after… well I was thinking about what to do about my job and … you know… now that we are partners.”

“Well drink your coffee and get showered. We can talk about things later, when you get back from site … that’s what partners do, right?”

Kevin nodded, “You’re right, two heads are better than one.” He smiled suddenly, “I think I love you Lee Jennifer Wainwright with two w’s, I just wanted to tell you that.”

Lee kissed him, “I know I love you Kevin Coombes, now go and get showered and don’t forget to wash between your big toes.”

“I’m very tender there,” said Kevin, getting to his feet.

“Me too, we can kiss each other better when you get back from site,” said Lee and slapped his bum, “Now hurry up before the hot water runs out.”

Lee - 24

Lee wanted to sing and dance around the caravan. She told herself not to get silly, but ended up singing in the shower till the hot water did run out. She struggled to think what to do and did an hour of Yoga in the caravan as it was drizzling out. She had another quick and luke warm shower, then went to Boots and got some calendula as she really was very sore between her big toes. She then went for a coffee and tried to get her head straight. Kevin loved her. She wanted to call Cindy and tell her, but thought it would be cruel now that Cindy was feeling so low and lost.

In the end she decided to do a roast dinner to celebrate and went to Morrisons and splashed out on a decent bottle of bubbly as well. She went back to the trailer park and double checked that she had everything she needed. The oven was big enough but there was no carving knife, so she stopped at the trailer park reception and asked if they had one she could borrow.

Lee realised that she wouldn’t be able to sit and read and was too pent up to go sight seeing, so she drove to Active Leisure and spent an hour and a half swimming across the shallow end of the pool till it got too busy. She was exhausted by then anyway. Her arms felt like lead as she drove back to the trailer park, then after putting the chicken in the oven and checking it after twenty minutes, she walked to the building site with her book and messaged Kevin to say she was going to the site canteen so that she could walk home with him.

The rain was bucketing down by the time Kevin finished for the day. He grinned and told her it was better than snow as far as the works were concerned. They played scrabble till the food was ready, and toasted their partnership with bubbly as lighting and thunder crashed around them.

“I doubt we’ll get much done tomorrow if this hangs around as long as the forecasters say it will,” Kevin told her.

“Are you worried?” asked Lee

“I’m more worried about the river overflowing its banks. The site will probably be OK, the stormwater defences are already done, but we might get washed out of the trailer park.”

“You’re kidding right?” said Lee getting up and pressing her face against the window with her hands cupped so she could see the river, “It’s looking pretty wild.”

Kevin told her they would be fine, but suggested that she pack a bag of anything she didn't want to lose, just in case they had to get away quickly, but he was calm and relaxed.

Lee was relieved that the chicken and roast potatoes were OK, and there was very little left. They finished the wine and had more Irish coffee and some chocolate. They braved the rain and sloshed down to check on the river. It was a raging torrent but the bridge looked fine and in no danger of being swamped. A large and very soggy looking badger ran along the path a little ahead of them and vanished into a thicket just before they reached the trailer park. Lee had never seen one before and didn't realise they could get so big.

They didn’t have sex that night, Lee said she really sore and Kevin admitted that he was too. Kevin slept through the alarm again, but Lee woke him with coffee and walked to site with him. Half an hour later they walked back, the site was closed till Monday.

“Is that going to be a problem for you?” Lee asked Kevin.

“No, we are well ahead of schedule but I would have liked just five more days of good weather after which we could move all the heavy plant off site. We might get lucky next week.”

“What shall we do? Do you still want to visit York?”

“Not really… the storm is heading there now. I think we should go South, back home. Can you give me lift? I’ll get the train back on Sunday.”

An hour later they were on their way back to Colchester.

Lee asked Kevin if they could share the driving and he agreed to do the first two hours. She asked him what he had been thinking about with work that had kept him awake.

“Well, I suppose I was trying to work out how to change things so we could spend more time together… before I became a project manager, I worked from the office in Marks Tey and did very little site work. Now, as a project manager, my work will take me all over the country.”

“Which job do you prefer to do? Project planning or managing?”

“That depends… the senior planner and I don’t get on too well, he really hates me now that I’ve been promoted over his head. I like project planning… I suppose I think I am really good at it. I do my own project planning as a project manager. Project managing is very different, and I suppose I am really enjoying this site. I like the people I am working with, it’s a nice area, it’s a well designed project and the client seems to be OK. The next one could be a real doozy… it’s hard to say.”

“Well, I think you should stick to being a project manager. Going back to being a planner with a boss who hates you isn’t a good idea. We both have to work. I quite like my job, but it is really just a job. It pays OK, and I would probably struggle to get another job with the same pay and conditions so close to where I live. If something better comes up, I’ll think about it and discuss it with you. If something better comes up for you, then let’s talk about it. My plan… before I met you, was to save as much as I can and get myself as well organised as I can, so that one day, I can take things easier and maybe have a kid. It was working, but I was ever so lonely. Now I don’t feel lonely and things don’t seem so hopeless, and the plan still seems like a good one.”

“That’s not so very different to my plan,” said Kevin, “I was just plugging away, getting the hours in, and hoping that one day things would be easier and better, but I was not very happy. Being with you makes me happy, and looking forward to being with you makes me happy, so OK. Maybe we should just keep doing what we are doing and take our chances when we can?”

The rain eased by the time they reached Derby and Lee took over driving. They stopped at the Super Sainsbury’s for groceries and were having coffee in Kevin’s flat just after two PM. The flat smelled of fresh paint.

Kevin arranged to see his Great Aunt at six that night and Lee suggested that he use her car and drop her at her flat on the way, then bring her fish and chips on the way back and spend the night with her.

Kevin - 25

Great Aunt Sally handed Kevin a little box with her engagement ring in it as soon as he had kissed her cheek.

“I’ve had it cleaned up, valued and insured,” she told him, “It’s all yours now, and it would please me greatly to see it on Lee’s finger.”

Kevin told her that they had just driven down from Barnard Castle and that he’d already asked her to be his partner for life.

“She’s a sensible woman,” said Sally, “She probably won’t want to waste money on a church wedding and reception, but even if it's done in a registry office, I would like very much to be there.”

Kevin told Sally that they weren’t in any great hurry, but said she would be the first person invited when it happened.

By seven forty five, Kevin was at DelhiChips.

They had an early night but didn't get to sleep till after midnight.

When Kevin woke it was after eight and Lee was sewing a cushion cover using a sewing machine.

They went to the Castle Community Kitchen for breakfast and Kevin presented the ring to Lee and asked her to marry him. She went very pale, nodded and couldn't speak. The ring was a little loose on her finger but she couldn't take her eyes off it. She hugged him and cried.

"I was thinking of putting it in with the fish and chips last night," said Kevin with a grin, "Because we first met in DelhiChips, but I thought that was… well, thank you for accepting it."

The waitress congratulated them and agreed to take a photo of them when Lee asked her to. They posed in the big window so that the Castle would be in the background and every body cheered and congratulated them. The manageress sent two slices of their baked cheesecake and told them that their meal was on the house.

They went back to Kevin's flat and then to the Leisure Centre, and Kevin was really impressed at how much Lee's swimming had improved. He got her using his kick-board, just to get her used to it, and showed her some things to work on. They had almost two hours in the pool before it got too crowded.

They went back to Kevin's flat and ended up spending the rest of the day in bed and eventually falling asleep at midnight. The following morning Kevin took the mail that had accumulated, with him to Lee's flat and cooked breakfast for both of them while Lee finished covering the cushion for the new armchair she had upholstered. It looked great and was much more comfortable than the smaller one it had replaced.

Kevin had decided to take the twelve O'Clock train and suggested walking to the community kitchen for an early lunch. Cindy called while they were on their way there. Lee asked Kevin if it was OK to invite Cindy to join them, and he said he was fine with it.

It turned out to be a mistake. Cindy was there before them, and insisted on hugging and kissing Kevin on the cheek when they were

introduced. She looked unkempt and miserable, but smiled and thanked them for meeting her.

Lee asked if she was OK and Cindy shrugged and said she was struggling to cope, but would rather not talk about it. Kevin guessed it was-because he was there.

“I’d much rather hear your news… when did you two get together?”

“Well that depends on which together you mean?” said Lee with a smile, “Kevin gave me this yesterday!” She fetched the ring out of her bag and opened the box to show it to Cindy, “It’s a bit big for my finger, so I’m going to get made smaller at Samuel’s. We haven’t set a date yet…”

“Bloody Hell! Look at the size of that diamond!” Cindy took the ring out of the box and peered at it, “That’s enormous. You didn’t hang about did you?” she grinned at Lee, “I can’t believe it.” She looked at Kevin, “You’re quite a catch aren’t you? I thought she was daft spending all that time trying to find you, but now you’ve gone and asked her to marry you.” She burst out laughing, “And there I was feeling sorry for her… stalking a fella who smiled at her in a chippy.”

Lee got up, “Damn you Cindy… how can… you bitch!” She had gone very pale, and before Cindy could respond she turned and literally ran out of the cafe.

“Well it’s true… she did stalk you,” muttered Cindy defiantly, “Go on, run after her. You had better take this.” She held out the ring.

Kevin took the ring and picked up the box that Lee had dropped on the table. He replaced the ring in it, snapped the box shut and put it in his pocket.

“I thought you were her friend?” he said to Cindy as he hefted his backpack and left.

Lee was nowhere in sight. He tried calling but Lee didn’t pick up. He sent a WhatsApp message asking her to call him, telling her that he didn’t care what Cindy said. He walked to his Flat and tried calling

again, then walked to Lee's Flat, but there was no sign of her there. He walked back to the Community Kitchen, Cindy had gone and there was still no sign of Lee or an answer from her. Kevin cursed Cindy as he set off for the station and sent yet another message to Lee begging her to call him.

Kevin had a long wait for the next train.

Lee - 26

Lee didn't stop running till she got home. She started crying in the car but was dry-eyed when she finally stopped at Walton on the Naze. She had switched off her phone when Kevin called, and couldn't bring herself to switch it on again. She stared unseeing out across the steely grey sea and wished she was dead. For the briefest of moments her life had seemed perfect and now… She wanted to tear Cindy's hair out and bang her face against a wall. Lee moaned and banged her head against the side window. What an idiot she had been.

A man walked across the deserted carpark towards her, his shoulders hunched against wind. He looked as if he wanted to talk to her. Lee started the engine and drove away, reluctantly heading back to Colchester.

Lee hurried, she was late for night shift again.

Kevin was waiting outside the ward.

Lee stared at him, unable to speak.

"Please talk to me Lee?" asked Kevin, he held out both hands, "I love you Lee… don't shut me out, please?"

"You missed your train," Lee managed. She searched his face for any sign of the contempt she deserved, all she saw was pleading.

"I don't care about the train or the job Lee. I care about you and want you in my life. It can get lonely out there."

“Kevin… I didn’t mean… I just wanted to know who you were… I felt something…I wasn’t…”

Kevin stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her, “I am so glad you did… so very, very glad.” He held up his hand, “Take this please, and don’t give up on me?”

Lee took the ring and nodded. Kevin kissed her on the lips.

“I’m going now… back to Barnard Castle. I’ll call you tomorrow afternoon.”

Lee nodded but couldn’t speak past the lump in her throat.

Kevin - 27

Kevin cursed Cindy several times as he struggled to get to Barnard Castle. He arrived there, thoroughly fed up at three AM, and the rain was pouring down.

He sent a message to Lee and climbed into bed and slept badly. Somehow he managed to get to site just before eight. The site manager, foreman and supervisors were still in the canteen getting hot drinks before the site meeting.

Morgan, the QS, nodded in greeting, “Morning Kevin… Looks like you had a rough weekend.”

“Good morning Morgan, more like a rough night last night. I’ve had enough of this rain already.”

“It’ll be dry by midday, mark my words,” said Morgan, “We should just about get done outside before the snow comes.”

The site manager said much the same. The site meeting was mercifully short and by ten AM Kevin had done what he needed to do for the day on site. He headed back to his caravan and spent another hour emailing reports and responding to emails.

Alena Parsons had written a very brief email to inform him that Mike Coulsden had been charged with aiding and abetting arson and criminal damage along with Greg Baines. Both had pleaded guilty and were remanded in prison till sentencing.

Kevin contemplated driving to Active Leisure, then decided against it and went to bed.

He set up a face time video call with Lee at four PM, she looked tired and pale.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Betrayed and embarrassed,” said Lee, “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry Lee, you haven’t done anything wrong. I’m really sorry that Cindy betrayed your trust, that was awful of her.”

“Well… it's mostly my fault for trusting her and for… I really didn’t mean to do any harm.”

“Of course not. I really don’t understand what the fuss is all about. It’s perfectly normal to try and find out more about someone that interests you.”

“I over reacted,” said Lee, “I think it is because I realised then that Cindy hated me. She hated that I’d found happiness, just as she realised that she never really had it.”

“Just don’t let her spoil it for you… for us.”

“I’m trying… so, how was your trip and how are things at the building site?”

“The trip was awful, but things are looking good here. The rain stopped this afternoon and it should stay dry for eight more days. We only need five at the most to finish with all the heavy plant machinery. When the roofing is done we can get on with all the interior works.”

“I read in the papers that two people were charged for burning your car and trying to burn your flat… they both pleaded guilty.”

“Yes. I’ve had a letter from the courts about a compensation hearing. I’ve written to my boss about asking the company lawyer to attend it for me.”

“Let me know if you need to get a lawyer, I know a couple of good local lawyers that I to went to school with.”

“Thanks. As long as the insurance pays out I don’t need any compensation. I’m hoping the insurance companies are going to get their money back from the bastards though. When are your days off? I want to get back to Colchester for a few days, and it would be nice if you were free..”

“My last night shift ends on Saturday morning, and I don’t start night again till the following Sunday night. I’ll probably sleep till midday Saturday.”

“OK, I’ll probably arrive on Friday night, and stay till Wednesday evening. Can you come for dinner on Saturday? I want to make a curry.”

“I love curries; yes please!”

They talked till five PM when Lee said she needed to get ready for work.

There was an email from Alena Parsons telling him that TurnKey Consultant’s lawyer would be happy to act on his behalf, as he was now an associate partner of company. She told him that Ms. Melanie Philips would email him in that regard. She also told him that she would like to bring a prospective client to the Barnard Castle site to meet him and that it would probably be in mid-November. She had attached a letter confirming his acceptance as an Associate Partner in KeyStone Consultants.

Kevin was back to working twelve hour days for the next few days, as the new subcontractors began arriving and working on the site. He began to enjoy the work more too. A lot of the new subcontractors were living in the trailer park. The only difference that made to Kevin was that the launderette was busier, but Amanda, the daughter of the owner/manager of the trailer park was happy to do service washes for him, and told him he would always get the best service.

He was surprised to get a call from an unknown number just before he set off for Colchester on Friday at seven PM. It was Alena Parsons.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry Kevin, so I’ll be brief… I need to meet with you, privately, just for an hour, perhaps two. The sooner the better. The thing is, I can’t come up to you. Can you get here and meet me somewhere discreet?”

“I’m actually just about to set off for Colchester, I should get there around eleven tonight. What is this about?”

“Something I would rather not discuss on the phone, this is my husband’s number, please don’t call it back, and don’t call me. Would you mind meeting me tonight? I live in Coggeshall.”

“Sure… my route goes through Coggeshall. Just tell me where and once I know roughly when…”

“The Royal Oak in Coggeshall … I’ll get there for ten and wait for you in the bar. This is important, please keep it to yourself?”

“The Royal Oak, Coggeshall. I should be there around ten. OK, see you soon.”

Kevin could not think why Alena would want to meet him privately, unless it concerned Mike Coulsden. After digitally signing and returning the papers to Melanie Philips, the TurnKey lawyer, He hadn’t heard any more about the court-case.

He turned the radio on and decided not to worry about it. He made good time and reached Coggeshall just before ten. He decided to fill the Shogun up with diesel before he went to the Royal Oak.

He managed to park near the entrance, there were two coaches in the car park and the large bar was quite full with middle aged people. He spotted Alena before she saw him, she was sat at a corner table, with a glass of red wine and a thick stack of papers that she was working on with a slim silver pencil.

“Hello Alena, you look busy,” he said, “May I join you?”

She looked startled but smiled and stood to give him a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek.”

“Thank you for seeing me,” she said, taking off her glasses and tidying up the papers before putting them into a worn looking leather satchel, “Office politics, I’m afraid. Have you ordered anything? The curries here are very good. You’ll, have to order at the counter. They are a bit busy - bowlers, would you believe. It’s a full house.”

“Can I get something for you?”

“Yes please, the beef curry, no rice, just poppadoms, and a cold pilsner I think. Put it all on my Tab.”

Kevin ordered the same food for himself but asked for a large bottle of water and a coffee to drink.

Alena had cleared away all her papers and finished her wine by the time he got back to the table.

“You must be worried; I’m sorry. There’s nothing awry, I’m just being a manipulative bitch and hoping you will help me. You are an associate partner now, and the company is going to ask you to become a full partner before Christmas… This is confidential, and you could have me removed as managing partner if you went to the other partners with what I am telling you. So, here is how it works: being a partner means having an equal share in the company. You

have earned some shares already, as your annual bonuses, but to be a full partner will cost you about a hundred and twenty five thousand pounds."

She looked at Kevin, who just nodded and didn't say anything. Alena frowned and carried on, "I assume that you do not have that much disposable income, as does the rest of the board… they are counting on it, and they will offer to advance you that money against your bonuses. I want you to decline their offer." She looked expectantly at Kevin.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it is a trap," said Alena, "You will be better off borrowing that money from a bank and keeping your bonuses. Your tax status as a partner will be very different. The partners will want to leverage the loan to control you, mainly to get you to back them against me. I'm not asking you to support me, I'm trying to ensure that you can choose to do what you think is best," She held up her hand, "There is one more thing… Weatherby Holdings want us to project manage the construction of a residential resort in Thetford, it is huge, they want us because we have you. That is the client I am bringing to see you next month. Play hard to get will you? This is all part of the partnership thing, the board will only offer you a partnership if you agree to project manage the Thetford job - that's two years without a break. Drag your heels, don't agree. Don't refuse outright, just sow doubt. You'll be dealing with the board through me… I know this sounds daft, but I know the board and know that they would prefer to have you on the board if you are prepared to stand up to me."

"Why are you doing this?"

Alena laughed and leaned back in her seat, "Because I am the managing partner. I used my husband's money to start the company, I built it up, step by painful step and I am getting tired now, I want to step back and I don't want to be replaced by people whose idea of making money is by fleecing their associates. You are making money for the company, you add value to it. Thanks to that idiot Greg Baines we have managed to get rid of Mike

Coulsden and his Father-in-Law, Dennis Pyle, who lost us a great deal of money by insisting that we employ Mike. I have three more Partners in my sights and once they are gone I hope I can hand over the reigns to someone younger and more capable. I suspect that you have no desire to be a managing partner, and I respect that, but I believe you would be a very effective managing partner, and as such, an asset on the board."

The food arrived then, curtailing further discussion. Alena didn't think she could manage to eat all of her curry and asked Kevin if he could manage half of hers. He agreed readily as he hadn't eaten all day. It was excellent curry too.

"Mike Coulsden got a two year suspended sentence, Greg got five years and a recommendation that he serve at least two years. Apparently he was suspected of involvement in two other fires, at his high school and his parents' home."

Kevin nodded, "I'm just sorry that it happened."

"Don't be… Mike even suggested to Greg that he burn your caravan next, with you in it, and offered to drive him to Barnard Castle! The police found messages on their phones."

Kevin wasn't prepared for that, "Seriously? What have I done to deserve that?"

"You made Mike look bad… as soon as you started at TurnKey, the clients wanted you to do their planning, he really resented you for that," she shrugged, "And then I used you for Barnard Castle, which he would have buggered up. After that things went downhill for him. Greg is just an idiot. Having got his foot in the door, so to speak, he wanted to do as little as possible and coast along. We don't need that type."

Alena excused herself and headed for the toilets. Kevin finished the food and decided against more coffee. He wasn't sure about Alena's manipulations but felt obligated to her and trusted her. He could probably raise eighty thousand pounds easily enough without

borrowing. He had savings and some money held in a Trust fund that he could draw on, but he would get financial advice. His Great Aunt Sally had introduced him to a financial guru who had saved him a great deal of money during his move from Chichester to Colchester. He had intended to ask Kemal's advice after his promotion to project manager but just hadn't got round to it.

When Alena returned she asked him to consider what she had said, and keep it to himself. She picked up her coat and bag and kissed him on the cheek, saying her husband was waiting outside for her and in a hurry to get back to watching cricket. Kevin walked out with her and held open the car door for her. It was a Bentley, and a large man behind the steering wheel was watching cricket on a dashboard display the size of a small TV. He greeted Kevin politely but his attention was on the cricket.

An hour later Kevin was lying in bed wide awake and wondering if he would be able to sleep. He woke at eight and went to the Community Kitchen for breakfast. He wondered if he would see Cindy there again. He hoped not.

By four PM he had cleaned the flat, written to Kemal Aklan, the financial guru, and written to the insurance company rejecting the offer of nine thousand pounds for his Saab and sending them a copy of the last valuation report that he had sent them with his annual renewal fee in January, showing it to be valued at twenty three thousand pounds and reminding them that he had paid the insurance premium based on that price. He copied the email to Melanie Philips. He had also made a beef curry, and had stocked up with cider and some red and white wine.

Lee - 28

Lee arrived on an old fashioned bicycle and explained that her car was in for a service and she was thinking of trading it in.

"The curry smells wonderful!" she said as soon as she entered the flat.

“When do you want to eat?” asked Kevin, “Everything is ready.”

“I’m starving,” said Lee, cautiously giving him a hug.

“I really missed you,” said Kevin, lifting her off her feet and spinning around.

Lee laughed, and felt more relieved than she could express. She kissed him hard on the lips and hung on to him till her head stopped spinning.

Lee wanted to know what was happening at the building site and what his plans were for his visit. When he told her that he wanted to speak to Kemal about his finances, she wanted to know more about Kemal.

“Its important to make your money work for you,” she said, “Dad was an accountant, and taught me to make the most of every penny. I’m surprised that so many people get into debt, even when they’re paid really well.”

“I’m not very clever about money,” said Kevin, “I have a managed Trust fund, which I can borrow from, and I have a Halifax savings account and a Nat West Current account, but I’m told my tax status changes now that I’ve been promoted and been made an associate Partner.”

Lee was wary of giving financial advice since Cindy had blamed her after she had lost money investing in stocks. Cindy had not done what Lee had advised and spread out her investments to balance out the risks, and she had also invested money that she could not afford to lose. That had been when they were both in their early twenties, and since then, Cindy, who earned twice as much as Lee when she was an hospital administrator, was always broke.

“Have you spoken to Cindy recently?” asked Kevin.

Lee shook her head, “No… she left a card and a muffin at the nursing station for me. Her way of saying sorry. She’s been on sick

leave and someone said she's gone to stay with her parents in Frinton."

"Is she a nurse too?"

"No, she started doing a nursing degree, but switched to hospital administration. She's not a bad person… just a bit spoiled I think. Her mum and dad had money and gave her everything she wanted."

"Got any plans for the next few days?"

"Only to spend as much time with you as possible."

"It's Sally's eighty fourth birthday tomorrow… I would like to take her to the Zoo and out for lunch… would you come with us?"

"I'd love to. I wish you'd told me earlier so I could have found a nice card."

"You can put your name on the card I got, and I bought some of the chocolates she likes, for you to give to her. She doesn't like things and clutter, but she likes outings and seeing animals and she really likes eating out. I thought we could go to the Royal Oak at Coggeshall for lunch."

"What time?"

Kevin smiled "That will be for her to decide, I'll call her now and ask."

They collected Great Aunt Sally at nine the next morning. The rain held off till after they reached Coggeshall. Sally was delighted with her day and very pleased to see the ring on Lee's finger. She fell asleep in the car on the way back to St. Osyth, and snored very loudly and contentedly.

On Monday, Kevin spent three hours with Kemal before meeting Lee for lunch at Cafe Med. He looked exhausted and said he had a stinking headache, but seemed happy enough. He showed Lee the

notes Kemal had given him and she said it looked like sound advice. After lunch he went with Lee to look at a Fiat Qubo in Greenstead. Kevin liked the look of the vehicle and got himself grubby giving it a thorough going over. The seller was interested in Lee's Honda Fit, and while he took it for a quick test drive, Kevin told Lee what he thought of the Qubo. He left her to haggle with the seller and ended up driving it back to Colchester hospital, where Lee sold her Honda to one of the hospital maintenance staff. Lee then drove the Qubo to a house behind Delhi Chips and left the car with Anand's cousin, Jay, who promised to give it a thorough check up and full service. They walked back to Kevin's flat and got cleaned up before spending the rest of the afternoon and all night in bed.

Lee spent most of Tuesday morning sorting out the insurance change of ownership details for the Fiat Qubo and Honda Fit, leaving Kevin at home to work through the papers he had got from Kemal.

They went to the Bottled Crab for dinner - it was a theme night of sorts with seventies music. Kevin was surprised at how much of it he actually knew, and even more surprised when Lee decided to dance… she was really good, and managed to get him to dance as well. They had a really good evening and stayed till midnight. They bumped into Louise and Marissa, who had just got out of a taxi and were invited to their flat. They had just come back from a birthday party in Chelmsford. Lee felt comfortable with them immediately, and Marissa said she had seen them walking by the Hythe together a few weeks earlier. They had met with the cycling nurse that Lee had told Kevin about but had not made any training arrangements.

They didn't stay long as both Louise and Marissa had work the next day.

It was raining hard by the time they reached Kevin's flat, and still raining when Lee got up early to make coffee. She enjoyed watching Kevin wake up in the mornings. They made bacon and scrambled eggs for breakfast and then went back to bed,

They lunched on the left overs in the fridge, then had a walk around Castle park and coffee in the community kitchen. At six, Kevin drove Lee back to her flat and then set off for Barnard Castle. Bad weather and traffic delays kept him on the road for seven hours.

Kevin - 29

Kevin woke to a clear frosty morning. His body was tired and he was really quite sore between his big toes, but otherwise he was feeling great and looking forward to getting back to work.

Things were going well on site. The Denby and Essam board of Directors arrived early on Friday morning and were very complimentary. One of the younger directors; Kevin could not recall his name or having met him before, asked Kevin to show him the planning software he was using. Kevin spent half an hour demonstrating features of MicroPlanner XPert to him, and was then asked to join all of the Directors and site management team for dinner that evening at the Three Horse Shoes Hotel.

It was a very boozy dinner, and Kevin was surprised when he was asked to sit with the two most senior directors and the Site Manager. He had met Charles Denby and Michael Essam before, the site manager, Fred Morely, seemed quite nervous, but Charles and Michael were friendly and good company. Kevin learned that the young director he had shown the planning software to was Peter, the youngest son of Michael Essam and had only just joined the company after working in Australia for a year. Peter had told them that critical path planning, properly done, was the key to successful projects. Fred Morely came out of his shell and said that he agreed, and insisted that Kevin's planning had helped him tremendously. Kevin stuck to rum, which he knew he would regret, as the hangovers it gave him were dreadful, but he also knew he could keep his head while drinking rum. He also had a lot of coffee. Charles and Michael were very unsteady when they finally decided to head for their rooms. Fred patted Kevin on the shoulder in a rare gesture of familiarity, "You did well, young'un," He said quietly before excusing himself.

Kevin shared a taxi with Harry and Bill, the Electrical and Plumbing contract managers, who both lived at the caravan park. Harry was was well drunk and passed out in the taxi. Bill, a tall, and very quiet man from Redcar, helped Kevin get Harry to his caravan.

Kevin was on site early, and was surprised when Peter Essam appeared around nine. He seemed cheerful and friendly and accompanied him in his rounds chatting cheerfully while Kevin checked on progress and completed his update sheets.

Fred Morely was in the site office when Kevin returned to process the updates. He looked unphased by the heavy night's drinking and greeted Kevin and Peter cheerfully and set off with Peter to get a coffee in the canteen, leaving Kevin to put the updates into his computer.

Kevin was feeling the dull throb of a hangover headache by the time he finished doing the updates. He pencilled the changes onto the Site Office PERT, then walked over to the canteen and got a coffee before making the changes to the canteen PERT. Bill came and studied the PERT while he was updating it and nodded his usual quiet greeting to Kevin. He didn't see Harry.

The cold, dry weather continued and the site progressed steadily. There were a few setbacks, some thefts, a bit of vandalism and a small fire caused by the use of substandard wiring which set the project back by almost two weeks. Harry's company Yeoman Electrical was removed from site and replaced by Dalectrical. Their manager, a feisty Scott, another Bill, made good progress. He sat down with Kevin and asked him what he had to do to catch up and ended up getting his staff to work three eight hour shifts a day for four weeks to make up the lost time.

Alena visited with her husband and Cynthia and Michael Weatherby. They arrived at midday on the seventeenth of November, Kevin's birthday, in Alena's husband's Bentley.

Alena's husband introduced himself simply as Jim, he was huge. Cynthia and Michael Weatherby looked a little older than Kevin. She was very beautiful, in a sharp and angular way, and had an accent

and voice that reminded Kevin of Lize Ducet, the BBC's War Correspondent. Michael Weatherby sounded very English, and seemed reserved. Cynthia did most of the talking.

They asked Fred Morely if they could have a tour of the site. By the way he answered, Kevin guessed that it had already been agreed with him. He accompanied them, and seemed very comfortable answering questions. Jim hardly said a word, but listened attentively. Michael Weatherby seemed distracted and hardly asked any questions. By three PM Cynthia had seen enough and they returned to the site office. Alena took Kevin aside and asked him if he could bring his laptop to the canteen and go through some "what if" scenarios with her.

As soon as they were in the canteen she asked him if he had thought about the discussion they'd had in the Royal Oak.

Kevin nodded, "Yes of course," he said.

"Good, the Weatherbys are an odd couple, but they are determined to build their resort and they really mean to get it done exactly the way they want it done. Jim knows them well and says they are smart operators. They will be questioning Fred about you now. Are you nervous?"

"Not really, should I be?"

Alena laughed delightedly, "Well, I bloody well am. Denby and Essam want us to do a project for them in Hertfordshire. Fred might try and see them off."

Kevin shrugged, "I've never found worrying to be much help with anything."

"You are right. Well, you might as well book us in to a restaurant. We are staying at the Old Well Inn, but I'd rather eat somewhere else. Any suggestions?"

"The Stables," said Kevin, he fetched out his phone and reserved a table at seven.

Michael Weatherby came into the canteen and asked Kevin if he could show him the computer programme he used to do the project plan. Kevin pulled up the programme and spent the next twenty minutes showing how it could and should be used. Michael asked some very intelligent questions and was clearly intrigued and impressed by the software. By the time he was satisfied, his wife and Jim were in the canteen, looking at the PERT and discussing it with Alena. Kevin went with them to the Old Well and waited in the lounge while they readied themselves for supper.

The supper at the Stables was actually very pleasant. Kevin had switched his phone off after sending a message to Lee saying he was going out to supper with his boss, her husband and some clients. Jim was a good raconteur and kept them entertained with amusing stories. After their main course, Alena informed them that it was Kevin's birthday and they all congratulated him and insisted on toasting his birthday. Kevin stuck to rum again, groaning inwardly as the night seemed to drag on. After desert they had Irish coffee and Cynthia turned her attention on Kevin.

"Well Kevin, we seem to have monopolised your birthday, for which I apologise, but we came here to learn about you. I am sure you are aware that we want to build a resort in Thetford, but it isn't just a resort, we want it to be perfect and we can't afford to make any mistakes. The plans have been drawn, the main contractor has been chosen. We believe we will be ready to start in late April or early May of next year…. what we want now is a project plan and a project manager that we can trust, because we cannot be here for most of the build. Can you do it for us?"

"You have already spent some time looking at the PERT for Denby and Essam project," Kevin said carefully, "It is not due to be finished until June the fifth, and things can go awry… I cannot start on another project before this job is finished."

"Fred Morely says you have pulled the completion date forward by a little over six weeks since you started here in July. He thinks you can probably bring it forward even more."

Kevin shook his head, “I’ve cut out every ounce of slack I could find in the plan. The only way I can see to do things faster is to allocate more resources, and that will push the cost up. Denby and Essam would have to approve the expenditure.”

“How much more will it cost?” asked her husband.

“Give me a target completion date, and half a day and I will give you an estimate based on current projections, the final figure will depend on what the contractors will charge.”

“The thirty first of March,” said Cynthia immediately, “Please let us have your estimate as soon as possible?”

Kevin nodded.

“Fred mentioned that Denby and Essam were probably considering approaching you with an offer of employment, and might have even done so already,” said Cynthia, “Are you open to discussions on the subject?”

“Not really,” said Kevin, “I’m happy with TurnKey and uncomfortable about playing that sort of game.”

Jim laughed out loud, “I warned you Cinny,” he said, “Well said Kevin… I think we have time for one more Irish Coffee and then I, for one, am going to bed.”

“I am sorry Kevin,” said Cynthia, “I thought… well, never mind. You will still do the estimate for us please?”

“Yes of course,” said Kevin. He had already done it, after a fashion though not in absolute detail. He had done such projections as a matter of course. Suddenly he had had enough. “Actually, it is time I called a taxi. Thank you for an excellent dinner. Goodnight.” He stood. “Will you be coming to site tomorrow?”

“No, I don’t think there is any need, but you did say it would take you half a day… can you bring us the estimate tomorrow evening, at the Old Well?” asked Cynthia.

Kevin looked at Alena, who nodded, before he answered and said yes.

Alena walked with him to the door and thanked him. She seemed pleased.

Kevin forgot to switch his phone back on and woke after seven. He sent a message to Fred saying he was working on a projection and would not come to site for a few hours. He drove to Active Leisure and had half an hour in the pool before returning to his caravan and getting on with the project plan. At two he emailed the estimate to Alena and called her to say he had done so, then walked to site.

Fred was in the canteen when Kevin went in to get some coffee. They walked back to the site office together, “So, did they make you an offer you can’t refuse?” asked Fred.

“No, they asked me how much more it would cost to be done here by the end of March,” Kevin told him, “One million eight hundred thousand pounds, or thereabouts, and that doesn't include any bonus payments. I’ve sent you a copy. Do you think Denby and Essam will agree?”

Fred laughed, “They’ll do whatever Jim tells them,” he said. Kevin didn’t understand, and Fred gripped his shoulder, “You do know who Jim is?”

“Alena Parson’s husband?” said Kevin.

“Aye… Jim Short… Lord James, the Earl of Gloucester, owner of Ipswich and Chelmsford football clubs and one of the richest men in England.”

“Do you know the Weatherbys?” asked Kevin

Fred shook his head, “Only that they are filthy rich and that he is a royal of sorts, but the money comes from her side… she is Canadian.”

Kevin’s phone buzzed while he was printing the updated PERT, a message from Alena asking him to join them for afternoon tea at four PM at the Old Well to discuss the projections. He got there fifteen minutes early. Alena and her husband were sat in the lounge talking quietly. Alena waved him over and invited him to sit. Jim stood up and shook his hand.

“Michael and Cynthia will be along soon,” said Alena patting the seat next to her, “Sit here so I can keep an eye on her.”

“How certain are you of the projections?” asked Jim.

“ I am confidant that the work can be done on time for that amount,” said Kevin, but things can go wrong, as in anything.”

“Did we ruin your birthday celebration?” asked Alena.

Kevin smiled, “Not at all… I was not going to celebrate it at all and ended up having a rather nice dinner with some interesting people.”

Cynthia and Michael arrived, sweaty in running gear and said they would join them after they had showered and changed.

They were quick, and almost exactly at four PM, Cynthia started asking Kevin how he arrived at the figures he had come up with. She was sharp, and thorough. By five PM she was satisfied and thanked him politely. Alena walked to the car park with Kevin and thanked him. When he asked her what to expect she shrugged and said she was not sure, but said that she had asked for the building plans and bills of materials and quantities for the Thetford Resort and would forward them to him as soon as she had them.

“You will need a team for Thetford. I’m going to ask Louise to work with you on this, who would you like from planning?”

“I don’t get overtime as an associate partner do I?”

Alena shook her head, “No, sorry.”

“That’s not really on is it?” said Kevin, “I’m going to burn out!”

“If you need help ask for it.” said Alena, “Let them do the overtime… you get bigger bonuses.”

“I’ll take whoever will work the overtime… they are going to be doing fifty hour weeks at a minimum.”

“OK… I’ll get back to you… I think the newest… Martha, might be interested. She doesn’t have family and is trying to save up for a deposit on a flat. I don’t think you have met her.”

Kevin didn’t know what to think as he drove back to the caravan park, but decided to take things as they arrived.

There was a message from Lee, wishing him a belated Happy Birthday and saying she had only just learned that it had been his birthday from his Great Aunt Sally, who she had visited earlier in the day.

He messaged back and apologised for not calling her earlier, explaining that work had got in the way again. He knew she would not see the message until she had completed her nightshift.

Kevin got an email from the contract’s manager at KeyStone the next day, copied to Alena, asking him to read, sign and return a contract attached, committing to starting work on a two year project in Thetford due to begin in April the following year. Kevin read the contract and wrote back, copying Alena, saying he was unable to sign the contract as he was still required to complete the work at Barnard Castle, which was not due completion till June, and reminding them that he was due five weeks of leave following completion of the Barnard Castle work.

Kevin felt surprisingly calm, now that the nonsense had started. He got an almost immediate response from the contract’s manager, saying that Kevin’s negative response was disappointing, especially

in light of the Company's recent elevation of him to the position of Associate Partner.

Kevin wrote back to say that he was sorry to have disappointed, adding that being an associate partner meant that he was no longer being paid overtime, despite working 70 plus hour weeks, and that he was not prepared to jeopardise the bonus he now needed to earn at Barnard Castle to make up for the lost overtime payments. He also said that it would not be in his or the company's interests to jeopardise his health further by getting stressed out at this critical phase of the works.

Apart from Fred Morely, the site manager, becoming more noticeably friendly, very little seemed to have change at the site. Nobody mentioned the proposal that Kevin had put forward to complete earlier.

Three days later Kevin received an email from the TurnKey Consultants company secretary telling him that the board of partners would like to have a virtual meeting with him, giving some dates and asking him to confirm when he could manage. There was a business suite at the Three Horse Shoes Hotel in Barnard Castle that had suitable video conferencing facilities. Kevin replied saying he could attend at a time and date of their choosing and asked if he needed to prepare anything for the meeting. He got an almost immediate response saying that it would not be necessary to prepare anything and that the board had agreed on the venue's earliest available date, which was at three PM the following day. Kevin had twenty four hours to go.

He printed off a copy of the agreements he had signed regarding bonuses and overtime for Barnard Castle, and scanned and printed the relevant sections about overtime and bonus payments from the policy document on Associate Partners and spent some time reading through it all and highlighting sections and adding notes to the margins.

Fred was still in the site office, dealing with a delivery driver who had tried to get a short delivery signed off by offering cash to the subcontractor taking the delivery. Kevin fetched a mug of tea from

the canteen and put it on Fred's desk, before adding some notes to the PERT on the wall until the driver and the subcontractor left.

"Thanks for the tea," said Fred taking a sip and sighing, "It never ends does it?"

"We'd be out of a job if it did," said Kevin, "I read that Google wants to replace all its warehouse staff with AI systems to reduce shrinkage, but all that will happen is smarter coders will hack the AI systems to steal for them."

Fred laughed, "Aye, reckon you're right there."

"Have you had anything back from the bosses about that proposal I did to bring back completion to March?"

"Yes, but it wasn't positive… sorry, the plan's good but they don't want to spend another one point eight million. Between you and me, they'd be happy to open the resort in time for the May bank holiday, but no-one's going to come here in April."

"That makes sense to me, and between you and me, that's doable without spending a lot more. I'll work on a plan over the weekend - for your eyes only… you can decide whether to push it up the line."

"Do you really think you can shave another month off the completion date without more money?"

"It will cost, but not much… The idea came to me last night… after I'd done the last review. I'll work on it tonight."

"Can I ask you… and I won't take offence if you don't want to answer… has young Essam made you an offer?"

"No offers… Alena told me that she expected me to be approached, but Charles and Michael are pretty shrewd judges of character. I wouldn't trust them if they made an offer, and they wouldn't trust me if I accepted. Besides, I'm saving them money as it is."

“Charles and Michael are old school and straight, but Peter’s a different story,” said Fred, frowning, “Watch out for him.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll go and work on that plan now. See you tomorrow Fred.”

Kevin felt excited, the solutions had started to fall into place while he was talking to Fred, and by the time he got back to his caravan, he was certain it could be done. He called Lee as soon as he got to the caravan, and spent half an hour video chatting with her. She noticed that he was upbeat and he told her that he had a plan that he was about to get working on that might earn him a bigger bonus. Lee wished him luck with that.

Kevin was done just after midnight. He checked everything twice before closing down his computer. He was still too engaged with the plan to sleep so he went for a long walk. It was bitterly cold, but bright and dry out. He saw a pair of foxes and stopped to help an elderly couple change a tyre, skinning a knuckle in the process. He overslept, and sent a message to Fred saying he would be in mid-morning.

He drove to Barnard Castle and parked in the Morrison’s car park but went to Thelma’s Bakery for breakfast and checked through his project plan again, then wrote a proposal, suggesting the changes and pointing out that the costs were minimal, and that most contractors would more than recover the costs by the increased early completion bonuses they would earn. He emailed the proposal to Fred, then ordered another coffee and a double portion of egg bacon and sausage, telling the waitress that he was really hungry.

It was eleven thirty when Kevin got back to site and the Site-office was full to bursting. Fred was taking questions from the subcontractor and section managers and answering each one patiently and clearly. It seemed that Kevin’s planned changes had already been accepted. There were a few sceptics, but Fred seemed confident and by twelve they were all gone.

Fred grinned at Kevin, “You’ve gone and done it young’un. Charles and Michael are tickled pink. You’ll be hearing from them soon enough I reckon. You’d best get new PERTs up quick.”

Kevin was shown to a small video conference room on the third floor of the Three Horse Shoes, there was a sideboard with tea and coffee and a large tray of sandwiches, enough for half a dozen hungry people.

Kevin sat at the table and got his papers and laptop ready, wondering if anyone else was going to join him. There were six chairs around the conference table. At thee PM exactly, the console lit up and a face appeared on the screen, a pretty young woman that Kevin didn't recognise.

She smiled and addressed him as Mr. Coombes and then her face was replaced by twelve small screens, three of which were empty. He recognised Alena and was pleased to see that there was a name on each screen. Alena started speaking and her screen moved to the middle, growing in size as the others grew smaller.

She welcomed them all and thanked them for being prompt. She sounded business-like and slightly impatient.

“Who would like to begin?” she asked.

Two voices and then Alena’s as another face took centre screen and grew in size, replacing Alena’s. The name was Joseph Weller.

“Thank you Alena,” Mr. Weller cleared his throat, “Mr. Coombes, let me start by thanking you for the excellent work you are doing at the Denby and Essam project in Yorkshire…” he paused and Kevin nodded his head but said nothing. Weller continued, “We are all aware of your contribution and commitment to getting the project completed on time, but we are also mindful of the fact that a larger and potentially more profitable project is due to start in April of next year and we would very much like to have you on board for that.”

Kevin saw that his image was now centred and enlarged on the screen, and assumed he was required to answer.

“That is very flattering, thank you,” he said, “As much as I would like to be involved in the Thetford project, I am obliged by the agreement between TurnKey Consultants and Denby and Essam to work exclusively on the Barnard Castle project until completion. I was required to sign an agreement to that effect when I was assigned to the project as a planner, and again as the project manager and more recently when I was made an Associate Partner. I am restrained by the agreements that were imposed by the company.”

Kevin sat back, but his face remained front and centre on the screen.

Alena spoke, “Malcolm, I think you should respond; Mr. Coombes has a valid point there.”

Kevin’s box was replaced by that of a younger looking spectacled man, who looked irked. Malcolm Dearbourne.

“There are… Sorry, let me start again,” said Dearbourne, his head was down and he seemed to be leafing through a document. He smiled and looked up, “You were a project manager before you came to TurnKey Consultants, working in Sussex and Hampshire, I believe?”

“Yes,” Kevin nodded.

“And you worked through the pandemic I believe, it says here that you managed three sites, the Gosport convention centre build, the Shoreham Parade Hotel renovation and the construction of Andrey Kress… something’s home in UpMarden.”

“Yes, that is correct,” said Kevin.

“These were big projects, and I am assuming you had to work remotely because of Covid restrictions, but they were completed satisfactorily were they not?”

“They were completed, but the Kresselovytz mansion was delayed six months, and yes, I did all of those sites remotely.”

“Why was that?” asked a voice.

“Can you be more specific?” asked Kevin when nobody spoke for a while.

“What caused the delay to the mansion?”

“Thank you. Well, a number of things… Mr. Kresselovytz held a number of contractors hostage when they refused to pull down a listed building on the site. The Sussex Fire Brigade said that their approval for the building had been acquired illegally and I was prevented from working on the project for two weeks.”

“How were you prevented from working on the project?” Alena’s voice.

“A senior manager at the company pulled me off the project,” said Kevin carefully, “The decision was reversed two weeks later.”

“Can we get back on topic?” asked an irritated sounding male voice.

“What is preventing you from working remotely on the Denby and Essam project while initiating the Wea … the Thetford Project, Mr. Coombes?” asked Dearbourne.

“Please call me Kevin?” asked Kevin, “The agreements prevent me.” He picked up a piece of paper and held it in view before continuing, “I quote… you are required to work exclusively on the Denby and Essam Riverview Resort until completion. It seems pretty clear to me.” Kevin picked up another piece of paper, “You prepared the agreement… at least it says prepared by M. Dearbourne followed by a bunch of legal qualifications and the words “Senior Partner” on the agreement.”

“I don’t think you understand what is at stake here… Kevin,” the irritated man. Kevin saw that he was Charles Wright, as his face filled the screen, “The company simply can not afford to lose the

Thetford Resort Project. You are not being asked to do anything unethical, we just want you to step up and do a little bit extra to help make it happen."

"A little bit more than the seventy plus hours a week that I am already doing? You aren't paying me for those hours Mr. Wright and now you are asking me to jeopardise my completion bonus and risk being dismissed for not adhering to the agreements you asked me to sign, for another project that will mean me working more seventy plus hour weeks with no vacations for two years before getting that completion bonus? As for the ethics of what you are asking, perhaps you could invite Charles Denby and Michael Essam to join this video conference… If they agree to me working their project remotely while getting the Thetford Project started, it will be a lot easier for you to provide me with a revised agreement."

Alena cut in then, "Nobody is questioning your integrity Kevin, and we are all very aware of the good work you have done. Unfortunately we are faced with a dilemma. You have met the Weatherbys, and you must be aware by now that they want you to plan and manage their project and they want to start in April. That means getting started on the planning now. We cannot wait until the Barnard Castle project ends in June. Denby and Essam have rejected the proposal to complete in March, they are happy enough to complete at the end of June."

"The Barnard Castle project should end in the last week of April," said Kevin, "I submitted the updated plan earlier today."

They all started speaking at once and Alena raised her voice and muted the sound. Kevin watched but could not hear what was being said. After a few minutes, during which Kevin managed to grab himself a bottle of water and plate of sandwiches, Alena's voice again.

"Are you saying that Denby and Essam have agreed to pay for more resources?"

Kevin struggled to swallow and gulped some water before answering, "No… sorry," he coughed, "No, I managed to narrow

things down and saved five weeks, the contractors will have to pay their staff more overtime, but that will be more than offset by the early completion bonus."

"Can you excuse us for a while please Kevin?" asked Alena, "Twenty minutes… perhaps half an hour would be better?" The screen went blank before Kevin managed to answer.

He opened his iPad and saw that he just might catch Lee before she needed to get ready for work.

She asked him where he was and seemed impressed when he told her he was taking a break from a conference call with the company partners. They were still chatting when the screen lit up. Kevin said a hasty goodby and ended the FaceTime chat.

"Let me start by thanking you Kevin," said Alena, "We are all very pleased at the early completion bonus the company will be receiving. We think we have a solution, and I urge you think carefully before responding to what Malcolm has to say."

Kevin nodded and waited patiently while Malcolm Dearbourne studied something on the desk in front of him. He looked up and smiled… "As a full partner in the company, you would not be subject to the same restrictions as an associate … Kevin. Your monthly earnings would significantly improve as would your share of bonuses… I cannot give you an exact figure at this time, but your monthly stipend would be almost treble, before taxes. I believe that we can persuade Denby and Essam to allow us to provide an onsite project manager under your direct supervision." He looked expectantly at Kevin.

Kevin gazed back and didn't respond until Alena asked him to.

"Kevin… we are offering you a full partnership. What do you have to say?"

"Er… Well, I don't actually know what that entails. So sorry, I wasn't prepared for this. Perhaps you could let me have a copy of the Articles of Association and any guidelines for Partners that I can

study? I also do not understand how this absolves the company or me from our obligations to Denby and Essam?"

"Simply put, as a full Partner, you would no longer be an employee of the company and therefore no longer subject to the agreements you signed or were subject to as an employee," said Dearbourne.

Kevin was not convinced, but did not argue, "Thank you. If you let me have the Articles of Association, Guidelines for Partners and copies of whatever documents that you want me to sign, I will go through them and get back to you when I have a better understanding of what I am agreeing to?"

"I can have the documents sent up to you… it will take a few days."

"I can collect them from Marks Tey tomorrow morning," said Kevin, "I will drive down tonight."

That caused a flurry of muttering which ended when Alena told him she would make sure everything was ready for him by nine AM, then thanked everybody and ended the call.

Kevin went down to reception and asked if he could have a container to take some sandwiches home in, then fetched his flask from the car, rinsed it and filled it with coffee from the pot. He ate a couple of sandwiches and then filled the brown cardboard box with sandwiches and left.

There was a hamper for him at the Caravan Park reception from Denby and Essam, containing a selection of Yorkshire Cheeses and a bottle of Ron Zacapa. There was a card with one word in it, "Thankyou,"

He put the hamper in the Shogun, then cleared out the perishables in the fridge and carried them to Bill's caravan and asked if he wanted them. Bill thanked him and nodded when Kevin said he would be away for a few days.

Kevin sent a voice message to Fred saying he was going to be away for at least three days and would update the project and email it to him every night till he was back.

The drive south went smoothly and Kevin was in his bed and fast asleep before eleven.

He was at the office by seven AM and was leaving just as Louise arrived at nine thirty. She had a support bandage around her left wrist.

“Who’d you punch?” asked Kevin before she spoke.

“I fell, like an idiot,” said Louise making a face, “What are you doing here?”

“Just leaving,” said Kevin, holding up a large manilla envelope covered in red confidential stamps, “Fetched some papers. I’ll be in Colchester at least a couple more days, depending on what’s in here.”

“Great … can we meet up for a bite with Marissa and Lee maybe?” Call me when you know what you are doing?”

Kevin pulled into a Little Chef as traffic was snarled up. He had a coffee and went through the papers, then called Kemal and agreed to see him at eleven thirty.

Kemal didn’t waste time. Using a yellow highlighter and a propellor pencil he went through everything before asking Kevin questions. Then he added a few more notes and handed the papers back to Kevin.

“It’s all there… read it all through before you leave my office so I can deal with any questions. Do you want coffee… I’m going to get for myself?”

Kevin went through all of the documents again and thanked Kemal when he returned with the coffee. Kemal told him to make copies of everything after he had signed them, and of all correspondence.

“I don’t like partnerships Kevin, the only partner you should have is the one that wears your ring,” said Kemal, tapping his wedding ring. Nine partners in a such a diverse company…” he shrugged, “How much do you know about mining, chemical engineering and security? Sure… you can make money but you could lose everything if one partner goes rogue. As for audited accounts… pfft! I don’t trust auditors. Let me see the last audited accounts before you give them a penny?”

Kevin spent an hour in the pool before walking to Lee’s flat. She was up and upholstering another armchair in her lock up. She put everything away and refused to let Kevin kiss her till she had showered and brushed her teeth. He made coffee for them both and cheese on toast for Lee while she showered. He told her his news while they walked to the hospital.

Lee agreed with Kemal about partnerships and auditors, saying her dad had said they same thing. She asked if she could sleep at his flat the next morning.

“Only if you let me ravage you first,” he told her.

Kevin took the left over sandwiches with him and walked around the castle park feeding the birds and a very hungry dog whose owner apologised profusely, saying her dog, a large labrador pup, was a walking dustbin.

That evening Kevin wrote to Alena, saying that he needed more information about the company and asked to see the audited accounts.

He spent a couple of hours updating the project plan for Barnard Castle them emailed it to Fred. He had a number of questions for some of the sub-contractors, and sent messages, voice mails and emails to each of them, depending on their likes and dislikes, then had another walk around Castle Park before going to bed.

He woke when Lee slipped naked into his bed and wrapped herself around him.

“I got off early,” she said grinning. “I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Kevin reluctantly extracted himself from the bed tangle at around nine and showered. He let himself out of the flat and went to the Community Kitchen and checked his email while he waited for breakfast. He forwarded the accounts to Kemal and then enjoyed his breakfast before dealing with the Barnard Castle emails and messages. He was sorely tempted to go back to his flat and climb into bed with Lee, but decided that as much as she might enjoy being woken up with a good rogering, she needed her sleep and he could enjoy looking forward to waking her later.

He messaged Melanie Phillips and asked if she had managed to get any more money out of Guardian Royal Exchange for his Saab, then returned his laptop to the flat before going out for another walk.

Melanie called him just as he reached the Culver Centre where a brass band was playing Christmas carols. He couldn’t hear what Melanie was saying and ended the call, messaging to say he would call from a quieter spot. She picked up straight away and apologised, saying she had just returned from a vacation. She told him that she had not yet had a response from the Insurance company, and had asked for the insured value of the car, plus the cost of hiring a similar vehicle up to and including date of actual payment.

“They will pay, eventually,” she said, “They are just doing what insurance companies do… I’ll put a bit more pressure on.”

Lee was up and dressed when Kevin returned to his flat, and told him she had started her period, and wasn’t feeling up to sex. They went to Cafe Med to eat and then walked to the hospital. She told him that Cindy had lost her baby, and had applied to get her job back at the hospital. Lee thought that she might have HIV, but Cindy would not talk about it. Lee had heard from one of the other nurses that Cindy’s boyfriend, Jason, had full blown AIDS and had been moved to a secure hospital ward in Chelmsford with a lung and liver infection.

Lee - 30

Lee was worried about Kevin. He had been very quiet and was clearly troubled about the partnership offer and complications with his work. She was also annoyed at the timing of her period, starting just as she finished nights and while Kevin was in Colchester.

Things had gone well for her otherwise. She did feel bad for Cindy, but knew that wouldn't do her or Cindy any good. Part of her hoped the hospital would turn Cindy's job application down, but she knew that would do Cindy a lot of damage. The new rhinoplasty surgeon, Mr. Ranjbar was good though, Lee made a mental note to tell Kevin, though she didn't think he needed to fix his nose. She remembered, just as she was about to turn her phone off and put it in her locker, that she had agreed to take Sally to the Bottled Crab for their Poetry Reading Dinner the following evening. She quickly messaged Kevin to tell him, then switched off her phone.

Kevin - 31

Kevin called Louise as soon as he had read Lee's message, and Louise said she would ask Marissa to book a table. Kevin walked back to his flat and spent the evening looking at the architectural plans for the Thetford resort. He would have preferred to have them in print form, but only had an A4 printer at home. It was a massive and very impressive project. He had never heard of the Architects, but the Bills of quantities and materials looked comprehensive and well done and they had even included a Gantt Chart. He updated and emailed the Barnard Castle plan to Fred and sent out more update requests and clarifications before walking to the community kitchen and having a bowl of thick onion soup.

He slept badly that night and was up and struggling with acid when Lee got back from work. She took the anti-acid tablets away from him and gave him a glass of vinegar and water to drink. Kevin protested but Lee asked him to trust her. The pain was gone in seconds and didn't come back. Lee asked him what was troubling him and listened quietly while he explained that he did not like the

feeling of being manipulated by Alena and the partners and wasn't sure what to do about it.

Lee asked him to make coffee while she showered, then walked with him to the community kitchen where they had more coffee and breakfast.

"So," Lee asked him when their breakfast had been served, "What would you like to happen with your work. If you could make it exactly the way you wanted it… what would you be doing?"

"I'd be a construction project manager," said Kevin after a long while, "I like being part of the projects I work on… I can do project plans as well, but it's nice to be part of the project… I like building sites and being part of that. I do not like office politics."

"Well there's always politics in every job, at every level," said Lee, "But I know what you mean. I could not work in the hospital administration, though there's a few nurses that have gone that route. So what you have to figure out is how to get from where you are, to where you want to be. Any ideas?"

"Where I want to be is in bed with you," said Kevin, "But OK, as an associate partner I am basically a well paid employee with shares who can't earn overtime and gets quarterly dividends based on his shares and specific project bonuses, in my case that's almost ten thousand pounds if the project ends before the first of May next year, but I am supposed to be in-line for a partnership, which means that, in theory at least, I want to be a full partner. Which I do not. So, I suppose the first thing to do is to tell them that."

"What's the worst that can happen if you do that?"

"I don't know," said Kevin, "I haven't agreed to be a partner, and I certainly have not asked to be a partner, so there's nothing wrong with saying no, but I did accept the associate partnership… I don't know whether that implies acceptance of a partnership if and when it is offered. I have been paid more as an associate partner, but I have also not earned overtime… which probably means I am earning less, at least before tax but I should get a larger early

completion bonus as an associate than I would have got as an ordinary employee."

"OK, so how about you tell them that you aren't interested in being a partner until you are done at Barnard Castle? That gives you some time to think more about it and then, when you've been paid your bonus, you can decide whether to go for a partnership, remain as you are, or tell them to shove their associate partnership and return to being an ordinary employee."

"That would work for me, except they want me to work on another, much bigger project, after getting me to sign that I will work exclusively on the Barnard Castle job till it is finished."

"That's got to be dodgy," said Lee, "They can't do that."

Kevin laughed, "Well clearly they can and have, but it's OK, I'm going to tell them I don't want to be a partner yet. I just need to do it without getting fired."

Lee nodded and Kevin suggested she go and get some sleep, reminding her that they were going to the Bottled Crab with his Aunt Sally for supper. He told her that he had asked Louise and Marissa to join them.

They walked back to his flat and Kevin took his laptop to Cafe Med.

There was a short email from Kemal saying that he was not overly impressed by the audited accounts. He listed a few points with brief explanations and said he would send a more detailed report later adding that he would not advise Kevin to invest in TurnKey Consultants shares.

Kevin spent a short while trying to make sense of the points Kemal had made, then wrote an email to Alena thanking her for the board's kind offer of a partnership but saying that on reflection and after reviewing their accounts he had decided that he did not wish to be a partner. He added that he would gladly sign a revised agreement with TurnKey Consultants that released him from the obligation to work exclusively on any particular client but which allowed him to

divide his time between a mutually agreed number of projects and charge overtime as necessary and agreed on the projects.

He read the email carefully several times before sending it and told himself that he was being pathetic for worrying about it.

Lee - 32

Lee called Sarah Collins, one of her high school friends, who was now a lawyer in Chelmsford. She asked Sarah if she was able to give advice relating to employee rights in a company, and explained Kevin's position, being careful not to give away the company or Kevin's name. Sarah said she would have to do some research and promised to get back to her.

Lee fell asleep imagining what it would like to have a child with Kevin.

Kevin was asleep in an armchair when she woke up a little after two PM. His head was leaning back on the wall and he was snoring gently. She wanted to cuddle him, but showered and made the bed, then checked her phone and saw a message from Sarah saying that an employee paying PAYE was still an employee even if they were associate partners, and had the same employment rights as any other employee. A full partner, was not an employee, did not pay PAYE and was bound by the agreements and articles of association that he/she put their signature to. She had included links to various sites where Lee could read more detail.

Lee made coffee and woke Kevin up with a kiss.

"You do snore," she said, "Very gently and quietly, but I would't call it apnoea." She kissed him again, "And in case you still wanted to get your nose straightened, there's a new surgeon at the Hospital, Mr. Ranjbar, and he is really good, He specialises in Rhinoplasty - that's nose jobs, and I would trust him two hundred percent."

“I knew a Ranjbar, a long time ago. Bijan Ranjbar, from Iran. He was a student at Chichester College of Further education - learning English I think. Nice guy.”

“I think Mr. Ranjbar is from York,” said Lee, but he might have Iranian parents, he is brown-skinned and he is really lovely. The patients love him.”

“So you think I should get my nose straightened?”

“No!” said Lee laughing. She kissed his nose, “I love your nose, I love you, but if you are set on straightening it, you could trust him to do a good job. I would’t want Mr. Chaudry going anywhere near anyone’s nose, he makes too many mistakes. He’s on the way out I reckon.”

She got up, “We had better go and fetch your Great Aunt Sally. We can use my car if you like?”

“I can get her into the Shogun easily enough,” said Kevin, “Let me go and get showered quickly.”

They had trouble finding a place to park and off-load Sally and ended up having to push her some distance to the Bottled Crab. Marissa was already there and told them that Louise would be there soon.

They had a wonderful time and Sally got on well with Marissa and Louise. The Poetry Reading started at nine PM, by which time Sally was beginning to fade, so Kevin and Lee took her back to St. Osyth. On the way back from St. Osyth, Lee told Kevin what she had learned from her lawyer friend Sarah and he thanked her. He told her that he had written to the managing partner, telling her that he didn't want to be a partner and suggesting that they put something in writing removing his obligation to work exclusively on the Barnard Castle project. He told her he hadn’t had a response and didn’t really expect one till Monday at the earliest.

There was a Bentley parked in his parking space when he got back to his flat.

Lee gasped when the driver got out of the car and walked around to open the passenger door, “That’s James Short - he owns Ipswich and Chelmsford football clubs, he’s a Lord.”

“The Earl of Gloucester,” said Kevin, “Just call him Jim, he’s my boss’s husband.”

Kevin got out of the car and introduced Lee to Jim and Alena.

“There’s a nice place in Culver street… can I buy you two a drink?” asked Alena.

They walked to Cafe Med. Jim suggested they sit and asked what they wanted, Lee offered to help Jim with the drinks.

“She’s rather lovely,” said Alena, “I thought you were single and alone?”

“Yes, she is lovely, and I was alone till very recently,” replied Kevin.

“I got your email… I sense you aren’t just playing my game, you really don’t want to be a partner?”

“No I don’t,” said Kevin, “For a bunch of reasons, but here’s a few: You expect me to buy a hundred and twenty thousand pounds worth of shares, that makes the company worth around a million pounds - but it owns nothing.”

“It has contracts worth many times that value,” said Alena.

“I’d prefer something a little more concrete,” said Kevin, “I own my home, and I could lose that if one of the partners gets caught bribing some tin-pot dictator in Africa or Asia. Look what happened to FQM in Panama, what if we had been involved in that?”

“That’s my job Kevin. I’m the risk management consultant, It’s up to me to ensure that we don’t end up like FQM’s Cobra project.”

“Well, you seem to be doing well so far,” said Kevin, “But I’m not a risk consultant, and I don’t want to risk my home. I’m not that hungry for more money and I really don’t enjoy the power games that are going on with the Board.”

“Yes… yes, I can see that, and I am sorry, but thank you for going along with it so far. Is there anyway I can change your mind?”

“I like my job, and I appreciate the opportunities you have made for me but I really do not want to be a Partner. I can project manage Barnard Castle and do the project planning for Thetford at the same time if I have the right support, but I expect to be paid for the work I do.”

“Kevin…do you trust me?”

“About as much as you trust me… yes,”

Alena looked at him for a long time without speaking then nodded, “Fair enough… OK! I want to get rid of three more partners… the risk takers, the ones that could close us down with their risk taking. I would like your help… please? Money is tight, and the company really needs the Thetford Project, and the smaller one that Denby and Essam are bidding for in Hertfordshire. The Weatherby’s have made it clear that they want you as the Project Manager for Thetford. Denby and Essam also want you for Hertfordshire, especially for the planning. To be honest, I think they would be happy just to have you overseeing the project plan on Barnard Castle, but I insisted on the exclusivity clause and … well they are Yorkshiremen and they will insist that we honour it. Please just play on for a little while? I am hoping that at least one of the three will offer an inducement to you or Denby and Essam. When that happens I can get rid of whoever it is and we can start again.”

“So you want me to do what exactly?”

“Dither… Don’t let them know that you aren’t interested in being a Partner. Tell them that you are nervous about losing your bonus by breaking the exclusivity agreement. Tell them that you need the bonus money to help you to pay for your shares and are frightened

of risking it. Jim will make sure that the Weatherbys put just as much pressure on to get you to agree to work on their project. Time is running out, and I am certain that one of them will try to bribe you. They know that they can't bully you." She looked towards the counter, "I think Lee is beginning to get worried, please say you will help me?"

Kevin nodded reluctantly and Alena smiled and waved a hand for Jim's attention.

Jim and Lee weaved their way to the table, Jim had a tray with their drinks and Lee had two large platters of finger foods,

"I've told Lee what's what," said Jim handing out drinks, "She's sharp. How are you getting on?"

Alena looked at Kevin who shrugged, "I've agreed to play along," he said.

"Good man," said Jim holding out a platter, "Try some of these they're marvellous."

Kevin felt much more relaxed. Alena promised Lee that everything would work out.

They walked back to St. Botolphs and said their farewells, Kevin parked the Shogun in his spot and suggested they walk a bit.

"He's very normal isn't he," said Lee after a while, "No aires and graces."

"He's comfortable with himself," said Kevin, "People who are comfortable with themselves fit in everywhere."

"How do you feel about it?"

Kevin shrugged, "I don't like it," he said, "But Alena asked me to help, so I will, but I don't like it."

“Jim says she thinks some of them are accepting and giving bribes in places like the Congo and Indonesia … It’s much harder to catch them in places like that.”

Kevin nodded, “Yes, it is.”

“Are you still worried?”

“Yes, a little. The last time someone at work lost their job because of me, they set fire to my car and flat, and wanted to set fire to the caravan with me in it.”

“What? Who told you that?”

Kevin told Lee about Mike Coulsden. She was incensed that Coulsden only got a suspended sentence.

They walked back and Kevin fell asleep surprisingly quickly. Lee snuggled close and lay awake for a long while wondering what was going to happen next.

In the end, Kevin stayed until she went back on night shift, and seemed a lot more relaxed and happy.

Kevin - 33

Kevin was happy to be back on site. Morgan, the QS, was putting up copies of the latest PERT in A0 format after getting them printed at Castle Graphics. Kevin helped him and thanked him for doing it.

Fred was in early and told Kevin that his wife had offered to have his baby for knocking another month off the finishing date as it meant that they could both fly to Australia in time for their son’s wedding.

Fred grinned and added, “Mind, she’ll castrate you if we fall behind now. She’s already spent most of the bonus I’m due on presents and new clothes.”

Disaster struck hours later that same day when a glazer fell and broke his neck. The area was closed down for the investigation, and Kevin had a frantic few hours reassigning tasks and ensuring that most of the contractors could keep working. Charles Denby and Michael Essam both came to site. Michael Essam brought him and Morgan fish and chips while they worked late that night to update the plan. He sat quietly in the site office while they ran through several “what if?”scenarios and only spoke when Kevin sat back after saving the plan and sending copies to Fred and the others on the mailing list.

“My youngest, Peter, says this project software is the bee’s knees. He’s in Bath doing a course on it now. Is it really so much better than MicroSoft Planner?”

“I think so,” said Kevin, “I paid for the software myself after I did a course with MicroPlanner when I left the military. It wasn’t so expensive then. I tried MicroSoft Planner at Skarpetti and it is a joke in comparison.”

“So you use your own software for your work? Did your predecessor… Brian Humphries, did he use MicroPlanner?”

Kevin shook his head, No, he used MicroSoft Planner… There’s a few of the TurnKey planners that use OmniPlanner, but I’m the only one, as far as I know, that uses MicroPlanner.”

“It’s bloody expensive.”

Kevin smiled, “It has saved you a lot of money on this site.”

“Aye, as maybe, but a tool’s only as good as the man that uses it. Seems to me that your attention to detail is what makes the biggest difference,” said Michael getting to his feet, “Are you done for the night? I’m done in.”

Kevin was surprised when Michael walked to the caravan site with him. He told him that Charles had gone back to York. They’d drawn straws to decide who should stay and deal with the inquiry into the fatal fall. Kevin learned that Charles was married to Michaels’ sister

and that they'd started Denby and Essam doing dry stone walling for Yorkshire Heritage when they left school. Michael's older son, also Michael, was a British Airways pilot and his daughter, Alice, had just been elected as the Labour MP for Richmond.

The rest of the weekend and week after that went well, considering the death of the glazer and the disruption caused by that. Fred informed them that the preliminary police report indicated that Rick Allen, the glazer had not clipped his safety harness to the mobile platform he was working on and had slipped off. No fault had been found with the safety equipment or procedures.

Kevin enjoyed the work, but was less comfortable with the roughly twice a week email back and forth in which Alena acted as piggy-in-the-middle between the partners and Kevin in the matter of him accepting a partnership and agreeing to do the Thetford project. Kevin had toned down his outright refusal, but had retained elements of his real objections, basically saying that he could not afford to purchase the shares necessary to become a partner, and didn't feel comfortable borrowing over a hundred thousand pounds to buy shares in a business that owned practically nothing.

They had snow, which affected some deliveries, but work was progressing faster, as most of the contractors had taken to living in the caravan park. Kevin decided not to risk driving to Colchester, and Lee cheerfully did extra night shifts to cover for a sick colleague. She re-upholstered three more armchairs and sold them at a good profit, and was making Yule Logs and Christmas Tree decorations to sell at the Culver Street craft market. She told him that Cindy had started working at a care home in Frinton.

Kevin really enjoyed their daily FaceTime video chats, and seeing all the things she was doing. He loved how positive and practical she was. She visited his Great Aunt Sally at least once a week and often took her out, and had even got Sally and some of the other residents at the care home to knit bubble hats and scarves to sell at the craft market.

Very heavy snowfalls in the Midlands closed the motorways for most of the first week of December, but the project was back on

track by the twentieth of December, when Denby and Essam put on a Christmas party in the recently completed foyer. The site was officially closed and would open again on the fourth of January, although some of the contractors had opted to continue working.

Kevin set off after the party, and drove for eight hours because of road closures.

Lee - 34

Lee was really looking forward to seeing Kevin, and was following his progress on Google Live Maps. She called and ordered a feast of Indian food from the Maharani and then drove to collect it and got back ten minutes before Kevin arrived.

He looked really pleased when he saw the Christmas tree and decorations she'd put up in his Flat. Lee wanted to drag him into bed when he wrapped his arms around her.

"God, I've missed you," said Kevin, "I don't want to put you down."

Lee laughed, "Go and wash your hands… supper is on the table and getting cold… do you want cider?"

Kevin kissed her again and put her down, "Yes please… the food smells wonderful."

They both ate too much, but came back to the kitchen for more well after midnight.

Lee got very nervous about attending the TurnKey Christmas party when she learned that this wasn't the usual staff gathering at the TurnKey offices canteen, but a much smaller gathering of the Partners, associates and senior managers, at the Layer Marney Towers. It didn't help that Kevin clearly did not want to attend, and told her firmly to stop asking him what she should wear to it. When she learned that Louise and Marissa would probably be there, as Louise was an Associate Partner, she decided to call and ask Marissa's advice.

Marissa agreed to meet her for coffee and they ended up spending the day together, shopping and helping each other to choose the right outfits. Marissa said the Partners, all men apart from Alena, were less of a problem than their wives, who wore designer clothes and expensive jewellery like offensive weapons. She admitted to being terrified of getting things wrong, especially as she and Louise were the only openly gay couple in the company. In the end they went for a formal look, “understated elegance” was how Marissa described it and Lee agreed to help Marissa with her makeup.

Louise and Marissa shared their taxi to the Christmas party, and Louise had them all laughing with tales from her first attendance two years earlier. Kevin had been very quiet, but he seemed to relax when they arrived.

Alena and Jim greeted them warmly. They were offered Champagne and vol-au-vents by liveried serving staff. Louise introduced Lee and Kevin to the others as they mingled in a stately looking wood panelled lounge with two large crackling fireplaces.

They ended up in a small group of ten, where two women and a man seemed delighted that Kevin was now “one of them”, they were all construction related engineers, and Associate Partners rather than Partners. One of the women with a lovely accent, Carole, who described herself as a concrete engineer, told Lee that consultants were generally offered Associate Partnerships when their earning potential was too good for TurnKey to risk losing them. “They don’t want to pay us more, so they give us shares to keep us from leaving.” Carole said she was from Cockermouth in the Lake District. She admired Lee’s engagement ring and said she looked lovely, and warned her not to dance with two of the Partners; pointing them out, unless she enjoyed being fondled.

They were called for dinner into a smallish banqueting room with a round table. Lee was sat between two of the Partners, thankfully not the one’s Carole had warned her against. Kevin was sat between Alena and the wife of one of partners. Lee couldn’t remember her name, but the woman had been very complimentary when they had

been introduced and had congratulated Lee on her engagement to Kevin.

There were short speeches; Alena began by welcoming them all, and especially Kevin and Peter, the two new associates. She ended by thanking them all for their efforts during the year and asked them all to bow their heads for a minute's silence as they remembered Brian Humphries, who had died so tragically.

Most of the partners gave thanks to the others for their contributions to the Company Pot and announced new contracts. Only one of the Partners spoke for any length of time, and that was one of the men Carole had warned her not to dance with. He started by telling them that the company had agreed to support Brian Humphries' widow by paying off his mortgage, then went on to say that the company's finances were further stretched by having to pay out Dennis Pyle's shareholding following his retirement. He ended by saying that he was hopeful that an imminent and promising new contract to manage the building of a luxury resort in Thetford would ease their financial concerns. Lee saw several of the partners glance at Kevin after the man mentioned Thetford. Kevin was looking down at the table and twiddling a piece of cutlery, but Alena looked annoyed. The woman on Kevin's left whispered something to Kevin, which made him smile and nod in return.

The food was good, and Lee was careful not to eat too much of it. The wines were really good and it was much harder not to over indulge as her glass was kept topped up by a very attentive waiter. Lee eventually relaxed and realised that the mood had softened, and that somebody was playing a piano, just before Alena announced that that they should return to the lounge.

An elegant young woman was playing the grand piano and a small dance space had been created in the lounge. Desserts and a selection of cheeses were laid out on a long table, and they were asked what they would like to drink by the liveried staff. Lee headed for the ladies and found Alena there, who told her that she looked wonderful and warned her not to dance with Malcolm Dearbourne, and described him. It was the partner who had spoken the longest.

“He’s just awful and as much as I would like to watch Kevin break his arms, it wouldn’t go down very well.”

Lee stayed close to Kevin after that, and only wanted to dance with him. She sensed that Louise and Marissa were shielding her from Dearbourne, intercepting him each time he looked like he might approach her. She stayed on the dance floor, dancing with Louise and Marissa, when Kevin said he needed to use the loo. He was intercepted by the woman who had been sat next to him at dinner. She guided him towards the dessert table and Kevin appeared to be listening attentively as she spoke. He loaded a plate with cheeses and kept nodding while she spoke. He looked thoughtful when he eventually responded, very briefly. The woman seemed pleased, and touched his forearm, in a reassuring way, before walking quickly away. Kevin watched after her for a while and was approached by one of the liveried staff. Kevin smiled and appeared to ask for coffee, before loading more things onto his plate.
Lee moved towards Kevin, and lost sight of him as someone spoke, “Would you do me the honour of dancing with me Lee?” It was Jim, Alena’s husband.

“Of course,” said Lee, smiling, “I’ve never danced with an Earl before.”

Jim was a good dancer. He asked her if she and Kevin had set a date to get married. He told her that Alena had refused a Church wedding, but had agreed to a private celebration with his and her immediate family, which had infuriated his mother, much to his and his father’s delight, “My mother still bullies us both, but has never managed to bully Alena. I really love that woman!”

Lee asked him who he cheered for when Ipswich played Chelmsford and he said Chelmsford, because that’s where he met Alena. He told Lee about the cheeky young girl who had prodded him in the back with her finger and yelled at him to sit down during an exciting bit of a match so that she could see what was happening. Chelmsford lost that match but Jim and Alena were married six months later.

Jim thanked Lee when the dance ended, and wished her a Merry Christmas.

Kevin was sat close to one of the fires, talking to Alena. He shook his head and stood, smiling when he saw Lee approaching, “No, it’s fine really, I can arrange my own finances,” he said to Alena before asking Lee if she would like him to get her something to drink. Lee shook her head and asked if she could sit, and perched on the end of the two seater that Kevin was using, and greeted Alena, who responded with a smile.

“Hello Lee, I was just congratulating Kevin for accepting a Partnership, I should let him tell you about it. I’m very pleased that he is on the board.” She stood and nodded at Kevin before excusing herself and moving away. Lee saw Jim holding out a hand for her.

Lee asked a liveried young man for a coffee. Kevin sat and held out a plate loaded with cheeses, olives and nuts, “The cheeses are really good, watch out for the olives, they have stones.”

Lee picked out a piece of cheese and a half walnut, “Did you really accept a partnership?”

“I did… for now anyway. I will explain later and hope it makes sense to you, because it doesn’t really make sense to me,” Kevin lifted his cup, “Do you think we could sneak away soon?”

“Here come Marissa and Louise… let’s ask them?”

Kevin - 35

Kevin had a stinking headache and really wanted to leave. He had not wanted to attend in the first place. Lee looked wonderful, and Kevin was very aware of the impact she had on some of the men. He felt a strong urge to punch a couple of the leerers, and had carefully avoided drinking too much alcohol.

The lady next to him at dinner, Helen, the wife of one of the partners, commented after Malcolm Dearbourne mentioned the Thetford Project, that Kevin seemed to have a strong bargaining position.

Helen had spoken to him later at the desert table, and surprised him by telling him that three of the partners had agreed to front the money for him, giving him a no interest loan repayable over five years if he accepted the partnership. She urged him to accept, not least because as a partner, he would have more freedom to decide how to spend his time and would be able to delegate work to employees. He'd agreed on condition that it was done through and approved by Alena. It hadn't taken Alena long to seek him out and tell him that the three partners would probably try to use the loan to pressure him to vote with them. He told her that he had accepted the offer because they were obviously desperate, which probably meant they were up to no good, and that he would rather risk their money than his. He assured her that he didn't actually need their money.

Kevin asked Lee not to say anything about the Partnership to Louise and Marissa, he really didn't want to talk about it and the headache made him want to throw up. Lee handed him two paracetamol from her tiny purse, before asking Louise and Marissa if they wanted to share a taxi back to Colchester.

Kevin fell asleep in the front passenger seat, and was fast sleep within minutes of getting back to his flat.

He woke up in the pitch dark and spent some time taking stock of what had happened. It didn't feel real to him, he'd become a Partner without intending to, and owned shares worth, nominally, a hundred and twenty five thousand pounds, and they had not cost him a penny… yet. He could easily pay the two thousand pounds a month from his increased earnings. He'd given Alena what she wanted, they hadn't bribed him exactly, but it was probably as good as she was going to get. How she used the knowledge was up to her. He knew that Helen's husband, Simon was a Geologist and was Consulting for a mine in Indonesia and another in DRC, but he

hadn’t spoken with Simon other than to shake his hand and exchange greetings.

He got up, taking care not to wake Lee and fumbled around on the back of the door for his dressing gown, before going downstairs and making coffee.

His phone was flat, so he put it on charge and fetched his laptop. By the time Lee came down, he had drafted the preliminary plan for the Thetford Project and written to Alena, saying that he would like to have Sally Jones, the newest project planner, working as on-site planner at Barnard Castle. He put the Thetford Drawings onto a thumb drive; he would get them printed at Culver Street Reprographics.

“How are you feeling?” asked Lee, bending down to press her lips against his forehead.

“I feel like taking you back up to bed,” said Kevin with a grin, getting his hands onto her buttocks under the oversize T shirt she was wearing.

Two hours later they walked to the Culver Centre and had brunch at Cafe Med while the plans were being printed at Reprographics.

“It feels unreal,” said Kevin, “I feel like a bit of a fraud, and I keep expecting something nasty to happen… you know, like I was set up as a huge practical joke.”

I don’t understand,” said Lee, “You’re still doing the same job aren’t you?”

“I am still doing the same work, but now I am working for me… I can decide how much or little I want to do, I don’t earn overtime but my profit share is pretty good and I get paid four times a year instead of once a month, but it's almost five times what I was earning when I met you. That reminds me… I need to write to Kemal.”

So what changed…. I mean, you were not happy about being a Partner before?”

“Well, mostly, the cost. I did not want to borrow a hundred and twenty five thousand pounds to pay for the shares I would need to be a full partner, but it's a bit more complicated than that. Alena wanted me to delay… she wanted to see if some of the partners would try to put pressure on me. They didn’t, but three of them offered to pool together and give me an interest free loan if I accepted the Partnership and got started immediately on the Thetford job.”

Lee looked puzzled, and Kevin explained that they had to be pretty desperate to make the offer, which meant that Alena needed to take a closer look at what they were doing.

Kevin still felt uncomfortable about being a partner, knowing that he wasn’t mentally prepared for it, but he was confident that he could project manage the completion of the Barnard Castle site, and do the planning for the Thetford site. He was relieved when Lee said that as long as he was happy about it, she was too.

Lee - 36

Lee engineered a meeting between Mr. Ranjbar and Kevin at the Community Kitchen, Mr. Ranjbar had remembered Kevin immediately when she had asked him if he had been in Chichester and told him that her boyfriend, Kevin Coombes, had known an Iranian Bijan Ranjbar who had studied English there about twenty years earlier.

Mr. Ranjbar had been quite emotional, and said he had liked Kevin very much. He told her that Kevin had saved him from a “very terrible” situation. He also said that he was surprised that Kevin had never had his nose fixed, it had happened shortly before he had met Kevin. Lee explained that she had met him when he came to see Mr. Chaudry about getting it straightened, but Mr. Chaudry had not been able to make the appointment.

At the hospital Christmas staff party, Mr. Ranjbar asked Lee how Kevin was, and agreed to surprise him when Lee had a chance to get them together.

Kevin was answering a message on his phone, frowning fiercely, when Mr. Ranjbar approached their table. He looked quizzically at Lee and she gestured for him to approach Kevin.

Kevin looked up when Mr. Ranjbar cleared his throat. The fierce frown on his face changed to a delighted grin as he stood and embraced the startled surgeon enthusiastically. “Bijan!” he said, “What a wonderful surprise!”

Bijan shook Kevin’s hand with both of his, grinning delightedly, “It is very good to see you again Kevin, please forgive Lee, I wanted to surprise you.”

“There is nothing to forgive. So you are a plastic surgeon now. Fantastic! Lee says you are the best.”

Bijan gave a depreciating shrug and waggled his head, “She is very kind, but I prefer the term reconstructive surgeon, although I do cosmetic surgery as well, it is not my speciality.”

“You are still the best we have ever had,” said Lee, “By a very long way.”

The surgeon sat with them and chatted for over an hour. Lee learned that he had initially wanted to be an engineer, but had been persuaded to do medicine by a fellow Iranian. They both trained and remained in York, but his friend has succumbed early in the Pandemic to Covid. Bijan was married to a dentist, who now had a practice in Colchester, and they had a daughter at St. Mary’s high school. Mr. Ranjbar chided Kevin gently for not having his nose fixed, and suggested that he come and see him in January, to have it straightened. He told him he needn’t take time off work, when Kevin said he would be working seven day weeks for the foreseeable future, saying it was a two hour procedure and that Kevin could go back to work in the morning if he opted for early evening surgery.

“Let me do this for you my friend? I would like to repay the kindness you showed me all those years ago,” he asked quietly, “But now I have to go; my daughter needs to be taken to a rehearsal.” He turned to Lee, “Make sure he comes to see me Lee… he will be top of my surgery list? Please?”

Kevin wouldn’t tell Lee what had happened when she asked what he had done for Bijan, saying only that it was nothing special.

They went to see his Great Aunt Sally afterwards; she was recovering from a chest infection and was still very weak and quiet, but glad of their visit.

Kevin stepped in at the last moment when the Santa Clause for the children's ward fell sick on Christmas eve. He and Lee spent a couple of hours altering the Santa Uniform, and were at the Fire Brigade at four thirty in the morning so Kevin could practice getting in and out of the high lift basket they would use to take him up to the ward on the second floor at five thirty, so that the day and night shift staff would all be there. Lee, being the senior sister, dressed up as Santa’s helpful Elf.

It went very well, and Lee loved seeing how kind and gentle Kevin was with the children, especially those that seemed a little frightened of him. One tiny little Asian girl, Falguni, who had endured weeks of painful surgery and recovery for burns to her left arm and chest, didn’t want to let go of Kevin after she had got over her fear, so he asked her to stay close and help him with the other children.

There was a bit of a shock when they got back to the Fire Brigade and discovered that Kevin’s coat, trousers, boots and house-keys were missing from the locker he had left them in. The shift commander was embarrassed and promised to investigate. Kevin was given a fire brigade tracksuit, coat and trainers and declined a lift home.

Lee had keys to Kevin's flat, and called a local locksmith that she knew who agreed to come and change the front and back door locks. It was the first time Lee had seen Kevin really angry.

Lee's phone rang while the locksmith was replacing the locks. It was the Fire Brigade, they had Kevin's keys, they had been thrown under a hedge in front of the station. Lee said she would collect them later and was told that the station commander was on her way to deliver them to Kevin's flat. Kevin just nodded when she told him.

The Station Commander knocked on the door while Kevin was having a shower. Lee let her in, and warned her that Kevin was really angry.

"I don't blame him," said the station commander, she was ruddy faced and almost as wide shouldered as Kevin and probably ten years older, "We know who did it, and we can probably get Mr. Coombes' clothing back, though he might not want to wear them again. We call him Mumbles, he's a drug addict and lives rough, I saw him clearly on the CCTV footage."

Lee offered her coffee, and Jacqui thanked her. Kevin came down while Lee was pouring the coffee.

He greeted Jacqui and thanked her for returning his keys. Lee had already told her that the locks had been replaced at a cost of five hundred and fifty pounds on account of it being Christmas day. Kevin managed a smile when Jacqui told him they had identified the thief, and told her not to bother following it up on his behalf. He said he could afford more clothes and the addict probably could not.

"That's very kind of you Mr. Coombes… sorry, Kevin. Mumbles probably did it so that he would be banged up in Cells over Christmas. I'm just so sorry that it happened to you."

They collected Sally and had a really good Christmas Luncheon at the Bottled Crab with Louise and Marissa and got back to Kevin's flat exhausted and over stuffed just before midnight. Kevin insisted that Lee open her Christmas present, a large rectangular parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with coarse sisal string.

Inside was a wicker hamper, and inside the hamper was a bottle each of red and white wine, a box of Ferrero Roche chocolates, three small rounds of cheese, two tubes of Pringles, a cordless stapler/nail gun and a return air-ticket to Lanzarote, taped to the bottom of the hamper so that Lee would find it last. He had wrapped each and every item in brown paper and tied them with string.

Lee was wide awake by the time she got to the air-tickets and hoped her passport was still valid.

She kissed and thanked Kevin for each gift.

“Now that I’ve got you, I don’t need any presents,” she told him, “But thank you. Your present is in the coal cellar, come on and help me with it.”

Kevin was delighted with the reclining armchair.

They fell asleep in the sitting room, and made their way up to bed well after midnight.

Lee woke up early and got into in a panic about her passport. She crept out of bed and ran most of the way to her flat. She nearly wept with relief when she found it and saw that it was still valid.

Kevin was still fast asleep when she got back to his flat and slid naked into the bed. He wasn’t asleep for long after that.

Kevin - 37

Kevin slept most of the way to Lanzarote. Lee seemed very pleased with the holiday, despite it being so short. She practically bounced off the plane and onto the Club LaSanta courtesy bus. They were assigned a guide, Monica, who showed them to their suite and suggested that they have lunch before exploring. They changed into shorts, T shirts and sandals and chose the nearest restaurant, where there was a buffet with a carvery.

Kevin loaded up a plate of roast beef, lamb and pork and a very large salad. Lee spent a lot longer choosing tiny portions of a wide variety of foods. They both had wine spritzers to drink.

Lee had already decided on the activities she wanted to do before the plane landed, wind surfing, kayaking and pilates, Kevin wanted to do the windsurfing, kayaking and open water swimming, but was also interested in scuba diving, Monica found them when they were having their coffee, and took them to see the instructors for the activities, and within half an hour of having had their lunch, they were kayaking. Kevin found it a bit tame, but was happy just being out on the water with Lee. After ninety minutes it was time to head back and Kevin had an introduction to scuba diving in the pool while Lee went off to do pilates.

The Australian diving instructor, Bob, was brilliant, and had Kevin happily doing all manner of drills in the deep end of the pool before his hour was up. Bob suggested that they do an hour of scuba diving in the lagoon at ten the next morning, and walked to the lagoon with Kevin to join in with the open water swimming. Kevin had done a lot of open water swimming already, and after checking him out, the instructor let Bob and Kevin head off on their own, with a kayaking minder for safety. Kevin really enjoyed the swim, and paced himself well enough to get across the lagoon and back without having to stop. Bob was impressed and admitted that he had struggled to keep up. Kevin spent fifteen minutes helping Bob with his technique.

They found Lee at the windsurfing section. Kevin had learned to windsurf in the military, and had an intermediate certificate. The instructor assigned to him got him kitted up and set off with him, while Bob offered to help Lee.

Kevin really enjoyed the windsurfing, despite his arms being a bit tired after the swimming. The instructor stayed close and offered some advice on using the harness, but let Kevin enjoy himself. The wind was not too strong.

Lee was just getting the hang of balancing on the board in the water and pulling up the sail when Kevin returned. She looked pleased with herself, but admitted to being really tired.

They had a drink with Bob, who told them it was his second year as an instructor there, and his last. He would be heading off to California in February with his fiancée. Cathy was American and also an instructor. Like him, she taught several different things, and they were hoping to start their own activity centre. He said it was Cathy's day off, and she had gone to work as a hang gliding instructor at another resort, He looked at his watch and said he'd better get a move on as he was supposed to pick her up. He thanked Kevin for the drink, and the swimming tips and recommended they try Alma Tapas for supper.

"I'm so glad you taught me to swim properly," said Lee when Bob had gone, "I spent more time in the water than on the board today. Bob was very patient."

"It took me two days to actually sail a windsurf board," Kevin told her, "But after that it was a doddle. The instructors here seem pretty good."

"Bob was great," said Lee, "The pilates was good too. Did you go scuba diving?"

"No, I just pootled about in the pool. Bob's taking me scuba diving in the lagoon tomorrow after the open water swimming training. How about a massage before supper?"

They were up till ten, and enjoyed Alma Tapas and the dancing. Mostly the people were fun, and the few that drank too much were quietly shuffled away. They both fell asleep, exhausted, as soon as they got back to their suite.

Monica found them at breakfast and checked that they were set up for the day. Kevin just had coffee, not wanting to swim hard on a full stomach. Lee went for more windsurfing instruction while Kevin did the open water swim, there were at least thirty swimmers, including

Bob, who greeted Kevin with a cheery grin. Kevin paced himself again, and slowly overtook most of the other swimmers. Four swimmers finished before him. Kevin had a coffee and an omelette before going over to the windsurfing centre and taking out a board. Lee was being coached by a woman, and was getting a lot better.

An instructor asked Kevin if he wanted a race, and pointed out three buoys, which they would sail around clockwise. The instructor won easily, but encouraged Kevin all the way, and thanked him afterwards. Kevin sailed the same course several times, then sailed back to check on Lee, who was sailing slowly, but confidently. She gave him a bright smile, then fell off.

They had more coffee, Kevin had a half hour of diving in the lagoon with Bob and loved it. He then tried to do Pilates with Lee and found it really difficult and exhausting.

They both tried Tennis and then went to the Golf Driving range. They both really enjoyed that, and Lee got the hang of it a lot faster than Kevin. They stayed at the driving range till lunch, which they had at the Atlantico again. Kevin tried some fish, before heaping his plate with roast beef and filling a bowl with kimchi. Bob introduced them to his partner Cathy, and they sat with them for lunch. Cathy looked super fit, and said that she had come to Club La Santa as a physiotherapist five years earlier, and had fallen in love with the adventure sport lifestyle.

The week passed too quickly, but they really made the most of being there, and apart from a long lie in after partying through the night on New Year’s eve until breakfast, they made the most of the activities. They ate most of their evening meals with Bob and Cathy, and exchanged contact details with them before leaving. Lee had got a basic windsurfing certificate. Kevin taught Bob and Cathy to swim butterfly so quickly that he was offered work as a swimming instructor at the club.

Kevin drove back to Barnard Castle twelve hours after arriving back in UK from Lanzarote. He hardly remembered crawling into bed and slept through his alarm the next morning. He just managed to get to site by seven thirty.

Updating the plan to show the work done by contractors who had worked through the Christmas and New Year break took him till lunch time, after which he took Sally Jones around the site. She seemed a little unsure of herself at first, but was more relaxed with Kevin by the time he suggested they go and warm up with a coffee in the canteen. Sally didn't drink coffee, she told him it made her feel giddy. He loved her Welsh accent.

"Ms. Parsons said you asked for me specifically," she said when they were sat, "Only, I've never really spoken to you before."

Kevin nodded and answered carefully, "You are the newest planner, I am hoping I can get you to use MicroPlanner… all the others are experienced with MicroSoft Planner or OmniPlan, and I don't want to waste too much time teaching old dogs new tricks."

"Oh… well, I used BIM Planner and GanttPro at college, but Ms. Parsons said you would teach me something better. She gave me the latest MacBook Pro… I prefer Macs to PC's."

"MicroPlanner Xpert runs on Macs," Kevin told her, "It is not difficult to use, and I promise that you will not want to use anything else if you learn to use it properly. We can leave it to download in the site office tonight."

"I don't think I can afford to pay much for a licence."

Kevin laughed, "Don't worry about that, if this site goes well, I hope to persuade Alena to get a multi-user license for the company."

"She told me the site is going very well… "

Kevin smiled, "It is, and you are going to help keep it going well. Come on, let's go and finish off the tour?"

"Is there a user manual for MicroPlanner?"

Kevin shook his head, “Not that I know of. The help menu is pretty good, but It’s really intuitive. I thought so anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll look on line for a manual,” said Sally.

She had come up by train, and had brought her bicycle, she was a keen cyclist. Kevin asked her if she knew Louise from the QS, department and she shook her head. Kevin explained that Louise was keen long distance runner, and that they had tried to make a triathlon team, with him as a swimmer, and were looking for a cyclist. Sally said she was definitely interested. She was also living in the trailer park, her trailer was close to the reception.

It took two weeks before Kevin was confident about leaving Sally on site. She had no trouble updating the project plan, and Kevin thought she would get the hang of creating plans on MicroPlanner quickly, and suggested that she ask Alena to send her a small project to do the planning for. She did it well enough and once Kevin had spent an hour in the canteen talking her through using the critical path and doing “what if” plans, she got quite excited about the software. Kevin told her to account separately for any time she spent working on other project plans, and told her that she could book up to twelve hours a week overtime without permission, which meant that she could probably do at least twenty hours a week on other projects unless something went horribly wrong at Barnard Castle.

Fred was perfectly happy with Sally, and Morgan got on well with her. She told Kevin she was used to fending off “Building Site Romeos” as she liked to call them, and said she was a pretty good kick boxer.

Kevin had two weeks in Colchester before he went to Thetford. The Weatherbys had made several changes, which had pushed up the costs and extended the project to two and a half years. Alena told Kevin not to try and save them any time or money at this stage, and warned him that there would be a lot more changes before the project was done. So far Keystone Consultants’ Team consisted of Kevin, as project manager and planner, Patricia, the quantity

surveyor, Gareth and Ahmed, who were the consultant Structural and Civil engineers for the project. The main contractor, Mako Construction, was based in Pinner. Kevin had only spoken to the Managing Director, Contracts manager and Site Manager on video conference calls. They had sounded confident, but said that they were working flat out finalising the handover of a large project for the MoD and needed some time before they could devote themselves fully to the Thetford Project.

Lee and Bijan convinced Kevin to go for a nose job on the first Friday of February. He'd opted for general anaesthetic, though he had been told he could have it done under local. Lee had been allowed to observe the operation. Bijan had gently suggested that he leave Kevin's nose slightly crooked, saying it would give Kevin a bit of a Liam Neeson look. Kevin liked the suggestion.

Kevin felt really nauseous after surgery, but after that, the pain was negligible. His nose and sinuses felt very congested, but it wasn't bad. He looked a bit alarming with a heavily bandaged nose and red eyes. Lee told him the dressings could come off after a week. Bijan said the surgery had gone smoothly and had taken only twenty minutes.

"He is really, really neat and precise," said Lee, "I hated watching Mr. Chaudry operate. Watching Bijan is so very different."

Kevin was out of hospital and having breakfast with Lee at the Community Kitchen on Saturday morning when Michael Essam called.

"First I want to congratulate you on being a partner," he said, "I was hoping you'd tell TurnKey to bugger off so that I could make you an offer," he laughed, "But now that you're a partner I can deal directly with you, which might be even better for me."

"Is everything alright at Barnard Castle?" asked Kevin.

"Aye, that it is. Young Sally is doing a good job and Fred says everything is as it should be. No, I want to talk about another project - Stortford Castle Resort, between Bishops Stortford and Hatfield

Forest… We've won the tender and we want you to oversee the project planning. Can we talk … face to face?"

"Sure… when and where?"

"I'm in London now, just waiting for you to tell me when I should come to Marks Tey."

"I live in Colchester, you are welcome anytime," said Kevin.

"What about this evening?" asked Michael, "Can we meet for dinner, I'm with the wife, Yvette. Bring that lovely lass, Lee? I'm paying and you can choose the place, somewhere that we can talk without having to shout? Can you recommend somewhere to stay?"

"The Premier Inn," said Kevin, "Its clean and comfortable."

"Right then, we'll set off as soon as Yvette has done some shopping. I look forward to hearing from you and seeing you later."

Kevin put his phone away. Lee gave him a questioning look.

"It looks like I am going to be negotiating a contract with Michael Essam," said Kevin, "And I haven't got a clue how!" He laughed.

Lee - 38

Lee was not certain that she could watch Bijan… Mr. Ranjbar, operate on Kevin. She had generally avoided theatre work since Mr. Chaudry had taken over as the resident surgeon. She had only agreed because Mr. Ranjbar had asked her, and she didn't want to offend him by refusing. He was really good.

She had really enjoyed their holiday at Club La Santa. It was only her second holiday out of UK. Her first was a nightmare trip to Benidorm with Cindy. She shuddered at the thought of the Benidorm trip. She had felt safe with Kevin, even on New Year's Eve, Kevin never got drunk. She could relax when she was with him.

Now as she sat listening to him on the phone, she realised that she was actually happy. She cast her mind back, trying to remember when she had last felt really happy. Probably not since she was a teenager. She thought about Alan then, and realised that she had been chasing happiness; hoping it would come.

Kevin ended the call and laughed, telling her that he had no idea how to negotiate a contract.

“Well a contract is just a formal agreement, so as long as you agree to do what he wants to do and he agrees to pay what you want for doing it, everything should be OK.” Lee told him, “And you can always just listen to what he wants and tell him that you will need advice before committing, but you already know that.”

“We’ve been invited out for dinner… he wants me to recommend a place where we can talk business without having to shout. Any suggestions. His wife is coming too.”

“Cafe Med is close, but the Bottled Crab is nicer, let me check to see if they have anything on. Do you want me to book a table?”

Kevin nodded, “Not if there is anything noisy going on.”

Kevin thanked her and a short while later sent a message to Michael saying they had booked a table at the Bottled Crab for seven PM and could collect them from the Premier Inn at six thirty. Michael messaged back immediately confirming.

Kevin said he wanted to call Alena and get her advice before meeting with Michael, so they walked back to his flat and Lee went out to get some materials she wanted for a lampshade she wanted to make.

When she got back, Kevin was fast asleep in the armchair she had given him for Christmas.

The Essams were lovely. Yvette was a small, rounded woman with a strong French accent, though she had lived in Yorkshire for forty

years. They had just celebrated their fortieth anniversary in the same Hotel in London that they had met in forty two years earlier. Michael folded his lanky frame into the front seat of the Shogun after letting the women into the back.

They liked the look of the Bottled Crab, and chatted comfortably. They had been to Lanzarote and told Kevin and Lee about César Manrique, the artist and sculptor who had done much to transform the island. One of their children had been to Club La Santa and loved it. After they had eaten, Yvette suggested that she and Lee sit closer to the fire and allow Michael and Kevin talk business.

Kevin - 39

Michael was politely blunt and to the point, “I don’t want to waste your time Kevin, You saved us a great deal of time and money in Barnard Castle, and we want you to do the same in with the Stortford Castle Resort. Its a bit bigger than Barnard Castle, and there’s nowt in the way now. We can do it without you, but Charles and I agree that we want you in charge of project planning. We’d like you on site as the Project Manager, but we realise that you have to do the Weatherby job as well. Fred will be site manager… in fact you know most of the staff as they have mostly been working on Barnard Castle.”

“Well I want to do it, but I cannot be full time on site,” said Kevin, “It’s not that far from Colchester or Thetford, and I don’t think I will have any problem. I’d like to have a planner on site, preferably Sally Jones, and she will cost you four thousand a month. If I can’t have Sally, it might cost you a little more. I can’t give you a price for the plan until I’ve seen the drawings and the bill of quantities.”

Michael nodded, “That sounds fair enough, I’m expecting the plan to cost up to double what we paid for Barnard Castle. What’s important to me, and Charles, is that you give us your word that it will be you as does the planning and managing of the plan. We’ll be building an actual Castle this time.” he laughed, “I’ve always wanted to build a castle.”

“You have my word,” said Kevin, “I have really enjoyed working with you and look forward to doing so again.”

“Excellent,” said Michael, “Let’s sit with the ladies… I think I’m going to order some of that cheesecake now; it looks good.” He put a hand on Kevin’s shoulder, “I’d like to ask you something personal, and I’ll take no offence if you don’t answer… are you happy being a partner in TurnKey Consultants?”

“It’s too early to say. I didn’t expect or want to be a partner,” said Kevin.

Michael nodded, “Aye… I’ve been lucky with Charles, we been best mates since early childhood, but generally, I think Partnerships, outside of marriage that is, are best avoided.”

Kevin just nodded, but agreed whole heartedly.

He enjoyed the rest of the evening, Yvette was an interesting woman, and excellent company. She was a forensic auditor, and travelled widely. When they dropped the Essams at the Premier Inn, Michael shook Kevin’s hand and said he would get all the plans and paperwork to Kevin within a week.

Lee - 40

Lee had liked the Essams immediately, Yvette had told her that she’d never heard her husband speak so highly of a non-Yorkshireman before. She was surprised to learn that Kevin wasn’t really English, but was born and raised in Zambia.

Kevin had not spoken much about work, and Lee suspected that he was uncertain of how things worked now that he was a partner. She thought that a hundred and twenty five thousand pounds was a lot of money to have invested in a consultancy that didn’t own anything apart from its office equipment and furniture. Her father had told her often enough that the value of intangible assets was notoriously fickle.

Kevin was working from home mostly, and she was careful not to disrupt him. He worked long hours, but would take a break from the computer screens every hour, usually taking a walk in the castle park, despite the cold.

Lee had suggested that she revert to day shift work while he was working from home, and Kevin had told her that he would probably be working from home for a very long time, and suggested that she find a routine that suited her rather than him.

“I hated night shifts before,” she told him, “I think that was because the only thing I had to look forward to when I was awake was work, but now I look forward to spending time with you.”

Lee finally decided on doing mainly nights, when she could, because having a week of not having to work at all, allowed her to spend more waking time with Kevin. Their sex life had quietened down a lot, but was still very satisfying. The extra money was handy too.

Towards the end of March she asked Kevin if she could move in with him, having not spent very much time in her own flat. Kevin helped her clear out and paint the coal cellar and agreed to let her pay an electrician to install lights and sockets so that she could use it for her upholstery and crafts workshop. It was much warmer than the unheated lock-up at her flat. She rented out her flat to a lawyer friend of her friend, Sarah Collins. Aggie Wiseman was a public defender at the Chichester Magistrates’ Court close to Kevin’s flat. She had a cat, and rented the flat unfurnished, so Lee sold all her furniture rather than put it in storage, and invested the money in a Solar Start Up based in West Bergholt and owned by the son of her father’s best friend. He had installed a heat pump in her flat which had halved her electricity bill and she had been really impressed with his work-ethic.

Kevin had asked her to attend the opening of Barnard Castle Riverview Resort on the 27 of March. Yvette introduced her to the Mayor and stayed with Lee while Kevin was being dragged around by Michael and Charles. She had finally got to meet Sally Jones, and thought she was a bit intense, but nice enough. Lee had told

herself that she wasn't the jealous type, but she had learned otherwise when Kevin had spent the occasional night at Barnard Castle to help Sally sort out muddles on the project. Sally was good looking in a sporty, angular way, and very Welsh. She told Lee that she was from Port Talbot, and had no intention of ever going back there.

The celebrations continued till early morning and they slept till past midday before driving back to Colchester with Sally and her bicycle and belongings filling the back of the Shogun. They left Sally at Stansted Airport to fly to Tenerife for a two week holiday.

Kevin went into the Marks Tey office early the next morning, and told Lee it was likely to be a long hard day as he was meeting with the Weatherbys and the managers of the main contractor they had chosen for the Thetford Resort. Kevin didn't know them, but Alena had told him that they were problematic.

Kevin - 41

Kevin had stopped feeling self-conscious about his nose, and was secretly very pleased with it. He had been surprised at how blatantly some of the women had flirted with him at the Riverview Resort opening ceremony.

Alena Parsons had warned him that she did not think much of the main contractors for the Thetford project. Jim had warned her off them when they had expressed an interest, but their tender was so low that Cynthia and Michael had asked her to arrange a meeting to scrutinise it.

"Don't hold back Kevin, if anything bothers you, bring it up. These things are often bruising, but it is far better to get the fighting done before the contract is awarded. I advised Cynthia and Michael not to attend in person, so that they can record the meeting from Toronto."

Louise was also attending, as the senior quantity surveyor. She was waiting at reception and handed Kevin a sheaf of papers.

“Their BOQ is awful Kevin,” she told him quietly, “This isn’t going to be a pleasant meeting. I’m sitting close to you.”

There were five representatives from Mako Construction, the CEO, Colin, was a small neat looking man, who looked to be about Kevin’s age. The Operations Director, Nigel, was a large man in his sixties with a distinctively Zimbabwean accent, the contracts manager, Sam, and the site manager, Roy, looked like they were related and the only female on their team was a very quiet and very pale woman, who looked to be in her thirties and who was introduced as Lesley, an administrator.

The Architect that designed the project, Charlotte seemed keen to meet Kevin and told him that she had driven down from Barnard Castle the night before, after looking at the Riverview Resort.

“I have heard good things about you from Charles Denby and Michael Essam,” she said laughing, “They aren’t usually complimentary about anything not native to Yorkshire, including me even though I’m Danish, and York was a Danish city.”

Alena welcomed them all and asked them to introduce themselves while they were being served tea and coffee.

“As you are all aware, this meeting has been called by Weatherby Investments as part of the due diligence investigation concerning the Mako Construction tender for the construction of the Thetford Forest Resort. Ms. Pele, as the Project Architect has asked that she begin, as she has another engagement this morning that cannot be missed.”

Charlotte thanked her and began by asking Colin to let her have contact details for the Architects of the last three major construction projects they had completed.

“Thank you Charlotte… I hope you don’t mind me calling you Charlotte? Of course I will forward you the details after obtaining permission from the commissioning architects…”

“Well, you listed five major projects in your tender documents,” said Charlotte, “Two are for the Ministry of Defence, and I have not been able to get a response from the Whitehall Contracts Department. Willesdon Council and The Barnaby Housing Trust have not responded to my emails, and when I call, they put me on hold until the line disengages. Hammond Pension Fund have responded and told me that they are unable to discuss the Project with us because of an ongoing legal dispute.”

Colin shrugged, “I’m sorry about that, but Lesley will contact the commissioning Architects and ask them to contact you or allow her to share their contacts details with you. Please make a note to do so as soon as we have finished here Lesley?”

“Is there anything else Charlotte?” asked Alena.

Charlotte shook her head, “No more questions from me at the moment thank you Alena, but I have another hour before I need to leave so…”

“You are welcome to stay as long as you are comfortable,” said Alena. She turned to Louise, “Louise, you said you had some issues to discuss?”

Louise cleared her throat and nodded, “Yes…Just to remind you, I am the senior consultant QS for Turnkey Consultants. I would like to bring your attention to the Bill of Quantities attached to your proposal.” She handed a wad of papers to Kevin, “Please take one and pass them on? I have highlighted the areas of concern.”

She waited while they were passed around before beginning. It was a very long list, and at a glance, Kevin could see there were a lot of simple arithmetic mistakes.

“Your BOQ is based on the Bill of Materials provided by Charlotte,” said Louise, but there appear to be a rather large number of simple arithmetical mistakes that I will not waste your time with…”

“These things happen,” said Nigel, “You could simply have informed us by email rather than waste time bringing it up here.”

Louise paused and looked at him, but didn't respond.

"Please continue Louise?" asked Alena.

"The first thing I would like to ask concerns thatching," said Louise, "The Architects Bill of Material calls for reed thatching, and the price you have submitted is less than half of the cost of thatching reed, and the cost for thatching subcontractors is a lot lower than the Thatching Guild guidelines…"

"We have a great deal of experience with Thatching," said Nigel, "I don't know about the …"

"We thought it would be better to use wheatstraw than reed," cut in Sam, "The cost of importing reed from Belgium is…"

"The Architect stipulated reed thatch," cut in Louise firmly, "Reed is more expensive, but has a thirty to fifty year expected life, whereas wheatstraw will need replacing every seven to ten years."

"We have a lot of experience of thatching," said Nigel, "And treatments to extend the life of thatch."

Charlotte had raised her hand, and Alena asked her to speak.

"I didn't see any mention of these life extending treatments in your prospectus, but your company was only registered five years ago… did you do any thatching before that?"

"Nigel is referring to our experience in Zimbabwe," said Colin, "We have done a lot of thatching there, some of the thatching we did on Safari Lodges still looks pristine after twenty years and the African climate is much harsher than UK's. We are shareholders in a proprietary thatch treatment product, produced in Zimbabwe, that is a fire and insect retardant for thatch."

"I'm sure it is," said Alena, "But we are required to work to British Standards here, and reed was stipulated for the thatching. wheatstraw simply is not durable enough."

“Please let me have a data sheet and details of the thatch treatment?” asked Charlotte, “And contact details of a property that you have thatched in UK that I can visit?”

Nigel nodded. “Please see to that Lesley?”

“Moving on,” said Louise, “I note that you have included an amount for the removal of the rubble from demolishing the original CentreParks structures from site, and have later included an amount for procuring and transporting rubble to site for landscaping. I would have thought it made more sense to keep the rubble and re-use it?”

“I don’t like messy sites,” said Nigel, “I want a clean slate to work from, in my experience this saves money. All that rubble sitting around for two years is going to be a problem.”

“Actually, there is no need for the rubble to sit around,” said Kevin, “Landscaping can start at the same time as construction, which will save a great deal of time and cost.”

“That’s not how we work,” said Nigel, dismissively, “There would be too many contractors on site, getting in each others’ way.”

“I think you might find that things have changed a bit,” said Kevin, “This is a big project, and Thetford Forest …”

“I’ve been building since before you were born,” said Nigel, going red in the face, “No matter what your fancy computer work tells you...”

Colin put a hand on Nigel’s forearm and spoke reassuringly, “We’ll take a look at … Kevin’s suggestion and get back to you. Perhaps we can move on?” He looked at Louise.

Louise nodded, “Well related to the rubble, I can see no mention of the cost of disposal fees for the waste material… there are transport costs, but no disposal fees.”

“We’d use the material on other sites,” said Nigel, his face still red.

“My understanding is that all your resources would be engaged on the Thetford site,” said Alena, “Do you have a facility close to Thetford where you can keep all the rubble?”

“We have some MOD contacts who would allow us to use their depots,” said Colin, “Is there anything else?”

“I’d like a definitive answer from you, Colin, on whether or not you have other projects that will be ongoing during the Thetford build?” Cynthia’s voice.

“Well, at this moment, no actually, but as works progress we may take the opportunity… making the most of idle machinery and staff. I like to keep everyone busy,” said Colin.

There was a long silence following that, and Alena asked Louise to continue.

“Materials… I have written above your prices, the current prices for washed sand, stone, and other locally available materials that you can check before revising your BOQ,” said Louise, “You have asterisked most of the final fix materials and marked them as liable to change… I am not certain that is acceptable.”

“We cannot guarantee prices two years in advance,” said Nigel, “Nobody can.”

“No… that is why it was suggested in the tender documents, that you arrange for onsite storage containers, security and insurance for the high cost materials…”

“Have you ever tried to run a building site?” asked Nigel, “First you expected us to keep hundreds of tons of building rubble on site and now you want us to store millions of pounds worth of high value goods on a building site in a bloody forest. You’ve no bloody idea, have you?”

“I’d prefer that you refrain from being rude Nigel,” said Alena quietly but firmly.

Charlotte excused herself, and left.

Louise continued for another hour, querying specific things like the quality and rating of electrical switchgear and cabling, pumps and finally finished on the certification costs, which had been omitted from the tender document. Kevin sensed she had left that till last deliberately.

By this time, Nigel was saying very little, and what he was saying, was being muttered to Colin. Sam and Roy said very little, Lesley said nothing at all.

“Is there anything else before we wind this up?” asked Alena. She looked directly at Kevin as she spoke.

Kevin nodded, “Yes… it concerns project management and planning,” he said, “I need to know how that sits with you, Nigel and Sam? If I am to work with you as the Project Manager, are you going to work with me or am I going to be wasting my time trying to persuade you to do some things differently?”

Sam looked at Nigel, who frowned and looked down at the table where his fingers were drumming as if playing a piano.

“How much construction experience do you have Kevin?” he asked eventually.

“Twenty years,” said Kevin, “You?”

Nigel’s head came up then and he glared at Kevin.

“It says in your Company Prospectus that you were a policeman for ten years,” said Kevin, “Rhodesian Special Branch, after which you worked in the private security industry for forty five years before starting in construction. Was that five years ago when you registered Mako Construction?”

There was a long silence after that.

“It was me that insisted on having Kevin Coombes on this project,” Cynthia’s voice on the speaker, “As far as I am concerned, he is the only key person for this project. If you are unable to work with him then I will be choosing another contractor.”

“I am sure that we will be able to work with Kevin,” said Colin smoothly. “We will get onto dealing with the points raised today and get back to you with assurances and answers by the end of the week.”

That signalled the end of the meeting. Louise slipped out of the room almost immediately. Colin was charming and affable as he shook hands with Kevin and Alena, and hovered anxiously while the others said their farewells. Nigel’s huge hand tried to crush Kevin’s and he slapped Kevin on the shoulder and thanked him for keeping him on his toes. The others put a brave face on it.

When they had gone, Alena invited Kevin to her office and fetched two bottles of water from her fridge, handing him one and slipping off her shoes as she flopped onto her couch and put her feet up.

“I’m so glad that is over,” she said, then glanced at her watch, “Cynthia will be calling any minute now.”

It was about ten minutes, by which time Louise had joined them. Alena asked her PA to get some real coffee for them all and complained about the expensive Nespresso Machine that had broken down.

“Nespresso is not real coffee,” Louise told her, “You only got it because you think George Clooney is a hunk.”

Cynthia was not at all impressed with Mako Construction and apologised profusely to Alena. She said she had sent the recording of the interview to Jim, and spoken to him.

Alena told her not to worry and said that Louise had already started checking the tender documents from Alliance Construction. She told

Cynthia that Louise and Kevin were with her. Kevin was startled when Cynthia asked him who had fixed his nose; he hadn't realised that the video link was on. She said she liked the result.

When Cynthia suggested telling Mako not to bother resubmitting, Alena cut her off and told her to let them "dangle", saying they had wasted Cynthia's and TurnKey's time with their shoddy attempt at ripping her off, and that it might do them some good to refudge their fudgings.

"Jim will see to it that they get sort shrift from government and MOD contracts," said Alena, "They are briefcase bandits… that I am sure of."

Kevin learned that Charlotte was having treatment at Addenbrookes for a rare form of cancer, which was where she had met the Weatherbys. Michael Weatherby was in remission, for the second time, which Kevin assumed was the reason they were so keen to get started on the Thetford Project. He thought the stress would not be helpful, but kept his opinions to himself.

Alena asked him to visit a site in Gog Magog, Cambridgeshire, which had just been built by Alliance, and gave him the number and contact details for the Client's supervising architect for the project, a community centre.

Kevin had a stinking headache by the time he left, which was mid afternoon. He drove straight to St. Osyth to collect his Great Aunt Sally who wanted to attend a play at the Bottled Crab. Louise said she and Marissa were also attending, but Lee was on night duty.

Kevin set off to Cambridge the following morning after messaging the Architect who had agreed to meet him at the Gog Magog site at ten thirty.

The Architect, a tiny woman with huge glasses and a mass of multi coloured hair decided that she really liked Kevin.

“I wouldn’t mind being shipwrecked on a deserted island with you,” she said, “No wedding band… you aren’t gay are you? That would break my heart.”

“I’m in a relationship!” said Kevin, laughing and hoping he was not going red, “But otherwise I’d be looking for a ship to wreck.”

“Well let me know if it doesn’t work out,” said the Architect, “My husband can take care of the kids till I’ve worn you out.” She laughed and punched him on the arm.

She showed him around the site and told him that she was happy with Alliance Construction. They were properly trained construction contractors, and very professional. She had worked with them on three jobs and had no complaints. She gave him names of the staff she knew and liked and suggested that he take a look at a house they were finishing in Billericay, which was close to their head office and yard. She sent him a WhatsApp pin to the house and told him to just turn up, saying the house owner, an architect friend of hers, was in Australia and had asked her to keep an eye on the works as she had recommended Alliance Construction.

Kevin drove to Billericay and parked outside the gate of what had once been a farm, by the look of it. He put on a safety helmet and went into the building site. A cheerful young man pushing an empty wheelbarrow asked him if he could help.

“I’ve come to look around the site,” said Kevin, “Lucy Mitchell said it would be OK. I’m Kevin.”

“That’s OK,” said the lad, bumping fists, “I’m Mack. Let me take you to Brian, the site foreman.”

Brian, a sturdy looking man, shook Kevin’s hand and asked him what he wanted to see.

“I just wanted to see how you guys work,” said Kevin, “You tendered for a job in Thetford and we are interested in you.”

Brian grinned, “OK, well, feel free to go where you like and ask what you will. I’ll ask Mack to stay with you just for safety. Can I ask how you found us?”

“I spoke to Lucy Mitchell at the Gog Magog Community Centre. You did a good job there.”

“Lucy? She’s nuts that one, a bloody good architect but a total lunatic. She recommended us to the fellow that designed this place. We don’t do a lot of small stuff but enough of us wanted the extra money…”

Mack followed Kevin around, he was talkative. Kevin learned that most of the staff had taken leave to blow the bonus they had earned on the Gog Magog Community Centre while waiting for the next job. A Land Rover drove up and parked next to Kevin’s Shogun. A ruddy faced woman got out and asked him if he was Kevin.

“I’m Jade Owens, Alliance Construction,” she said, “Brian said you are checking us out for the Weatherby job.”

Kevin shook her hand and said he was guilty as charged.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

“What can you tell me?” asked Kevin, “I’m going to project manage the job, and wanted to see your guys at work.”

“Follow me,” she said, “Our yard isn’t far.”

She made coffee and answered the few questions Kevin had. He told her that TurnKey Consultants were doing the due diligence and they were being considered. He admitted that he had never been involved in choosing a contractor before. She’d heard of Denby and Essam and told him that she had lost a tender for the Stortford Castle Job to them. She’d also heard of Scarpetti and Son and said it had gone downhill since Scarpetti Senior had retired.

“We’d like the job,” she told Kevin, “But I’ve learned not to put all my eggs into one basket, especially when it's such a big basket. We’ll

be doing one or two small jobs alongside, just to make sure we have a cashflow. Give me a call if you want any more answers."

Kevin called Alena and met her and Jim at the Royal Oak in Coggeshall on the way home.

He told them what he'd learned and said they looked like a well organised and competent construction company. He thought they would be able to do the work and that he would be able to work with the people he had met.

Two days later he was tramping around the site of the old Centre Parks with Jade Owens and Cynthia Weatherby, while Jade's surveyors and QS got started and a crew started assembling the prefabricated accommodation units. Kevin had been there before, in his army days, crawling through the burned out buildings on a night time escape and evasion exercise.

A week later it was unrecognisable.

Sally Jones bought herself a mobile home and had it transported to the Bishops Stortford site. Michael Essam put in a septic tank and soak-away for it and put up a six foot fence enclosure around it, with a sturdy lockable gate and security lights for her.

Lee - 42

Lee came home early after her last night duty and managed to get showered and slip into the bed before waking Kevin up. She loved waking him up for sex in the morning, and loved it even more when he did the same for her. They were late getting to the Community Kitchen to meet Cindy that afternoon, but Cindy was even later and apologised saying she'd missed the bus and had to call a taxi.

Cindy looked a lot better, and told them that she was getting married and wanted Lee to be her Bridesmaid. The wedding was set for the fourth of June, in Frinton. Cindy gave Lee an invitation which included Kevin and spent an hour going on about the wedding details and the dress and the hen party and who she had

invited. Lee had seen Cindy like this before and hoped things would work out this time. Kevin was very nice about it, though Lee suspected he didn't want to be there.

They took fish and chips to St. Osyth when they visited Kevin's Great Aunt Sally, who had just recovered from another chest infection.

When Lee told her that her friend, Cindy Gibb, was getting married to John Noaks in Frinton, Sally told her that John Noaks' mother was in the care home, and introduced them to Margaret Noaks. John was her only son. Margaret was prone to seizures, according to Sally, and had suffered from several bad falls. Margaret had met Cindy, and said that she doted on John. She showed them a photo of John and told them that he was fifty six years old, but very vigorous for his age.

The Hen Party was at the Iceni Club outside Colchester, and it was dreadful. Lee was horrified when a male stripper made an appearance and mortified when Cindy sucked his penis. She stormed out and called a taxi.

She told Kevin what had happened and told her she couldn't face being Cindy's bridesmaid after that. She then told him about the dreadful night in Tenerife with Cindy and being raped. Kevin held her and told her he was sorry that she'd suffered.

Kevin left early for Thetford the next morning. Cindy knocked on the door before Lee left for the hospital. She looked bedraggled and sorry for herself. She cried and begged Lee not to abandon her, saying that she knew she had an alcohol and drug problem, but that she was doing her best.

Lee asked her to leave and threatened to throw her out if she didn't go. Cindy followed her all the way to the hospital pleading with her. When they reached the hospital, Lee turned to Cindy in exasperation, "For God's sake pull yourself together Cindy. Clean yourself up and get yourself onto a rehab programme. I don't want to see or hear from you until you can prove to me that you are

actually doing something about your addiction. Now leave me alone."

Lee thought that the only reason that Cindy didn't follow her into the hospital, was that she was too ashamed and didn't want the staff she had worked with to see her in the state she was in. That gave her a glimmer of hope that Cindy might be able to help herself. Lee knew from some of the patients that had passed through her ward, that there was little point in trying to help an addict who would not help themselves.

She walked home that evening, half convinced that Cindy would appear and continue her wheedling. She was really happy to find Kevin home. He looked tired, but said he was happy and had started teaching himself SketchUp, a program she had shown him, which she used to design small things she wanted to make.

They went for a walk after making and eating supper. Lee told him about Cindy coming to the house and following her to the hospital.

"I'm so sorry Lee," he told her pulling her close, "It's hard to see someone you know falling into the mess that is addiction. I've met more addicts than I can count. Addicts often become dependent and demanding on others for their emotional well-being." He kissed the top of Lee's head, "You have boosted my sense of self-worth. I am addicted to you."

"I'm happy to be your drug of choice," said Lee, "But I know what you mean. Don't worry, I won't let Cindy drag me down." She turned her head to look up at him, "Do you gamble?"

Kevin chuckled, "Yes I do; every time I get behind a steering wheel, or cross the road, I gamble with my life and health. Every time I let go of you I run the risk of losing to you to some lucky and more charming fellow. That is more gambling than I would like."

"You know what I mean…" Lee tightened her grip around Kevin's waist, "I'm not letting you go for any other fellow, no matter how charming he is."

“No… I don’t gamble in the conventional sense. Don’t really know how and have never felt the need. I did go into a bookies once, In Chichester when I had a hot tip from a kitchen porter I worked with. He’d started an apprenticeship as a jockey but grew too big. He gambled like crazy, and won ten thousand pounds on a horse one day, and lost it all over the next two days. I can’t remember the horse or race he advised me to bet on, but I got very confused in the betting shop and eventually walked out without placing a bet. They talk a different language. The horse did win apparently.”

“Mum’s dad used to bet on the Dog Races,” Lee told him, “She said he celebrated the wins in the pub, and let his family celebrate the losses with empty bellies at home.”

Kevin - 43

Kevin was worried… he was working long hours, but it was more out of habit than necessity. He really didn't need to. Sally was doing an excellent job at the Stortford Castle site. She still had a lot to learn, but she didn’t cut corners and was dogged about chasing up progress. He did all the project planning for Thetford, and the Alliance Construction QS was really good at keeping him updated on progress and changes, and regularly pencilled in changes on the printed PERTs. Both projects still had a long way to go, but Kevin kept wondering if he had missed something. He’d decided to learn SketchUp so that he could draw three dimensional models of the projects. It had already helped him to spot potential problems and it kept him busy and focused on the projects.

The June Partners’ Meeting had been an eye opener for him, and did nothing to ease his misgivings about being a partner. Two Partners had admitted, when challenged by Alena, that they were being investigated for “improper” business practices in Ghana, Indonesia and DRC, but both had been adamant that they had done nothing illegal. Both were partners who had lent money to Kevin to purchase his shares. The third partner that had lent money to Kevin had reported problems with their investment in an Israeli-owned defence contractor, accused of supplying spyware that had been

used to steal information from European and American defence contractors.

Malcolm Dearbourne had thanked Kevin for securing the Stortford and Thetford contracts, and went on to say that he needed to bring in more work. Kevin had not thought to respond at the meeting, but asked Alena afterwards if any of the other partners had brought in new contracts during the last quarter. She had shrugged and said there was always more pressure on new Partners. The quarterly financial report didn't make a lot of sense to Kevin, but he filed it away for reference and decided that he would wait till the next quarterly meeting before asking Kemal's advice.

Kevin wasn't sure what to think about Cindy. He didn't have a lot of friends, and had learned early in his life, that some "friends" were toxic, they encouraged bad behaviour because they wanted collaborators to make them feel less guilty about their own short comings. On the other hand he knew what it felt like to be alone and friendless. It made him wonder if he was too emotionally dependent on Lee. He decided to go for a swim.

Louise had suggested that they team up with Sally to do the Essex Epic Team Triathlon in August, and the open water swim of 2km appealed to Kevin. He sent a message to Lee's phone saying he would be in the pool and had taken her swimming stuff with him in case she wanted a swim after work. She was swimming confidently now, and was pretty fast in short bursts.

Lee joined him in the pool and swam for half an hour. They collected a take out from The Maharani on the way home.

"I've a rest day tomorrow, before I start nights on Wednesday," Lee told him while they were eating, "Can I come to site with you… I don't want to stay at home in case Cindy visits."

Kevin's mouth was full; he nodded and Lee waited patiently till he had swallowed, "Sure… I'm going to Billericay first to meet the Architect for the Thetford job and the main contractor," he laughed, "I might make a fool of myself, but I think I have found a problem in the drawings, thanks to you introducing me to SketchUp."

Lee - 44

Lee had suggested to Kevin that she wait in the car, but Jade, the manager of Alliance, had insisted that she come inside, and opened the car door for her. Lee suspected that Jade would have dragged her out of the car if she had to; she looked strong enough. Charlotte was lovely too, and made Lee feel welcome as they all crowded around Kevin's laptop in Jade's office. He apologised and said he was still a novice with SketchUp but eventually managed to show the section of the building that he thought would be a problem. Charlotte had already unrolled the plan for that section and had the corners weighted down with a stapler, hole punch, ruler and a mug without a handle that was filled with pens and pencils.

Lee moved to Kevin's left and tried to follow the discussion. She was impressed with Kevin's SketchUp model, he had learned to do a lot more than she had ever managed. Charlotte saw the problem first and thanked Kevin for saving her later embarrassment. Jade took a bit longer to spot the problem, which Lee still didn't understand. When Jade did see it she thumped a hand down on Kevin's back and laughed.

"I should have seen that myself," she said, "Well, no harm done, we can work around that easily enough. Thank you Kevin, I owe you one."

Charlotte apologised and said she would correct the drawing. She declined coffee and said she would rather get the drawing done before her next treatment.

"I owe you one too Kevin," she said, "Lunch is on me after next week's site meeting with Cynthia."

"Christ! I forgot about that," muttered Jade, "I had better mark it on my calendar." She took a yellow highlighter from the mug and coloured in the following Friday on the calendar hanging on the wall next to the PERT

They walked Charlotte to her car.

“I had a Saab just like that,” said Kevin, “I really loved that car.”

“I feel safe in it,” said Charlotte grinning, “Its built like a tank and thirsty, but I’ve had no trouble with it.”

Kevin told Lee that Charlotte was being treated for cancer at Addenbrookes, and admitted that he didn’t know, or even want to know anymore about it, saying the thought of cancer bothered him. He explained that the problem he had found would not cost anything to fix, as he’d discovered it before the foundations had been poured in that section. It would have been very difficult and costly to fix if they had waited till they were doing the upper level construction and discovered that a load bearing wall and foundation were in the wrong place.

Lee loved walking around the building site with Kevin and trying to imagine what the building was going to look like. She was very aware of Janet, a very good looking woman who helped Kevin to update the PERT plans at Thetford. Janet seemed to be measuring Lee up, but was friendly enough. She wore a heavy signet ring on her left ring finger, but that didn’t mean anything.

Lee had been nervous when Kevin offered to drive a large bulldozer that had slid down an embankment and damaged a footbridge. The driver had been injured by a section of steel rail from the bridge and had been taken to hospital by the on-site First Aid supervisor. Kevin pointed out that the bulldozer was starting to sink into the embankment, and was told by the site manager that there was nobody on site able to drive it.

Janet and the site manager, whose name Lee didn’t know, looked as nervous as Lee felt, he insisted that Kevin put on a high visibility jacket in case he ended up in the muddy water and called some of the workers to standby in case they had to get him out of the water if the machine tipped or slid further down the embankment. Kevin started the bulldozer and eased the bucket out of the bridge with a loud squealing of tortured metal, before reversing it smoothly up the embankment without any trouble at all.

“He’s bloody good!” said Janet.

“Kevin was in the Royal Engineers,” replied the site manager putting away the phone he had been filming with, “Jade’s husband was also a Sapper… he could drive anything.”

Kevin didn’t make a fuss, and half an hour later they were driving to the Stortford site.

“Getting the ‘dozer stuck in the pond might have cost us a few days of delay,” he said, “The bridge was going to be removed anyway, but it’s the driver that bothers me the most. He won’t be back at work for a while with a broken collar bone. They need another driver pronto.”

Sally Jones greeted Lee with a big smile. She was clearly enjoying her job. Fred, the site manager asked Kevin if he could stay late and meet with the commissioning architects and Charles Denby.

Kevin asked Lee if that was OK with her before agreeing. He asked Lee if she could wait for him in the canteen so that he could talk to Fred about something, but Sally insisted on taking Lee to her trailer for real coffee and home made scones.

Sally told Lee that Fred was worried about the architects, because he’d had a go at them about making changes to the drawings, and explained that there was a process, and that some Architects made changes that needed to be certified by engineers before they could be worked on. She didn’t seem concerned about it.

Lee liked the way Sally had organised her trailer and admired the framed artworks, which made Sally blush. She had done them, and said she was doing an online art course.

Kevin knocked on the trailer door and apologised for taking so long. He declined coffee and scones and asked Lee if she wanted to take a walk around the site with him. Sally came with them. Lee felt a lot more comfortable with her after their time together.

The roar of mechanical diggers made it impossible to talk, and Lee found it quite nerve wracking looking down into the huge foundation trenches they were making for the Castle. Sally pointed out the conservation observers to Lee. She had told Lee that they were very stand-offish and thought that was a shame, because most people, including the construction workers, understood the importance of protecting nature and the environment and wanted to be helpful.

They watched a huge tree being carefully removed and Sally said it was going to be repositioned. Lee could feel the earth beneath her feet shaking as the whole tree, along with a massive half-sphere of steel encased rootball was lifted out of the ground by a giant crane.

Fred was tidying up in the site office when they returned, and gratefully accepted Sally's offer to make coffee and tea when the Architects and Charles Denby arrived. Lee asked Sally if she could wait in Sally's trailer while they talked.

Kevin - 45

Charles Denby arrived first. He exuded energy and shook Kevin's hand enthusiastically, greeting him like an old friend, "Michael and Yvette send their best," he told him, "Have they bothersome buggers arrived yet?" He looked at his watch, "Its not far from Bishops Stortford; if I can get here on time from York, why can't they?" He rubbed his hands together, "Are we good for a pint or two after Fred? I fancy a game of pool too, I'm feeling lucky today."

Fred laughed, "Aye, and I'll still beat you Charles; you should stick to darts."

"Pah! I've been working on my game."

The architects, three of them, arrived half an hour late, by which time Charles and Fred had eaten all the scones that Sally had made.

Charles greeted them politely enough, and offered them luke warm tea or coffee after introducing Kevin and Sally.

“As the consultant Project Manager and critical path planner, Kevin can best explain the consequences and costs of your variations,” said Charles, “We aren’t here to argue, this is a discussion.”

The youngest of the Architects, Andrew, shook Kevin’s hand, “That sounds positive. I was worried that Mr. Morely was objecting to our proposals.”

Fred went a bit red but didn’t say anything.

“Well, perhaps you could start by reminding us of those proposals?” asked Charles, “I don’t think Kevin had been appraised of them yet.”

Fred handed out some printed correspondence. Three sheets of A4 stapled together. Kevin had been told about the proposals by Fred, but he read through them carefully before looking up. Everybody was looking at him expectantly.

“Well, if you are certain you want this done I can adjust the plan accordingly and give you a revised date. I am sure Denby and Essam can give you a price for the variations.”

The silence was eventually broken by the youngest architect, Andrew, “I’m not sure that these proposals, well not all of them, count as variations… they are simple adjustments. There are no additional costs involved.”

“Which proposals specifically?” asked Kevin.

“Hamish, could you help out here please?” asked Andrew.

The oldest architect nodded, “Mostly the changes to landscaping… this is normally done after the construction work, we had not anticipated that you would begin that so soon.”

Kevin moved across to the PERT chart on the site office wall and used his laser pointer to indicate the tasks, “As you can see, we have started landscaping. We have moved several trees, some of them rather large, to make way for your proposed waterway, driving range and putting green. Most of the embankments are more than fifty percent completed. You have received an updated copy of this chart every week since the project started. It clearly shows the date each task is scheduled to begin and expected to be completed.”

Nobody spoke, so after a while Kevin referred to the papers Fred had given him, “The reworking of the portcullis will need to be certified by an engineer, and that is not likely to cause serious delays, even if the foundations have to be enlarged, but there will be considerable additional cost especially if the larger portcullis requires a beefier mechanism. The same applies to points three, four, seven and eleven. They all have to be certified by engineers and then costed. The sooner that is done and agreed upon, the better in terms of delay.”

The silence was eventually broken by Charles, who clapped his hands before rubbing them together, “Well that sounds straight forward enough. Are we all in agreement?”

“Well… as to costs,” asked Andrew, “We were hoping to avoid additional costs at such an early stage of works.”

“We are building contractors Andrew,” said Charles evenly, “We work for money. Additional work means additional money. Consultant engineers will not certify the variations for free, and if extra materials and labour are needed, they will be costed in line with the Bill of Quantities that you signed off on when you awarded this contract to us.”

“I’d like to point out that Denby and Essam’s tender was accepted on the basis of price,” said the Architect who had not yet spoken, “As I recall, they were almost two hundred thousand pounds cheaper than the highest bidder, which was also lower than our budgeted estimate. We can, most probably, afford these variations.”

“We are going to have to explain this to the Council Arthur, and they are not going to like it,” said Andrew.

“Yes, we are,” said Arthur, “But that is not the fault of Denby and Essam or TurnKey Consultants…. they did their homework, and clearly, we did not.”

“Look,” said Charles, “We are not trying to rip anybody off. We can get the revised costs and dates to you in….” he looked at Fred and then Kevin, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“I can get costs in two days,” said Fred, “For the certification anyway. We can’t be absolutely sure of the material costs till after the engineers have given us specifications, but I can do a pretty good estimate I reckon.”

“Two days is enough for me,” Kevin told them.

“So let’s call it three days,” said Charles, “How long do you need do decide?”

“One weekday,” said Arthur, “If it takes any longer I suggest we stick to the original plan.”

Charles invited them all to the Nags Head in Bishops Stortford for a pint and a bite, Kevin and Sally declined, but the architects all agreed readily.

Kevin walked to Sally’s trailer with her. Lee, who had been reading a book, suggested they get a takeaway or go out for a meal together. Kevin was surprised but agreed, and they ended up going to an Indian restaurant near Stansted recommended by the Sikh security guard.

Kevin realised that Lee was getting Sally to talk. He relaxed and learned a lot about Sally in a surprisingly short time. She was a Catholic; her mum was French and a devout Catholic and had died while Sally was in university. Sally had gone to a convent school and liked singing, cycling and what she liked to call her “daft art”, basically drawing and painting. Her dad had run off with a much

younger woman while her mother was terminally ill in hospital and she had cut all ties with him and his family after her mother had died. She hated Port Talbot and wasn't that keen on what she called Chapel Welsh. He also learned that Fred was a practicing Catholic and collected Sally on Sundays to take her to Mass in Stansted.

They took Sally back to the site, where the big Sikh made sure that she locked the gate to her little fenced in garden.

"I think she is really lonely," said Lee, as they drove away, "Mr. Vikram, the security guard is very protective of her."

"I think she is happy there," said Kevin, feeling bad for not paying that much attention to Sally before.

"Yes she is," said Lee, "But you can be lonely and happy at the same time. Would you mind if I invited her to Colchester for a weekend?"

"Of course not," said Kevin, "Louise wants to see her too… about the triathlon in August."

Lee - 46

Lee thought that Sally was a little in love with Kevin and very much in awe of him, but she was surprised at how comfortable she felt about it. She also suspected that Sally was a virgin, and was determined to befriend the girl. She'd met young nurses like Sally, good girls, determined to make their way in the world, and petrified of failing. She scowled when she thought about Cindy and the contrast between her and Sally.

Kevin hadn't said much about the meeting he'd had with the architects; only that it had gone well. She knew that he was still uncomfortable about being a partner, but he didn't talk about it. His Great Aunt Sally said that he seemed pre-occupied and asked him what was bothering him when they had seen her last. Kevin had just smiled and apologised.

Cindy had put a card in their letter box; so she had visited. The card, just said “I’m So Very Sorry Lee - please don’t abandon me?” and had a picture of a forlorn looking kitten. Lee put it straight into the waste bin.

After an early swim, Kevin spent most of the next morning at the computer, and they walked to the Community Kitchen for lunch. Lee still fretted about the waste of money eating out so often, but Kevin said he would rather spend the money than lose the time to shopping, preparing food and washing up.

Over lunch he told her that he’d been invited to attend a reunion at the Royal Engineers barracks in Chatham over the weekend and wanted to attend. Lee was working nights over the weekend anyway. He told her that he hadn’t attended for a couple of years, and wanted to attend this time, if that was OK with her.

“Of course you should attend,” Lee told him, “You don’t need my permission, but you do have my blessing. It will do you good to see some of your old mates.”

Keven grinned wryly, “Not so many old mates, but there are one or two that I wouldn’t mind seeing. No, I suppose the main reason I want to go is to remind myself that I used to be part of something that I was proud of. I learned a lot in the Engineers.”

“Like driving that huge bulldozer yesterday… you made it look so easy.”

“Everything’s easy when you know how,” said Kevin with his embarrassed smile.

“Well, you are part of something now that you should be proud of. you are a consultant project engineer and a Partner in TurnKey Consulting.”

Kevin laughed, “A paper tiger… that’s all TurnKey is, but I like the work I do. You look after people who have had terrible accidents, helping them to get their lives back together. Much more important.”

“There’s a fair number of vanity cases too,” said Lee.

“Like my nose!” said Kevin grinning and pushing his nose to the left.

“You spent six hours on the ward… and slept for most of it,” said Lee.

Kevin - 47

Kevin was pleasantly surprised when he got two referrals for project planning from Lucy Mitchell, one was for a Residential Training Centre outside Cambridge, and the other, a complicated renovation job on a fire damaged National Trust owned Stately Home in Hedingham.

He visited his Great Aunt Sally, taking fish and chips. Sally was out of sorts and told him it was about time that he married Lee. Despite saying that she wasn’t hungry, she finished her fish and chips and thrashed Kevin at Scrabble while complaining that he really ought to learn to play Whist or Bridge. Apparently Lee was very good at Whist.

By the weekend Kevin had received two more project planning jobs, one from a client of Charlotte’s for a stable conversion outside Cheltenham, and another from a large contracting company, Stanton Construction, for an eighty-five house new build near Chigwell on the M11.

Kevin set off to Chatham after making breakfast for Lee when she got home from nights. The last time he had driven there, had been in his Saab, and it had taken an hour and twenty minutes, though he had left Chichester at four AM. This time it took three and a half hours but it wasn’t too bad; the Shogun was comfortable and he had enjoyed listening to the radio. He arrived in time for lunch and put himself down for watersports and pub games when he registered. He was definitely not playing seven-a-side rugby again… ever.

There were one or two vaguely familiar faces in the mess hall, but none that he knew names to. He sat at a table with three much older guys and happily listened to their tales.

They'd changed the venue since he had last visited, to a large hanger. Kevin spent an hour or so reading the notice boards, and was sad that so many of them were death announcements. He saw that his name was listed in a team for pool games at the swimming pool at 16:00, none of the other names were familiar to him. He set his phone alarm to buzz at 15:30 and sat in on a talk on Active Health given by a good looking young woman.

He retraced his steps to the barrack room and got his swimming kit before heading to the pool, which looked a lot better than it used to. Kevin recognised one of his former colleagues who was also heading to the pool, but couldn't remember his name till he saw his visitors badge. Geoff knew him straight away,

"Fuck me Coombes, you fixed your conk!" he said grinning widely as they shook hands, "Nearly didn't recognise you. How's it going in civvy street?"

"All good thanks Geoff. How long have you been out?"

"Just a year mate, did the full twenty two and then three more years as a Rupert. Can you imagine me as a Captain?"

"Yes Sir!" said Kevin, snapping a salute, "Well done. Are you enjoying being a civvy?"

"It's alright… a bit boring. I'm thinking of going to Australia… new start. So what are you doing as a civvy?"

"Project management in construction," said Kevin, "I like it… mostly."

"Not the same though is it? I miss the Corps you know, having a sense of purpose."

Kevin nodded, “Yes, I miss that, but it is what it is. Are you doing the pool games?”

“Not me… I don’t even like water in my whisky,” said Geoff with a grin, “No, I’m just going to check in with a mate who works at the gym. Allard - did you know him? SSM Allard now.”

Kevin shook his head.

Kevin was in a team of ten, and didn't know any of them, though one said he recognised him. They were all good swimmers, but some were not so fit. The events were well organised and good fun, despite some participants being more competitive than others. Kevin’s group won the pool tug-of-war, which was thankfully the last event as two of the team got so exhausted they threw up afterwards. They almost won the changing relay, where participants had to change into a set of overalls before swimming fifty metres. Kevin struggled to get into the overalls, but managed to overtake three swimmers to get second place. His team mates ribbed him gently for having such wide shoulders. They did well enough in all the other events and were all surprised when they ended up as the overall winners. They chose the smallest and youngest team member, Dawn, to collect the trophy.

The dinner that evening was the main event. Kevin had taken his mess dress, and was surprised that it was a little loose. There were five long parallel tables and the seating plan had Kevin sat between and opposite former sergeants, two of which he knew.

The dinner began as he remembered, but the roll call of the deceased was a lot longer than he expected. When he mentioned it, Graham, who was on his left, a former combat engineer sergeant who had only just left after 15 years, told him that six of his mates had been killed while volunteering in Ukraine.

The speeches were a little tedious, but Kevin enjoyed listening to the chatter. The two men he had served with had both emigrated, one to Canada and the other to Brunei, and had returned for the reunion. The fellow opposite Kevin, Jack, who had left the engineers before Kevin had joined, said he was working as a driver

for UNHCR in Ukraine… he seemed a little unhinged and was drinking steadily.

They started mingling when desserts and coffee were brought in. Kevin felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see a familiar face.

“I nearly didn’t recognise you Sergeant Coombes, not with the beard. May I join you?”

Kevin stood and held out the chair, “I’d be honoured Ma’am,” he said, “I thought you were moving permanently to Washington?”

“I did,” said Colonel Gibson, “But one can still travel, and I miss this life, so…” she shrugged and sat, “What are you doing with yourself these days? You were with a mobster construction company the last time I checked.”

Kevin laughed, “Skarpetti and Son… yes, I was, but I moved to Colchester a few years ago. I do the same; project management for TurnKey Consultants.”

“Well, you are looking fit and very dapper… not married yet I see?” she held up her left hand, “I married a Yankee Redneck, West Point and Oil Money. Bastard wants kids…” she made a face.

“Congratulations!” said Kevin, laughing, “Good luck with the kids. I’ve popped the question, but we haven‘t settled on a date…” He shrugged.

“Just do it,” she said, “Its not like it has to be forever anymore.”

“Are you still serving?” asked Kevin.

“No… not for three years now. Ted’s attached to the DoD, and will do a few more years. I consult now… much more money, for doing much less. You should try it.”

“I am,” admitted Kevin, “I feel like an absolute fraud… but the money is good.”

Colonel Gibson really laughed at that. She put a hand over her mouth to stop herself, “I’m so sorry Kevin, but that is exactly what I said to Ted. And I’ll tell you what he told me - You must be doing it right then!”

They talked for hours and she insisted that he call her Nancy. She had been one of Kevin’s instructors and had taught Building Information Management, or BIM. Now she worked as a consultant for American Defence contract works in overseas territories, doing much the same as Kevin, but she used BIM 360 software rather than MicroPlanner. They exchanged contact details and Nancy told him to contact her if ever he wanted to visit Washington. He walked her to the Officer’s mess at around three in the morning before going to bed.

Somehow Kevin managed to get up in time for breakfast, and ended up at a table comprised of most of his swimming team mates from the previous day. Some looked pretty rough. It was a good sociable breakfast. Kevin learned that Dawn Kemp, who was a lot older than she looked, had only just left the military and had been a project planner. She had not yet found a job and was working as a checkout operator in the Tunbridge Wells Waitrose. He gave her a business card and asked her to send him a CV and a copy of her service record.

Two of the others were from Chelmsford and asked Kevin for a lift. One, Mick Putt, a former plant operator mechanic with twenty two years service, was living on his pension and doing odd jobs for fun. Kevin suggested he contact Alliance Construction in Billericay, who might be looking for an experienced plant operator. He gave Mick Jade’s email address.

Kevin managed to wake up Lee the way she liked to be woken up and took her to the Maharani for an early supper before her night shift.

“This might seem a bit sudden,” he said, while they were waiting for their food, “But I want to marry you… as soon as possible. Please will you marry me Lee? I’ll go down on one knee…”

“Don’t you dare!” said Lee, getting up and throwing her arms around his neck, “Yes…of course I’ll marry you.”

Lee - 48

Lee couldn't remember much about the meal. She was still feeling good after Kevin’s very welcome waking of her, and was having trouble getting her head around getting married. She wanted to shout and dance around like a mad woman and told herself to focus on her work before she made a mistake.

Kevin seemed much more relaxed when he got back from Chatham, he hadn’t said much about it but … She felt her face growing warm… there had not been much time for chatting.

She wished her mum was still alive… she needed to talk to someone, and that was not going to be Cindy.

The night seemed to drag on forever and she had to force herself to stay calm while doing the handover. She ran most of the way to the flat, hoping that Kevin would still be asleep. He was up, and had already been to the pool. She dragged him back to bed anyway.

Kevin was up and working at the computer when Lee woke. She kissed his neck and wrapped her arms around his wide shoulders.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I need to go out soon, and I’ll probably be out all day and go straight to work. It’s a girl thing, about getting married. OK?”

Kevin grumbled but agreed, and said he needed to take a walk and get something to eat anyway. He was gone by the time Lee had showered.

She called and arranged to visit Sally, Kevin’s Great Aunt, and asked the care assistant to tell Sally that she wanted to talk about getting married to Kevin. The assistant told her that Sally was

waiting to see her. She thought about Cindy on her way to St. Osyth and decided she couldn't deal with Cindy yet.

Kevin - 49

Kevin suddenly had more work than he had time with which to do it. He decided to let Sally do the planning outline for the Cheltenham Stable conversion, he was reluctant to ask any of the other three project planners at TurnKey Projects for help, they were busy enough with the work they specialised in, which was not building construction, and none of them were interested in using MicroPlanner. Dave Little had put in an official letter of complaint saying that Kevin had been given preferential treatment when Kevin was made an Associate Partner. Dave had been at TurnKey Consultants two years longer than Kevin and had a masters degree in project management. He worked mostly on Mine Exploration and Corporate Expansion projects. Myra had been with TurnKey Consultants since it started, and worked with IT and product developments. She had apparently refused an offer to be an Associate Partner. Louise had told Kevin that Myra was the highest paid employee in TurnKey Consultants and she never stayed late.

He had forwarded Dawn Kemp's CV to Alena, saying that he would like to give her a try out, but Alena had not responded beyond acknowledging the email. The September Quarterly meeting was approaching and Kevin decided to wait till then before following up on Dawn Kemp.

He was very relieved that Lee had agreed to marry him, and felt guilty about leaving her to make all the arrangements. The only people he was keen to invite were his Great Aunt Sally, Louise and Marissa.

He had agreed to collect Sally and her bicycle the morning before the Essex Epic. Lee had already prepared the spare room in his flat for Sally. Kevin had not managed to get any open water training done though he had swum an hour most mornings at the pool using his resistance strap. Louise had also been pressed for time because of work related issues and only Sally seemed properly

prepared for the event. Marissa had taken charge of all the logistics and had two student helpers.

Sally talked non-stop from the minute they left the site till they arrived at Kevin's flat. They met with Louise and Marissa at the Community Kitchen for lunch. Lee joined them looking pale from lack of sleep, having stayed up to greet Sally when she arrived.

Marissa was very organised and had everything ready for them and asked Kevin and Lee to check that their cars were fuelled and ready to go. Lee was driving Sally and her bicycle to Frinton with Andy, the cycle "mechanic". Kevin, Louise, Marissa and Sandy, the "medic" would go in Kevin's car to Walton on the Naze and Louise would drive the car, Marissa and Sandy to Frinton, and then, after Kevin finished the swim and Sally set off on her bike, Louise would take Kevin, Marissa and Sandy to Basildon where they would wait for Sally. Lee and Andy would follow the cyclists and then take Sally and her bicycle to Southend to see the finish once Louise started on the run.

Lee went to bed shortly after they had lunch. Sally helped Kevin to check both vehicles and then checked her bike and equipment. They went to Cafe Med for a pasta supper, and had an early night.

Lee managed to get up and make coffee and porridge without waking Kevin, then got him up and ready before Louise and Marissa arrived with Andy and Sandy all crammed into Louise's tiny car.

Kevin was dismayed to see so many swimmers crowding onto the beach. Louise, ever the quantity surveyor, said there were about a hundred, but it looked like more to Kevin. It was a cool morning and a brisk wind made the water look a bit choppy. The umpires used megaphones to get them into their age groups. There were only twelve in Kevin's group, the bulk of the swimmers were younger, and there were only about thirty swimmers left on the beach when Kevin and his group were asked to get ready. He handed his tracksuit and trainers to Marissa, and got a kiss on the cheek from her and Louise and felt the butterflies begin to tremble in his belly for the first time.

The water was cold, but bearable. It took Kevin a few minutes to get into the right rhythm. He had no trouble keeping a good line and sensed a lifeguard following quite close behind him in a kayak. He stopped counting the swimmers he passed after twenty, and concentrated on keeping a steady pace and the right distance from the shore. He had no idea how long he had been swimming but was feeling quite good when he saw people on the beach cheering him on, he risked a heads up forward look and saw the finish line, and at least ten swimmers ahead of him. He pressed a little harder and managed to pass eight more before he saw the finish line again, about fifty metres ahead, he picked up the pace again but there was no one in the water to pass. His legs felt a bit wobbly when he started to run and he saw Marissa waving a lurid pink flag, guiding him towards Sally. He passed one young man who was retching with his hands on his knees and waited till he reached the official waiting next to Sally before removing the rubber wrist band with their team name and number and showed it to the official before handing it to Sally who was grinning madly. She look of with a loud “whoop” as Lee handed Kevin an opened bottle of water and draped a towel over his shoulders. “You did well,” she shouted and blew him a kiss before setting off with Andy to follow Sally in the car. Marissa collected Kevin after getting Kevin’s time from the official recorder, One hour fifteen minutes and twenty five seconds. Louise and Marissa were both very pleased but it didn't mean a great deal to Kevin.

Marissa gave him coffee and a chocolate brownie when he had changed, and walked with him to the car. Louise drove them to Basildon and told Kevin that he had given Sally a really good head start. Kevin went in search of some hot food when they got to Basildon, leaving Marissa and Louise in the carpark watching the live coverage of the race on an iPad. He got himself some fish and chips and then had a cappuccino before heading back to the car park. Louise and Marissa were getting very excited, and said that Sally was in sixth place. Marissa got Louise to start warming up.

Marissa started yelling and waving her flag around when the first cyclist crossed the finish line. Louise was jogging gently on the

spot, her eyes half closed. Sally came in fourth, and handed the wrist band to Louise who took off with a tensely whispered “Thanks”

Marissa hugged Sally and kissed her cheeks, telling her she had done really well. Kevin took her bike and steadied her while she got her breath and shook life back into her arms and legs. By the time Lee and Andy arrived, Sally was curled up fast asleep on the back seat of the Shogun with a half eaten Snickers bar in her hand.

They had trouble finding parking in South End. Kevin dropped Andy, Marissa and Sally by the pier before going in search of parking.

Lee and Kevin yelled encouragement as soon as they saw the runners. Louise was struggling but was in third place and gaining on the man in second place, who just managed to stay ahead of her.

Kevin shouldered a way through the crowd with Lee holding onto him. An official eventually allowed them into the competitors’ area when Marissa intervened.

Louise looked like she was sobbing while a young woman was rubbing something on her shins. Lee told him that Sandy had gone with an ambulance that had taken one of the cyclists to hospital. Louise was actually laughing and said her shins were killing her. Marissa bundled her off to get cleaned up and changed and handed Kevin the folder with their times and details.

There was a large tent where they could get refreshments, and a large screen where they showed footage from the competition and results. There was a complicated handicap system, which was causing some trouble judging by the red faces and the delay announcements.

Kevin, Sally and Louise had all come first in their age groups. Sally was the fastest woman on a bicycle, Louise was the fasted female runner and Kevin was the second fastest swimmer overall. The gender and age handicap meant that TurnKey had come in second overall, though this was hotly contested by Marissa, who said they were first. Louise told her not to worry about it. Sally was indignant for the team but very pleased about being the fastest female,

apparently there was an ex-Team GB member in the race. Kevin was happy when it was all over and they could go home. They all agreed to meet up in the Bottled Crab to celebrate over dinner.

The dinner was fun, despite Marissa and Sandy not attending. Louise apologised and said she had upset Marissa over the results. She said she competed for her enjoyment, and arguing over handicaps didn't interest her. Sandy had told Andy that she was too tired to attend.

Kevin was up early the next morning to drive to Chigwell to meet the Stanton Construction management team at the proposed site. Lee said she would take Sally back to Stortford. They seemed to get on well.

Kevin got to the Chigwell site half an hour early, the early Sunday traffic had been very light. A security guard allowed him to park in the well lit parking lot and said it was OK for Kevin to wander around the site. The two large conjoined pre-fabs included a pre-sales office with a model of the completed project on a large table. Kevin went for a walk, more to stretch his stiff muscles, than anything else. A grid of dirt roads had been created and a TLB, grader and water bowser were parked in the parking lot. There weren't many trees standing and the ground seemed heavily compacted. Kevin guessed it must have been some sort of lorry park or container yard.

He made his way back to the parking lot when two Mercedes saloon cars drove towards the site.

Greg Stanton was a big man in his seventies or eighties, slightly deaf, with very bushy eyebrows and a strong Yorkshire accent. He greeted Kevin affably and introduced his son, Gregory, who was a little shorter and slimmer than his father, but still well over six foot. The woman who unlocked the offices was Ms. Norton, and the site manager and architect were both Alan's, one bald and the other with a ponytail and gold earring.

Ms, Norton, who asked Kevin to call her Grace, was the Administrator, she gave Kevin a site folder and asked him to sit while Greg, surprisingly, busied himself with making tea and coffee.

“Thanks for coming Kevin,” said Gregory, “You were recommended to dad by Charles Denby of Denby and Essam; he says you saved them eight weeks and many thousands of pounds at Barnard Castle. I understand you are a BIM expert?”

“I still call it Critical Path Planning,” said Kevin, “But I am told that Building Information Management is the correct term.”

“We, that is Alan Hobbs,” he indicated the site manager, “Uses MS 365 project, are you familiar with it?”

“Familiar… but I don’t use it myself. I am able to import it into my preferred software, MicroPlanner and can export Gantts and PERTS and some data to MS 365 Project format, but if I am to do your planning, I would prefer to send you PDF PERTS that you can have printed in large format or view with a projector like the one you have here.”

Greg handed out coffee and tea and seated himself between Grace and Gregory.

“Has Gregory told you what we want from you Kevin?” he asked, “I’ll ask you to speak loudly please? I’m a bit deaf and need new batteries for my hearing aid.”

“I was explaining what software I use!” said Kevin.

“Aye well, the thing is, Charles Denby says you have a system that allows you to predict the outcome of any…. challenges, shall we say.” He glanced at Grace, “Ms. Norton doesn’t abide coarse language,” he chuckled. “The thing is, Gregory here wants to learn it, and we’re hoping you can show us what it can do and give him some on-the-job training?”

Kevin nodded, “I can do that.” he said, “I’m guessing you have a project plan for the site already? If you let me have that, the BOQ

and drawings, I'll put together a preliminary PERT, after which I can show you what can be done with it. If you like it, we can take it from there."

"How much will it cost us?" asked Grace.

"For the preliminary PERT and a four hour review will be two thousand pounds, perhaps a little less if your BOQ is, as I suspect, made of several standard housing units."

"And if we agree to proceed?" asked Grace.

"That will depend on how much of my time you use," said Kevin, "Mostly I should be able to work remotely. I charge a hundred and fifty pounds an hour. "

"Could our own planner take over the day to day management and updating of the plan after you have set it up?" asked Gregory, "A hundred and fifty pounds an hour adds up quite quickly."

"That's entirely up to you," Kevin replied, "You would have to purchase the software, a single user licence is around eight hundred pounds."

"That's a lot of money for software," said Gregory.

"It is," Kevin agreed, "There may be cheaper BIM packages out there… I really do not know any of them, as I have been using XPert for eight years now. The annual upgrades aren't expensive.

Gregory looked uncomfortable, Greg drummed his fingers on the table and looked around the table, "Well, what do you think?"

Site manager Alan spoke first, "I'd say two thousand pounds is worth it," he glanced at Grace, "Perhaps it can be written up as professional development?"

Grace nodded, “Yes, that is possible, I think, but how much time and money can this software save us in reality?”

“Denby and Essam run a tight operation,” said Alan the site manager, “They used 365 Project to start with, and said that Kevin saved them eight weeks and almost eighty thousand pounds on an eighteen month project. We expect to be a year here, at least … “

Alan the Architect raised his hand to speak, and waited for Greg’s nod before turning to Kevin, “How much of the savings was down to your software? Could anyone have done what you did?”

Kevin grinned, “Smart question. OK, you are all familiar with the expression rubbish in, rubbish out I think? Computers are not infallible, as far as I know there are no AI BIM programmes out there ready to replace us. XPert is a computer programme, if you make mistakes, it will adversely affect the outcome. I am told that I have an obsession with detail, and that helps with XPert. There are no shortcuts, getting the linkages and data right is important. I like to update the data every day, and I also like to double check the data. I can usually tell within a few weeks whether I am being lied to. It happens, but it's easy enough to spot if you pay attention.”

Greg asked for some examples, and that got them all involved, recalling incidents and the outcomes. Eventually Greg announced that he’d heard enough.

“Thank you Kevin. We’ll consider it and let you have an answer tomorrow. Personally I’m in favour, with one or two reservations that have nothing to do with you.”

Greg walked Kevin to his car and thanked him again, “I’m thinking this programme of yours needs the right person, and that’s not Gregory… it needs to be someone who can stand-back and speak out… Am I right?”

Kevin nodded, “I was trained in the army, and my instructor always said that the planner should not be involved in the actual project, except as a planner, less chance of a conflict of interest.” She does BIM consulting for the American Department of Defence now.”

Kevin's phone rang as he was driving back to Colchester, it was Alena.

"I believe congratulations are in order?" she said, "On two fronts. Have you and Lee agreed a date?"

"Not as far as I know," said Kevin, "I've left the gory details to Lee…"

Alena laughed, "Well, Jim always calls our marriage a life sentence, but alright, I'll speak with Lee… can you let me have her phone number. She will need female advice."

"Thanks Alena, I'll do that as soon as I get home."

He told her about the meeting at Chigwell. Alena was quiet for a while, then told him that she had interviewed Dawn Kemp on WhatsApp Video, and had offered her a position. She hadn't heard back from her.

"Thanks Alena," he said, "I was getting worried about having to turn down work."

"How are you feeling after your swim yesterday? Louise said you were second overall and won your age group?"

"I'm a little stiff, but OK," he said, "Sally and Louise were outstanding, they were both the fastest women in their events."

"It's in the Essex Chronicle, you all look so fresh in the photos! I think I'd die trying any of those events."

"Training helps," said Kevin, "Thanks for letting me know about Dawn, I hope she accepts."

Lee and Sally were still in Colchester when he got back. Kevin was surprised to learn that Lee had accompanied Sally to Mass, and they had then met up with Louise and Marissa at the Community Kitchen for brunch.

Kevin drove them to Storton, and had a quick look around the site while Lee and Sally chatted in Sally's trailer. The big Sikh security guard arrived with his dog and greeted Kevin politely. They walked together for a while, and Kevin learned that Vikram had also been born in Zambia, but his parents had been expelled in the seventies and his father's home and cycle repair business were given to one of Kenneth Kaunda's "enforcers" in the UNIP youth.

"They call them Cadres now," said Kevin, "I read a while ago that some of the ruling party cadres ransacked the main police station in Lusaka."

Vikram nodded, "My parents were driven out of Uganda by Amin, and out of Zambia by Kaunda, my grandparents left Kashmir when Pakistan took over the area they lived in. Muslims don't get on with Sikhs. Now we have to worry about Farage. My wife wants to move to Canada, but I'm not so sure."

"Being different is difficult," said Kevin, "We need to celebrate our differences, but it seems there is always someone trying to exploit our differences to gain influence."

Vikram laughed, "My father says the same. He says if we were all the same colour and religion, we would fight over height or size."

"I saw the inter-clan violence in Afghanistan," said Kevin, "That was really scary. I'm told it's even worse in Sudan."

"Basically people are shits when they get into groups," said Vikram.

"I think you are right there, gang mentality can be ugly."

While they were driving back to Colchester, Lee asked Kevin if he thought Sally was attractive.

"Yes… well she is pretty, she has a nice figure and she is an interesting and well mannered person, what is there not to like?"

“She’s twenty six and never had a boyfriend,” said Lee, “She says it doesn’t bother her, but…”

“Well, I’m a bit old for her, but if you want…Ouch! What did you hit me for?”

“We are getting married… and you had better behave!”

“Have you worked out a date yet?”

“I wanted to discuss it with you… I mean, all the details, but you seem busy.”

Kevin nodded, “I feel a bit overwhelmed really, but this is important and when we have settled on a date, I’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Well, it also depends on who we want to attend, I know you said your Great Aunt Sally, Louise and Marissa, but Alena called while you were walking around the site and said that she and Jim would like to attend if it's possible, she also offered to help with a venue… there’s a chapel and a Barn that they had fixed up for their daughter’s wedding that we can use for a reception.”

“I’m happy with them if you are Lee… you can invite whoever you want and make it as simple or as fancy as you want. The only person I will be paying any real attention to on the day will be you.”

“God you’re a smooth talker Kevin Coombes… how is it you are still single?”

“Because I hadn’t met you.”

Lee laughed, “Well I’m flattered, but what about after? Can you afford to take time off for a honeymoon?”

“I think so… probably at least a week, but it would have to be some where with good internet so that I can deal with any problems.”

“Any ideas where?”

“Portugal? I always wanted to visit Portugal, but I don’t know much about it. Let’s eat at the Maharani and look up holidays in Portugal while we are there!”

By ten PM they had agreed on Albufeira for the last week of September, so they could have a Solstice Wedding.

Kevin was up at four AM the next morning, hoping to catch up on work. There was an email from Dawn Kemp asking him to recommend somewhere for her to rent near Marks Tey as she had accepted the job offer from TurnKey Consultants. She had a motorbike but didn't want to ride to work through winter. He emailed back, suggesting that she come up to Colchester for a couple of days and use his guest room, while he put her through her paces with MicroPlanner XPert. He said that she could work from home if she wanted to. He suggested that she message him on WhatsApp when he could call and discuss things further.

He got a message two minutes later saying she could talk any time from now till seven AM when she had to leave for Waitrose. He called her back straight away. She was happy to work from home, and said she could start immediately in that case. She sounded reserved about staying in Kevin’s guest room, so he assured her she would be safe, that he lived with his girlfriend and they were getting married on the 22nd of the month. She said she would arrange a couple of days off and get back to him. She also said she had to give thirty days notice at Waitrose, and would prefer to wait a week or two before doing that, though she was happy to work up to eight hours a day seven days a week outside of her eight AM to four PM shifts at Waitrose. Kevin talked her through downloading the XPert software, and sent her a User Key.

Lee was still asleep when he let himself out to go for a swim and he happily woke her up when he got back after six. They went to the Community Kitchen for breakfast and he told her that he had invited Dawn to spend a couple of nights in the guest room and why. Lee seemed a bit reserved about it and he apologised, saying he hadn’t really thought about it. “I’ll book her into the Premier Inn,” he said, “I can claim it on expenses, and she will probably feel a lot more comfortable there.”

“She’ll think I’m a right cow,” said Lee, “And I am…only I was going to ask you if Sally Jones can spend a few nights … I’ve asked her to be my Bridesmaid and…”

Kevin laughed, “Problem solved, don’t worry about it. Dawn will be fine.”

“What does she look like?” asked Lee

Kevin fetched out his phone and found the group shots from the reunion and pointed out Dawn.

“She’s just a kid!” said Lee, “What’s she going to do at TurnKey?”

“She’s twenty six I think,” said Kevin, “She’s a project planner… I want her to take some of the planning work off me. Like Sally does.”

“She hardly looks seventeen!”

“I thought so too, she is small, but gutsy. You’ll probably like her.”

Greg Stanton called while they were walking back to the flat, he told Kevin to go ahead with the proposal he’d made and said Ms. Norton would email the confirmation and arrange payment and all the details with him.

Lee set off to meet Marissa, leaving Kevin to get on with work. He skipped lunch and managed to clear all the work he needed to do for the Thetford and Storton Sites. He met Lee and Marissa at Cafe Med for coffee and a sandwich at four PM and told Lee he was going to be working late. He finished the preliminary plan outline for the Chigwell site at two in the morning and had to take a walk to clear his head before showering and going to bed. Lee woke him at seven when he failed to wake to his alarm. He had another long day but by midnight he was happy with the Chigwell Plan. He emailed Grace Norton asking when it would convenient for him to present the Project Plan to Greg and the others, saying it had to be before the 22nd of September or after the eighth of October.

He managed to wake up in time to get half an hour of swimming done and get back to the flat in time to wake Lee up at seven. She woke him up again at nine AM to tell him his phone was ringing and she was going out.

It was Grace Norton asking if Kevin could manage a visit that evening. He said he would have to call her back and called Lee, who said that was fine as she was having a night out with the girls. Kevin confirmed with Grace and when his phone rang again it was Dawn, saying that she was in Colchester and asking him to send a WhatsApp Pin for his location.

She arrived ten minutes later on a huge motorbike.

“Sorry, but my supervisor told me this morning, when I arrived for shift, that I could have today and tomorrow off… so here I am!”

Kevin nodded, “Nice bike, bad timing, but we can make this work. Have you had breakfast?”

Kevin pointed out the Premier Inn and asked her to make her way there and wait for him in Reception. He jogged there and got her a room, then walked to the Community Kitchen with her, explaining about the wedding.

“Sorry Boss,” said Dawn grinning cheerfully, “Looks like you’re in over your head, good thing you can swim.”

In the end it all worked out really well. Dawn was a quick learner, and had already familiarised herself with XPert, which she liked. She went to Chigwell with Kevin and sat quietly through his presentation. It went well. His preliminary plan showed a completion two weeks later than the Gannt done by the site manager, Alan. Kevin already knew that he could save several weeks, but waited till they had asked him to demonstrate the outcome of several scenarios and were tired of that before demonstrating the real power of critical path planning. Kevin was pleased to see how engaged Dawn was with it and encouraged her to ask questions. When he had shortened the project by three weeks, he asked them to suggest ways to improve the plan.

“It never hurts to ask; ‘what if we did it this way or that way?’ As long as you have added your resources properly and set up the tasks correctly, the programme will show you how long it will take and how much it will cost. You can save each idea separately. It helps to think outside of the box and challenge the norms. I’m going to throw in a suggestion of my own; Landscaping… in your plan the landscaping starts after the roofs are on… what if you started landscaping as soon as you started building, how much time would that save?”

“It doesn't make sense,” said Alan, the site manager, “It would be chaos with too many contractors on site at the same time. Also the dust…” He shook his head, “And then we’d have building contractors bug…. messing up the lawns and such.”

“Well, you can get the road grid in first, and a driveway to each house on your model,” said Dawn pointing at the scale model of the project, “There’s no need for anyone to drive over the landscaping area, they can use the roads. There’ll be less dust when you’re finishing the buildings if the trees, lawns and hedges are established by then.”

“It would take very detailed planning,” said Alan, the Architect, “But it might work!”

“It could be staggered,” said Grace, “You could start at the north end, finish building the houses there and get started on the landscaping there while building starts on the next row of houses and work your way down that way… well that’s what I think!” She had gone very red.

“I like that idea Ms. Norton,” said Greg, “What do you think son?”

Gregory smiled, “I think I‘d ask Kevin to run it and let me know.” He looked at Kevin as he spoke.

Kevin nodded and pressed a key on his keypad, “I took the liberty of running it through the Programme, much as Grace described, but working from West to East rather than North to South, I think

Grace's suggestion is better. I've added an additional ten percent on time and materials for the landscaping, because there will be damage, but it reduced the project time by an additional two and a half weeks."

"Are you certain?" asked Greg, "About the figures I mean?"

Kevin shrugged, "I've used the data you gave me, if that is accurate then I am certain." He looked at his watch, "Tomorrow I'll email a PDF of this and the other scenarios that we did. You can study them and look for mistakes, but I need to wrap up now. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity. I hope we can work together."

Gregory asked him to send the last PERT to his phone, so that he could project it on the screen and discuss it with the others..

Greg saw Dawn and Kevin out and shook both their hands, "Well I am convinced. Thank you Kevin. Ms. Norton will be in touch. Perhaps she should be our planner eh? She's sharp is Ms. Norton."

In the car, Dawn told him that she was also convinced. He asked if she was hungry and they stopped for a late supper at the Royal Oak in Coggeshall. Dawn asked a lot of questions about XPert and some Kevin found difficult to answer. He dropped her at the Premier Inn and told her that she could set off back to Tunbridge Wells in she morning, unless she had any more questions for him, which he would deal with in the morning, any time after eight.

She said she would like to play around with the Chigwell plan, with him around to help her if she had any trouble and perhaps leave at midday.

Sally's bicycle was in the hallway, but neither Sally or Lee were home when he got back to his flat. It was after midnight when Lee slipped into bed, trying not to wake him. She told him that they'd had a really good night at the Bottled Crab and that Alena was sharing the guest room with Sally. They had also taken his Great Aunt Sally to the Hen night and said that she had really enjoyed herself. Lee hadn't had any alcohol as she was driving, but Alena

had got quite drunk, both Sally's had had a few drinks and got on really well.

Lee - 50

Lee was getting worried about Kevin, he had lost weight and had dark rings under his eyes. He never complained, but Lee could see that he was worried, and was certain that it was about work, though she did think that perhaps the prospect of getting married might also be worrying him. She had confided in Marissa, who told Louise, who must have told Alena. Alena called her to congratulate her on getting married, and had since gone out of her way to befriend her.

Lee liked Alena, and really appreciated her help, but she was reluctant to voice her concerns about Kevin's workload to her.

Kevin's Great Aunt Sally had also noticed, and told Lee not to worry about it, as that wouldn't help her or Kevin, saying; "He has always been the sort of boy that insists on getting his chores done, putting work before play. Once he has found his footing as a Partner, he'll get things organised and find a better balance."

Lee had stopped asking Kevin what he wanted for the wedding. When she had asked him to take a look at the different dresses that she had modelled, he scrolled through the photos Marissa had taken, and told her he liked them all. When Lee, slightly exasperated, asked if he would be happier if she wore nothing, he grinned, picked her up, carried her to the bedroom and ravished her before going back to the computer.

Lee was determined to be there for Kevin, to make sure that he wanted to come home, to her, whenever he had an opportunity. She remembered all too well how her mother's resentment of her father working late to meet tax deadlines had fouled the atmosphere at home, to the point when her father, who was not really a drinking man, began going to the pub rather than face the month-end and especially financial year-end dinner table recriminations at home.

Lee was surprised at how excited she was about getting married, not just about being married to Kevin, but the actual wedding. Sally Jones had been delighted when Lee asked her to be her bridesmaid, and had encouraged her to make the most of her “Big Day” with infectious enthusiasm. Alena was also quietly determined, saying that unless Lee considered marriage to Kevin as a practice run for something better, she should make it as memorable as possible. She had generously offered her home as a venue, and it really was perfect.

The Hen Night at the Bottled Crab had been fun too, even though Lee hadn’t had any alcohol at all; the memory of Cindy’s awful behaviour at the Iceni Club was still too fresh in her mind. Alena had been very amusing, and had them all in stitches with some of her outrageous stories. The two Sally’s had got on very well too, and Sally Jones was just as nice when she’d had a few drinks too many.

She woke just around nine to the sound of a large motorbike outside the flat, and went downstairs just as Kevin offered to make coffee for Dawn, the tiny, but tough looking ex-army girl that had just started to work for him. She called Kevin “Boss” and shook Lee’s hand and apologised for waking her. Lee couldn’t read her expression, but she was polite.

Kevin asked Lee to show Dawn where to park her bike while he made them all coffee.

Lee told Dawn she was sorry she’d had to stay at the Premier Inn, and explained that Alena and Sally Jones were using the spare room.

“No worries,” said Dawn, “I was a bit… you know, uncomfortable with Kevin being my boss and all. Kevin says you are getting married tomorrow… congratulations! I only just met him, but he seems like a good bloke.”

Lee thanked her, and marvelled at how well she handled the huge motorbike.

Sally Jones had come down while they were out, and was sitting at the kitchen counter looking sleepy. She brightened up when Lee introduced her to Dawn. Lee left them to chat and went up to get showered and dressed. She looked in on Alena, who was sitting up in bed, looking worse for wear, though she smiled and said she would be up soon.

They all went for breakfast at the community kitchen, and Alena persuaded Dawn to give her a lift home, which let Kevin get ready for the wedding. She said she'd loved riding on the back of Jim's motorbike when they were young and carefree.

Kevin - 51

Kevin felt bad but knew he would feel even worse if he didn't get the work done before the wedding. Lee's calm acceptance made him feel really guilty. He was grateful to Alena for getting Dawn away, and grateful to Sally when she said that it was considered bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other the night before the wedding. She'd taken Lee to the Premier Inn and told Kevin that Louise and Marissa would be around in the morning to get him ready for the wedding.

By midnight he had done as much as he could and packed his suitcase and double checked that he had everything ready for the morning. The flat needed a good clean, but that would just have to wait.

Louise and Marissa arrived at eight. Louise insisted on driving, after checking that he had everything he needed. She liked the look of his Mess Dress.

Kevin had never been to Alena and Jim's home. It was huge, with a smart red brick gate house in the same imposing style as the main house. They arrived just after nine and there were at least thirty cars parked in front of the house. A uniformed man showed them where to park and directed them up a path to the left of the house.

Marissa froze at the sight of two huge wolfhounds being led towards them by a young woman in jeans and wellingtons, but the dogs paid them no attention.

The chapel looked very old and was a hodgepodge of stone and brickwork. Louise said it had apparently been damaged during the second world war by debris from a bomber that had crashed near the house.

There were a lot more people than Kevin expected. He recognised the tall figure of Michael Essam, but mostly he saw lots of phones and cameras pointing at him. It was quite dark in the chapel, but he saw his Great Aunt Sally looking very elegant and bright eyed in her wheelchair. He kissed her cheek and she patted his and told him he looked very handsome.

“You’ll have to make do with me as the best man,” said Louise, “I’ve got the rings. Now just stand here and keep smiling.” They were next to the baptismal pedestal.

Marissa looked as if she was going to cry, and kissed both his cheeks before blessing him in what sounded like Spanish and going to sit next to his Great Aunt Sally.

The little chapel filled up quickly. Kevin recognised Bijan Ranjbar, Charles Denby, Charlotte Pele, Jade Owens, Simon and Helen Bottle and Dawn Kemp. There were several TurnKey staff, some whose names he wasn’t sure of, but he was really surprised to see Dave and Myra from TurnKey project planning there.

A young woman started playing the organ, which sounded a little wheezy, and everybody turned towards the door expectantly as a large Bentley crunched up the gravel. Kevin recognised Jim, looking even taller in top hat and tails. He opened the door and helped Lee out. He couldn’t see her face for the veil, but the chin and smile were definitely hers. She was dressed in white, and looked slim and elegant and very small next to Jim as she took his arm. Sally Jones looked bright and radiant in pale blue behind her. Lights flashed as people took photos. Louise poked Kevin in the ribs and took a photo of him as he turned to look at her.

“Smile and look at the Bride,” she hissed, grinning widely at him.

Kevin got quite a shock when Lee lifted her veil. She looked like a china doll. He hadn’t seen her wearing so much make up before. She did look very happy though, and more than a little nervous.

Kevin managed to get through it all without any prompting, and was relieved when they finally got to the rings. The ring on his finger felt warm and surprisingly heavy. He felt oddly uncomfortable kissing Lee in front of everybody.

The photographs afterward seemed to go on forever, and Kevin was desperate to pee. He was totally blind-sided when Jade Owens and a slightly familiar looking man insisted on a photo with them. The man shook his hand and thanked him. Kevin was wracking his brain trying to remember who he was till Jade laughed and told him that he had given Mick a lift from Chatham and suggested he contact her for a job, “My late husband, Doug, was a sapper too,” she said before planting a kiss on Mick’s cheek.

Kevin followed Jim’s example and peed behind a bush before they walked to the converted Barn for the reception. Dawn Kemp looked like a naughty child as she came in last and made a face, “Sorry for crashing your reception in jeans Boss,” she said, standing on tiptoe to peck him on the cheek and going very red. “Ms. Parsons said you needed reinforcements, given what a friendless bugger you are.”

The Barn was done up beautifully. Lee told him that Alena and Jim had done it all and refused any payment. Alena shrugged and told him it was an investment. Jim just laughed and said he loved a party. Louise jabbed him in the ribs again, and handed him a folded piece of paper, “Notes for your speech,” she said.

Lee - 52

Lee felt completely drained, and very happy. Seeing Kevin in the chapel, in his smart uniform looking a little scared but very happy

had been wonderful. All the hard work had been worth it. Jim had been wonderful and told her that her father would be really proud. The contrast between Jim at six foot five and her dad at five foot six made her smile, but yes, he would have been proud and would most definitely have approved of Kevin. Her mum would have liked him too, she was sure of it.

Louise's speech had been really good, and she had made sure that Kevin said all the right things too. Kevin's simple speech had made her cry with his heartfelt honesty. She'd had to remove her make up, and he told her, when they danced, that she didn't need make up, he loved her face just as it was.

It was nice that so many people had agreed to come. Kevin said he didn't know most of them, but he seemed pleased too. The little ex-army girl was quite a dancer, Lee was surprised to see her getting on so well with Sally Jones, they seemed so very different.

It was time to go. She and Kevin had thanked everybody while Jim's driver took Great Aunt Sally back to St. Osyth and he was now waiting to take them to Stansted.

"So are you going to be Lee Jennifer Coombes-Wainwright with two w's or Wainwright-Coombes?" asked Kevin, when they were at the check-in desk.

"Lee Jennifer Coombes," Lee told him smiling, "My mum's maiden name was Pratt… she hated it."

"You did an amazing job. Thank you."

"I had a lot of help. Jim and Alena have been very generous."

"I'm sorry I didn't do…."

"You don't need to apologise. You said you would be happy with a registry office wedding… and I could see you were really busy. I would have been happy with a registry office wedding too, but when Alena got involved… it was fun, and I think it was worth it."

“I’m sorry Cindy didn’t make it.”

“I’m glad really, but sorry too. She says she is in rehab. I hope it's the truth.”

Kevin slept till past eleven the following morning, Lee didn't want to wake him. She’d stocked up on vitamin C and MultiVitamins after persuading Kevin to take some every day. She did her yoga looking out over the ocean then started writing a thank you letter to Alena and Jim that she had to finish later that evening, as Kevin woke and dragged her back into into the bed. They nearly missed lunch.

Kevin - 53

The week in Albufeira passed too quickly for Kevin’s liking. He closed his phone and powered it off when he saw Lee walking towards him carrying two coffees. He still found it hard to believe that this beautiful and utterly wonderful woman had married him.

“The man says he will bring the almond cake as soon as he can, it’s just about ready to come out of the oven.” Lee told him, “The flight has been delayed anyway.”

“We should have stayed another week,” said Kevin, “Things have quietened on the work front.”

“It was good though,” said Lee, “And you are looking a lot healthier than you did a week ago.”’

“Did I tell you that Dawn has replaced me as the swimmer in the TurnKey Triathlon Team?” asked Kevin.

“Sally messaged me… she said it's just for the indoor pool swimming.”

“Short course… I’m not very good in the pool, my tumble turns are too slow,” said Kevin, “I prefer open water swimming.”

“Do you think she’s gay?” asked Lee.

“Dawn?” asked Kevin, “I really have no idea. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious… she’s a tough one, that’s for sure. How is she getting on as a planner?”

“She’s pretty good, and Greg Stanton says good things about her.”

Kevin was pleased with Dawn, but not ready to give her more work yet, as she was still working off her notice at Waitrose.

Dave Little had surprised him by emailing to ask if Kevin needed any planning done, saying he could take on more work. Kevin sent him the Architect’s schematics, Gannt and BOQ for the Cheltenham stable job and was waiting to see what Dave came up with. He half expected Dave to respond directly to Charlotte Pele, the Architect, and leave him out of the loop, but it was a risk he thought worth taking.

Kevin had worked on the Cambridge Residential Training Centre for Lucy Mitchell during their break and had sent her a Preliminary Plan. He would wait for her response before deciding what to do with the Hedgingly Stately Home job. He had done work for the National Trust when he was with Skarpetti and Son, and knew that they were very slow to respond and decide.

“Are you serious about the loft conversion?” he asked Lee.

“Yes of course,” said Lee brightly, “It will be fun and I can always pay someone to help if there is something I can’t do.”

“I’m quite handy… though the few tools I had got burned with my car,” said Kevin, “I can weld too.”

They’d agreed one night after a dinner dance in their hotel, to convert the loft of Kevin’s flat into an office if they could get planning permission. Kevin had suggested looking for a bigger house, but Lee said they would not likely find a better location than his flat, and that two bedrooms was big enough if he made the roof-space into a study or office. She said he should draw it in SketchUp and she

would do the work, if they got approval. Lee had already impressed Kevin with her woodworking skills by making a very neat nightstand for the spare bedroom.

Kevin couldn't believe his luck in finding a woman like Lee. He fought back the thought that it was too good to be true and that something awful would spoil it. He took her hand and marvelled at how perfect it felt in his, and kissed it.

"I love you," he told her just as their flight was called to the boarding gate.

Lee - 54

Lee watched attentively as Henry and Victor put in the skylight. She had been disappointed that their application for putting in a dormer window had been denied; it would have made the loft office much nicer. The sales lady from Carter Windows told her to wait a couple of years and apply again, saying that they turned down half the applications on principle. Kevin had told her not to worry about it and suggested a skylight.

Kevin had helped a lot with the loft conversion, and it had been fun, except when he'd sliced his scalp open on an exposed nail. The Skylight would be the end of it and Lee wanted to have all the furniture in before Kevin got back from Cambridge.

Henry suggested that she get a solar system, saying their roof was perfectly orientated for it, and that it would be easy to keep the panels clean now that they had a skylight that could be opened. She would discuss it with Kevin.

Cindy had asked her to meet at Cafe Med a week after they'd returned from their honeymoon. She'd brought a pair of hand crafted coffee mugs with the names Kevin and Lee painted on them as a wedding present, and told Lee that she hadn't touched any alcohol or drugs since the end of June. She looked healthier and said that she was back together with John Noakes, and said he would marry her if she stayed sober for two years. Somehow she

had managed to hang on to her job as a carer. She asked Cindy what John had said about her sucking the strippers penis in the Iceni Club, and Cindy shook her head and said he didn't know about it. Lee told her that it was hardly a secret, as at least a dozen of her friends had been there, and some were from Frinton. Cindy had told her not to be a cow, and said she was sure Lee had secrets that Kevin didn't know about.

Lee thought about that now that she did have a secret; something that Sally Jones had asked her not to tell Kevin. Sally had told her that Dawn had spent a week with her, just after Kevin and Sally had returned from Portugal, and that they had got on well. Dawn was going to stand in for Sally when Sally went to Bath on a two week XPert course in December, and Kevin wanted her to get to know the Denby and Essam site crew. Dawn liked dancing and had taken Sally with her to the Iceni Club on her motorbike. Dawn liked to drink, but was very strict about not drinking when she was driving and had lost her temper when someone had spiked their drinks; her coke and Sally's orange juice. Dawn had made a really big fuss and called the police. Sally had called Lee afterwards, and begged her not to tell Kevin. As far as Lee could see, Dawn hadn't done anything wrong, but Sally was worried because Dawn had accused the barman of spiking the drinks and said it might end up in court.

Kevin - 55

Kevin had to rewrite the project plan for the Cambridge Residential Training Centre, but it wasn't a complete disaster, the Trust fund had decided to have the entire project remodelled and it was now going to be almost twice as big as the original, and he had been asked to work on two other projects. One was a business start up for a 3D Printer manufacturer that had developed a 3D Printer able to print metal objects for the Ministry of Defence. He read through it carefully before sending it to Myra asking her to do it. The other was for a storage facility in Chelmsford, which he offered to Dave Little, who had done a really good job on the stable conversion in Cheltenham.

Kevin had less success with Virginia “Ginny” Woods, the other planner at TurnKey Systems, who had been on Maternity leave when he joined and who he had never really interacted with. She was old school and, he suspected, a Mike Coulsden fan. Alena had asked him to put some work her way. Ginny had done the bare minimum on a Southend strip mall construction project plan, which was basically a clone of the architect’s Gantt. Kevin had driven to Marks Tey to sit with Ginny and tried to get her to be a bit more proactive, and she had got up and walked out on him, and complained to HR that he was “bullying” her. Kevin had been advised by the company lawyer, Melanie Philips, to write a statement and get it to her. Louise told Kevin that Ginny was a time bomb, and said the company would be better off without her.

Kevin liked the studio, as he preferred to call the loft office at their home. He had helped with the insulation and the stairs, but Lee had done most of the work.

Dawn had taken over from him on the Chigwell project. Sally Jones was doing very well on the Storton Castle Project and Alena had reluctantly agreed to pay for her to do a two week course on XPert in Bath. Alena was worried that Denby and Essam would offer Sally a position with them, but Kevin didn’t think they would do that.

Gregory Stanton had offered Dawn a job, she told Kevin about it during a video call and asked his advice. Kevin told her that the contract TurnKey had with Stanton Construction meant that Stanton would be in breach of contract it they employed a TurnKey employee during the contract period, but that when the Chigwell Project was completed, they could make an offer and she could accept if she chose to do so. He advised her to check any offer that Gregory made with Greg before accepting it.

“I’m still on probation,” said Dawn, “If I don’t make it… would that mean Stanton could employ me?”

“I think even the lawyers would find that hard to answer with any real confidence,” said Kevin, “But I would guess that TurnKey’s Lawyers would say no. However, I would go for it if I were you in that situation, because I cannot see any court finding against you

for getting a job somewhere else if TurnKey doesn't want to employ you, and, as a Partner in TurnKey I would be against taking any action against you for accepting an offer from Stanton Construction under those conditions. However, I am confident that you will pass probation."

"I think I'd prefer to work for you… but I don't want to end up on my arse and jobless again."

"Well, I can't give you any guarantees beyond saying that I am really happy with your work, and that if you are not given a permanent job, I will personally recommend you to all of our contractors as a project planner."

"Thanks Boss,"

"I'm sending you the Architect's drawings, Gannt and BOQ for a strip mall in Southend that I'd like you to get finished as soon as you can please? The work for Stanton Construction is a priority though? Let me know if you have any problems?"

"Will do Boss."

Kevin terminated the call and decided that he liked working with Dawn. She was very direct. He didn't like that she preferred to use her bike for site visits rather than public transport, but knew that was her choice.

Lee - 56

Lee felt all wrong and miserable. She had really yelled at Kevin and now felt guilty. It was their first big fight. Well, her first big fight with Kevin, because he hadn't yelled back, which had made her even angrier at the time.

She'd asked him, if he was ready for her to come off the pill, and he'd just shrugged and said that it was really her choice.

“It’s not just my choice,” she had told him firmly, “Having a child is something we both need to agree on, and I want to know if you are ready for that sort of commitment.”

“Well… OK, I suppose I am really happy with the way things are at the moment, but if you are prepared to give up your job and go for it, I will do whatever I have to do to help you make it happen,” Kevin had replied, “We’ve practiced the sex enough.”

“But do you want a child?” Lee asked him, “I don’t want you to help me get what I want… we both need to want a baby and be ready to commit to that before…”

“Lee… I want you in my life, and I think a baby will be a bonus, but I don’t really know that for sure. All I know for certain is that I want you. It’s not me that is going to have to carry the baby and go through the birthing process… I would never insist on you doing that for me. If you want a baby badly enough to put yourself through that… I’ll do everything I can to support you.”

“Do you want us to have a child Kevin? A simple yes or no answer will do.”

“Its not that simple though is it?” said Kevin, “If our roles were reversed, if I was a woman, I would not consider having a baby… I’d be too scared of … well everything! I’m sorry… I just can’t imagine putting myself through all that discomfort, pain and danger to have a child. I don’t want to lose you… I’d not know how to live with myself if anything happened to because you were pregnant.”

“Well I am a woman, and it is something I am prepared to do… I just want to know if you want it too.”

“If you want a baby, then I want a baby,” said Kevin.

“So it is all up to me? Shit Kevin! All I am asking is DO YOU WANT A CHILD?”

“Please don’t get angry?” Kevin had replied, “I want you and I want you happy about being with me. I believe I can be happy with you with or without children. If you…”

“DO NOT PUT IT ALL ON ME KEVIN!” Lee had really shouted then, even though she knew at the time that she was being unreasonable. She’d gathered up her things and stormed out of the flat half an hour early for her night shift, and she’d forgotten her phone, so she couldn’t even call or message to say she was sorry for shouting.

She had all night to think about it, and kept asking herself why it was so important to her. She decided that she needed to talk to Marissa or perhaps Alena. Alena had had children, but she was Kevin’s boss. She wondered if Great Aunt Sally would be able to help her see through the muddle her mind was in.

Lee walked home after her shift, dreading having to face Kevin, but he was not home. She found her phone and saw that he had messaged saying that he’d been called out to deal with a problem. She called Holnbrook house to ask Great Aunt Sally if she could visit, and was told that Sally would not be back from an outing to Brighton till late that evening.

Lee didn’t want to call Kevin, but she did send a voice message, saying she was sorry that she had shouted. She did an hour of yoga, showered and went to bed and somehow managed to sleep.

Kevin - 57

Lucy Mitchel got to Rosswith Manor before him, and was talking with a tall, severe looking woman and two uniformed police officers next to a police vehicle parked in the offloading bay. She looked relieved when he approached.

“This is the project planner, Kevin Coombes,” she said to the tall woman who introduced herself as Inspector White.

“Can you tell me what has happened?” asked Kevin.

“Theft, Mr. Coombes… the place has been stripped bare,” said the inspector, “Ms. Mitchel has called the National Trust Curator, we’re waiting for him to arrive before we enter the premises. Can you tell me how well you know Reginald Pennington?”

“I’ve spoken to him on the phone several times, and seen him on a video conference call. I’ve never actually met him.”

“Were you involved in any way with Pennington Construction?” asked the Inspector.

“Well, I did the project planning for the reconstruction work at this site… the East Wing and the roof and the kennels were damaged in a fire and Pennington Construction got the job of doing the renovation.”

“Yes, I am aware of that, but what I would like to know is if you had any dealings with Pennington Construction or any of their employees before they were awarded the contract?”

Kevin shook his head, “Not that I am aware of… No. I only started communicating with them after the contract had been awarded to them.”

“How often do you come to Rosswith Manor, can you give me dates?”

Kevin nodded, “This is my second visit… yes I can, just let me check on my phone.” He took his phone out and opened the gallery, then searched for and found a photo of the burned out kennel building, and looked at the information on the photo. “I was here on the fourth of October; six days ago. That was my first and only other visit apart from today, I came here to check on the project plan with the Architect, Lucy Mitchel.”

“May I see your phone Sir?”

Kevin shrugged and handed his phone over to the inspector. She Thanked him and asked him for the unlock code, and he gave it to her.

“I’m going to keep your phone as evidence Mr. Coombes… my associate, constable Evans, will give you a receipt.”

“I need my phone for work,” said Kevin, “Can’t you just copy the photos that you want?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Coombes, your phone will be returned to you in due course. Constable Evans will take a statement from you, and then you can leave.”

Kevin looked at Lucy who shrugged, “They took my phone too. Have you had breakfast yet?”

“No, I came as soon as you called.”

A uniformed officer asked Kevin to get into the police car so he could record a statement. Lucy said she would wait for him. The constable would not let Kevin write his own statement. It seemed to take forever, by which time another vehicle had arrived. Kevin got very frustrated with Constable Evans but kept his cool and eventually signed the statement that he had beaten into shape word by painful word.

Lucy was waiting for him and agreed to go in his car, directing him to a Little Chef.

“What’s going on?” Kevin asked as soon as they set off.

“There was an accident on the Leeds bypass,” said Lucy, “It was a Budget Rental van … it was filled with furniture and artwork from the site…It’s all labelled with National Trust labels. The driver was badly injured, and told the police he works for Reg Pennington, he said they were moving the furniture and artworks to a safe location while they restored the Manor. It looks like Penningtons got the contract so they could steal everything.”

“How much has been stolen?” asked Kevin.

“I don’t know. Anton Myers has just arrived, the inspector took him into the building.”

“Who is Anton Myers?” asked Kevin.

“He’s the National Trust Curator for Leeds… He’s in charge of the inventory and has the keys to the rest of building.”

“How was the contractor chosen?” asked Kevin, “Were you even involved?”

Lucy shook her head, “No, thank God. I did submit the names of contractors I had worked with and was happy with, but I had never heard of Pennington’s. They are based in Leeds apparently. The National Trust decided who would do the work.”

Kevin took Lucy back to collect her car, and had to drop her at the gate house, as the police would not allow him to enter. He drove back to Leeds town centre and and managed to buy himself another iPhone. By eleven he had it working and had sent notifications to everybody on his contact list with his new phone number. He also emailed Alena Parsons informing her of the problem at Rosswith Manor.

Kevin decided to make the most of being on the road and drove to Chigwell, for an unannounced site visit, before going to the Stortford site and lastly to Thetford.

Cynthia and Michael Weatherby were at Thetford with Charlotte. They insisted that he have dinner with them at the Cottage Inn. Michael and Cynthia were staying there, and the dinner went on for a very long time. Kevin did enjoy the conversation and company, but was really very tired by the time he managed to say his goodbyes and head back to Colchester. Charlotte had looked a lot better, and told them that the results from the hospital were optimistic.

Kevin, showered and fell exhausted into bed after sending a message to Lee to say he was home.

Lee - 58

Lee let herself quietly into the flat hoping that Kevin was still asleep, but the bed was made and empty. He was in the loft, working at the computer with headphones on, but he turned and smiled when Lee looked in on him, then took off his headphones and asking if she wanted cocoa, saying that the kettle should have boiled already.

He told her about the theft at Rosswith Manor, and about the police taking his and the Architect's phones while making toast and cocoa for Lee.

"You are very quiet… are you still angry with me?" he asked.

"I'm not angry Kevin, and I'm sorry that I shouted, I shouldn't have shouted. Perhaps we can talk about it after I finish nights, when I can think straight?"

Kevin nodded, "That's OK with me, I'm hoping I can get on with some work at home today."

Lee felt a coolness between them, a distance that she wasn't sure how to deal with. She took herself to bed, and cried silently, cursing herself for shouting at Kevin. Kevin was out of the house when she woke around two PM, but his car was in its slot, so she reasoned that he must have gone for a walk. Kevin returned at three carrying a brown paper bag with butter chicken, jeera rice and naan from the Maharani for them both.

Lee heated and plated the food while he cleaned off his boots and washed his hands.

"We should get some langlauf skiis," he said, "You'll be able to ski to the hospital and back before Christmas I reckon."

"That would be fun," said Lee, forcing herself to smile, "I've never skied, but I was keen on ice skating as a kid. My dad used to take me to Romford Ice Rink for my birthday."

“Ice skating is a lot harder than skiing,” said Kevin, “I can ski reasonably, but never did get comfortable with ice-skating or any other kind of skating. We should try to get to the Haartz Mountains over the Christmas break… would you like that?”

Lee nodded automatically, “Sure… Actually, I think Marissa was talking about going somewhere in Germany to ski… Somewhere that Louise likes to go for training.”

“I told Louise when I first met her, that some of the army triathlon guys used to do Langlauf skiing, it's great for fitness and upper body and knee strength. The British Military used to have a cross country skiing school near Bad Harzburg. I had two weeks there and loved it… are you OK Lee?” Kevin put a hand on her shoulder and looked so concerned that Lee thought she was going to cry.

“Yes… yes I am OK, it's just that I feel so bad for shouting at you… I’m really sorry Kevin.”

“You were angry… it happens,” said Kevin.

Lee put her hands up to stop him from saying more, “No, don’t do that, don’t be reasonable, it will just make me feel worse. It isn’t OK Kevin, We are both adults and I need to be able to explain myself without getting angry.”

Kevin took his hand off Lee’s shoulder and moved back a little, “Well, I’m not going to argue about that, but all the same, it's OK.”

Lee nodded, took a deep breath, “I want a child Kevin, I want your child… I think it's just how I feel family life should be… I love you and I know that you love me… I love how life has turned out since you and I got together… if we don’t … if we can’t have a child, it will be OK… but I want us to make that picture whole, if we can…and I want you to be part of it Kevin… heart and soul.”

Kevin didn’t answer for such a long time that Lee felt a bubble of fear and panic rise in her chest. When he did answer, he spoke very quietly and carefully.

“I’ll happily be part of that family… heart and soul as you say, but I have to tell you that I am terrified of something going wrong, of losing you because childbirth is dangerous, and also losing you to the disappointment of perhaps not being able to have a child. I know that it is unreasonable of me… but I want to be absolutely honest with you Lee.”

It was Lee’s turn to think carefully before she spoke, “I am a nurse, and of course I know that so many things can go wrong. I am scared too, and I cannot promise that things will be OK. All I can promise is that I will do my best.”

Kevin moved close and and put his arms around Lee, “OK let’s give it a try… the longer we wait the more difficult it will be I suppose. Don’t die on me Lee… I don’t want to live without you.”

Lee felt herself smiling and bit his chest, “I’m not planning on dying,” she mumbled into his shirt, “Can we go to bed now?”

Kevin - 59

Kevin had a nagging feeling that he had forgotten something. He realised he always felt like this when things were going well, but he went though his mental check-list anyway. He was actually looking forward to the Partners’ quarterly meeting, and was driving to Marks Tey for it rather than attending remotely. He had spent half the previous day going over the notes he had made at his meeting with Kemal. He wanted to spend a little time with Myra and David as well.

Louise called out to him as he walked past her cubicle.

“What time are you heading back to Colchester?” she asked, “I’d like to scrounge a lift if I can?”

“Sure,” Kevin told her, “The meeting starts at two… hopefully we’ll wrap up before four. I’ll come and get you.”

“Great… I can tell you about the trip… Sally and Dawn have both agreed to come too.”

Myra frowned at him over her glasses when he knocked on the door to her cubicle, “Oh, it's you… can we go and get a coffee?” she asked, “If that idiot Gordon tries to sell me raffle tickets again, I’ll throw something at him.”

David was already in the canteen, he cheerfully excused himself from the table he was at and joined Kevin and Myra.

“I’m hoping that’s our financials you’re carrying for the big parlaise,” he said, looking pointedly at the folder Kevin was carrying.

Kevin shook his head and smiled, “No, that’s all done and dusted. We’ve done well this year… you should get the email before the meeting even begins.” He tapped the folder, “Five new projects for the new year, only one for you Myra, but it's huge… and very confidential. You can only discuss it with Alena or me.” Kevin opened the folder and slid out a buff envelope stamped “CONFIDENTIAL” in large red lettering, “Read and sign that and get it back to Alena.”

Myra’s eyes lit up as she took the envelope, and tucked it into her bag, “Does this mean I can use Pyle’s office?” she asked.

Kevin nodded, “Alena’s approved it with facilities, she agrees that it makes sense for you to have it. The pen plotter will go in your cubicle, so you’ll have a lot more space.”

“Thank God for that!” said Myra, “I can’t stand the noise and smell it makes.”

“Who am I supposed to argue with now?” said David, his eyes fixed on the folder.

“You can carry on arguing with yourself as usual,” said Myra, “I think I’m going to get some cake to celebrate… do you want anything?”

Neither Kevin or David wanted anything. Kevin handed David the folder, “All yours David, I’ve added the site foreman’s number for each project. They are all Alliance Contracting jobs, all planning to start early March. Let me know if there are any problems?”

David nodded but didn't say anything as he scanned through the covering letters for each project. Kevin expected David to ask about his travel expense budget, but David just nodded and tried not to look pleased.

Myra returned and asked Kevin and David if they had plans for Christmas and New Year.

“I’m heading to Cornwall,” said David gloomily, “The wife wants to see her mum and dad and they can’t travel… my youngest is bound to throw up in the car. All those narrow bloody roads.”

Myra laughed, “Well the joys of children… I prefer cats. What about you Kevin?”

“Skiing in Germany - the Harz mountains…”

“That thing Louise is organising?” said David, lowering his voice, “Isn’t that some sort of LGBTQ+ thing?”

Myra burst out laughing, making David go very red.

Kevin smiled and shook his head, “No… it's just a skiing thing… the Harz mountains aren’t very steep, a good place to learn cross country skiing. They have trails and we ski from one cabin to the next. Its great for families and very affordable. Lee and Sally have never skied before, so we are on a beginners route.”

“You’ll be sharing a chalet with five women?” said David, clearly shocked.

“You lucky bugger,” said Myra with a chuckle, “Can that little biker girl ski?”

“Dawn used to be in the Royal Engineers biathlon team,” Kevin replied, “She offered to teach Lee and Sally.”

Kevin’s phone buzzed. He told them he had to go and wished them a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year before heading for the conference room. He saw the acne-faced intern, Gordon, and bought twenty pounds worth of raffle tickets from him, then told him that Myra wanted to buy more raffle tickets.

Alena was the only person in the conference room when he got there. She glanced at him and murmured a greeting before returning her attention to the papers she was sorting into piles.

Kevin read through the notes he had prepared then switched off his phone and went to pour himself a coffee. He placed a coffee next to Alena who thanked him with a distracted smile.

Only two more partners joined them in the conference room, John Carpenter and Malcolm Dearbourne. Kevin stood and greeted each of them. John shook his hand and made small talk, while Malcolm just nodded and said he needed a few minutes to get ready.

Alena suggested they sit together, two either side of a corner of the table and Kevin rearranged the conference camera.

Kevin sat quietly through the meeting, listening carefully but not saying anything. As with the last two quarterly meetings, Malcolm Dearbourne spoke the most, though there was not a great deal of substance in what he had to say. Kevin added several question marks to the notes he had prepared while Malcolm went through the financials. There were a couple of questions for Malcolm, that he replied to without actually answering. Kevin waited till Malcolm had finished before speaking.

“I’m sorry Malcolm, but I don’t think your financial report has covered the things I want to hear about.”

It was Alena who replied, Malcolm just stared at Kevin incredulously.

“Can you be a bit more specific please Kevin?”

“Sure… What exactly are our liabilities? Contingent liabilities means what exactly? I would like some details. How much are we likely to lose in Indonesia, what are we spending on the court case and why were we not given the choice to settle out of court? There’s a lot more… but that will do for starters?”

“This is neither the time or place…”

“This is a quarterly meeting of the Board,” said Kevin, “Which is exactly the right time and place… does anybody else disagree?”

“You aren't a full partner yet…your shares are…”

“I am a full partner, and have a hundred and twenty five thousand pounds worth shares in my name,” said Kevin, “The loan arrangement I have to pay for those shares has nothing to do with you or the board. As a partner I am entitled to know the details of the company’s finances, and this report is anything but detailed.” said Kevin, raising the sheaf of papers.

Malcolm looked at John and then at Alena, “Quite frankly, I find this offensive,” he said, “You can’t just waltz in and expect me to give you … privileged information regarding other partners.”

Kevin saw two other partners nodding on the screen.

“Why not? This is a partnership… and you are welcome to disclose every aspect of the projects I am involved in… every penny has been accounted for, there are no hidden liabilities, no contingencies that threaten out finances…”

“The National Trust thing…. the case is still in court…” said Malcolm.

“We are not a defendant in that case,” said Alena, “The contractor is, and they were chosen by the National Trust’s Leeds representative, and not recommended by us or the architect… “

“It still represents a loss of earnings and sullies our reputation,” insisted Malcolm.

“The project planning is still payable,” said Kevin, “It was accepted and approved by the Client. We can not expect an early completion bonus as the works have been suspended pending the court case, but we will be paid in full.”

After another fifteen minutes of bluster and evasion Kevin decided it was time to end the play acting.

“If you are unwilling to provide satisfactory answers and full details I believe I have no choice but to ask that the Board appoint a Company Inspector to investigate the finances of this company as per the articles of association, paragraph twelve,” said Kevin. He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

Malcolm Dearbourne swore and then laughed, “Bloody upstart…”

“I second Kevin’s proposal,” said John, causing Malcolm Dearbourne to half rise in his chair. He sank back down red-faced when Alena spoke.

“Very well…. all in favour raise your hands?”

“This isn’t fucking happening…” said a voice, “…ungrateful cunt.” It sounded like Simon Bottle.

Alena spoke Kevin’s name and looked at him with her eyebrows raised.

“Sorry..” Kevin raised his hand.

“Five for,” said Alena, “All against… Malcolm?”

“Yes…I am most fucking definitely against,” snarled Malcolm, getting to his feet, “This is a fucking joke.” He snatched at his briefcase and stormed from the conference room.

“Could you close the door please Kevin?” asked Alena, She looked at the screen, “Three against. The motion is carried… In light of this I would like to adjourn the meeting for twenty minutes. Thank you gentlemen.” She reached forward and closed the conference connection, then slowly sank her head down till it touched the table. “Alena I…” Kevin began and stopped when Alena held her hand up to stop him speaking.

“Its been a long time coming Kevin,” she said, “But Christmas is only four days away…” She smiled, “Well… it is what it is. I need the loo.”

John waited till Alena had left the room before ensuring that the conference equipment was turned off, then turned to Kevin, “They’ll call in their loans.”

Kevin nodded, but didn’t say anything,

John walked around the table and asked Kevin if he wanted another coffee, then poured two coffees and carried them and a plate of biscuits over to Kevin before sitting down.

“I suppose the timing could work in your favour, with the banks closing for Christmas.” said John.

Alena returned with her laptop and personal assistant, She asked Kevin to fetch Ms. Cope’s pot of tea and plate of chicken sandwiches from the canteen. They were on a tray when he got there, and when he returned Ms. Cope’s fingers were flying all over the keyboard at astonishing speed. She had a set of headphones over her ears and mouthed a thank you to Kevin when he placed the tray next to her. There was no sign of John or Alena.

Kevin went to Louise’s cubicle and told her that he would be a while longer.

Louise told him not to worry, they would be stuck in heavy traffic if they left now and she had plenty to do while she waited for him.

Ms. Cope was gone, along with her tray when Kevin returned to the board room. John was there, messaging on his phone, as was Alena. The conference system was on and only Malcolm Dearbourne and Simon Bottle were not in attendance. Alena reconvened the meeting, and read the minutes of the meeting, which were accepted as read by those present. Joseph Weller, raised an objection to Kevin's motion to appoint a Company's Inspector, and it was quashed by Alena, who pointed out that Kevin's shares had been paid for, albeit not by Kevin. She told them that they would be informed when a Company Inspector had been appointed and wished them all a Very Merry Christmas.

John shook Kevin's hand, kissed Alena's cheek and left. Alena regarded Kevin cooly before asking him if he was prepared for the fall out.

Kevin nodded, "I'm hoping my home doesn't get burned, but it's insured. I never bought another car."

Alena smiled, "Let's hope things don't get that bad." She unplugged the power to the conference system and closed down her laptop. "You're going away for Christmas?" she asked, and thanked Kevin for holding the door open for her.

Kevin nodded, "Tomorrow - sorry, I did tell Ms. Cope that we would not be attending the dinner."

"Yes, she told me. It's probably just as well. Have fun and wish Lee a Merry Christmas from me and Jim?"

Kevin collected Louise from her office. She didn't say anything till they were in the car.

"Was it you that had Malcolm Dearbourne stalk out of the building in a rage?" she asked.

Kevin drove around the deserted car park and tested the brakes before answering Louise, "Well, he did get peeved with me," said Kevin carefully, "But I suspect his real anger is with himself."

Louise laughed, “Well done, whatever you did. If I never see him again it will be too soon.”

“So… are you all packed and ready?” asked Kevin.

“Oh yes, Marissa has everything in the hallway already. She is very organised. When is Dawn arriving?”

“She said she would come up on the train around midday.”

“Thank God she’s not riding that beastly motorbike of hers in this weather. Did she tell you that Marissa might have found her a place in Colchester?”

“No… I know she was looking for somewhere.”

“It’s only one bedroom, but there’s a lock up garage with it, and it’s close to the Bottled Crab.”

“Handy,” said Kevin, “Sally was trying to persuade her to get a mobile home. She’s sold her caravan and bought a mobile home.”

Louise laughed, “She can’t drive yet… can she?”

“No… but she says she’ll persuade one of the lads to drive it when she needs to leave the site. She is doing driving lessons.”

Kevin ended up driving directly to the Bottled Crab. Marissa, Lee, Sally and Dawn were already there and had ordered for them.

Dawn was very excited, having seen the apartment Marissa had found for her.

Lee - 60

Lee knew, as soon as Kevin walked into the Bottled Crab with Louise, that something had happened. His body language was different, he didn’t say anything and seemed to get into holiday mode despite not drinking, as he had to drive home afterwards.

He checked his emails as soon as they arrived home, then checked that everything he needed for their holiday was packed and ready before showering and climbing into bed.

“Is everything alright?” asked Lee as she slipped into the bed, “You seem a little bit…. well, sort of tense.”

“I hope so,” said Kevin with a little smile, “I refused to accept the Company Financial report at today’s meeting, and asked for a Company Inspector to be appointed.”

“What’s a company inspector?” Lee asked.

“Someone who can cut through the bullshit that Malcolm Dearbourne has been spinning about the financial liabilities of the Company. A super-auditor with special powers. I’m hoping that Alena can find the right person.”

“Why did you do it now?” asked Lee.

“Well, because we will be away for Christmas and New Year and I want this mess cleared up before I get the big bonuses I am due on the Stortford Castle and Thetford projects.”

Kevin was asleep when Lee realised what he meant about them being away for Christmas. She got up and went downstairs to check that there was nothing in the letter box and put the latch chains on the front and back doors. She could hear Sally and Dawn arguing about something and trying to be quiet about it when she went back up to bed.

Kevin - 61

Kevin felt strangely detached for the first few days of their holiday. Lee had no trouble learning to langlauf, and Sally learned quickly enough. She and Dawn were good friends, despite being so very different from each other. Dawn and Louise both spoke reasonable German, and Kevin was able to get by well enough in German.

They stayed in self catering chalets that were really very nice but they didn't do very much self catering beyond making hot drinks.

They had a lot of fun on Christmas Eve in a delightful little village that boasted a physiotherapy college. There were students there from all over Europe and they danced and sang and celebrated through the night till it was time for breakfast.

They stayed at a small hotel in Bad Harzburg for New Year's Eve and New Year's day, and the only trouble they had was late on New Years day, when two rather drunk men decided to join in when all five women were dancing together - Marissa was trying to teach them all a Columbian dance. Kevin had gone off to the toilet and returned just as Dawn confronted one of the men, telling him to go away and leave them alone. She pushed the man away, propelling him into Kevin, and was then attacked by the second man who grabbed her arms from behind. Kevin heaved the man Dawn had shoved into a pillar, then tapped the back of the second man's left knee with his foot as he pulled back hard on the man's left shoulder and swung him away from Dawn, who turned really fast and lashed out with a foot, catching Kevin right between the legs.

"Thanks Dawn," he mumbled as he dropped to his knees, both hands over his crotch, "Happy New Year to you too."

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The men stumbled off muttering in German and Lee suggested that Kevin go and ease his aching family jewels in the plunge pool next to the little sauna behind their hotel. Dawn was mortified and started calling him Boss again, having been calling him Kevin since they reached Germany.

They took the Train to Hannover the next day and spent the night in the Hotel am Stadtpark before flying back to Stansted.

Kevin was surprised, when he got home, that there were no letters from the partners that had lent him money to pay for his shares. He was certain they would call in the loans after he called for a

Company Inspector to be appointed. He double checked his emails and spam, but there was nothing.

He had hoped to have Lee to himself, when they got back, but both Dawn and Sally would be staying for the night; Dawn wanted to check what needed fixing up on the apartment Marissa had found for her in the Hythe, and Sally had offered to help her with that.

Kevin stayed up late answering emails and sending our requests for updates. Fred Morely had asked him to let him know when he could manage a site visit at Stortford, so he could inform the commissioning Architects and Charles Denby. Kevin wrote back to ask Fred to suggest a date and time that suited the others and he would adjust his schedule around that.

Lee got up when he finally went to bed, and said she needed to empty the washing machine and start another load. Kevin was fast asleep before she returned.

Lee - 62

Lee was less pleased about offering to put Sally and Dawn now that she was sorting through all their laundry and trying to figure out what could and could not be tumbled dried. She had enjoyed the holiday much more than she had expected; she had not wanted it to end. It hadn’t taken her long to learn how to Langlauf, and she had loved it. She had loved everything about the holiday. She had been worried about Dawn, but she was really good company. She drank a bit and she liked to dance, but she was sensible. She was tough too, and fiercely protective of her friends. She had kicked Kevin in the balls by mistake while fighting off two drunken men who had tried to grab hold of her and Sally while they were dancing. Kevin had taken it well, and was still a bit sore.

Kevin had relaxed once they got to Germany. He told Lee that he was ninety percent confident that things would work out alright with the Partners, but at least three of them were going to be very unhappy with him. The ones that had paid for his shares.

“The worst that can happen is that they demand their money back and strip me of my partnership, but I can’t see that happening while the Bishops Stortford and Thetford Projects are still on. More likely is that they will ask for their money back. That’s not a problem for me either… I can return the money and pay for the shares myself. I’m not sure I want to continue as a Partner anyway and will decide that when the Company Inspector wraps up the investigation.”

Lee loved that Kevin stayed true to himself when he was in a group. She noticed that almost everyone else, including herself, seemed different on a one-to-one basis than when they were in a group, but not Kevin or Dawn. Maybe it was an Army thing? Kevin didn’t get loud when he drank, and he didn’t get drunk. He did some work during their holiday, mostly SketchUp drawing, early in the mornings, when everybody else was still in bed. Lee loved watching him while he worked.

She’d managed to discuss having children with Marissa while they were Langlaufing. Marissa told her that it was a sore point with her and Louise. Louise had lost a baby, some time before she met Marissa. She didn’t want children now… though Marissa did but was unable because she’d had a hysterectomy after what turned out to be a cancer false alarm. Marissa warned Lee that everything would change if she did have a child, but she thought it was the most worthwhile thing a person could do.

Lee hadn’t said much when Dawn and Sally had included her in a conversation about men and having a family. Sally said she was going to find the right man, and have three children. Dawn wished her luck, and said she’d been raised by foster parents, who had six other foster children because they had both been orphans themselves and wanted to help as many orphans as they could. “I just want to live my life and not have to worry about anyone else,” said Dawn, “You only get one life and you never know when it will end, so be as kind as you can, and make the most of it.” That summed up Dawn quite well, thought Lee; purposeful and considerate.

Kevin - 63

Kevin woke later than usual, but the house was quiet and Lee was still fast asleep. He made his way downstairs and was startled by the festoons of ladies' smalls hanging on make shift drying lines strung between overhead kitchen cupboards. He ducked under it all and moved the coffee maker and kettle to make make himself coffee. Getting a mug required more gymnastics.

He left a note for Lee, saying he'd been called to a site meeting and would probably be home late. She woke up while he was dressing, and told him to enjoy his day and apologised for all the laundry hanging up in the kitchen.

Kevin stopped for coffee outside Stansted and saw that there was a missed call from an unknown number. He called back, and the phone was answered by Jim Short, who asked where he was.

"Stansted is perfect… how long are you there for?"

"Well, I am just having a coffee - I've got a site meeting with the client and main contractor at Stortford at nine. They requested it, so I have no idea how long it will be."

"That's the Denby and Essam job is it? Can you let me know when you are done there so we can meet?"

"Of course Jim, I was planning on going to Chigwell next, but that can wait."

"Thanks..I'll wait to hear from you." Jim disconnected.

Kevin got to site at eight thirty and had gone over the project plan and all recent correspondence while he was having coffee. Everything appeared to be in order. Charles Denby was in the site office with Fred and Morgan. Fred looked rough and had a mask on. He said he'd got flu but was over the worst of it.

“Do you have any idea what this about?” Charles asked Kevin, “I hope the buggers get here on time, I’ve a flight to Manchester booked for eleven.”

“Not a clue,” said Kevin, “Any problems over the festive season?”

“Some lad got caught trying to get into Sally’s new camper van,” said Fred, “Vikram’s dog bit his arse and his mum is threatening legal action, but there‘s footage of him trying to get into the gas lockers and running off when he heard the dog barking. The cops say he’s a known player… why don’t they lock him away then, or tag the idiot?”

Only two of the architects arrived, with a lady from the Council, Mrs. Burns, and they were only five minutes late.

Kevin had filled his flask with coffee at the Flightpath Cafe in Stansted, but offered to make tea while Mrs. Burns used the “facilities”.

Arthur and Hamish, the Architects explained that the new MP for Bishops Stortford had stirred things up a bit, and was anxious for the project to be completed, and that Mrs. Burns was a money person. They said that Andrew Anderson was no longer involved in the project.

Mrs. Burns, as soon as she had returned and got a cup of tea, got down to business.

“We want this project finished as soon as possible, gentlemen. Mr. Montgomery tells me that you, Mr. Coombes, are able to advise on what needs doing to ensure that this project is ready by the first of April, no jokes please?”

“Well, before Kevin says anything,” said Charles, “You originally wanted us to be ready before the August Bank Holiday. It was Kevin that got the completion to the first week in July, and now you want it on the first of April? Can you tell us why?”

“We would like it finished at the end of March, so that we can get started with a series of cultural and sporting events, beginning on the first of April, which is Easter Monday and culminating on the fourteenth of April. Can you do it, and how much will it cost?”

Charles looked at Kevin, who nodded, “I can certainly look at what needs doing in terms of the construction, my costings will be provisional though, and will need to be scrutinised and adjusted by Denby and Essam. I can also give you a revised schedule for the tenants, and you will have to deal with them directly regarding their shop-fitting, signage and stocks etcetera.”

“When can we have this information?”

“I’ll need an hour or so to answer that,” said Kevin, and looked at Fred, “If Mr. Morely and his QS could sit with me…”

“We can go and get brunch,” suggested Arthur, “Call me when you are ready to discuss this further please?” He ushered Mrs. Burns and Hamish out of the room.

Charles looked at Kevin, “What else do you need?”

“I’m good,” said Kevin, “I’ve got coffee.” He set up his laptop and got on with it. It took the whole hour, but he was much more positive about it by the time Mrs. Burns and the architects had returned. He and Fred had almost got the completion date to 31st of March.

“Keep them talking,” Fred told Charles Denby, “Take them for a walk around the site and show them the Castle, give us another forty five minutes and we should have some preliminary costings ready. Right Kevin?”

Kevin nodded, “Yes… it's very doable, just more manpower really, tradesmen.”

Kevin declined a celebratory lunch with Fred and Charles, saying he had another meeting. He called Jim, who answered immediately and said he was at the Waverly Arms, in Chigwell.

Kevin was feeling less positive when he parked next to the Bentley outside the Waverly Arms, but Jim greeted him affably and asked how his holiday had been. He said the food was good and recommended the Shepherds Pie.

Kevin felt he'd had enough coffee to last a week, and asked for water.

"You must be wondering what this is all about?" asked Jim with a smile, "Alena is on the warpath… and I'm circling the battlefield, but it's nothing to worry about. The Company Inspector has been appointed, it's Michael Dunn, King's Councillor, he specialises in corporate finance issues. He's bloody good - Alena says that Simon Bottle has flown in to see him. Simon, George and Kenneth each paid for a third of the shares you needed to be a full partner. You should have paid back about a fifth of what you owe already, but you still owe almost a hundred thousand. Now… if as Alena believes, those three partners have been hiding liabilities from us, they will be personally liable, they might well need the money you owe them, but you have an agreement with them, which has been duly minuted and witnessed by all the partners. You need to hold them to that agreement. They can not force you to return the money owed. Alena says you are able to raise enough money to repay the loan; please do not do that? Insist that you will repay it, as agreed over five years?"

Kevin nodded and smiled, "You could have told me this over the phone Jim. I'll do as you say."

"Thanks, but this way I can get out of the house and watch the sport," he said grinning and pointing at the huge screen, "I love my children and grandchildren but the noise… they should be gone by the weekend."

Kevin got home at nine pm after being stuck in roadworks on the A12 for two hours. Lee had fetched their favourite butter chicken with jeera rice and garlic butter naan from the Maharani. She sent him up to shower and handed him a glass of cider as soon as he came back down.

“We have the house to ourselves and I start nights again tomorrow,” she said, “We have a lot of shagging to catch up on, husband of mine, but first we eat and you tell me all about your day.”

“How did you get rid of Sally and Dawn?” Kevin asked.

“They are busy painting Dawn’s new place… and making a party out of it. Youngsters only. Sally’s taking the train to Bishops Stortford tomorrow - Fred asked her to get back early. So, any excitements?”

“Well, nothing went horribly wrong over the break. Sally is going to be very busy for a week or two, Denby and Essam have to finish Stortford Castle resort before Easter, which will earn her a five thousand pound bonus if it happens, and it should. We’ve picked up five new planning jobs and have been short listed for two big project management jobs, and … well there’s a chance of a really big project management job coming up in the Hebrides… it's residential.”

“For you or…”

“For me… but it's not confirmed yet. Will you come to the Hebrides with me for two years?”

“Probably… but what will I do?”

“Whatever you want to do… we can visit the island before deciding, but only if Denby and Essam win the tender. They’ll know by the end of the month.”

“What about your other work… how will you manage?”

“Internet,” said Kevin, “We have a good team.”

Lee - 64

Lee was not looking forward to twelve consecutive night shifts, but it didn't take long to get into the routine. Kevin was home most days and she enjoyed his special wake ups very much.

Great Aunt Sally got very sick with another chest infection and was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit for two days, before making a swift recovery just in time for Lee to take her back to St. Osyth's when she finished her night shifts. She and Kevin were invited to a gala dinner in London, and spent the night at the Russel Hotel. They were sat with Alena and Jim and another couple, Michael and Laetitia Dunn, she was sat between Jim and Michael, who were very entertaining. Alena seemed very relaxed too. Lee was surprised when she did manage to speak to Laetitia, who told her that she was a primary school teacher in Shoreditch. Laetitia said her husband was a Barrister and a keen yacht racer. She said he spent more time racing than working or being at home, and was about to fly to Sydney for a race out there. They had five children, that Laetitia was clearly very proud of. She told Lee about the National Childbirth Trust and insisted on giving her the phone number of her obstetrician, an Irish woman, who Laetitia said was just wonderful.

The next day Jim drove Lee back to Colchester while Kevin and Alena attended a special Partners' meeting. Jim asked her about her holiday and said he might try doing something like it with Alena and their children. He said he'd done some downhill skiing as a youngster, and quite a lot of ice skating, which he really liked.

Kevin called at two PM and said he was on his way home, and suggested they go out to the Bottled Crab for supper. Lee was in St. Osyth, playing whist with Great Aunt Sally, and Kevin invited her too… saying it was a celebration. He said Louise and Marissa would be there too,

Lee collected Kevin on the way to the Bottled Crab, and he refused to say what the celebration was until they were at a table with Louise and Marissa.

“I’ve a special announcement to make, so ready your glasses,” said Kevin, “Louise is now a full partner in the new TurnKey Consultants. Congratulations Louise!”

Lee was pleased for Louise, and congratulated her, but wanted to know what Kevin meant by the “new” TurnKey consultants.”

“Well, it's smaller for a start,” said Louise, “We’ve got rid of four partners and a lot of bad debt, and we have a new Managing Partner,” she looked at Kevin, “Congratulations Kevin, should I be calling you Boss now?”

Kevin smiled and shook his head, “Only if it makes you happy Louise.”

“What happened to Alena?” asked Lee, “We …”

“Alena wanted to step back… she is still a partner and has agreed to mentor me for a while,” said Kevin, “This wasn’t my idea.”

“The remaining partners chose him,” said Louise, “It was unanimous, and really hard to make him agree.”

In the car, on the way back to St. Osyth, Great Aunt Sally asked if he would now be running the company instead of project managing.

“Not really… Ms. Cope is an outstanding Administrator. Alena will be keeping an eye on the office… I’ll give it a go and see. We’ve got rid of all the overseas projects. Very few were profitable.”

When they were on their way home after getting Great Aunt Sally to bed in St. Osyth, Lee asked Kevin what was really going on.

“Well, I am not a hundred percent sure,” said Kevin, “Alena told me that she was tired and wanted to step down a while ago, but she wanted to clean up the company first. We are consultants, we are paid by people who need our expertise, there’s a lot of pressure to win big contracts. Who you know helps, but you have to deliver, and it seems that some of the partners were spending money to get contracts… paying bribes, and it became a bit of a problem. Alena

used me to get them out… they lent me money, hoping that they could control me. I called in a company inspector, that man we met with Alena and Jim at the Gala dinner in London, Michael Dunn, he is a top lawyer, a specialist in business fraud, he quickly discovered that four of the partners were using company money to try and bribe their way out of trouble after making bad decisions, basically more bribes, in Sudan, Indonesia, Panama and Ghana… they have resigned and are very busy trying to make amends, so that they can stay out of jail."

"Do you really think they could go to jail?"

Kevin shrugged, "That's what Alena said, but I don't know the details yet, apparently one of them came clean and was very cooperative. Don't worry… it really doesn't change our plans."

Kevin - 65

Kevin's phone rang while he was walking back from the pool just after seven the next morning, it was Michael Essam, "Morning Kevin, sorry if I woke you lad, but Fred messaged to say you've taken over as Managing Partner at TurnKey…" he said, "Only I just got confirmation last night on Ulva Castle… and I'm worried…"

"You didn't wake me Michael, and there's no need to worry… I'm still your man for the Castle Build, if you want me?"

"That's alright then… I have to tell you that I panicked when Fred told me. This is a real castle in the middle of bloody nowhere."

"I was planning on writing to you this morning, to tell you about the changes at TurnKey," said Kevin, "I'll still write, but I am sorry to have worried you. When can I visit the site…I'd like to bring Lee as well."

"The architect wants to meet you at Stortford… she's flying in from Los Angeles tomorrow… can you manage Saturday or Sunday?"

“Yes… either or both, that’s not a problem, just let me know when to be there.”

“Right, excellent. Look forward to seeing you… and congratulations!”

“Thanks, I think!” said Kevin, before disconnecting.

Lee was up and doing her yoga.

“Michael Essam just told me that they have the Castle job in Scotland. Please let me have all your off dates, so we can visit the site?”

“So we are going to live in the Hebrides for two years? Really?” Lee looked more worried than pleased.

“You’ll love it,” said Kevin, “Lots of fresh sea air… perfect place to have and raise a baby.”

“I’m not sure I’m even pregnant yet,” said Lee… “I’ve never been to the Hebrides… it gets really cold there.”

“I really love the Hebrides,” said Kevin, “Most engineers hated it, but I loved every minute, and was always volunteering to stand in for engineers who needed a break when they were there.”

“Do I have any say in it?” asked Lee, “I know you have to work there, but what if I really hate living there?”

“Of course you have a say, you don’t have to set foot there if you don’t want to, but I want to be with you… if I can.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want to Kevin, I’m just … I’m overthinking things. It will be fun, I’m sure, and I look forward to seeing it.”

“Can we have brunch at the Community Kitchen, say around ten or ten thirty?” asked Kevin, “I’ve got a bunch of emails I need to send off as soon as possible.”

“I’ll bring you a coffee when I’ve done my yoga,” said Lee.

Kevin really was excited at the prospect of spending two years in the Hebrides. He had refused the position of Managing partner when it was first made…saying he did not wish to be a business administrator, and that he preferred project managing on construction sites.

John Carpenter and Alena had both told him that he could manage the company and be a project manager, which is why he had been chosen, the only person who didn't vote for Kevin, was Kevin.

There was an email from Glenda Cope asking Kevin to consider the suggestions she had listed below and get back to her with his response. There were four points, the first and second were straightforward enough, and he responded to thank her and agree that she go ahead with items one and two, which was to inform all employees of the changes in the Board of Partners, and inform all clients of the same, but that he needed to think about three which was to find a suitable gift and replacement for Melanie Philips, who was taking six months off to have a baby, and would probably call her to advise him on what options were available. Item four he thought was an excellent idea… getting out of the offices they were leasing in Mark’s Tey now that they had twenty five less staff, but he didn’t have a clue how to go about relocating the office. Alena had already warned him that Ms. Cope was like a guided weapon, utterly remorseless once she had an objective.

Kevin set off for Chigwell. He wanted to send Dawn to Bath to do a XPert course; between her and Grace Norton, the Stanton Construction Administrator, they had the planning as good as Kevin could hope for, but he believed in verification.

Alan Booth, the site manager, seemed happy enough. Grace Norton was not on site, having gone into Chigwell for something. Alan grumbled about the Housing Association, who wanted to move into the show house and start selling.

“They’ve got a bloody nerve,” he muttered, “Them houses are only finished early because of the way we tweaked the plan and now

they want us to allow any Tom, Dick and Harry to drive through the building site… I'm not having it."

"It's still your building site till you've signed off on it, and you can point out the health and safety violations and get your insurance people to quote for additional liability and and pass it to them for payment. That should shut them up."

"Aye well, if young Gregory hadn't put his foot in his mouth, it would have. Now he's talking about putting in an access road around the back for them." He shook his head, "When Greg gets back from New Zealand he'll deal with it. Gregory is staying out of Ms. Norton's way."

Everything looked good, and Kevin couldn't find anything to criticise. He waited for Grace, and she seemed amused when he asked her if she would mind if he took over the project planning from Dawn for a fortnight, so that she could do a course.

"Dawn said you are the big boss now," said Grace, "There's not much to do with the plan except add the completion dates as we finish each task… " She pointed at the PERT on the site office wall, "I haven't had an update printed for weeks, I just pencil in the dates as we complete each task.

He met Charlotte at the Heddingham stately home renovation. The new contractors were a lot younger than Kevin expected, and Charlotte said they were mostly students… One of the History Professors at Cambridge had organised a group of student volunteers that had worked on historical building projects, into a Cooperative, and they had been accepted by the National Trust governing body. She told him that most of the stolen artwork and furniture had been recovered. The foreman's posh accent contrasted strongly with his lime green mohican hair style and what looked like Mayan mythology tattoos. He had a lot of questions about the project plan, and called in several others. Kevin spent four hours going over the plan with them, and persuaded "Jazz" the foreman, to let an awkward looking young man, Hector, take responsibility for providing him with daily updates and getting the

revised PERTs printed and displayed. Charlotte, who was the supervising Architect, said she would help as necessary.

Kevin only had time to visit two of David's new projects, both in Cambridgeshire. The main contractor was Alliance construction, but he didn't meet any crew that he knew. The plans looked alright and the site foremen were both happy enough. Kevin sent a message to David, saying that they seemed to be engaging with the plan, and adding that he liked the format David was using.

He stopped at the Marks Tey offices on his way home, mainly because he really needed to use the loo. He was surprised to find Myra logged in, and tapped on her door and asked if she was OK.

"Oh… hello Kevin. Yes, I'm fine thanks, I'm just getting to grips with this new BIM Plus package… it's a lot different to 365 Project. What are you doing here?"

"I needed the loo… I'm on my way home," he said, "Is BIM Plus what David is using now? I saw he is using something different - the Charts look good."

"Yes… Alena approved the purchase before… It makes me wonder why I bothered with 365 Project. Its a lot cheaper than XPert."

"The person who taught me project planning uses BIM Plus, and she does work for the US Defence department, so it must be good," Kevin told her, "Talking of Defence Departments… can I go with you to Redhill on your next site visit?"

Myra nodded, "Will you drive? I really don't want to drive and getting there by train is awful."

"Sure… when?"

"I haven't been this week… so whenever suits you? Tomorrow?"

"That works, can we go early? When and where should I pick you up?"

“Is six too early? I can be here at six?”

“Great… see you tomorrow at six,” said Kevin, “Goodnight!”

Lee had cooked, and was looking relaxed and happy.

“I called Alena,” she said, “I hope you don’t mind? Anyway, she told me that I should definitely consider going to the Hebrides with you… especially if I was going to have a baby. Did you know that the client is Shannon McKay the actress? I looked her up… she was born on Ulva!”

Kevin shook his head, “Never heard of her… what film is she in?”

“Loads… she is in that Netflix thing about Aliens that are hiding on earth because they are being hunted… Quest something… everyone is watching it.”

Kevin laughed, “Not everyone it seems… sorry no. I know whoever bought it is rich and American. I’m meeting the architect on Saturday at Stortford. Do you want to come?”

“I’d love to… but I’ve agreed to do nights on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, so that I can have next week off.”

Lee - 66

Kevin was gone before Lee woke in the morning. She’d wanted to tell him that she had missed her period, but decided to wait for a couple more days, just in case. Her heart beat faster at the thought.

She had really enjoyed her talk with Alena. She seemed very happy to have Kevin take over as Managing Partner. She’d cut back on her work, and was not doing anymore overseas work. Her oldest grandchild was now three, and Alena said she was looking forward to spoiling her. She’d told Lee that Kevin had a way with people… he’d brought in more work than any of the partners, and that all of it had been profitable… and he had managed to get the rest of the planning department profitable too.

“I had wanted Louise to take over from me,” said Alena, “But Louise told me that she had no interest whatsoever, and only agreed to become a partner when I promised to respect her wishes. I still think she would be good … like Kevin, she leads by example.”

Lee had spent an age on Google learning what she could about the Hebrides and Ulva in particular. It looked rather grim on Google Maps, and she had no idea where on the huge island the Castle was going to be, or where they would live. Part of her was excited, and part of her was scared. She also worried about Great Aunt Sally, who would miss Kevin’s regular visits. She got on well with Great Aunt Sally and would miss her a great deal.

She would even miss Cindy, though she hadn’t visited her for a while. She realised that she could probably video call with Cindy as easily from Ulva as from Colchester, especially as Kevin would have a good internet connection so he could manage other projects and the company remotely.

She decided to call the obstetrician that Laetitia Dunn had recommended, and make an appointment.

Kevin - 67

Kevin got to the Marks Tey office at a quarter to six, and seconds later an Austin Mini drove in. It was Myra. She parked around the back of the building, Kevin got out to stretch his legs and greeted Myra when she hurried around to the front.

“Nice car,” he said, “Looks in really good condition.”

“I’ve had it since new,” said Myra proudly, “I have to be careful where I park it… they are worth a fortune just for spare parts.”

“Do you drink coffee?” asked Kevin, “I’ve got a flask full, black and sugarless, but …”

“I’ve got some herbal tea thanks,” said Myra, “And some chocolate hobnobs to share.”

Kevin held the door open for her. He learned quite a lot about Myra on the ninety minute drive to Red Hill. She lived alone, in Marks Tey, she had a cat, she was a keen lawns bowler and spent most of her holidays in a time share on the Norfolk Broads, where she read books and lived on herbal tea, biscuits and chocolate. She liked Alena but detested Malcolm Dearbourne with a frightening intensity, and said he had made a “dark art” of the company finances.

They reached the Project before eight, just as the staff began to arrive. Myra had fretted about Kevin’s security clearance, but the security guard let them in without a fuss. Myra gave him a tour of the project and explained how it all went together. They were joined by a tall man with a flushed face and a monk-like hairstyle, he was the Project Engineer. They spent four hours at the project. Kevin liked Myra’s dogged approach to problem solving and getting them to be honest about progress.

They were invited to lunch at the nearby Nutbourne Priory Hotel and Spa - it looked ridiculously expensive, and was, but the food was excellent.

Myra told Kevin when they were on the way back to MarksTey, that the project’s proximity to Nutbourne Priory was probably contributing to the slow progress of the project.

“Would you like to spend more time at the Project?” asked Kevin.

“I’m not qualified as a project manager,” said Myra, “David has suggested I do an on-line diploma course… but I’m not sure a diploma would do.”

“From what I saw today, you are as good a project manager as anyone I’ve met… you are an outstanding project planner and you are able to get people doing what needs to be done.”

“I don’t want to drive… even if it’s a hire car, I’d be spending four or more hours a day in traffic, and longer if I went by train… no… sorry, I can’t do it.”

“I’m not sure we could afford Nutbourne Priory, even if they would allow cats,” said Kevin, “So the other option is for you to have an assistant on site that can do the chivvying for you.”

“It would be nice to have a minion, but not if the bugger tries to burn my house and car like that Greg Baines did to you.”

“I’m told Mike Coulsden egged him on,” said Kevin, “But I’ll let you decide.”

“If I can find affordable accommodation that will take a cat, near the site…. would that be alright?”

“Sure… Glenda will know what the rules are, and might be able to help you find something suitable. Let me know and I’ll make a recommendation to WhiteHall contracts department and see if they will agree to pay for an onsite project manager.”

Myra lost no time at all, and started searching for accommodation on her cell phone. By the time they had reached Marks Tey, Myra was determined to find a way to be the onsite project manager. Kevin asked Glenda Cope’s advice and by five PM she had made an offer on a single bedroom apartment fifty metres from the Project and had drafted a letter for Kevin’s approval and signature to Sir Melville Marks at MoD Contracts saying that following an assessment by the Managing Partner, TurnKey Consultants were recommending that Ms. Myra Ferguson, the senior project planner work full time on site to mitigate cost spirals and completion delays. She said that would add a further forty five thousand pounds to the project, and save at least ten times that amount.

Kevin walked Myra to her car, and asked if he could have a good look at it… It really was in good condition. Myra said she used a mechanic in Little Tey who liked working on older cars, and sent Kevin the mechanic’s contact details.

Kevin got caught up in heavy traffic and stopped at the Maharani for supper when he realised he would not get to the flat before Lee left for nightshift. By ten PM he'd caught up with all his correspondence and planning work. He still felt uncomfortable about his role as Managing Partner and had troubled dreams, but slept well enough.

He managed a swim and a hasty breakfast of coffee and toast before setting off for the Storton Site. It was Full House there, with Charles Denby and Michael Essam as well as the commissioning architects, Arthur and Hamish waiting to meet Shannon McKay's Architect, Claire O'Donnel.

Sally Jones had found Ms. O'Donnel's web site, CastleDesign, and told them she was from Oswestry, and had designed eight castles that had been build. Only one, her very first, had been built in UK, also in the Hebrides. Callaghan Castle.

Ms. O'Donnel arrived on time, and clearly didn't like to waste time. After perfunctory introductions she asked to see the castle, donning a hard hat, wellingtons and a reflective jacket. She politely asked that the site manager and planners accompany her, as she would like to speak with them. She didn't comment on the castle design at all, but asked intelligent questions about the stone work, the progression of works, and schedule.

"What planning software do you use Ms. Jones?" she asked, and nodded approvingly when Sally said MicroPlanner XPert. She hardly spoke to Kevin, and only after they had looked at the PERT in the Site Office, did she ask him a direct question, "You were in the Royal Engineers, Mr. Coombes… do you know Ben Cox?"

"The name is familiar, but I can't put a face to it," replied Kevin.

"I understand you will be the on-site project manager for Ulva Castle?" she asked.

"Yes, that is correct."

“Thank you all, I’ve seen enough and look forward to working with you on Ulva Castle,” she said, and left without a backward glance.

Wow.. that was quick!” said Sally.

Arthur and Hamish appeared a little peeved, and declined tea or coffee and scones.

“Well then,” said Charles, rubbing his hands together and beaming happily, “That means more for us.”

Michael told Kevin that Shannon McKay had arranged for a helicopter to be on standby to get people from Glasgow to Ulva from the first to the fifth of February, during which time she would be on the island. He said Fred would staying on Mull over the same period, but that a crew had already started putting up accommodation units on Ulva, one of which was for Kevin. He suggested that Kevin talk directly to the crew leader, Doug, and said he would send him Doug’s phone number.

Fred gave Kevin a thumb drive with all the drawings and contractual information on Ulva Castle Project, and the contact details for the helicopter service.

Kevin sent a WhatsApp to Lee, saying that he would like to visit Ulva from the first to the fifth of February and would like her to come with him if possible, adding that the sooner he knew the better.

He got a call from Glenda Cope asking when he could make himself available for a conference call with Ms. Jones from MoD Contracts Department concerning the Redhill project. Kevin pulled into the car park of a Little Chef while he was talking to Glenda and said he could manage immediately from the car. Five minutes later, he was in a conference call with Glenda Cope, Ms. Jones and Myra.

Kevin did most of the talking, basically telling Ms. Jones, who had a faint Welsh accent, that he believed that the project would benefit from having an independent, on site project manager, to ensure that realistic deadlines were set and adhered to.

“Are you saying that the contractors are wilfully wasting time?” asked Ms. Jones.

“What I am saying is that while they are probably the best in their field of expertise, which is designing and building cutting edge 3D printing equipment, Myra Ferguson is the best person I know at getting projects of this nature up and running in time and on budget, but she needs to be there,” said Kevin.

There was a long pause after this, eventually Ms. Jones spoke, “Very well… I’ve seen the way some of these projects get out of hand. Can I ask you to give me a frank and confidential appraisal, say on a fortnightly basis, Ms. Ferguson?”

“Yes of course,” replied Myra.

“Thank you… I have budget approval, the payment should reach you in the next two to three working days. Please confirm receipt Ms. Cope?”

“Thank you, I will do that.”

Ms. Jones left the call and Kevin thanked Myra and Glenda. Myra sounded pleased.

There was a message from Lee saying she had the first two weeks of February off, so Kevin went into the little Chef, ordered a coffee and spent the next hour and a half making arrangements to visit Ulva.

Doug told Kevin that a two bedroom accommodation unit would be ready for him by the first of February, fully furnished - all he had to bring were his personal effects and groceries. He promised to have photos and an inventory of the prefab unit sent by WhatsApp messenger before the first of February. He recommended getting the best foul weather gear Kevin could afford - at least two sets. Doug was a Hebridean and said the Hebrides was Heaven on Earth, but only for the well-prepared.

Kevin got home in time to walk Lee to the hospital. She seemed quite excited about the prospect of visiting Ulva.

Kevin worked on the Ulva project plan till ten PM. It was a huge undertaking. The castle was big enough, a two year build in itself, but the village below it was a three year build on its own. All stone. The castle and village constructions would run concurrently, but the Architect wanted them run as two separate projects.

He slept though his alarm, and enjoyed being woken up by Lee.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered in his ear after they collapsed exhausted in a sweaty tangle of limbs.

Lee - 68

Lee had never flown in an Helicopter before, and found it rather disappointing. She had expected something a bit more basic and open to the elements, but this was just like being in a large, and rather noisy bus, except the windows were smaller.

The days had passed swiftly, Lee realised that she had been very distracted with being pregnant. It felt a bit surreal to her. She had been worried about Kevin’s reaction to the news and hadn’t really thought about how she would react. Kevin had not said very much at all about it, other than admitting that he was a bit scared. He said he was even more scared by the scale of the Ulva Project which was to build a castle as well as a village.

Douglas McKell, a tough looking Hebridean, with a cheerful smile was in his sixties. He showed them to their accommodation unit. It was brand new and surprisingly comfortable… a lot bigger than Lee’s Layer road flat. Douglas said that everything worked, but warned that it was all new and said he had no idea how it would hold up to Hebridean weather.

Lee thought that she would be blown off her feet by the gusting wind when Kevin took her to see the castle site. There were eight pairs of surveyors, using devices on tripods and long telescopic

measuring devices. They hammered steel pegs into the ground and tied coloured labels to them. Even talking was difficult because of the fierce and bitingly cold wind, but the sky was blue and streaked with wispy cloud.

Kevin pointed out the site of the village, nestled in the folds below the castle and facing the sea. Lee counted another twenty surveyors down there.

Kevin borrowed a Land Rover from Douglas, and drove to the Mull and Iona Hospital with Lee, it took three hours, including the ferry crossing. Lee was quite pleased with the hospital. The sister in charge of the obstetrics ward assured her that they would be able to get her to the hospital from Ulva using the Air Medical Helicopter Service, if necessary, and suggested that they visit the Wilson Thompson Helipad next to the hospital.

Lee asked if she could drive the Land Rover on the way back and decided that she liked it. They spent the night at Oskamull, which had been rented by Denby and Essam for their senior staff. Fred was there with his wife Celia. Celia persuaded Lee to stay a further two days, while Fred and Kevin tramped around the Castle and Village sites with Claire O'Donnel and the surveyors.

Celia didn't drive, so Lee drove Fred's fancy Land Rover Discovery while Celia navigated. They drove every road on Mull and Iona exploring. Celia wasn't keen on walking anywhere, but Lee thought she would enjoy being on Mull… there was so much to explore.

On the fourth day, Kevin introduced Lee to Shannon McKay, who was very nice, though she had hardly met them when she was whisked off by a well dressed young man to answer an important telephone call, she apologised profusely.

Kevin introduced her to the project Architect, Claire, who was polite but distant.

The helicopter flew into bad weather getting them back to Glasgow. Lee thought it was very exciting. One of the Americans got very scared but Kevin actually slept through it all.

Kevin - 69

Kevin was impressed with the accommodation at Ulva, and surprised that Fred had chosen to stay on Mull, but suspected it had more to do with his wife, Celia, who seemed a bit wet to Kevin.

He didn't recognise the client… Shannon McKay, but she was extremely good looking and seemed very normal for an American. She had told him that she had been born on Ulva… they hadn't talked much… she said that she wanted things done properly and on time.

They'd had really good weather for the time of year, and Kevin was determined to get back to Ulva before the end of the month, when the quarrying and foundation work would begin. The heavy machinery had already been despatched.

Lee seemed to enjoy herself exploring Mull and Iona with Fred's wife and the Hospital looked great. Kevin didn't like to say it, but it seemed a friendlier and more organised place than the Colchester Hospital, and it had a helipad right next to it. He was going to drive his Shogun to Ulva. It was a long drive, but he'd done it in tank transporters, taking around eighteen and once twenty six hours, so it should be a lot easier in a luxury 4x4. He needed to get a vehicle for Lee to drive as well, and she had liked the Land Rover Defender Douglas had lent them.

More planning work was coming in, and Glenda Cope had suggested they recruit another planner and dismiss Virginia Woods. She said that Martha Taylor, who had left of her own accord during her probation, to care for her mother, had reapplied for a job. Glenda emailed a CV and application letter from an experienced project manager, Clive Slater and asked if Kevin wanted to interview him. Kevin saw that Clive Slater was an experienced user of MicroPlanner XPert and had worked mainly on IT Projects. he asked Glenda to arrange a video interview and ask Myra to participate.

He asked what had happened with Virginia, saying he thought she had left months earlier.

Glenda wrote back and attached some correspondence with a Dr. F. Aziz, who had been treating Virginia for BiPolar Depression. Virginia had not worked for three months. Glenda said there was a procedure for termination of employment of medical grounds. Kevin told her to go ahead.

Kevin spent two hours working with David on a complicated demolition and construction project in Guildford for the MoD and had a stinking headache when he left the office. His phone rang, it was Dawn.

“Hi Dawn, what’s up?” he asked.

“Sorry to call you Boss, is it OK to talk?… it sounds like you are on speaker phone.”

“I’m driving but alone,” Kevin told her.

“Umm… I’m really sorry Boss, I have a summons to appear in court.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“I accused a barman of spiking Sally and my drinks in October… he’s suing me. I’m really, really sorry Boss.”

“There’s no need to apologise Dawn. Can you email me a copy of the summons and I’ll ask the company lawyer to help.”

“There’s… I mean, I don’t need help Boss, I’m just sorry that it will mean I can’t be on site.”

“OK…I am sure you can manage, but this is why we have a company lawyer. Please at least let the lawyer advise you?”

“There’s more… Sally also has to attend court,” said Dawn, “I’m really, really sorry Boss.”

“Dawn… I have a stinking headache already, so I am just going to say this once. You haven’t done anything wrong. You have nothing to apologise for and I would really appreciate it if you would allow the company lawyer to help you deal with this. OK?”

“Roger that Boss, I’ll send you the summons now. Thanks Boss.”

Kevin stopped at Sainsbury’s and got some paracetamol, then called Glenda and asked her to get the company lawyer to help Dawn and Sally

“I’m on it,” said Glenda, “Can you manage the interview with Clive Slater at five PM?”

“I should be home by then,” said Kevin, “I hope this awful headache will be gone by then.”

Lee was home, and suggested he have a hot shower and then massaged his neck and shoulders. Kevin was feeling a lot better when Glenda called to start the Video Conference.

She introduced everybody. Clive said he preferred to be called Cliff, he looked to be between forty and fifty. Glenda asked him to tell them about his most recent project. It was setting up a cellular communications company in Haiti. The project, according to Jim had been on plan and on target, but never completed because of the gang violence. The project before that had been in Moldova, setting up a cellular farm communications network, and according to Clive, it had been a success. Before that he had managed the take over of the government owned cellular system in Mauritius by MTN.

Myra asked if he had done any projects in UK and Clive said he hadn’t worked in UK for twenty years.

“Well, TurnKey are looking for project managers to work in UK,” said Kevin, “We have pulled back from overseas projects, for the time being. Are you comfortable working in UK.”

“I would prefer international work,” said Clive, “I have extensive contacts in the French speaking world, and can bring valuable clients to your company. I prefer large contracts… I have five children and they all attend private schools.”

“Why do you want to work with TurnKey Consultants?” asked Myra.

“Support mainly…administrative support, I understand you have excellent planning and administrative back up, and have in house civil, structural and electrical engineers, as well as QS staff.”

“Thank you, we do,” said Kevin, “Here’s a suggestion. I’d like to send you a small project proposal… and see your response to it? Could you do that?”

Clive looked surprised but agreed.

“Great,” said Kevin “I’ll get something to you before this time tomorrow, and look forward to seeing your response. Thankyou Cliff.”

Kevin waited till Clive and Myra had disconnected before thanking Glenda and disconnecting. He spent an hour removing all the client details from a four bedroom house build that Sally had just done a project plan for, and emailed it to Glenda, asking her to pass that on to Clive and asking him to put forward a preliminary plan, with a PERT.

He saw a message from Myra on his phone.

“I’ve looked Clive Slater up, and he’s a lazy, back-stabbing turd, according to one of his former colleagues at Motorola. He used to work for Mike Coulsden.”

Kevin wrote back, “Good to know. Thanks.”

Lee joined him for a long walk around Castle Park. It was cold, but it helped to clear Kevin’s headache. He told her that Sally and Dawn had been summoned to court after Dawn had accused a barman of spiking their drinks.

“It was at the Iceni Club,” said Lee, “Some of the nurses say that drink spiking was a real problem there till he got fired.”

“The barman?” asked Kevin, “You knew about it?”

“I should have told you,” said Lee, “Sorry.”

Kevin shook his head, “Well, the barman is suing Dawn and Sally apparently.”

“I’ll ask my friend for help,” said Lee.

“I’ve asked the company lawyer to help them too,” said Kevin, “So this is happening here in Colchester?”

Lee shrugged, “I don’t know… I just know that Dawn accused the barman and made a complaint to the police… months ago.”

Kevin sent an email to Glenda Cope asking her to take on Martha on a six month probation.

The next morning Glenda wrote to say that Virginia Woods had written to the Labour tribunal alleging that she had been unfairly dismissed.

Kevin groaned out aloud, causing Lee to come up to Loft Studio and ask what was wrong.

“Now one of our ex-staff is taking us to court for unfair dismissal after she was laid off after taking three months off for depression.”

Kevin worked fourteen hour days for the rest of the week and had forgotten about Clive Slater when he received the email forwarded by Glenda.

The Project Plan was a mess. Kevin couldn’t believe it was done by a qualified project manager with more than twenty years experience. He went over it three times before drafting a response,

thanking Clive Slater for his application but regretting that they did not have a position worthy of his expertise and experience.

Lee - 70

Lee found herself being increasingly distracted by the changes in her body. It was fascinating, if a bit scary. She worried about Kevin, who was working longer hours than ever, he had lost a lot of weight too, but seemed to be eating well enough. Although he worked from home a lot, he wasn't the sort of man who brought his work into his home life. Lee knew that he'd had to go to court, but learned more about it from Dawn, who'd also had to go to court, along with Sally. Kevin had also attended the Chelmsford Labour Tribunal … a former staff member had taken TurnKey Consulting to the Labour Tribunal for unfair dismissal… and had apparently accused Kevin of bullying her. The woman had lost her case, but it had added to Kevin's work load. Dawn's case had been adjourned, but she and Sally had already spent three days each in the Colchester Magistrate's court… Dawn felt really bad about it, because Kevin had taken on her work as well as Sally's. Kevin hadn't complained at all.

Great Aunt Sally had been admitted to hospital again, and was waiting for an appointment to see a specialist for a persistent chest infection that was not responding to treatment. Kevin visited her every evening, and Lee managed to see her most mornings after her shift ended. The ward sister told Lee that things were not looking great, but Sally was not in pain, though she grumbled about being weak and sleeping such a lot.

Kevin - 71

Kevin was not looking forward to the quarterly meeting. He went through the notes he had prepared with Glenda and decided to have a short walk before the meeting started. Louise caught up with him, and asked if she could walk with him.

"Nervous?" he asked, and she nodded.

“Me too,” said Kevin, “Have you got any races lined up?”

Louise laughed, “Well yes… thanks to you, I’m doing the Stortford Castle Marathon on Monday. Well done for getting that finished so early!”

“Good luck with the marathon,” said Kevin, “I’m not sure I can do the Epic this year; I haven’t found anywhere to swim on Ulva… well not safely anyway.”

“I think I’ll give it a miss this year,” said Louise, “Marissa will probably leave me if I put her through so much stress again, but it was quite a revelation to me… I did better though I felt less prepared and I enjoyed it more.”

“I think that happens a lot, especially for endurance events… they are so taxing that if you go into it in peak condition, you burn up before the event is over.”

“Well, I should do well on this marathon then,” said Louise, “I’m definitely not properly prepared.”

“I wonder if that works for meetings as well?” asked Kevin, “I seem to spend more time preparing for these quarterly meetings than doing my job.”

“Rather you than me,” said Louise, “I’m sorry about the nonsense with Ginny Woods… was Mike Coulsden really involved in that?”

“Yes, the idiot, and, would you believe, he tried to get one of his former colleagues into the company?”

Louise laughed, “Yes… Myra told me about him. Apparently he couldn’t plan a simple house build, despite being a big shot project manager doing international projects.”

“He’s been unemployed since before the pandemic, and lied about his experience. He made the mistake of offending Glenda. She and Myra have left him with nowhere to hide.”

The meeting was not as awful as Kevin had expected. The partners didn't say anything about the legal costs, and accepted the financials without objection. Charles Wright asked what role Kevin had in Mike Coulsden being arrested, and it was John Carpenter that responded, saying that Charles should read the report all the Partners had received on the Virginia Woods Labour tribunal, but summed it up anyway.

"Mike Coulsden has been charged with incitement and accessory to perjury, he convinced Ginny that she could get a huge settlement from TurnKey by accusing Kevin of bullying. The judge from Mike and Greg Baines's trial decided that Mike was in breach by inciting another person to act illegally against Kevin, and so he has to serve the two year sentence that had been suspended. Mike has a problem…. read Glenda's report, there's a lot more in it."

Charles Wright actually laughed and congratulated Kevin. This prompted more congratulations and the meeting ended shortly after that.

Kevin managed to get home before the traffic snarled up. Lee had finished nights and had the Easter Weekend and the following week off. They walked to the hospital to see Great Aunt Sally, who really was looking frail. Lee warned him that the ward Sister had said she didn't think Sally would last through the weekend. Sally was pleased to see them, and delighted that Lee's bump was now visible.

"I don't expect to see her born," she said, "But it is a girl…I am sure of it…. No… don't say it Kevin. It's alright, I have lived a long life and you two have made me very happy. I am ready and not afraid."

Lee - 72

Lee didn't know what to say when she realised that Kevin was crying. She just held his hand and pulled him closer. She had been about to suggest they walk to the Maharani for supper, but instead they walked around the city walls. Kevin put an arm around her and

kissed her cheek. He hadn't make a sound, but his cheeks and beard were wet with tears.

They went into the Rose and Crown… Lee hadn't set foot in it for years, and had fish and chips. Kevin had a rum, which he swallowed in one swift gulp before asking for a black coffee.

"I'm going to miss her," he said simply, "She's a grand lady."

Lee picked up Kevin's rum glass and sniffed it…she loved the smell of rum. "She told me that you made her life worth living… that you moved to Colchester to be close to her when she moved into the Care Home," she said, "She loves you very much Kevin, and she is really proud of you."

"Will you come with me to Norwich tomorrow?" asked Kevin, "I want to go by train."

"Yes OK, what's in Norwich? Aren't you going to the Stortford Castle Ceremony?"

"No…Sally can have all the honours there," said Kevin, "Norwich is a surprise… Well I hope it will be a good one."

"What if…" Lee hadn't been able to say it.

"There's nothing we can do," said Kevin, "I spoke to Dr. Arlett yesterday… he said the only thing keeping Sally alive is her determination. She told me she doesn't want us there at the end. We'll be back from Norwich before visiting hours tomorrow. If…"

Kevin couldn't say any more, the words caught in his throat.. Lee nodded and reached for his hand.

Lee didn't sleep well that night, but she enjoyed watching Kevin sleep. He hadn't said anything about the Partner's meeting beyond saying it had finished earlier than he expected. Lee knew that March had been a tough month for Kevin. She wanted to touch his face, to wrap her arms around him and hug him.

The train to Norwich was crowded with school children for some reason. Kevin refused to tell her anything, but asked her what she thought of renting out their flat while they were in Ulva.

Lee didn't want to let it furnished, and Kevin said they could put their things into storage easily enough. He also thought Lee should take her tools to Ulva, so that she could carry on making things if she wanted to.

Kevin got a taxi at the railway station when they got to Norwich, handing the driver a piece of paper with an address on it. The driver, a woman, turned to look at Lee, then grinned and nodded.

They ended up on the outskirts of Norwich, outside a farmhouse with a huge barn. Kevin paid the driver who waved and grinned at Lee, then left.

A black and white sheepdog bounded up to them excitedly and Kevin had to stop it jumping up on Lee till an older woman called it away.

The woman limped towards them, a friendly grin on her face as she greeted them.

“Mr. Coombes?” she asked, “I’m Bev… Hello, you must be Lee? Come … it’s in the Barn.”

The dog ran around them in circles, Bev assured Lee that she was friendly, and just liked visitors.

Kevin helped her open the barn door.

“Well… it's a little early, but Happy Birthday Lee,” said Kevin, “She’s all yours.” He pointed to a Green Land Rover that looked just like the one they had borrowed from Doug in Ulva, except this one was gleaming and had brand new tyres.

Lee didn’t know what to say and had a sudden and very strong urge to pee, “Can I use your toilet please Bev?” she asked, “I need to rush!”

She hurried after Bev, leaving Kevin looking a bit worried.

He'd started the Land Rover and driven it out of the barn by the time she returned with Bev, and a mug of hot chocolate.

"It's wonderful Kevin!" Lee told him, "I can't believe you bought me a Land Rover… it looks wonderful."

"We've had it fixed up," said Bev, "My son is a Land Rover enthusiast."

"Do you want to drive?" asked Kevin, "Its all legal and roadworthy."

Kevin navigated, and they had lunch with Sally at Thetford. She had passed her driving test but had asked Fred to drive her mobile-home to Thetford, saying she wasn't ready to drive such a big vehicle yet. She said nice things about the Land Rover.

Lee asked Kevin to drive from Thetford back to Colchester, as the traffic was quite heavy.

"Where did you find time to buy me a Land Rover with everything else you've had to do?" she asked him.

Kevin shrugged, "Myra told me about Bev's son Daniel. She has an old Mini, and her mechanic is a friend of Daniel's. When I told her I was looking for a good Land Rover Defender… she recommended Daniel. We can drive it up to Ulva next week if you like, or I can take it up later?"

"How long will it take?"

"We could probably do it in twelve to fifteen hours if we pushed, but I thought it would be nicer to take our time… make a little holiday out of it. I really feel in need of a break."

"That would be nice," Lee told him, "We can share the driving."

"When do you have to see the obstetrician again?"

“She said she doesn’t need to see me till May, but I can call anytime if I’m worried about anything. I called her on Monday… she says I can keep on doing my yoga as long as I feel comfortable.”

Mrs. Eames let them use her parking slot for the Land Rover.

Kevin kept checking his phone when they got back, and seemed really anxious when they set off to visit Great Aunt Sally at the hospital. She was sleeping when they got there. Kevin sat with her while Lee chatted with the Sister in the nurses’ station.

Marissa called Lee while she was in the nurses station to ask if they were going to Storton Castle. Lee told her about Great Aunt Sally, and Marissa said they should meet up at the Bottled Crab for supper.

Kevin agreed, and asked asked Lee if she was up to walking to the Hythe.

“I don‘t think she is going to wake,” he told Lee as they left the hospital, “It’s OK… she is peaceful, I sort of sensed that she was ready.”

Kevin told Lee that Great Aunt Sally had arranged for the care home to deal with everything when she died. Kevin’s phone rang before they reached the Bottled Crab, Great Aunt Sally’s heart had stopped. Kevin quietly thanked the Sister for letting him know.

Louise and Marissa were wonderful, Dawn was there too. They had all liked Sally. They held their own private wake for Great Aunt Sally. Lee was touched and surprised when Dawn told her that Sally had described Lee as Kevin’s soul mate at their wedding. They stayed at the Bottled Crab till it closed at midnight, then Kevin and Lee walked back to St Botolphs. The sky was very clear and the stars seemed brighter than usual to Lee. She didn’t cry till after Kevin had fallen asleep.

Kevin - 73

Kevin was surprised at how much he missed his Great Aunt Sally. She had been a constant in his life.

He double checked everything on Lee's Land Rover before showering and waking her up. He'd heard her crying during the night. She had got on well with Great Aunt Sally, and had spent more time with her than Kevin had over the last three months.

"Let's go and get breakfast at the Community Kitchen?" Kevin suggested, "We can make a list of what we need to pack while we're there - there's no need to rush."

They set off at midday. Kevin drove. The Land Rover didn't have a radio.

Lee asked him if he believed in life after death.

"Not in the sense of heaven and hell," said Kevin, "I think they are a state of mind, but yes I do believe that our souls or spirits continue after our bodies die… all that energy can't just vanish… I like to believe it is born again…perhaps reincarnation or simply a redistribution of living energy. What do you think?"

"Sometimes I think Mum and Dad are watching over me," said Lee, "I like to think that they are here, the spirits…of course there would be lots of them, so… I don't know. That's the whole point I suppose… none of us know?"

They spent the night at the Holiday Inn at Scotch Corner.

"This is one of my favourite roads," Kevin told Lee the next day as they set off towards Carlisle. They had a picnic lunch and then had supper at the Greyhound Inn before spending the night at the Premier Inn. Kevin told Lee about meeting King Charles in the Greyhound Inn when he was a Lance Corporal and Charles was the Prince of Wales, They had sat at the same table and Prince Charles

told him that the steak pies at the Greyhound were the best in Britain.

“I’ve never been much of a Royalist,” said Lee, “We had one of the Royals in the ward when I first started nursing there… one of Queen Elizabeth’s cousins. She wasn’t very nice at all… my dad always said that the notion that someone was born better was just plain wrong. It wasn’t so very long ago when ordinary British people belonged to the Royals… we were their slaves, and they still Lord it over us.”

“Jim Short is alright,” Kevin told her, “I don’t know where he fits in to the Royalty, but he doesn’t act like he is better than anyone else.”

“Yes…I like him, but not because he’s an Earl.”

“Have you ever thought of having your Genes tested?” asked Kevin, “To find out your ancestry?”

“Mum did a family tree,” said Lee, “We’ve got all sorts in my family. Dad’s mum was the daughter of a Jewish Rabbi, a Cohen.”

“Great Aunt Sally said that her grandmother… my great great grandmother was Jewish,” Kevin told her, “And her husband’s father was half Turkish.”

Lee had to use her cellphone to navigate the way to the Hospitality Inn in Glasgow, and after checking in, Kevin insisted that they go and get winter tyres fitted to the Land Rover.

They set off after breakfast the next day, and by the time they reached Mull, Kevin was exhausted. Lee drove to the Ferry and then onto site, it took two hours and she almost wept when she finally got there.

Someone had prepared their accommodation for them and put the heating on. There was a welcome basket on the kitchen table with bread, fruit and a large easter egg. There was milk, cheese, yoghurt and butter in the fridge.

Lee made them milky cocoa while Kevin unloaded the Land Rover.

There was a dusting of snow on the ground and stuck to the windows when they got up in the morning, but it was gone by evening, and the weather stayed cold but calm and clear till they flew back to Glasgow on Friday.

Kevin lay awake long after he and Lee got to bed that night. The idea that his Great Aunt Sally had simply given up because he was going to be in the Hebrides plagued him. He'd told her he would visit her at least once a month and even offered to find her somewhere to stay closer to Ulva, but she had told him not to make a fuss. Sally had told him once that it was folly to depend on someone else for happiness. "Nobody else can make you happy for long Kevin. Don't make your happiness someone else's burden, make your own happiness. It's more sustainable." Kevin looked at Lee; being with her made him happy, knowing she was near made him happy. He had no idea how to make his own happiness without Lee.

The next week was chaotic. Kevin was really touched when Dawn, Sally Jones, Louise and Marissa also attended the service for Great Aunt Sally in St. Osyth. Alena sent flowers and a card. She and Jim were in France for a wedding.

Lee - 74

Lee was glad that Kevin had decided against renting out his flat. It was a safety net for both of them, and the thought of having to stay in a hotel room when visiting Colchester just wasn't nice. Kevin had planned for them both to return Colchester once a month anyway, to visit Great Aunt Sally as well as for him to physically check on projects.

Lee had not wanted to drive back to Ulva with Kevin in his Shogun, but agreed after Kevin suggested that they go via Cheltenham, to put Great Aunt Sally's ashes in her husband's family mausoleum. Lee had worried about how often she needed to pee, but Kevin told her that he would stop as often as she wanted. In the end, she

really enjoyed the trip. Kevin said he could relax more while driving long distance.

Time passed swiftly, and April was over before Lee felt she had properly settled in to their new home. Kevin went with her to see the obstetrician in London. They spent three days in London at the Russel Hotel, and Lee managed to get more comfortable clothes as well as some upholstery material that she wanted.

Deirdre, the obstetrician, told her that her baby was fine and so was she. Lee and Kevin had decided they didn't want to know the baby's sex, much to Deidre's amusement.

Kevin hired a car and spent two days and the night in between visiting sites. He slept most of the way back to Ulva.

Lee managed to drive to Mull by herself. She collected Fred's wife, Celia for a day of being pampered at the Mull Hotel and Spa and found a second hand rocking chair that she bought to fix up. Celia seemed interested in learning some upholstery skills and Lee suggested that she spend a day or two with her on Ulva.

By the beginning of July, Lee felt well established on Ulva. Celia and Fred had moved to an accommodation unit close to them, and Celia was really enjoying doing the fabric side of upholstery. She and Lee had renovated and reupholstered two arm chairs for Douglas, much to his delight. Douglas had promised to find an old rocking chair for Celia, as she really liked the one Lee had fixed up for herself. Lee had a shopping list of tools and materials that Celia wanted.

Kevin - 75

Kevin had begun to enjoy work. Life on Ulva was great, he loved being involved with the project, and especially enjoyed watching the stone masons at work. They had three separate companies, two Polish and one Romanian doing the quarrying and stone shaping. Fred seemed much happier now that he was living close to the site.

Now that the massive foundations had been completed for the castle and its huge underground parking and storage space, the structures started taking shape. Kevin's 3D drawings had really helped to identify and prevent a number of potentially costly problems. The Architect, Claire, had thanked him and sent him a bottle of his favourite Ron Zacapa, much to his surprise, as she still seemed a bit distant and disapproving when she visited site.

He was finding being the managing partner easier too, but still felt he was missing something. The office move to Colchester's new Abbey Fields business park had gone smoothly, and everybody except Myra seemed pleased with it. Glenda Cope had done all the heavy lifting on that, and had cried when Kevin thanked her and insisted that she accept the two weeks paid leave and five thousand pound bonus before the June Partners meeting. Alena had taken over as the Financial Partner, and Kemal had been complimentary when Kevin showed him the company accounts.

David had been offered an associate partnership, but had declined, which Kevin thought was wise as he was earning so much overtime. He'd brought in three new large planning projects and was doing good work.

Martha had settled down and Kevin had two of her sites to visit before deciding on whether to end her probation. Dawn and Sally were both working as full time on-site project planners for Alliance construction and each managing four remote planning projects, for Alliance Construction, Stanton Construction and two small independent builders.

Myra's MoD project in RedHill had eventually come right, mostly due to Myra's tenacity. Ms. Jones at the MoD contracting had asked Myra to do the project planning for four small projects and one very large project that was being considered in the Midlands, which she wanted Myra to be the on-site project manager for. Myra had asked Kevin to help with the preliminary plan. It was a three to four year project, and Kevin suspected Myra would probably retire after doing it. He had started to do a SketchUp model of the project, and was intending to buy a bigger PowerMac while Lee was visiting Deidre,

the obstetrician at Great Ormond Street, as the project was just too big for his MacBook pro.

Lee was blooming, she radiated health and loved going for walks, her belly looked uncomfortably large, but she said the only real problems were needing to pee so often and ‘mild’ lower back pain.

Lee was slowly replacing the furniture in their accommodation with items that Douglas had found for her to renovate and reupholster. Douglas, the facilities manager for the Construction crew accommodation, had taken Lee and Celia under his wing. He looked after Lee’s Land Rover and built a car port for it. He regularly brought them fresh fish caught by one of his sons. He lent Lee the baby crib that his late wife had used for all three of their children, and which had been in her family for three generations. Lee was making a replica of it.

Kevin managed a flying visit to RedHill after getting Lee back to the Hotel after her appointment with Deidre at Great Ormond Street; Lee had decided to spend the afternoon in her room resting. Myra was pleased that he had come. She told him that Ms. Jones had told her that funding had been approved for the Joint Services Research Establishment in the Midlands. Work was expected to start in May. It would be the biggest project, that TurnKey consulting had done in UK.

“I’m going to need full time, on site help Kevin,” Myra told him, “How good is that little ex-Army girl; Dawn?”

“She’s good, I’ll ask her to come and spend a few days with you so you can decide if you want to work with each other.”

“What happened with that court case against her?”

“The charges were dropped when the barman was arrested for spiking a student teacher’s drink. The police had been watching him, and got video evidence.”

“I like the sound of her.”

“She’s good and security clearance should be easy, as she is still on colour service.”

“What does that mean?”

“She is an army reservist.”

“Crap… does that mean she has to attend training and that sort of thing?”

“Not really… she has to report once a year to the base in Chatham, and she can volunteer for manoeuvres if she wants to.”

“Boyfriends… girlfriends?”

“None that I am aware of… she likes dancing and gets on with Lee, Sally, Louise and Marissa.”

“What about Lee… how is she doing and when is the baby due?”

“Lee’s fine; the obstetrician checked her out this morning… the baby is due on the seventh of September, but apparently it can vary by more than ten days…”

“Good grief… that’s just around the corner! How do you feel about it… about being a father?”

“Terrified,” said Kevin, “Come on… show me the prototyping room; I have to leave soon.”

“Cats are much easier you know.”

“Lee used to have a cat… I like dogs, but not in the house. Seems cruel in this country.”

Kevin liked Myra; there was something about her that reminded him of his Great Aunt Sally.

Kevin managed a few hours at the Abbey Field office before they had to get to Stansted. Lee had arranged delivery for most of the

shopping they had done, but Kevin still struggled with all the luggage.

The day after they returned to Ulva, Lee found that she could no longer fit comfortably behind the steering wheel of her Land Rover. She could manage the Shogun though, so Kevin transferred all her “emergency kit” to the Shogun. He had intended to hand it back to the leasing agency before winter. He had already discussed giving up his lease hire car with Glenda, and getting a hire car at Stansted when he needed one. He didn't really need a vehicle on Ulva as he could walk to site from his accommodation and he could use Lee’s Land Rover for any local travel.

Lee - 76

Lee was struggling with everything, and finding it very hard to remain positive. The trip to London and Colchester had exhausted her, and she was even more exhausted when they got back to Ulva. When she discovered that she could not get behind the steering wheel of her Land Rover, she started to panic, and then felt embarrassed about it when Kevin told her to use the Shogun instead.

Celia was being very supportive, and Lee was determined not to become dependent on her. The arrival of the packages she and Kevin had freighted up to Ulva should have been a welcome distraction. Douglas helped Celia with the heavy lifting and dismantling the crates, but Lee had no energy for, or interest in doing much woodwork or upholstery. She started resenting that Kevin was able to carry on with and even enjoying his work, even though she knew it was unreasonable of her. She found herself snapping at him and then feeling angry if he snapped back and guilty if he didn’t. Celia told her it was just her hormones, but that wasn’t much comfort.

Kevin - 77

Kevin knew that he wasn’t at his best, but he tried to clear his mind for the Partners’ meeting. He read through Glenda’s notes several

times before he felt he could remember them. He'd decided to do the meeting virtually from the site office, rather than from his home. Fortunately there was not much to discuss. Alena had emailed the financials to everyone, and apart from one court case, where Alena had been summoned to give evidence against a client, there was nothing controversial to deal with. As always, Kevin felt that he must have forgotten something when it was all over. He walked back to the accommodation still preoccupied with the meeting. He was totally unprepared when Celia ran out to tell him that Lee needed to get to the hospital.

"Her waters haven't broken, yet, but given the distance… I think it is better that you take her to the hospital now. I'm coming with you."

Lee was pale but calm. They had everything ready, but Kevin really struggled to appear calm. They used the Shogun as it was more comfortable for Lee. Fred came over just as they were about to leave. He told them to call him if they needed anything and gave Lee a hug and told her it was going to be OK. Celia had already called the hospital and had been told that the helicopter crew were on standby.

Lee was clearly in pain, but she appeared calm. Kevin knew from experience that she didn't like chatting when she was in pain. He put on some of his jazz instrumental and concentrated on getting her safely to the ferry. The entire journey took ninety minutes, by which time Lee was drenched in sweat and breathing hard. The hospital staff took over with calm assurance, leaving Kevin feeling totally redundant.

"Gosh… that went well!" said Celia, after Lee was wheeled away, "I'll wait here for you while you park."

Kevin was gowned and gloved and ushered through into the delivery room. He struggled to stay calm, and really did not want to be there. Lee looked so pale and so frightened that he felt utterly useless. She held his hand but her gaze was turned inwards, Kevin felt light-headed and tried to clear his head by breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth.

Lee - 78

Lee thought she was going to die by the time they reached the hospital. The pain came in waves and each successive wave was worse.

Her waters broke seconds after she was wheeled through the doors. Something about the calm, steady behaviour of the staff helped. She found it impossible to speak, but managed to nod when asked if she wanted an epidural and gas for the pain. By the time Kevin was brought in she was managing a little better, but then Kevin toppled over and had to be carried out. They told her he was fine, but Lee could see blood on the sleeves of the midwife and nurse… Kevin's blood.

It seemed to take forever. Lee kept telling herself it was going to be OK… and it was in the end. Celia came in after the baby had been taken away and while Lee was being stitched up. She stroked Lee's cheek and told her that she was a clever girl, and that her daughter was absolutely perfect.

"How is Kevin?" asked Lee.

"They told me he fainted… I'm sure he is OK," said Celia, "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted…and very, very sore," said Lee, "I'm not sure I could go though with that ever again. When will they bring my baby?"

"They'll bring her as soon as they've cleaned her up, weighed and measured her… it's only been a few minutes. I know if feels like a long time. You were in labour for more than two hours you poor thing."

"Please check up on Kevin?" asked Lee, "He was bleeding after he fell over… I hope he is OK?"

Celia nodded and patted her shoulder, “Of course I will… Look… here’s your baby girl…isn’t she adorable?”

Celia waited till the nurse had handed the baby to Lee then asked if she could take a photo. She ran her fingers through Lee’s hair before using her phone to take several pictures, then said she would go and check up on Kevin.

Lee couldn’t stop looking at her daughter, and the nurse had to repeat herself before Lee responded, thanking her and letting her help Lee to put the baby to her breast. The tug on her nipple sent strange sensations though Lee’s body. She felt tears running down her face, but she wasn’t crying.

Celia returned and told her that Kevin was fine. He’d needed stitches to his forehead and cheek, but wasn’t seriously injured. She had not spoken to him as he was still having some tests done. Celia didn't know what sort of tests.

Lee didn’t remember going to sleep, but she must have, because she woke to find Kevin sat next to the bed and holding her hand. He looked sheepish and had a line of stitches for a gash that crossed the bridge of his nose from above his left eye to the middle of his right cheek.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, when he saw she was awake.

“My God Kevin, what did you fall on?” asked Lee, “Are you alright?”

“I feel like an idiot,” said Kevin grinning ruefully, “I’m really sorry.”

“Have you seen her?”

“The ugly little potato? Yes… isn’t she wonderful? You are such a clever girl.”

“She’s not an ugly potato… well she is, but she’s gorgeous too… What are we going to call her?”

“I haven’t got a clue…”

“Well… I think we should include her Grandmothers’s names. Both of them, so that gives us Sarah and Louise, but she needs her own name too. I like Maisie.

“Maisie Sarah Louise Coombes,” said Kevin slowly, “I like the sound of that.”

“We don’t have to agree yet, if you want something different…”

“I like Maisie, and I think adding Sarah and Louise is wonderful,” said Kevin, “How was it? The birth I mean?”

“Awful… I mean really awful. I’ve got stitches too and they are really uncomfortable. I tore… they don’t cut anymore, if they can help it. Are you OK?”

Kevin shook his head, “No… not really, I never thought I was squeamish, but the thought of you going through that. I can’t deal with it…sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologise!” Lee told him, “And … well, I don’t want to go through that ever again.”

“That’s fine by me.”

“When can we go home?”

“I have no idea,” said Kevin, “Do you feel up to it?”

“As long as I don’t have to walk far… I’m going to need a ring cushion.”

They ended up staying two nights at the hospital. The midwife told Lee it was because they wanted to observe Kevin, because he’d had concussion. She said that Kevin had fallen and hit his head on the corner of a surgical trolley.

They drove back to Ulva in pouring rain. Little Maisie slept the whole way, and then refused to sleep when they got home. Lee’s

swollen boobs irritated her a great deal, they leaked every time Maisie cried, and her nipples got very sore and cracked. Celia reassured her that it would all settle down. Lee worried about Kevin too, but he seemed cheerful enough and more embarrassed than upset about his fainting and concussion.

Lee was glad to be home though, and very pleased with her rocking chair and the crib she had made for Maisie.

Lee was very surprised when Claire O'Donnel, the architect, visited, bringing flowers, delicious chocolates and a small soft brown teddy for Maisie. Claire asked how she was feeling and seemed genuinely interested in how she was coping. She told Lee that she was unable to have children, which had led to an unpleasant separation from her first husband, who had died in a traffic accident before the divorce case concluded.

They were inundated with gifts, including beautiful baby clothes sent by the wives of many of the construction staff. Celia persuaded Lee to take Maisie to the construction crew recreation centre on the Solstice, as so many of the construction crew wanted to see her. They were really very pleasant, and made Lee feel very welcome and special. She started feeling a lot better after that.

Kevin drove them back to the hospital at the end of September. It was a really spectacular day and a lovely drive. Lee and Maisie were examined and pronounced "Very bonnie indeed," by the Maternity ward Matron. Lee and Kevin had their stitches removed.

They spent two nights at the Hotel and Spa, being pampered. Lee managed to drive back to the ferry without any discomfort. Maisie seemed happy enough in the vehicle, sleeping for most of the journey and gurgling contentedly when awake.

Kevin - 79

Kevin definitely did not like changing nappies, but he loved feeding Maisie, and he really loved watching Lee with Maisie. He blanked

out the awful experience of the hospital; he never wanted to go through that again, and was glad that Lee felt the same.

Maisie's birth seemed to touch many of the construction workers, and they were given more baby items than they would ever be able to use. There was even an impromptu Baby Party in the recreation centre on the Winter Solstice.

Kevin was struggling to keep his routines going, especially at home. Maisie had turned his home life upside down. Claire O'Donnel, the architect, who had always seemed rather stand-offish with him, congratulated him and told him how envious she was of him and Lee. She told him that her mother had committed suicide while suffering from post natal depression shortly after she was born. "Spend as much time as you can with Lee and show her how important she is to you," she urged him.

Despite the mayhem Maisie had brought into his life, Kevin was happy. He loved walking with Maisie strapped to his chest and Lee holding his hand.

"I enjoyed the Hebrides when I was in the Army," he told Lee, "I have always been a loner, but somehow I didn't feel so lonely when I was in the Hebrides… now, with you and Maisie, it is even better. This feels like home. I'd like to get a house in this village, make this our home. What do you think?

Lee nodded and leaned into him, "I was thinking this morning about loneliness," she said, "There were days…after mum and dad passed and before I met you… I was so lonely that I thought I would never feel happy again. It's harder, I think, being alone and lonely when you are surrounded by happy seeming strangers; people with lovers and family all going about their lives. It would be nice to live here, to be part of a community right from its beginning. Is there a particular house you are thinking of?"

Kevin shook his head, "No, let's walk down and take a look?"